

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION



Christina Nguyen
Coastline Community College

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Coastline Community College
Interpersonal Communication

Christina Nguyen

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Introduction to Communication

Learning Objectives

- How does the communication process work?
- What does it take to be a competent communicator? And why is it important in our lives?

Successful students will be able to:

- Define communication
- Recognize components of the interpersonal communication process
- Recognize how context can affect shared meaning
- Explain seven principles of interpersonal communication
- Explain three interrelated types of interpersonal competence
- Identify three ways to grow interpersonal competence

About 70% of our days are spent communicating (Alberts, Martin, & Nakayama, 2016), either face-to-face or through mediated platforms, such as email or text message. Yet, we often overestimate how well others understand us and how well we understand others. The purpose of this text is to provide knowledge and skills to help minimize miscommunication in interactions and increase communication competence. Even though we have been communicating our entire life, there are always ways to improve and techniques we can learn to be more effective and accomplish our goals, in both personal and professional contexts. In this chapter, we will begin our journey into communication by becoming familiar with the communication process, addressing contextual considerations, exploring the principles of communication, and discussing communication competence.

[1.1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication](#)

[1.2: Communication Principles](#)

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Contributors and Attributions

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1.1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication

Being an Effective Communicator

As you open this book to read Chapter 1, stop and think about how many times you have communicated today. Did you take some time to scroll through your social media feeds? Did you chat with a friend, maybe send them a text? Did you order a coffee or some lunch at a local spot? Did you answer a question for a customer or client at work? Did you send your instructor an email? Maybe you are listening to music right now? All of these were communicative experiences, and we have thousands of them each day. Communication is fundamental to our lives but much of the time it remains unconscious and unexamined. We communicate because we must. But just because we communicate doesn't mean we do it effectively. Being an effective communicator requires not only practice, but knowledge.

This text is designed to help you gain this knowledge and become more effective communicators, specifically in interpersonal encounters. In this first chapter we will define interpersonal communication, examine why communication is fundamental to our existence, lay out the various models of communication, explore fundamental communication principles, and finally talk about what constitutes ethical communication.



Figure 1.1.1: Studying, Sean Benesh, Unsplash

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1.2: Communication Principles

The Nature of Communication

As we develop our understanding of not only communication as a whole, but more specifically interpersonal communication, there are some basic principles of communication that will lay the groundwork for our exploration in the chapters ahead. In this section we will discuss how communication is learned and then we will focus on the continuous, unrepeatable, irreversible nature of communication.

Communication Is Learned

While we are born with the capacity to communicate, communication is not innate to humans, rather it is learned. We have already talked about how communication is symbolic and dependent on the culture and context in which it takes place. How we make meaning from the symbols that we use is learned both formally and informally. When babies move from being vocal to verbal they begin the process of connecting symbols to items and ideas. This happens both formally when parents and caregivers teach children specific words and phrases, and informally as they observe what is happening around them and incorporate that knowledge. For example, one of the first things we taught our son when he was learning to use some simple words was the difference between “all done” and “more” so that he could express his desire when playing, eating, etc. There is nothing inherent about the letters m-o-r-e that means “I would like to continue.” Instead, this shared understanding of the word is learned when we are given additional helpings of food or allowed to extend our play time.

In addition to formal teaching, communication is also learned informally through observation and engagement with the world around us. Once a child is in school they are learning communication not just in the classroom but from their peers. This communication is no less valid than what they learn from their teachers. Both illustrate the fundamental principle that communication is learned.

Communication Is Continuous

In addition to being learned, communication is also continuous. We are always communicating. In fact, we cannot *not* communicate. While much of our communication is intentional, a lot of communication is unintentional. Whether or not communication has occurred is not always up to the person doing the communicating. When a student is sitting in our classroom and they yawn, they are probably not sending us a specific message. But if we see the yawn and start to think that they are bored and uninterested in what we are talking about, communication has occurred. In fact, our very existence communicates. What we wear, how we style our hair, our posture, where we are in the environment—all of these things are communicating to those around us. This shows us how communication is always happening, whether we intend to or not. Communication is continuous.



Figure 1.2.1 [Yawn](#), [Miiikka Luotio](#), [Unsplash](#)

Communication Is Unrepeatable

Communication is also unrepeatable. When we say that communication is unrepeatable, what we mean is that we can never reproduce the same exact communication twice. Even if we deliver the same message, other aspects—such as our tone, the environment we are in, or the context in which we are speaking—will be different, so the communication will be different. Heraclitus, an ancient Greek philosopher, said that no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man. Communication is the same way, because we are always communicating—and the context, our emotional state, even

internal factors like hunger or fatigue are contending with our words. These various aspects of communication are constantly flowing like the river, so even if we wanted to repeat a communication event we could not, just like we could not step in the same river twice. There will always be variation in our communication.

Communication Is Irreversible

Finally, in addition to being continuous and unrepeatable, communication is also irreversible. If you have ever watched *Law and Order* or another similar show you may have heard a judge say, “the jury will disregard.” In non-lawyer terms what the judge is doing is telling the jury to forget about the evidence they just heard because it is inadmissible. We don’t know about you, but this has always struck me as odd. Obviously the jury doesn’t just forget what they heard. Now that they know it, there is no way for them to “un-know” it. Once we communicate, we cannot undo it; what was communicated is permanently out in the world. This principle is particularly important when it comes to self-disclosure, or the sharing of personal or private information with another person that includes expression of your observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs in relationships. Once you share information about yourself you cannot take it back. If you tell a friend that you have romantic feelings for them and they don’t reciprocate those feelings, you can’t just go back to the way things were before you share that information. The communication is permanent, and in this case it has altered your relationship in an irreversible way. This permanence has taken on even more importance with the growth of communication technology. When we send a text, direct message (DM), or email, not only is the communication irreversible in the sense that we can’t take it back, but it is also literally permanent because there are saved copies of it. That communication can be shared over and over again beyond our initial communication; even if we delete the original, it is never completely gone. This isn’t meant to scare you, but to help you understand the impact that language can have. To fully understand interpersonal communication and its impact on our lives, we will start by discussing communication models.

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1.3: Models of Communication

Linear Model

There are many models of communication, and there are many components within these models that will be discussed in detail throughout this chapter.

One of the earliest models of communication in the Western world was the **linear model of communication**, which shows that a communication event took place. It contains one sender of the message and the message itself being sent to one receiver, as shown in Figure 1.3.1. The message is encoded (created) by the sender and sent out via the channel, then received by the receiver. This model does not include the concept of feedback as an integral component. One of the criticisms of the linear model is that it lacks the component feedback and the idea that meaning is created amongst communicators.

Figure 1.1
Linear Model of Communication



Figure 1.3.1: Linear Model of Communication on [Public Speaking](#)

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Interactional Model

Over time the linear model has evolved into the **interactional model of communication**. This newer model takes into account that for there to be a sender of communication, there needs to be a receiver who takes an active role in the communication event. The interactional model of communication, as shown in Figure 1.3.2, has both the sender and receiver actively using feedback so that communication is no longer seen as simply linear. However, this model lacks the co-creation of meaning that takes place in true communication interactions.

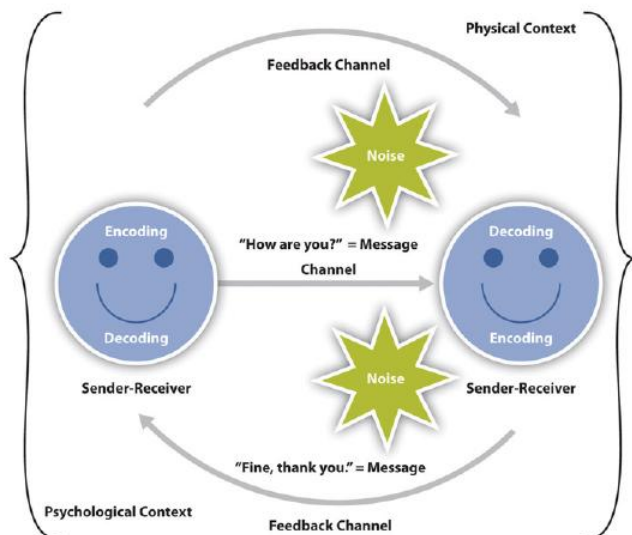


Figure 1.3.2 [Interactional Model of Communication](#) on [Survey of](#)

[Human Communication](#) is licensed under [CC BY 3.0](#)

When a pilot is getting ready to take off, they must listen to Air Traffic Control (ATC) on their radio to hear what is happening on the runway. When they are ready to take off, they will press a button inside the cockpit to send a request to ATC for clearance. When they are done, they have to release the button so they can hear the response from ATC. If they continue to hold down the button, they won't be able to receive a message and ATC won't be able to hear any other messages. The communication between

pilots and ATC is linear; it can only go one way. You can either send or receive a message; you cannot do both. For a long time this is how we thought about human communication. There is a **sender** (the pilot), who encodes a **message** (“request takeoff”) and sends it via a **channel** (radio) to the **receiver** (ATC), who then decodes the message. While this might be an accurate way to describe a two-way radio conversation, it is not an accurate reflection of human communication in general. When the pilot is sending a message to ATC, the pilot is also receiving messages simultaneously from a co-pilot or other crew. Likewise, the ATC contact is managing a number of different aircraft as well as coworkers in the tower. Communication is not linear. We are simultaneously sending and receiving, encoding and decoding, and managing several channels across contexts, all while we try to block out noise. Today, we have moved past this linear model of communication to embrace a transactional model.

Transactional Model

The current **transactional model of communication** was created to showcase the entirety of what humans experience when we communicate with one another, as shown in Figure 1.3.3.

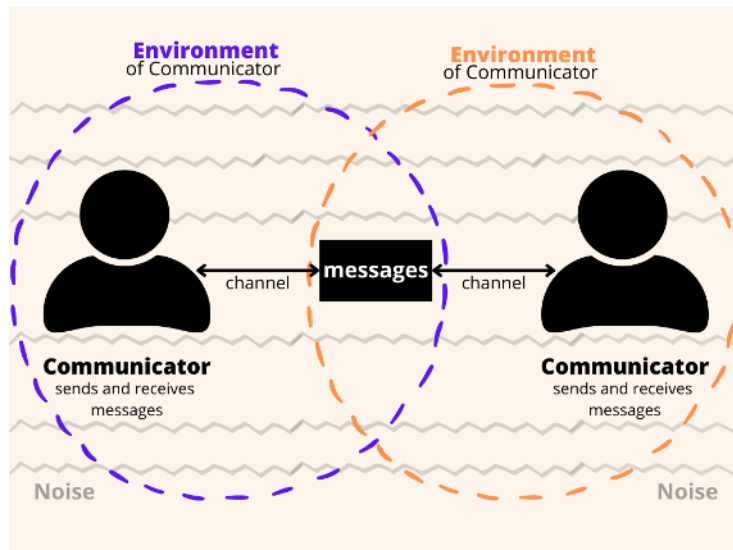


Figure 1.3.3 Transactional Model of Communication by

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The transactional model better acknowledges the complex nature of communication. Let’s take some time to break down the individual parts. First, rather than identifying the individual parties as sender and receiver, the transactional model simply refers to the parties involved as **communicators**.

Communicators

The communicators are simultaneously encoding and decoding throughout the exchange. **Encoding** occurs when an individual constructs a message using symbols; **decoding** happens when someone attempts to interpret the message. We create messages in our heads and then decide how to share those messages with others. Simultaneously, we are taking in messages from our communication partners, and trying to derive meaning from their feedback. The concepts of noise and feedback must taken into account as this occurs. The transactional model shows how meaning is co-created and feedback is at the core of shared meaning as all communicators are acting as senders and receivers in a synchronized manner.

Take for instance a scenario where you have come home from work and your roommate is home. You are tired but the monthly bills will be late if they are not paid. You make eye contact with your roommate and verbally ask your roommate if they have a minute. You have already begun the transaction of communication. In this scenario you are both communicators. You use verbal and nonverbal means of communicating. You knew it was imperative to discuss the bills and your mind started to create or **encode** messages. While you made eye contact and verbalized a message, your roommate was actively communicating with you. Did they make eye contact? What did this say to you? We are actively decoding and encoding simultaneously. **Decoding** in this scenario may be lack of eye contact or focused eye contact. We are attempting to make meaning from messages we receive while creating messages or responses. The feedback we give can be verbal and nonverbal. Perhaps your roommate had a tone that you interpret as irritated, which then changes how you respond. This message negotiation helps us co-create meaning. Understanding how each role in the model affects communication can help us to understand our communication and how to become behaviorally flexible and thereby competent communicators.

Message

The **message** is the meaning or content that one communicator is attempting to get the other to understand. The message can be verbal or nonverbal. A Verbal message is one that uses language. When a customer walks into a coffee shop and the barista says “good morning,” they are using language to express their message. Verbal messages can be spoken or written. If the message is nonverbal then there is an absence of language. When the customer walks into the coffee shop and the barista waves their hand, they have conveyed a similar message nonverbally because no language was used. Often the message contains both: for example, if they wave and say “good morning,” the message is both verbal and nonverbal.

Channel

In order for a communicator to send a message they must use a channel. The **channel** is how a message moves from one communicator to another, through different mediums of communication that extend the richness or leanness of the message. In the previous example the channel is face-to-face. This channel is the richest because it allows for all kinds of messages. We can hear, see, smell, touch, etc. so we can send all kinds of different messages. Every other channel limits the kinds of messages that we can send. For example, you could place a coffee order online through an app on your phone. In this case, you won’t talk to the barista or see them wave or smile, but they will still get your specific order. Technology has vastly expanded the number of different channels that we have to communicate with one another. For instance, after you pick up your coffee you can snap a picture and post it on Instagram or text a friend to show them how your name was misspelled. Each of these channels influences the kinds of messages and the potential communicators. The relationship between these different components of communication will be something we return to as we learn more about interpersonal communication.

Feedback

Feedback is a large part of how we co-create understanding by negotiating meaning, clarifying messages, and adding to our messages. We do this verbally and nonverbally. This occurs in face-to-face communication and in computer-mediated communication, or communication via electronic means. That may sound odd at first, but let’s say that you sent an important text message to your roommate about getting their share of the rent transferred today to avoid the rent being late. Your normally responsive roommate does not respond for hours. How might you interpret this feedback? In Chapter 5, you will learn about the nonverbal elements of communication, and more in-depth examples will show how feedback plays a crucial role in interpersonal communication.

Context

Communication requires communicators, at least one message, and a channel—but to limit the complexities of communication to just these three aspects would not give us a complete understanding of what communication truly is. Communication does not take place in a vacuum. Every time we communicate, we do so within larger contexts while also managing noise. We cannot separate the message and the channel from the larger contexts that the communicators are in. Each communication encounter is situated in a relational, environmental, and cultural **context** that impacts not only the individual people, but the communication itself.

Relational Context

When we communicate, there is a relational component involved that affects various aspects of the interaction, such as the message we send, the way we send it, and how the other person receives and interprets the message. The **relational context** is the relationship between the communicators that influences the other aspects of communication. While not all communication may seem to have a relational component involved, even a lack of relationship is part of the relational context and impacts the way we will communicate.

Relational contexts impact our communication in various ways. For example, If you miss a day of class, you might reach out to a classmate via text: “Hey, did I miss anything?” That same communication with your instructor would be very different because of the relationship between a student and professor. When you reach out to your professor, you might do so face-to-face or via email, and you might start by referring to them by name rather than “hey.” Because of the contextual nature of these relationships, peer-to-peer versus student-to-professor, we tend to treat the message differently because of the social norms and rules we have been taught growing up. For instance, we may show a small amount of respect to the instructor, including more detailed descriptions of why we missed class, and ask permission to turn in work late — as compared to texting our peers, where we might not feel the same level of responsibility to give that much detail.

While the relationship influences communication, the relational context will also be different for each communicator. Again, this will influence not only the content of the message, but also how the message is delivered. For example, one of the authors, as a

teenager often used curse words at home when talking to their mother, because it was seen as acceptable in their relationship and within their family. However, a lot of their peers were shocked when they found this out. They would never dare use curse words with their parents. While the relational communication with the author's mother was different than other peers had with their parental relationships, it doesn't mean one version of the communication was "wrong" and one was "right." They were different given the different and varying relational contexts involved.

While there are some generalities regarding what may be socially acceptable for certain relationships and relational context, our individual relationships are unique and therefore so is the communication they have.

Environmental Context

Where we communicate also influences our communication. The **environmental context** includes the setting, the circumstance, the situation, etc. that influence communication. Since this context can include a variety of situational factors, it has an impact upon the complex nature in which our communication takes place. The environmental context affects the communication interaction by helping or hindering the communicators effectiveness in creating and responding to the messages.

If you wanted to have a serious conversation with a friend or significant other, it wouldn't make sense to invite them out to a loud restaurant with live music. That kind of conversation would be better suited in a quiet and more intimate setting. This way the two of you could discuss the serious matter in private, where you wouldn't have to worry about people overhearing, and you could be more forthcoming. You could hear each other well and make sure you are paying attention, invested in the conversation, and not distracted by what's around you.

The circumstance of the communication encounter also dictates the appropriate nonverbal communication that is used. Take, for example, the appropriate attire one might wear to a funeral. In Western cultures like in the United States, family and friends in mourning will typically wear dark colors such as black, whereas, in East Asian cultures such as in Cambodia, white is the appropriate color worn to celebrate the reincarnation and circle of life of the person who has passed. Wearing white to a Western funeral or wearing black to an East Asian funeral would not be expected given the cultural norms of this type of event. The attire we wear and our appearance work as tools within our nonverbal communication to create meaning.

Cultural Context

Throughout the various relational contexts we may find ourselves in, and the various environments those relationships are happening in, the **cultural context** is always influencing our communication as well. **Culture** is defined as a group of people who share values, beliefs, norms, and a common language. Due to this shared way of thinking and behaving, people from the same culture often share similar perspectives on the world. Cultural context includes these learned perceptions of the world. What we find effective and/or appropriate in a given situation is greatly influenced by and influenced from our culture and cultural identity.

Some of the most basic understandings of culture and cultural context can be found in research conducted by Professor Geert Hofstede on cultural dimensions, which showcase six ways in which a culture's values, needs, and social behaviors are analyzed (Cho et. al, 2019). The six value dimensions that Hofstede established from their research are Collectivism versus Individualism, Nurturing versus Achievement, Power Distance (high or low), Uncertainty Avoidance (high or low), Time Orientation (long-term versus short-term), and Indulgence versus Restraint. The six value dimensions are explained in more detail in the sidebar titled "Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions."

Hofstede proposed that to understand how a particular culture utilizes communication, it is important to understand where its social behaviors lie on these dimensions. With regard to our understanding of interpersonal communication, these cultural dimensions are important building blocks in understanding the cultural context we may face when interacting within our relationships.

Cultural dimensions can be important in romantic relationships, where couples from two different cultures may have to learn each other's cultural norms in order to understand the ways their partner's family dynamics function as compared to their own. They can be also found in friendships, where each friend must respect and accept certain boundaries in the relationship because of their cultural differences, and in family relationships, where elder family members expect a certain level of respect and honor from younger generations. In order to promote understanding of our interpersonal relationships, fundamental understanding of our cultural differences is key.

Through dissecting the interpersonal scenarios that happen in our everyday life, we will explore the intersection between the relational context, environmental context, and most importantly, the cultural context to showcase the complex ways in which we communicate with others. While becoming a competent communicator includes a high amount of awareness, understanding, knowledge, and skill, it can help us build confidence and help to strengthen our relationships.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

The cultural dimensions are an excellent tool in beginning to analyze the different identity and cultural perspectives through a communicative lens. They allow us a small glimpse into the unique characteristics that make up the values, traditions, rituals, and practices of various cultures around the world. But just like each person is unique, so too is our understanding of cultural identity. It is difficult to place absolutes on human behavior, and therefore impossible to put absolutes on how someone's cultural identity will be displayed. While Hofstede's cultural dimensions are a beginning step in understanding interpersonal communication through a cultural lens, there are many more exciting steps to take along our learning journey.

Collectivism versus Individualism

The level of individual or group needs practiced within a culture. Collectivistic cultures are guided by collaborative support, interdependence, tight-knit large family structures, and a "we" identity. Individualistic cultures are guided by independence, autonomy, individuality, and the prioritization of immediate family structures over extended family structures.

Nurturing versus Achievement

The level of cooperation or competition practiced within a culture. Nurturing-based cultures are guided by concern for people and their well-being, emphasizing relationships and support. Achievement-based cultures are guided by markers of success such as material gain or status, and emphasize personal responsibility and stereotypical gender roles.

Power Distance (High or Low)

The level of, or distribution of, resources within a culture and the acceptance of those patterns of distribution from members of the culture. A high-power-distance culture emphasizes and accepts differences in status, title, hierarchy and authority. Cultures with low power distance have more equal divisions of power and do not put significance in titles, status, hierarchies, or authority.

Uncertainty Avoidance (High or Low)

The level to which a culture expects and accepts predictability, rules, regulations, and guidelines. A culture with high uncertainty avoidance will emphasize the need for rules and regulations. These cultures will find confidence in following guidelines and erring on the side of caution. A culture with low uncertainty avoidance will be more comfortable with variability, vagueness in rules or guidelines, riskiness, and adventure.

Time Orientation (Long-Term versus Short-Term)

The positionality of a culture's understanding of time being future-oriented or present-oriented. A culture with long-term orientation will be focused on instilling value in generational wisdom of elders, long-term relationships, and persistence as important to goal achievement. A culture with short-term time orientation focuses on short-term goals, having high respect for past traditions, and creating quick and efficient results.

Indulgence versus Restraint

The level to which a culture embodies the goals and virtues of personal happiness. A culture that is indulgent will be focused on individual satisfaction through leisure and personal freedom. A culture that values restraint emphasizes self-control and strict social norms, and individual freedoms like leisure are not valued as much as hard work and dedication.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you identify where you think you might fall within any of these cultural dimensions? Name the dimension and explain why.
2. Do you think having multiple cultural identities (for example, identifying as a Mexican American) will impact where you are in any one of these dimensions? Explain.
3. Have you had an instance where you can now see how a cultural dimension might have impacted your communication with someone in your life? Share your experience and the outcome of that interaction.

Noise



Figure 1.3.4 Loud by Elyas Pasban, Unsplash

Noise is the last part of the communication model. Noise is interesting because we do not need noise to communicate, but we cannot communicate without it. Noise is always present. **Noise** refers to anything that interrupts the communication process and prevents the message getting from one communicator to the other.

Physical Noise

Physical noise is anything in our environment that is loud enough to prevent one communicator from hearing the other. If you are at a large sporting event there is going to be a lot of physical noise that will interfere with your communication with the friend sitting next to you. In this case you will probably have to raise your voice to make sure they can hear you over the roar of the crowd, or the noise of the buzzer, etc. However, if you are texting with someone who is not with you, the loud noise wouldn't necessarily interfere with your conversation. Physical noise can interfere with the communication differently depending on the channel.

Psychological Noise

When we communicate, we not only have to manage the interference from cognitive noise, but we also have to keep from being distracted by our own internal noise. **Psychological noise** is noise within ourselves. For example, if you are reading a book but at the same time you are thinking about where you are going to meet up with friends later that night, your communication is being affected by psychological noise. You can physically read the whole page but not really decode the message within the page's content because you are distracted by your thoughts. Another example could be when you are walking into class and you receive a text message from a friend that you haven't heard from in a while. But because you are in class, you can't check your phone right away. So instead of being able to concentrate on the lecture, you are just thinking about what the text message could say. That message has now created psychological noise.

Physiological Noise

We also have physiological noise. This relates to our bodies on a physical level. Sometimes our bodies speak to us and that can be distracting. For instance, have you ever slept in a way that when you woke up your back or neck hurt? That discomfort may stay with us for hours and that prevents us from active listening or even taking in messages from other communicators. Maybe we have a cast on a broken bone and the itchy nature of that cast is consistently distracting. Any physical distraction that prevents us from taking in our communication partners' messages is considered **physiological noise**. Similarly, if you are sitting in class while the instructor is speaking but you are hungry because you didn't eat breakfast, your body's needs create thoughts that interfere with your ability to receive the message—and once again noise has impeded communication. This example shows both psychological and physiological noise both interfering with communication being received and understood.

Cultural Noise

Lastly, we have cultural noise. **Cultural noise** includes the barriers that exist among people from different cultural groups. This can range from speaking different languages, differences in meaning of nonverbal cues, or differences in cultural dimensions that create misunderstanding within relationships. Cultural noise creates obstacles in meaning that can become problematic in receiving messages accurately and appropriately. One of the most difficult aspects of cultural noise is when we are unaware that it is impacting our ability to be competent in our communication, or when we are unaware that the cultural noise is present within the environment. For example, an American individual is interviewing for a company where the boss conducting the interview is Filipino. While the company resides in the United States, the boss identifies as collectivistic and finds value in creating a team that

focuses on collaboration and group goal setting. The American interviewing for the company identifies as individualistic, and sees their greatest strengths as their self-reliance, freethinking, and having strong initiative. The individualistic person interviewing with the collectivistic boss may not understand the cultural noise that is being created within this situation by highlighting aspects of their work ethic and ability to do the job in ways that are not culturally valued by the person they are speaking to. This cultural noise creates miscommunication between the interviewer and interviewee in a way that would have negative outcomes of them not feeling this job was the right fit, while the interviewee doesn't get a chance to explain their ability and eagerness for teamwork.

Noise is always present in communication, but different types of noise interact with various channels and messages differently. No matter what noise is present, we must learn to manage it if we are going to communicate effectively. Now that you have a better understanding of the individual components of communication, we can turn our attention to the principles of communication.

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1.4: Interpersonal Communication Fulfills Our Needs

Why Study Interpersonal Communication?

Studying interpersonal communication is important for several different reasons. First, as we mentioned at the start, we spend a significant amount of time communicating with others. Second, learning about interpersonal communication will help us be more effective communicators in our relationships. Third, exploring something from new perspectives will help us broaden our understanding of ourselves. Finally, improving our interpersonal communication will help us better understand the role that communication serves in our lives. Human beings rely fundamentally on communication to meet various needs. In this section we will talk specifically about physical, instrumental, social, and identity needs.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

We are human and therefore, we are singular. Intrapersonal communication is communication with the self, whereas interpersonal communication is between two people. Interpersonal communication is needed to fulfill our needs. Figure 1.4.1 showcases Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which describes and explains what our needs are and how they affect and drive our interpersonal communication.

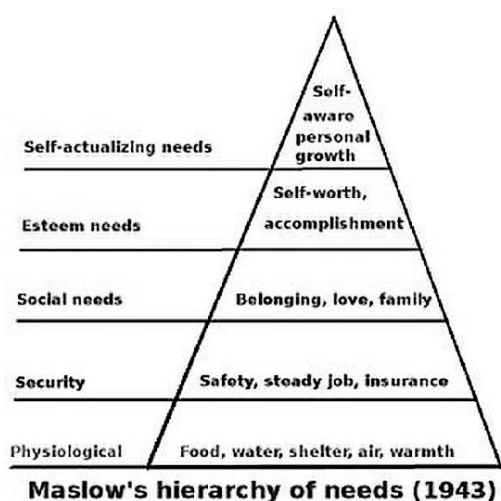


Figure 1.4.1 Maslow hierarchy of needs by Tomwsulcer on Wikipedia

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We have personal needs and to achieve fulfilling these needs, we use communication. The hierarchy of needs was created by Abraham Maslow. This model shows us ways we approach communication as a way to fulfill our human needs. We start at the bottom with our most prevalent and basic needs, our **physiological needs**. We need water and food before we can critically think about problem solving or if we are on track to our career of choice. Then we move to **security needs**. We need to have health (mental and physical) and feel safe before we can move onto social needs. **Social needs**, or needs for love and belonging, are how we connect to others. We have a physical and psychological need for affiliation and connection. When these needs are not met they may have negative effects on our development. Next are **esteem needs**. This category has evolved over time as we learn more about what helps us to achieve and be accomplished. Esteem needs have to do with our relationships to others (interpersonal communication) and ourselves (intrapersonal communication). The highest needs are **self-actualization needs**. These are the deep-seated goals we have for ourselves and are at the core of who we are and become over time.

In Maslow's model we move through our needs from the bottom of the pyramid to the top. It shows us is how we need to fulfill certain needs before other needs and goals can be attained. Despite the fact that we do not always achieve our needs in a linear fashion, this model shows us how our needs are built on and fulfilled by understanding other needs. In understanding where our needs lie, we can better prepare ourselves to reach achievement. This is predicated on the notion that we are individuals with our individual lived experience and culture. These components of our self-concept drive how we interpret and fulfill our needs.

Take for instance a scenario where we may be housing insecure. It would be difficult to worry about a career or success at work; however, a successful job would help our housing insecurity. When looking at the model, we start at the bottom of the pyramid and try to focus on how to move toward the top by fulfilling each of our needs. It is important to prioritize our needs. At times it is easy to become hard on ourselves and forget that our needs are unmet, which affects many aspects of our lives.

In Chapter 2, you will learn how the self-concept is formed and reinforced through interpersonal communication. Culture is a fundamental core of our self-concept. In looking at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is important to point out that interpersonal communication is not always hierarchical or unidirectional. However, Maslow does provide a framework for understanding our needs. Culture is how we understand ourselves and helps us to address our needs and how they are fulfilled.

Physical Needs

Communication is vital to our physical needs. **Physical needs** are those that keep our mind and body functioning. Communication helps us express our physical needs and identify when they are not being met. When a child tells a parent that they are hungry or tired they are using communication to help fulfill their physical needs.

Studies show that there is a link between mental health and physical health. In other words, people who encounter negative experiences, but are also willing to communicate those experiences, are more likely to have better mental and physical health. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many articles were written in magazines describing the decline in mental and physical health that people were experiencing due to a lack of communication. Almost all of us at one point or another felt a sense of loneliness or depression due to the lack of social interaction and physical proximity to other people. Research in health communication has shown time and time again that our ability to communicate with others not only benefits our mental health but also our physical health as well. Many health problems—both cognitive and functional—create stress, or are caused because of excess amounts of stress. One way to relieve these tensions and alleviate some of the physical symptoms that may occur is through open communication. It is vital for people to share what they feel, because if they keep their feelings bottled up, then they are more likely to suffer emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Instrumental Needs

Like physical needs, communication is fundamental to meeting our instrumental needs. **Instrumental needs** are those we engage in to complete daily tasks. When you show up to the classroom and ask a classmate if someone is sitting in the chair next to them, you are using communication to meet your instrumental needs. Instrumental needs account for much of our daily communication. Instrumental communication is evident in much of our workplace communication both with coworkers and clients/customers. We can also see it in our academic lives when we ask clarifying questions in class or send emails to instructors. It would not be possible to move through our lives without these instrumental conversations. In addition to the practical needs, communication is also influential to our well-being and sense of self.

Social Needs

Humans are social creatures; we need interaction with other humans to survive and thrive, and communication is fundamental to this social engagement. Relationships are communicative. We rely on communication to build, maintain, and ultimately to end relationships. Think about one of your good friends. Can you remember back to when you first met them? Who initiated the encounter? How did they do so? Was it face-to-face or online? Regardless of the setting or circumstance, you are only friends now because one of you initiated communication and the other reciprocated. When we communicate with others, we share a part of ourselves and over time what we are willing to share becomes more intimate. These interactions are what make our relationships. At their core relationships are communicative. We would not be able to have friends or romantic partners without communication, and without this social interaction we would not be fully human.

Solitary Confinement

The importance of social interaction cannot not be understated. The ability to engage with other people is fundamental to our physical and mental health. One area where we can see this reality play out is in the use of solitary confinement as a form of punishment. Former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy argued in a 2015 opinion that “years on end of near-total isolation exact a terrible price ... common side-effects of solitary confinement include anxiety, panic, withdrawal, hallucinations, self-mutilation, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The effects of social isolation are lethal. Even though people in solitary confinement comprise only 6% to 8% of the total prison population, they account for approximately half of those who die by suicide” (Herring, 2020). It is because of these effects that recent years have seen a renewed call to ban or severely restrict the use of solitary confinement in US prisons. The American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina along with the North Carolina Prisoner Legal Services is currently suing on behalf of several prisoners held in cells described as no bigger than a parking space for 22 to 24 hours a day (Waggoner, 2019). Another lawsuit was filed by Dennis Hope, who has spent 27 years in solitary confinement in a Texas prison. “His only human contact is with the guards who strip-search and

handcuff him before taking him to another enclosure to exercise, alone. He has had one personal phone call since 1994, when his mother died in 2013. He suffers from depression and paranoia and fears he is going insane.” His petition asks the Supreme Court to rule that such prolonged isolation is a violation of the Eighth Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment (Liptak, 2022). Some states have already restricted the use of such extreme measures with positive outcomes. For example, “assaults on employees at Colorado prisons dropped when the state reduced the use of solitary confinement and expanded access to mental health treatment” (Waggoner, 2019).

Discussion Questions

1. When has a lack of communication negatively affected you in your life?
2. After understanding the effects of solitary confinement, do you see isolation in our society (and therefore lack of communication) resulting in effects on the human body? Where do you see these effects as prevalent?

Identity Needs

Finally, communication is critical to our identity. Our sense of who we are is a reflection of how others see us. When someone tells you that you are funny, or smart, or attractive, you internalize these comments and they become a part of how you perceive yourself. An important part of our identity is being a Communication Studies instructor. We like teaching and we think we are good at it. This perception of ourselves is based on the communication that we have with our students. When students in our class are smiling and engaging, when they write comments on our evaluations, etc. this helps to reinforce our perception of ourselves and our identity as an instructor. Communication is also how we present ourselves to others. The biography that we have in our digital classroom on the university learning management system (LMS) allows us to present ourselves to our students by sharing aspects of our identity that we think will help us connect. We also share our identity nonverbally by posting a picture online and by how we present ourselves in the physical classroom. Communication is influential in both developing and sharing our identities.



Figure 1.4.2 Physics Teacher, Tra Nguyen, Unsplash

Without communication we would not be able to meet our basic needs, so learning to be more proficient with communication will help us in our daily lives and with our relationships. Taking this course will help you become a more competent communicator, and we hope that will help you navigate these needs more easily and successfully. “Communicative competence is the ability to achieve communicative goals in a socially appropriate manner. It is organized and goal-oriented, i.e. it includes the ability to select and apply skills that are appropriate and effective in the respective context” (Kiessling & Fabry, 2021). You are already on the path to becoming a more competent communicator. As you learn more about the concept you will begin to see changes in your communication skills and behavior. Building communication competence is a life-long endeavor, and this course is just one part of that journey.

As you can see there are a number of reasons you should be excited to engage with this text and learn more about interpersonal communication. As we begin that process it is important that we have a shared language to talk about communication moving forward. The next section will lay out some of the key concepts of communication so that we can discuss interpersonal communication.

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1.5: Communication Competence

Learning Outcomes

1. Explain competence.
2. Distinguish between social appropriateness and personal effectiveness and their relationship to communication competence.
3. Identify characteristics of competence.

Defining Competence

Brian Spitzberg (2000) argued that **communication competence** involved being both appropriate and effective.¹³ **Appropriate** communication is what most people would consider acceptable behaviors. **Effective** communication is getting your desired personal outcome.

You might think about communicators who were appropriate but not effective and vice versa. The two characteristics go hand in hand. You need to have both to be considered competent. Think about coaches who might say horrible or inappropriate things to their players to motivate them. This may be viewed as highly effective to some, but possibly very inappropriate to others. Especially if you are not used to harsh language or foul language, then your perceptions could hinder how you feel about the speaker. At the same time, you might have individuals that are highly appropriate but are not effective. They may say the right things, but cannot get any results. For instance, imagine a mother who is trying over and over to get her child to brush their teeth. She might try praises or persuasive techniques, but if the child doesn't brush their teeth, then she is not accomplishing her goal. You truly need a balance between the two.

Understanding Competence

First of all, no one way of communicating will be best or most effective for everyone.. Think about the speakers that you know. Perhaps, some are more charismatic, humorous, assertive, and timid than others. Just as there are many types of speakers and speaking styles, there are different types of competent communicators. For example, a joke in one context might be hilarious, but that same joke might be very offensive in another context. What this tells us is that there is no guaranteed or definite method that will work in every situation. Communication that works in one context and not another depends on the culture and the characteristics of the person or persons receiving the message.

Moreover, we know that communication varies from one context to another. For instance, kindergarten teachers may be wonderful in a room full of five-year-olds, but if you asked them to present in a college classroom, they might get a little nervous because the situation is different. Some situations are better for certain speakers than others. Some people can rise to the occasion and truly deliver a memorable speech in a moment of crisis. However, if you asked them to do it again, they might not be able to do so because of the situational variables that influenced the speech. Some individuals are wonderful public speakers but are truly unable to communicate in interpersonal relationships and vice versa. These situations occur because some people feel more comfortable in certain settings than others. Hence, competency can vary depending on the type of communication.

Also, competence can be taught. The main reason why taking a communication course is so important is to be a better speaker. Hence, this is why many schools make it a requirement for college students. Think about an invention or idea you might have. If you can't communicate that idea or invention, then it will probably never come to fruition.

Characteristics of Competence

Now that you know more about competence, it is important to note that competent communicators often share many similar characteristics. Studies on competence illustrate that competent communicators have distinctive characteristics that differ from incompetent communicators. We will discuss a few of these characteristics in this section.

Skillful

First, many competent communicators are skillful. In other words, they use situational cues to figure out which approach might be best. Think about a car salesperson and about how she/he will approach a customer who is wanting to make a purchase. If the salesperson is too aggressive, then they might lose a sale. For that reason, they need to cater to their customer and make sure that they meet their customer's needs. The salesperson might directly approach the customer by simply saying, "Hi I'm Jamie, I would be happy to help you today," or by asking questions like, "I see you looking at cars today. Are you interested in a particular

model?”, or they could ask the customer to talk more by saying, “Can you tell me more about what you are looking for?” And perhaps, a salesperson could even compliment the customer. Each of these strategies illustrates how a salesperson can be skillful in meeting the customer’s expectations and, at the same time, fulfilling their own goals. Just like a chef has many ingredients to use to prepare a dish, a competent communicator possesses many skills to use depending on the situation.

Adaptable

Second, competent communicators are adaptable. I am sure you might have seen a speaker who uses technology like PowerPoint to make their presentations. What happens if technology fails, does the speaker perform poorly as well? Competent communicators would not let technology stop them from presenting their message. They can perform under pressure and any type of constraint. For instance, if the communicator is presenting and notices that the audience has become bored, then they might change up their presentation and make it more exciting and lively to incite the audience.

Involved

Third, competent communicators can get others involved. Competent communicators think about their audience and being understood. They can get people excited about a cause or effort and create awareness or action. Think about motivational speakers and how they get people encouraged to do something. Competent communicators are also persuasive; they have the skill to involve their audience to do something such as protest, vote, or donate. Think about politicians who make speeches and provide so many interesting statements that people are more inclined to vote in a certain direction.

Understands Their Audience

Fourth, competent communicators can understand their audience. Keeping with the same example of politicians, many of them will say things like, “I know what it is like not to be able to feed your family, to struggle to make ends meet, or not to have a job. I know what you are going through. I understand where you are coming from.” These phrases are ways to create a bond between the speaker and the receiver of the message. Competent communicators can empathize and figure out the best way to approach the situation. For instance, if someone you know had a miscarriage and truly has wanted to have kids for a long time, then it would probably be very inconsiderate to say, “just try again.” This comment would be very rude, especially if this person has already tried for a long time to have a child. A competent communicator would have to think about how this person might feel and what words would genuinely be more appropriate to the situation.

Cognitive Complexity

Fifth, knowing how to say the same thing in different ways is called **cognitive complexity**. You might think that the only way to express affection would be to say, “I love you” or “I care about you.” What other ways could you express affection? This skill is being cognitively complex. Think about a professor you might have had that used different methods to solve the same problem. Your professor might say, “To solve this problem, you might try method A, and if that doesn’t work, you could try method B, and method C is still another way.” This illustrates that you don’t have to say things one way, you could say it in different ways. This helps your audience understand your message better because you provided different ways to comprehend your intended message.

Self-Monitoring

The last characteristic of competent communicators is the ability to monitor yourself. Also known as **self-monitoring**. This is the ability to focus on your behavior, and, in turn, determine how to behave in the situation. In every speaking situation, most people will have an internal gauge of what they might say next or not say. Some people never give any thought to what they might say to others. These individuals would have low self-monitoring skills, in which what you see is what you get. You could have high self-monitors that pay attention to every little thing, how they stand, where their eyes move, how they gesture, and maybe even how they breathe. They pay attention to these minor details because they are concerned with how the message might come across to others. Competent communicators have a balance of high and low self-monitoring, in which they realize how they might be perceived, but they are not overly focused on all the details of themselves.

Key Takeaways

- Competence involves being both appropriate and effective.
- Appropriateness refers to communicative behaviors that are socially acceptable behaviors; whereas, effectiveness refers to communicative behaviors that help achieve a desired outcome.
- Characteristics of competence involve skill, adaptability, involvement, complexity, and empathy.

Exercises

- Who do you think are competent/incompetent communicators? Why?
- How would you rate yourself as a competent speaker? Give a brief impromptu speech, then ask someone to rate you based on the characteristics of competence. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Using cognitive complexity skills, think about all the ways you can express affection/ hatred. Talk about how these ways would be interpreted by others – positively/ negatively and why? Does it matter if the other person was a different sex, culture, gender, ethnicity, age, or religion? How and why

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Culture and Communication

Culture and communication are inseparably intertwined as “language and culture are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate, and understand reality” (Vygostky, 1968, p.39). Culture influences our worldview, beliefs, and what we consider normal. However, as we all know from experience, many differences among cultures exist, which can often cause miscommunication and conflict. In this chapter, we will define culture and intercultural communication, explore eight ways in which cultural groups differ, discuss how a dialectical approach can be applied to intercultural communication, and address ways to improve communication competence.

Learning Objectives

- How do cultures differ? And how do those differences affect intercultural interactions?
- How can we improve intercultural communication competence? And for what reasons?

Successful students will be able to

- identify the definitions of culture and intercultural communication
- recognize 8 cultural variables
- explain four aspects of a dialectical approach to intercultural communication
- explain three aspects of intercultural competence

[2.1: Defining Culture and Intercultural Communication](#)

[2.2: How Identities are Built](#)

[2.3: Aspects of Identity](#)

[2.4: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions](#)

[2.5: Judging and Treating Others Fairly](#)

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2.1: Defining Culture and Intercultural Communication

In this section, we will define culture and explain what culture, co-culture, and intercultural communication is.

Definition of Culture



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Performance: In many ways, culture is like a theater performance: there are parts we see and parts we don't see. On-stage, we can see the actors, hear their words, and watch the action. But backstage there is a lot going on that we never see and are not aware of. What we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch is only a small part of what is actually happening. This is why it is often so difficult to say what is specifically making us feel uncomfortable or frustrated when we are in a foreign culture. Another way to think about culture is like an iceberg: one-third visible (on-stage) and two-thirds below the water (backstage).

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 among members of a group. Unpacking the definition, we can see that culture shouldn't be conceptualized as stable and unchanging. Culture is "negotiated," because it is dynamic, and cultural changes can be traced 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 deviation from and resistance to those patterns by individuals and subgroups within a culture, which is why cultural patterns change over time. Lastly, this 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.



(Image: Laura B, [Pixabay license](#))

Culture is often invisible to us and we tend to take it for granted. As the saying goes, ‘fish don’t necessarily know they are in water because they are completely immersed in it.’ Our cultural environment is difficult to perceive until we are exposed to something different. Just as a fish out of water is suddenly aware of what it normally lives inside of, we gain awareness of our own culture when we are exposed to situations and people that are unfamiliar and different.

Culture, Co-culture, and Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication occurs when people with different cultural and co-cultural groups interact with each other. Most people tend to think of intercultural communication in terms of communicating with someone from a different country. However, even within one geographic location, both a dominant culture and multiple co-cultural groups exist. The dominant culture is created by the group who is in power, runs the country, and makes laws and policies. The attitudes, beliefs, values, patterns of thinking, and communicative behaviors of the dominant group are the ones that have become normalized and are often viewed as ‘ideal’ or superior. For example, what is considered ‘proper’ English, acceptable hairstyles, and business attire have all been defined by the dominant group.

Historically, in the U.S., this dominant group has been comprised of wealthy, white, heterosexual, Christian, males. However, other co-cultural groups exist based on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, ableness, generation etc. Because of this, intercultural communication actually exists on a continuum. On the low end, we might be communicating with someone of the same race and social class, but they may be a different gender. On the high end, we may be communicating with someone who is from a completely different geographic location, gender, race, generation, etc.

Culture and co-culture(s) influence our behaviors, values, beliefs, patterns of thinking, and perception of our environment. Cultural and co-cultural identities distinguish groups of people from one another. This is important because group differences are often what make us feel uncomfortable in interactions and can lead to miscommunication and conflict. Moreover, in all cultures, co-cultural membership based on factors like gender or race can work to either privilege or disadvantage members of that particular group. Being part of the dominant group generates certain privileges that members of the nondominant group do not get and create unequal power dynamics in our communicative interactions. However, by recognizing privilege and studying the common differences that exist across cultures in terms of beliefs, values, attitudes, and patterns of thinking, we can better reflect on our own culture and co-culture, view it through a different lens, and improve our intercultural communication competence.



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Intercultural Communication: Intercultural communication exists on a continuum. On the low end, we might be communicating with someone of the same race and social class, but they may be a different gender. On the high end, we may be communicating with someone who is from a completely different geographic location, gender, race, generation, etc.

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2.2: How Identities are Built

The same factors that make intercultural communication competence today so relevant – increased human mobility and open, worldwide communication networks – also have led to the formation of personal identities that are more varied and dynamic than ever before. It is of course always been the case that as we grow, we evolve. From the narrow starting point of the family, we enter into ever wider social circles, as we attend school, make friends, start working, and find a partner. Added to this traditional model now is the increasing likelihood of exposure to individuals from different cultures. This modifies how we think, how we view the world, how we react to different situations, which, in turn, adds a variety of flavors to how others see us and how we see ourselves, i.e. our identity. Today, part of that process may well happen virtually, through online social networks and media. More exposure to different kinds of people does not necessarily mean acceptance of growing social diversity. Unfortunately, the result can be increased prejudice and intolerance. In this unit we will be looking at identity formation, the roles of ethnic and social groups, and issues surrounding stereotyping.

Laina Dawes: Identity assumptions sometimes go astray

Laina's identity comes from many different sources, growing up in a rural part of Canada where there were few if any other blacks, being adopted into a white family, and being a woman in love with heavy metal music. Her situation demonstrates that personal identity doesn't necessarily match expectations based on stereotypes, for example, that all black people prefer hip-hop.

[Audio](#) / [Transcript](#) of NPR story about Laina



Cultural identity

Our identities are formed in a variety of ways. As we grow, we develop characteristics and personality traits that set us apart as individuals. Some of those are biological, such as skin color, height, hair color, etc. We may be shy or outgoing, enjoy playing sports or prefer computer games. Each of us has a personal identity which develops and changes over time. Some of our individual characteristics we develop on our own, but many aspects of our personality and preferences develop through contact with others. The starting point is the family into which we are born. Our family typically supplies our initial **cultural identity** – the values, beliefs, and behaviors inherited from belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group. Cultural identities provide a default framework for how we interact with others. That doesn't mean that we continue to have this perspective throughout our lives.

Cultural identities are dynamic and can change with one's ongoing life experiences. This may be an individualized change or could reflect changes in views embraced by one of the cultural groups to which we belong. In the US, for example, a significant shift in attitudes towards Muslims occurred after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Many US citizens developed a new, often negative opinion of anyone perceived to be Muslim or from an Arab country. Major shifts have occurred in recent years in many countries in regard to same-sex marriage. It is certainly not the case that all citizens of those countries have changed their attitudes; after all, individuals have free will and the ability to adopt differing views.

It may be also that one's views may differ from those of the cultural mainstream through the link one has to a particular subculture. This might be a traditionally identified minority group – based on ethnic, racial, or language characteristics – or might be a group we belong to out of personal interest or through other relationships such as employment. Minority groups – or **microcultures** – are traditionally characterized as being distinct in several different ways (Neuliep, 2012). There may be distinctive physical characteristics, such as skin color or dress. Sometimes, microcultures practice in-group marriage, known as **endogamy** (as opposed to **exogamy** – marrying outside your group). Often microcultures receive unequal treatment and face discrimination in a variety of areas, including housing and employment. The social status and rights of microcultures vary considerably depending on time and place. At one time in the US, Irish immigrants were discriminated against, but they (and other European immigrants) have long since become part of the mainstream white culture in the US.

To indicate that subgroups exist within and must interact with the majority cultures, some use the term **co-culture** (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). The term is frequently used in the context of the power discrepancy between co-cultures and the dominant culture, highlighting the marginalization and disenfranchisement of many minority groups. In using the terms majority and minority, we are referencing a group's relative influence and power within a society, rather than numerical superiority. In some societies, such as in colonized countries, the largest number of inhabitants may not hold the levers of power, which may be in the hands of a smaller, elite group. In apartheid South Africa (before 1994), for example, the overwhelming majority of inhabitants were black, but the government, economic institutions, and school systems were all under the control of the minority white South Africans. One could point as well to similar discrepancies between numerical superiority and access to political, social, and economic power in Saddam Hussain's Iraq (Sunni versus Shi'a) or the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria (Alawi versus Sunni).

Cultural identities tend to be constructed differently depending on whether an individual is a member of a co-culture or a representative of the mainstream. Often, those in the majority population lack the social consciousness that typically accompanies being part of a minority. Members of the dominant culture typically will be happy with the social status quo. They are likely never to have been led or forced to examine their position or role in society, seeing themselves as "normal" or "regular" citizens. In the documentary film, the [Color of Fear](#) (Wah, 1994), the white US Americans identify themselves as "Americans", while those representing minority groups use hyphenated terms such as African-American, Mexican-American, or Chinese-American; those men have much more to say than their white counterparts about their cultural backgrounds. This is typical of the mainstream in the US: "People who are white know that they are white, but this is often translated as being just American. They do not have any experience understanding race and how it shapes our lives. They typically don't think about their whiteness, nor do they think about the privilege bestowed on them because of their race" (Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner & Schmitz, 2008, p. 29). In fact, white Americans may be reluctant to acknowledge that "white privilege" exists. Peggy McIntosh has put together a compelling list of examples of white privilege in the US (see sidebar). Unearned social and economic privilege is not unique to European-Americans; that phenomenon has parallels in many other countries, in which elite classes enjoy rights and advantages not available to all members of the society. Migrant workers in many countries are denied many of the benefits (education, housing, employment) afforded other sectors of society.

White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack

I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and time of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

[Note: the [full text](#) contains 50 items]

Members of a majority group may be unaware of the reality of life for minorities in their society. On the other hand, members of minority groups cannot ignore the dominant culture — they typically encounter aspects of that culture and its representatives on an everyday basis, as they go about their daily lives. The societal apparatus — education, housing, media, government, employment — is controlled by the mainstream population. Members of a minority are well aware of the situation and must adjust accordingly. It is likely, for instance, that in African-American families today, parents talk to their children (especially the boys) about how to interact with police officers. That is not likely to be a necessary conversation in white households. Members of a minority need to balance issues of adaptation and assimilation into the dominant culture with the need to retain identification with their own communities.

One of the issues with which microcultures often have to contend is language. The major institutions of a country — schools, government, industry — use predominantly or exclusively the language of the dominant culture. This means that members of a microculture who either speak a different language or use a dialectal variety of the standard language may be at a disadvantage. In fact, "**muted group theory**" suggests that those with less power in a society often have difficulty communicating effectively, as they must re-encode their thoughts to make them understood (Ardener, 1975). One response to this phenomenon is the creation of a

unique language. African American Vernacular English, or **Ebonics**, is an example of that (Perry & Delpit, 1998). **Spanglish** – **code-switching** between English and Spanish – is characteristic of many Latinos in the US (Stavans, 2004). In Germany *Kiezdeutsch* (also "kanaksprach") is a version of German that integrates Turkish terms (Freywald et al, 2011). Similar language hybrid phenomena can be observed in other cultures. We will be exploring issues around minority language use in chapter three.

Integration and Marginalization

To what extent microcultures remain separate or become integrated and eventually inseparable from the mainstream culture varies considerably. The metaphor popularly used for many years in the US was that of the melting pot, with the implication being that immigrant communities were to **assimilate**, or give up their cultural identities (and language) and adopt the mainstream European-American culture. In the US today there is increasing recognition of the right of minority groups to maintain aspects of their cultures of origin (Alba & Nee, 2009). This embrace of **pluralism** – with a more appropriate metaphor for the US being a garden salad or a mixed stew – is by no means universal. That is the case in other countries as well.

In the US, second and third generation immigrant families often have a quite different attitude toward their ethnic heritage than was the case for their parents or grandparents (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). They may express considerable interest and pride in that heritage, its customs, and language. The degree to which descendants of immigrant families or representatives of indigenous minorities are able to blend successfully their family/ethnic backgrounds into the dominant culture depends on the extent of social acceptance. Some groups have been systematically **marginalized**, that is, denied the same basic rights and privileges as granted to other populations. They may face discrimination in areas such as housing, access to education, or employment opportunities. Examples are the indigenous populations of North America or Australia, the Romani in Europe, the Palestinians in the Middle East, or the "Untouchables" (Lower Castes or *Dalit*) in India. There are as well counter-examples of societies, such as Canada, which have embraced multiculturalism, enabling newcomers to maintain their original cultural identities, as they adjust to the new Canadian environment (Peach, 2005).

Countries vary considerably in ethnic diversity. Japan and the Koreas, for example, are ethnically homogeneous, with small minority populations. That is characteristic as well of island nations, for understandable reasons. One of the main methodologies used to measure diversity is linguistic variation (Fearon, 2003). From that perspective, Papua New Guinea and South Africa rank particularly high in cultural diversity. That is the case as well for India, with 22 different languages and over 1500 officially recognized dialects. The cultural fabric of India (language, food habits, clothing, colors of houses, architecture, etc.) can vary tremendously from one region to another. The modern state of India, with its variety of cultures integrated into one political entity, is a byproduct of British colonialism. It was not uncommon for occupying colonial powers to construct arbitrary boundaries, determined by political and economic **hegemonic** interests rather than according to languages spoken or along traditional ethnic or tribal lines. This kind of forced political integration has led to conflict, as competing tribes or ethnic groups struggle for power, for example in Rwanda (1990-1994), Sudan (1955 to 1972), and Nigeria (1967-1970). Ethnic conflict is by no means limited to Africa. Tribal affiliations and religious differences have led to many conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere.



Figure 2.2.1: Women in Japan: a largely homogeneous country

Although European countries have tended to be largely homogeneous, there are exceptions such as Switzerland or Belgium. While the Swiss have managed to create a common national identity, which has largely shielded the country from strife among the linguistically and culturally diverse cantons, Belgium has not been so successful in national integration. The Flemish and French parts of the country have had considerable trouble cooperating politically and economically. Conflict has arisen as well in Latin America, with struggles of indigenous populations in Guatemala, Mexico, Columbia, and other countries for equal rights. In some

cases, ethnic strife has led to countries breaking apart into separate entities, such as happened in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s or in Sudan in 2011. Separatist movements have arisen in a number of countries, such as Catalonia in Spain or Scotland in the UK.

Just because a country is ethnically homogeneous, it does not mean that it will remain that way. Germany, for example, has traditionally been relatively homogeneous, but has seen several large waves of immigration which have made the population much more diverse. So-called "guest workers" (*Gastarbeiter*) were recruited in the 1950s and 1960s from Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Turkey to supply manpower for the growing post-war German economy (Herbert, 1990). Many of those workers and their families elected to resettle permanently in Germany. The large number of Turkish Germans has had a significant influence on German culture, with Germans of Turkish descent playing significant roles in politics, sports, entertainment and other areas. In 2015–2016, large numbers of refugees arrived in Germany, fleeing war, civil strife, and poverty in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Northern Africa. The substantial numbers of new arrivals placed stress on the ability of government agencies, churches, and citizen groups to provide sufficient services, such as housing and language training. As migrants are dispersed among different urban and rural areas in Germany, efforts to reach the different groups with information and training has been a challenge. One of the more successful methods that has been used is mobile technology (see sidebar). Not all Germans have welcomed the arrival of large numbers of refugees. Some refugee centers have been burned to the ground. Anti-immigrant movements such as PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamification of the West) have attracted popular support among some parts of the German population (Vorländer, Herold, & Schaller, 2015). As is the case in neighboring countries, that has also led to political changes, with a new anti-immigrant and anti-EU party, the Alternative for Germany (AFD), which in 2018 entered the German parliament. In France, the National Front has attracted large numbers of French voters unhappy with economic stagnation and with the perceived cultural changes in French society through the large numbers of immigrants from Northern Africa.

Smartphones and refugees

In Germany, the hoped-for destination of many refugees, a number of apps have been created targeting the immigrant population. The Goethe Institute, along with federal agencies dealing with immigration and employment, have created *Ankommen (Arrival)*, available in Arabic, English, Farsi, French, and German. As do other such apps, it is designed with minimal technical requirements, so as to be usable on older phones. It features three branched areas: German language study, German asylum procedures, and tips on living in Germany. Integreat offers a similar service for refugees in Germany. It is available in five languages and features information specific to one of the 80 German cities targeted. Daheim (*At Home*) offers a meeting platform for new arrivals and German natives, designed for language learning and intercultural exchange.

Godwin-Jones, 2017, p. 11

The extent to which members of microcultures integrate into the mainstream culture may depend on how that particular group arrived in the new country. This may have happened in a number of different ways: forced repatriation – as in the case of slavery –, voluntary immigration, for instance those seeking better job opportunities, or through refugee status, seeking protection from political persecution or dangerous living conditions. The integration process also depends on the nature of the group, and how similar or dissimilar its customs, language, and worldviews are to the mainstream culture. One of the central issues affecting the reception of recent migrants to Europe is that most are Muslims, while European countries are majority Christian. The difference in religion affects not only worship practices and religious doctrines but also social views, such as the role of women in society. Visibly different skin color or dress are likely to make integration, or even acceptance, into the mainstream culture potentially problematic. Diaspora communities tend to keep many customs and rituals from their places of origin. Indian families who migrated to Southern Africa, and from there to the UK, the USA, or Canada, may have never visited India, but still marry according to Indian customs. Yet, they also integrate Western customs, such as holding speeches at the wedding reception (A. Malik, personal communication, June 25, 2017).



Figure 2.2.2 PEGIDA demonstration in Dresden, Germany

The degree to which particular groups maintain cultural ties to their family places of origin differs significantly according to both the group and the nature of the destination culture. In the US, for example, many people of European ancestry have largely integrated culturally into the mainstream, and have lost most of their association with their ancestral homeland and may not even be aware of their family backgrounds. They may not know about the stigma which used to be attached to immigrants to the US from countries such as Ireland, Italy, or Germany. Some white US Americans may have a **symbolic ethnicity**, a largely voluntary affiliation with a particular ethnic group which only surfaces in particular contexts, as in the celebration of a holiday such as St. Patrick's Day or Oktoberfest. While many microcultures become segregated due to prejudicial treatment by the mainstream culture, as has historically been the case with African-Americans, some microcultures choose to remain apart. The Amish community in the US live apart from the non-Amish, with their religious beliefs leading them to reject many aspects of contemporary US culture. They dress differently, speak a German dialect, and shun modern technology. Because living in an Amish community isolates individuals so completely from mainstream US culture, young people are given an opportunity to experience the "English", i.e. non-Amish, world through a tradition called *rumspringa*.

Rumspringa: Amish youth exploring the world

In many communities, *Rumspringa* is a period when some Amish youth, boys more than girls, experience greater freedom. They are no longer under the control of their parents on weekends and, because they are not baptized, they are not yet under the authority of the church. During this time, many Amish youth adhere to traditional Amish behavior. Others experiment with "worldly" activities—buying a car, going to movies, wearing non-Amish clothes, buying a television.

Kraybill, 2016



Figure 2.2.3 Amish family in New York farming

Social Identity

While our national origin and ethnic background typically contribute substantially towards forming our individual identities, they alone do not play a determining role in shaping who we are. There are likely to be a variety of groups we belong to, constructing what is commonly called our **social identity**. Some of these are involuntary, such as age, race, or family. Others are groups we choose to join, such as a club, church, or political party. There may be groups we do not belong to but with which we identify in some way, for example, a professional group we hope to join one day (i.e., physicians, lawyers, astronauts) or political action groups with whose views we agree. These are known as **reference groups** (Shibutani, 1955). There may be as well any number of impromptu, ad-hoc groups with which we identify, forging a variety of shifting small cultures and affinity groups. At least some of

those are likely to be mostly or exclusively online, such as our *Facebook* friends or those we follow or who follow us on *Twitter* or through other social media.

How we communicate with others may be strongly influenced by our group memberships. Some groups distinguish sharply between who is in and who is out. Members of the **in-group** may feel prejudiced against those in **out-groups**. Extreme nationalists, for example, may discriminate against or even harass immigrant communities. One way in which groups tend to shape individual behavior is through a phenomenon known as **in-group bias**, in which we as members of an in-group automatically favor other members of our group (Brewer, 1979). This is in contrast to **out-group negativity** in which we attribute automatically negative characteristics to those outside our group (Sherif et al., 1961). The same observed behavior might be judged quite differently depending on whether the other person belongs to our group.

Interactions and communication among group members may also be influenced by individuals' roles within groups. In some groups, roles may be formal and well-defined, with a strict hierarchy in place. This is the case in many working environments. In such cases, how we communicate is determined by our place in the hierarchy, with those at the top accorded a high measure of respect and being addressed in deferential language. Different cultures may see group roles quite differently, even within similar groups or organizations. In most university communities in the US, for example, there is a fairly relaxed, relatively egalitarian relationship between students and professors, with the language used informal and colloquial. In other countries, such as South Korea, the relationship is likely to be more hierarchical, with an accompanying shift in the language to a much more formal register.

An increasingly prevalent approach to addressing the nature of social identity is the "**communication theory of identity**", developed originally by communication scholar Michael Hecht (1998). The theory provides a model for describing how groups create an identity through communication. The idea is that identity is negotiated in particular contexts, either between individuals of the same identity groups or individuals of different groups. In this view, social identities are constructed and fluid. We express our identities through such things as choice of language, nonverbals like clothing or body language, or the degree to which we emphasize our group membership. Depending on the situation, we may express our identity in different ways. The theory is helpful in breaking down into separate categories how our communication and behavior as members of a group affects our sense of identity in particular contexts. Identity components include the following:

- *Scope* (how many people hold the identity)
- *Salience* (how important the identity is to a person at a given point in time)
- *Centrality* (how important the identity is usually to a person's self-esteem)
- *Intensity* (how vocal or expressive one is about an identity)
- *Changeability* (some aspects of identities change and others do not)

How this works in practice is demonstrated in the example of women in the Sahara (see the sidebar).

In addition, the theory proposes that identities have both a *content component* – norms of behavior associated with an identity – and a *relationship component*, i.e., how we feel about an identity. The content may be actions, behaviors, or language expected or accepted in particular contexts such as using formal language when addressing a superior. The relationship component (sometimes referred to as "regard") refers to different views on particular behaviors or attitudes associated with an identity, which may be seen differently depending on the individual. Baldwin (2013) provides this example, "Two people might see themselves as 'geeks.' Both may agree what the identity means as far as characteristics (content), but one might embrace the identity (positive regard) and the other might dislike the identity (negative regard)". This approach treats identity as context-dependent and emergent, rather than static and fixed. This is in accord with views on identity formation current in the social sciences generally and has been of particular interest in applied linguistics and second language acquisition. In this view, we negotiate our identities on the fly, through our use of language and other identity markers such as body language or dress. The dynamics of that kind of identity assertion are dependent on the environment and on the background and behavior of those with whom we are communicating.

Women in the Sahara

If we think of the identity of gender in the Sahara, we can state that:

- **Scope:** Sex has a much broader scope than, say, Jewish people
- **Salience:** A woman might be a professional, a student, a researcher, or a Muslim. In some contexts, one identity will be more relevant or in the front of her mind than others.
- **Centrality:** Because of the emphasis on gender in the Sahara, this identity is probably "salient" all or most of the time—thus, it has more centrality.

- **Intensity:** Women may express their identity either more or less vocally. By wearing a head-covering, especially when such is optional, as it is in some countries, the women is expressing identity more explicitly. She is “out” about her religious identity.
- **Changeability:** Clearly, as expressed in the photo above, gender identity in parts of the Saharan region is changing—but likely in other ways staying the same.

Baldwin (2013)



Worldviews and Religions

One of the groups many belong to is a religious community. The religion to which we adhere may have a substantial impact on how we communicate with others:

Religious differences have tremendous implications for intercultural communication. Religion is a powerful force in marking cultural differences, which can lead to both intercultural conflict and intercultural cooperation. Even when not explicitly noted, religion may influence our attitudes about right and wrong and may influence our own behavior. (Nakayama & Martin, 2002, p. 21).

Religious beliefs often play a central role in a person's worldview, i.e., the set of values and beliefs about acceptable human behavior and about mankind's relationship to a supreme being and to the natural world. In some cases, religion and worldview are tightly connected. This is the case in what are deemed "sacred cultures", where there is a religious doctrine that plays a determining role in expected personal behavior, fundamental values, and appearance (Dodd, 1998). In some cultures, such as in Saudi Arabia, there may be a state religion which exerts this kind of controlling influence. In other cases, the connection between religion and worldview is not as clear-cut, as in the case of the Puritan influence in the US (see sidebar). Secular societies, such as the US, draw a sharp distinction between church and state. France has a long tradition of "*laïcité*" (secularity) which has been the expressed reason for controversial measures such as the banning of women wearing veils or headscarves in public schools (Caron, 2007). On the other hand, India, also a secular culture, has not banned religious symbols (Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr & Wegert, 2013).

Pervasive Puritanism

The influence of the Puritan settlers on US society can be seen in the fact that US Americans have rather conservative views about alcohol and nudity — something that many Europeans find rather prudish. This demonstrates the implicit influence of religion on worldview and perception — people in the United States who may not subscribe to Puritan or even Christian beliefs may still be influenced by that historical tradition and worldview.

Nakayama & Martin, 2002, p. 22

Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck (1961) developed a set of "value orientations" to distinguish worldviews. The values taxonomy indicates what instructions are implicitly provided by a culture as guidelines for living and interacting with others. They address the questions of man's place in the cosmos, namely:

- *Character of human nature* (basically good – a mixture of good and evil – basically evil)
- *Relation of humans to nature* (humans dominate—harmony of the two—nature dominates)

- *Time orientation* (future-oriented - present-oriented - past-oriented)
- *Activity orientation* ("doing"/action – "growing"/spiritual growth – "being"/who you are)
- *Relationships between people* (individual - group-oriented – collateral)

If applied to mainstream US culture, the human–nature orientation is that mankind is essentially good, with humans considered to be rational beings who have control of their own destinies (the much vaunted but elusive US "equality of opportunity"). The mutable nature of human character in the US view is demonstrated by the popularity of self-help groups, self-improvement seminars, and "life coaches". US culture sees mankind as empowered to rule over nature, with faith in science to solve problems. In terms of activity orientation, the US tends to value pragmatism and efficiency; that applies to time as well, which tends to be future-oriented. In their relationships with others, US Americans are seen as individualistic, with few binding group memberships. They are more likely to be willing to relocate to entirely new regions for education or employment.

India offers a dramatically different profile. In this life, humans must accept restraints and limitations, but need to work towards enlightenment and perfection, but that may occur over successive lives. The human-nature relationship is seen quite differently, with an emphasis on harmony, not control, and a concern for the "welfare of all things" taking precedence over human concerns (Roa & Thombre, 2015, p. 67). Spiritual growth is highly valued and that may occur over successive reincarnations, so that both the past and the future are important and are not seen as distinctly different entities. From an Indian perspective, time is not linear but circular. Indians are "highly collectivistic in their local group, but are individualistic in dealing with outsiders" (Rao & Thombre, 2015, p. 81). Starkly different regional characteristics in language and customs tend to lead Indians to feel most comfortable living in their home regions, and less likely than North Americans to accept moving far from home for education or employment (Rao & Thombre, 2015).

As is always the case with such generalizations, these value orientations need to be seen as just that — generalities which may be useful as default categories but do not hold for all members of a culture. In the case of the characteristics for US culture, for example, there are significant differences among different co-cultures, for instance in Native Americans' view of the relationship to nature or in the importance of family relations in the African-American household. A similar variety of values orientations are evident in India, as in many other countries. There are shifting views on man's relationship to nature, which derive in part from global warming and other natural phenomena. In India, for example, the concept of *dharma* (loosely, the right way of living) leads to environmentalism being built into Indian culture, while environmental pollution is viewed as an expression of *karma* (just retribution; Roa & Thombre, 2015). There are likely generational differences too, for example, in time orientation, with younger North Americans or Indians being more present-oriented, with greater interest in quality-of-life concerns. Looking at the value orientations of other cultures is likely to show similar results, that is, some common default values, with many discrepancies depending on group memberships.

The forces of globalization and mass immigration which have increasingly mixed cultures together have also brought together different worldviews and religions. This can lead to greater religious diversity. This phenomenon is seen by some as a weakening or dilution of religious beliefs. In response, fundamentalist religious movements have arisen in different parts of the world, which strive to set boundaries and adhere to a perceived "pure" version of a religion. Often, this is also a reaction against particular social changes, such as equality between men and women or equal rights for **LGBTQ** communities (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning). Religion is often deeply tied to people's cultural identity and a disregard or perceived disrespect for a person's religious beliefs or rituals is seen as a personal attack. In such cases, communication may be shut down completely.

Intercultural Communication and Ideology

When we talk about worldviews, another term that frequently comes into play is **ideology**. Ideology is similar to worldview in that it references our conception of the order of the world and humans' role in society, but it places additional emphasis on what in an ideal world human relationships and behavior should be. This often involves political and socio-economic considerations, with a central concern being the individual or groups who exercise power and control. From that perspective, the question arises as to who controls culture – that is where do our values and mores come from. Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci (1971, originally 1935), uses the concept of **cultural hegemony** to describe how those in power manipulate the value system of a society so as to co-op and control beliefs and behaviors among the population at large. In this way, the ruling class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm and establishes and justifies a social, political, and economic status quo.

Adrian Holliday (2010) sees the concept of culture itself as a form of ideology. Under the guise of culture, we (especially in the West) tend to establish and perpetuate static images of particular groups. Edward Said (1978) has shown, for example, how the West exoticized images of people from the East, creating a stereotype of "Orientals", which helped promote Western superiority

and hence justify colonialism and subjugation. Holliday has shown that the terms of cultural differentiation often used in intercultural communication such as collectivism and individualism often in subtle ways denigrate particular cultures or peoples. For Holliday, the concept of culture, as usually understood, leads "easily and sometimes innocently to the reduction of the foreign Other as culturally deficient" (Holliday, 2010, ix).



Figure 2.2.4 Snake Charmer, example of image in the West of

"Orientals"

If, in fact, as Holliday states, the world is governed by "unequal global politics in which ideology plays a major role" (2010, ix), that holds consequences for intercultural interactions. It makes it important to recognize our own ideological framework, both as individuals and groups. That includes a consideration of how our gender, socioeconomic class, and ethnic background affect our views of the world and of others. This critical self-awareness can enable us to view others and their cultural values and behaviors with a clearer appreciation of how forces beyond an individual's control contribute to identity formation and particular worldviews. Developing a knowledge of the interaction between culture and political institutions can help in finding avenues for change that are feasible, given societal constraints. We may see injustices which, given our own backgrounds, seem to be evidence of "backwards" beliefs or of a corrupt political culture. Rather than judge harshly an individual engaged in what we see as negative behavior, it is better to understand the constraints at work. Individuals do not always have the freedom to change aspects of behavior that are controlled by institutional forces. It is also the case, that as outsiders, we are not likely to have a full understanding of what may be a quite complex interplay of factors which determine individual behavior.

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2.3: Aspects of Identity

Every person has a range of identities, according to how they see themselves (and how others see them) in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and so on. This means that seeing an individual in terms of one aspect of their identity – as a black person, for example, rather than as (say) a black working-class woman who is also a social worker, a mother and a school governor – is inevitably reductive and misleading.

Identities are dynamic

The identities people assume, and the relative importance they attach to them, change over time because of both personal change in their lives and change in the external world (for example, as a result of changing ideas about disability). Consequently, identity should not be seen as something ‘fixed’ within people.

Identities have different and changing meanings

Aspects of identity may have different meanings at different times in people's lives, and the meanings that they attribute to aspects of their identity (for example, ethnicity) may be different from the meaning it has for others (for example, being black may be a source of pride for you, but the basis of someone else's negative stereotyping).

Identities are contextual and interactional

Different identities assume greater or less importance, and play different roles, in different contexts and settings, and in interactions with different people. Different aspects of people's identity may come to the fore in the workplace and in the home, for example, while people might emphasise different aspects of themselves to different people (and different people may see different identities when they meet them).

Identities are negotiated

In constructing their identities, people can only draw on terms that are available in society at that time, which have meanings and associations attached. However, people may attribute different meanings and importance to those labels. This means people always negotiate their identities, in the context of the different meanings attached to them.

Taking this view of identity, as a social process that people engage in, rather than as a fixed essence inside them, is not to deny that particular identities are extremely important for certain groups and individuals. Being a Sikh, or a woman, or gay, may feel like the most important and ‘deepest’ part of you. However, a more dynamic and social model of identity is useful because it makes it difficult to reduce people to any one aspect of their identity, or to use social identity as a way of explaining every aspect of their behaviour and needs, including their communication needs and behaviour.

Key points

Social identities, whether based on ethnicity, gender, disability or other factors, should be seen as:

- lural
- dynamic
- contextual
- negotiated
- produced in social and interactional contexts.

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2.4: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

In this section, we will look at cultural differences through the lenses of German psychologist Geert Hofstede; American anthropologist Edward Hall, and Scottish Business Professor Charles Tidwell. By gaining a rough understanding of different cultures, we can learn what to expect and how to interact with citizens of our diverse, multicultural society.

Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture

Psychologist Geert Hofstede published his cultural dimensions model at the end of the 1970s. Since then, it's become an internationally recognized standard for understanding cultural differences. Hofstede studied people who worked for IBM in more than 50 countries and identified six dimensions that could distinguish one culture from another. These six dimensions are individualism vs. collectivism, discussed in the previous section; high power distance vs. low power distance; high certainty avoidance vs. low certainty avoidance; long-term vs. short-term orientation; masculine vs. feminine; and indulgence vs. restraint.

Individualism and Collectivism



Figure 2.4.1

Put simply, you can think of an individualistic culture as an **I** culture where members are able to make choices based on *personal preference* with little regard for others, except for close family or significant relationships. They can pursue their own wants and needs free from concerns about meeting social expectations. The **United States** is a highly individualistic culture. While we value the role of certain aspects of collectivism such as government and social organizations, at our core we strongly believe it is up to each person to find and follow his or her path in life.

In a highly collectivistic culture, a **we** culture, just the opposite is true. It is the role of individuals to fulfill their place in the *overall social order*. Personal wants and needs are secondary to the needs of society at large. There is immense pressure to adhere to social norms and those who fail to conform risk social isolation, disconnection from family, and perhaps some form of banishment. **China** is typically considered a highly collectivistic culture. In China, multigenerational homes are common, and tradition calls for the oldest son to care for his parents as they age.

High Power-Distance and Low Power-Distance



Figure 2.4.2

Power is a normal feature of any relationship or society. How power is perceived, however, varies among cultures. In **high power-distance cultures**, the members accept some having more power and some having less power, and accept that this power distribution is natural and normal. Those with power are assumed to deserve it, and likewise, those without power are assumed to be in their proper place. In such a culture, there will be a rigid adherence to the use of titles, “Sir,” “Ma’am,” “Officer,” “Reverend,” and so on. The directives of those with higher power are to be obeyed, with little question.

In **low power-distance cultures**, the distribution of power is considered far more arbitrary and viewed as a result of luck, money, heritage, or other external variables. Those in power are far more likely to be challenged in a low power-distance culture than they would in a high power-distance culture. A wealthy person is typically seen as more powerful in western cultures. Elected officials, like United States Senators, will be seen as powerful since they had to win their office by receiving majority support. However, individuals who attempt to assert power are often faced with those who stand up to them, question them, ignore them, or otherwise refuse to acknowledge their power. While some titles may be used, they will be used far less than in high power-distance culture. For example, in colleges and universities in the U.S., it is far more common for students to address their instructors on a first-name basis, and engage in casual conversation on personal topics. In contrast, in a high power-distance culture like **Japan**, the students rise and bow as the teacher enters the room, address them formally at all times, and rarely engage in any personal conversation.

High Uncertainty Avoidance and Low Uncertainty Avoidance



Figure 2.4.3

This index shows the degree to which people accept or avoid something that is strange, unexpected, or different from the status quo.

Societies with high uncertainty avoidance choose strict rules, guidelines, and behavior codes. They usually depend on absolute truths or the idea that only one truth decides all proper conduct. High uncertainty avoidance cultures limit change and place a very high value on history, doing things as they have been done in the past, and honoring stable cultural norms.

Low uncertainty avoidance cultures see change is seen as inevitable and normal. These cultures are more accepting of contrasting opinions or beliefs. Society is less strict and lack of certainty is more acceptable. In a low uncertainty avoidance culture, innovation in all areas is valued. Businesses in the U.S. that can change rapidly, innovate quickly, and respond immediately to market and social pressures are seen as far more successful. Even though the U.S. is generally low in uncertainty avoidance, we can see some evidence of a degree of higher uncertainty avoidance related to certain social issues. As society changes, there are many who will decry the changes as they are “forgetting the past,” “dishonoring our forebears,” or “abandoning sacred traditions.” In the controversy over same-sex marriage, the phrase “traditional marriage” is used to refer to a two person, heterosexual marriage, suggesting same-sex marriage is a violation of tradition. Changing social norms creates uncertainty, and for many changes are very unsettling.

Long-Term Orientation and Short-Term Orientation



Figure 2.4.4

People and cultures view time in different ways. For some, the “here and now” is paramount, and for others, “saving for a rainy day” is the dominant view.

In a long-term culture, significant emphasis is placed on planning for the future. For example, the savings rates in France and Germany are 2-4 times greater than in the U.S., suggesting cultures with more of a “plan ahead” mentality (Pasquali & Aridas, 2012). These long-term cultures see change and social evolution are normal, integral parts of the human condition.

In a short-term culture, emphasis is placed far more on the “here and now.” Immediate needs and desires are paramount, with longer-term issues left for another day. The U.S. falls more into this type. Legislation tends to be passed to handle immediate problems, and it can be challenging for lawmakers to convince voters of the need to look at issues from a long-term perspective. With the fairly easy access to credit, consumers are encouraged to buy now versus waiting. We see evidence of the need to establish “absolute Truth” in our political arena on issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, and gun control. Our culture does not tend to favor middle grounds in which truth is not clear-cut.

Masculine and Feminine



Figure 2.4.5

Expectations for gender roles are a core component of any culture. All cultures have some sense of what it means to be a “man” or a “woman.” **Masculine cultures** are *traditionally seen as more aggressive and domineering*, while **feminine cultures** are *traditionally seen as more nurturing and caring*.

In a masculine culture, such as the U.S., winning is highly valued. We respect and honor those who demonstrate power and high degrees of competence. Consider the role of competitive sports such as football, basketball, or baseball, and how the rituals of identifying the best are significant events. The 2017 Super Bowl had 111 million viewers, (Huddleston, 2017) and the World Series regularly receives high ratings, with the final game in 2016 ending at the highest rating in ten years (Perez, 2016).

More feminine societies, such as those in the Scandinavian countries, will certainly have their sporting moments. However, the culture is far more structured to provide aid and support to citizens, focusing their energies on providing a reasonable quality of life for all (Hofstede, 2012b).

Indulgence and Restraint



Figure 2.4.6

A more recent addition to Hofstede’s dimensions of culture, the indulgence/restraint continuum addresses the degree of rigidity of social norms of behavior. He states:

Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. **Restraint** stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms (Hofstede, 2012a).

Indulgent cultures are comfortable with individuals acting on their more basic human drives. Sexual mores are less restrictive, and one can act more spontaneously than in cultures of restraint. Those in indulgent cultures will tend to communicate fewer messages of judgment and evaluation. Every spring thousands of U.S. college students flock to places like Cancun, Mexico, to engage in a week of fairly indulgent behavior. Feeling free from the social expectations of home, many will engage in some intense partying, sexual activity, and fairly limitless behaviors.

Cultures of restraint, such as many Islamic countries, have rigid social expectations of behavior that can be quite narrow. Guidelines on dress, food, drink, and behaviors are rigid and may even be formalized in law. In the U.S., a generally indulgent culture, there are sub-cultures that are more restraint-focused. The Amish are highly restrained by social norms, but so too can be inner-city gangs. Areas of the country, like Utah with its large Mormon culture, or the Deep South with its large evangelical Christian culture, are more restrained than areas such as San Francisco or New York City. Rural areas often have more rigid social norms than do urban areas. Those in more restraint-oriented cultures will identify those not adhering to these norms, placing pressure on them, either openly or subtly, to conform to social expectations.

Hall's Cultural Variations

In addition to these 6 dimensions from Hofstede, anthropologist Edward T. Hall identified two more significant cultural variations (Raimo, 2008).

Monochronic and Polychronic



Figure 2.4.7

Another aspect of **variations in time orientation** is the difference between monochronic and polychronic cultures. This refers to *how people perceive and value time*.

In a **monochronic culture**, like the U.S., *time is viewed as linear, as a sequential set of finite time units*. These units are a commodity, much like money, to be managed and used wisely; once the time is gone, it is gone and cannot be retrieved. Consider the language we use to refer to time: *spending* time; *saving* time; *budgeting* time; *making* time. These are the same terms and concepts we apply to money; time is a resource to be managed thoughtfully. Since we value time so highly, that means:

- Punctuality is valued. Since “time is money,” if a person runs late, they are wasting the resource.
- Scheduling is valued. Since time is finite, only so much is available, we need to plan how to allocate the resource. Monochronic cultures tend to let the schedule drive activity, much like money dictates what we can and cannot afford to do,
- Handling one task at a time is valued. Since time is finite and seen as a resource, monochronic cultures value fulfilling the time budget by doing what was scheduled. Compare this to a financial budget: funds are allocated for different needs, and we assume

those funds should be spent on the item budgeted. In a monochronic culture, since time and money are virtually equivalent, adhering to the “time budget” is valued.

- Being busy is valued. Since time is a resource, we tend to view those who are busy as “making the most of their time;” they are seen as using their resources wisely.

In a **polychronic culture**, like Spain, *time is far, far more fluid*. Schedules are more like rough outlines to be followed, altered, or ignored as events warrant. Relationship development is more important, and schedules do not drive activity. Multi-tasking is far more acceptable, as one can move between various tasks as demands change. In polychronic cultures, people make appointments, but there is more latitude for when they are expected to arrive. David's appointment may be at 10:15, but as long as he arrives sometime within the 10 o'clock hour, he is on time.

Consider a monochronic person attempting to do business in a polychronic culture. The monochronic person may expect meetings to start promptly on time, stay focused, and for work to be completed in a regimented manner to meet an established deadline. Yet those in a polychronic culture will not bring those same expectations to the encounter, sowing the seeds for some significant intercultural conflict.

High Context and Low Context



Figure 2.4.8

The last variation in culture to consider is whether the culture is high context or low context. To establish a little background, consider how we communicate. When we communicate we use a communication package, consisting of all of our verbal and nonverbal communication. As you have learned, our **verbal communication** refers to **our** use of language, and our **nonverbal communication** refers to *all other communication variables: body language, vocal traits, and dress*.

In **low-context cultures**, *verbal communication is given primary attention*. The assumption is that people will say what they mean relatively directly and clearly. Little will be left for the receiver to interpret or imply. In the U.S. if someone does not want something, we expect them to say, “No.” While we certainly use nonverbal communication variables to get a richer sense of the

meaning of the person's message, we consider what they say to be the core, primary message. Those in a high-context culture find the directness of low-context cultures quite disconcerting, to the point of rudeness.

In **high-context cultures**, *nonverbal communication is as important, if not more important, than verbal communication*. How something is said is a significant variable in interpreting what is meant. Messages are often implied and delivered quite subtly. Japan is well known for the reluctance of people to use blunt messages, so they have far more subtle ways to indicate disagreement than a low-context culture. Those in low context cultures find these subtle, implied messages frustrating.

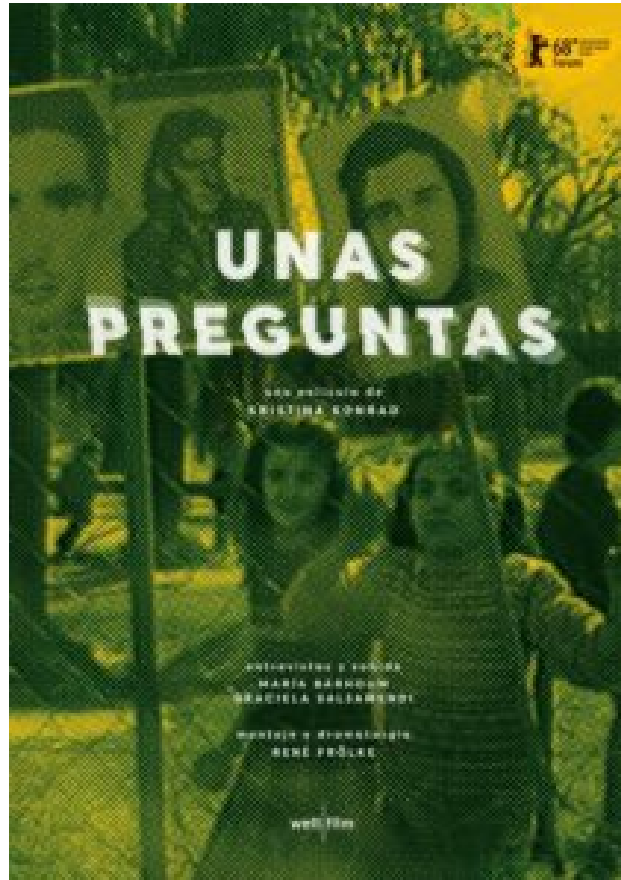


Figure 2.4.9

In summary, Hofstede's Dimensions and Hall's Cultural Variations give us some tools to use to identify, categorize, and discuss diversity in communication. As we learn to see these differences, we are better equipped to manage inter-cultural encounters, communicate more provisionally, and adapt to cultural variations.

While intended to show only broad cultural differences, these eight variables also can be useful tools to identify variations among individuals within a given culture. We can use them to identify sources of conflict or tension within a given relationship, such as a marriage. For example, Keith tends to be a short-term oriented, indulgent, monochronic person, while his wife tends to be long-term oriented, restrained, and more polychronic. Needless to say, they frequently experience their own personal "culture clashes."

Tidwell's Insights about Culture and Nonverbal Communication

Dr. Charles Tidwell, professor of Intercultural Business Relations at Andrews University, has spent many years studying and teaching intercultural communication. He provides some valuable insights on cultural differences in dress, movements, gestures, eye contact, touch, and vocalizations. Following are notes published from his graduate course on Interpersonal Communication.

General Appearance and Dress

All cultures are concerned about how they look and make judgments based on looks and dress. Some Americans, for instance, appear almost obsessed with dress and personal attractiveness. But cultural standards on what is attractive in dress and on what constitutes modesty vary greatly. An interesting area to research is how dress is used as a sign of status in different cultures.

Movements and Posture

We send information on attitude toward a person by movements and posture (facing or leaning towards another), emotional states (tapping fingers, jiggling coins), and desire to control the environment (moving towards or away from a person). There are more than 700,000 possible motions we can make — so it is impossible to categorize them all! But just be aware the body movement and position are key ingredients in sending messages. Consider the following actions and note cultural differences:

- Slouching (seen as rude in most Northern European areas)
- Hands in the pocket (disrespectful in Turkey)
- Sitting with legs crossed (offensive in Ghana, Turkey)
- Showing soles of feet. (offensive in Thailand, Saudi Arabia)
- Even in the US, there is a considerable difference in acceptable posture

Gestures

It is impossible to catalog them all. But we need to recognize that an acceptable gesture in one's own culture may be offensive in another. In addition, the amount of gesturing varies from culture to culture. Some cultures are animated; others are restrained. Restrained cultures often feel animated cultures lack manners and overall restraint. Animated cultures often feel restrained cultures lack emotion or interest. Even simple things like using hands to point and count differ. People in the US point with the index finger; Germany with the little finger; and the Japanese with the entire hand (in fact most Asians consider pointing with the index finger to be rude). In counting with the fingers, Germans use the thumb to indicate the number 1; the middle finger is the symbol for 1 in Indonesia.

Facial Expressions

While many facial expressions such as smiling, crying, or showing anger, sorrow, or disgust are recognized worldwide, the intensity varies from culture to culture. Many Asian cultures suppress facial expressions as much as possible. Many Mediterranean (Latino / Arabic) cultures exaggerate grief or sadness while most American men hide grief or sorrow. Some see “animated” expressions as a sign of a lack of control. Too much smiling is viewed as a sign of shallowness in some cultures. Women smile more than men.

Eye Contact and Gaze

In the USA, eye contact indicates our degree of attention or interest, regulates interaction, communicates emotion, defines power and status, and has a central role in managing the impressions of others. Western cultures see direct eye to eye contact as positive and advise children to look a person in the eyes. But within the USA, differences exist. For example, African-Americans use more eye contact when talking and less when listening with the reverse being true for Anglo-Americans.

- Arabic cultures make prolonged eye contact and believe it shows interest and helps them understand the truthfulness of the other person. (A person who doesn't reciprocate is seen as untrustworthy)
- Japan, Africa, Latin American, Caribbean — avoid eye contact to show respect.

Touch

Touch is culturally determined! The basic pattern is that cultures with high emotional restraint concepts (English, German, Scandinavian, Chinese, Japanese) have little public touch; those which encourage emotion (Latino, Middle-East, Jewish) accept frequent touches. But each culture has a clear concept of what parts of the body one may not touch. The basic message of touch is to show affection or to control others (i.e. hug, kiss, hit, kick). But rules for touch vary greatly, as shown below:

- Traditional Koreans (and many other Asian countries) don't touch strangers., especially members of the opposite sex.
- Islamic and Hindu Cultures: typically don't touch with the left hand. To do so is a social insult. The left hand is for toilet functions. It is mannerly in India to break your bread only with your right hand (sometimes difficult for non-Indians)
- Islamic cultures generally don't approve of any touching between genders (even handshakes). But consider such touching (including hand-holding, hugs) between same-sex to be appropriate.
- Many Asians don't touch the head. (The head houses the soul and a touch puts it in jeopardy).

Vocalizations

Vocal characterizers such as a laugh, cry, yell, moan, whine, belch, and yawn send different messages in different cultures. (Japan — giggling indicates embarrassment; India – belch indicates satisfaction) Other vocal qualifiers (volume, pitch, rhythm, tempo, and tone) also vary. Loudness indicates strength in Arabic cultures and softness indicates weakness; indicates confidence and authority

to the Germans; indicates impoliteness to the Thais; indicates loss of control to the Japanese. (Generally, one learns not to “shout” in Asia for nearly any reason!). Loudness is gender-based as well: women tend to speak higher and more softly than men.



Key Terms

- **Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture**
 - Individualism and Collectivism
 - Power Distance
 - Uncertainty Avoidance
 - Time Orientation
 - Masculine and Feminine
 - Indulgence and Restraint
- **Hall's Cultural Dimensions**
 - Monochronic and Polychronic
 - High-Context and Low-Context



Topics for Discussion

Although Hofstede's and Hall's Cultural Dimensions are useful in a study of cultures and co-cultures, it is important that we are careful not to oversimplify. Watch *The Danger of a Single Story* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>). What were key takeaways from this video?

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2.5: Judging and Treating Others Fairly

Categorization and stereotyping

When we encounter someone for the first time, we may not be aware of their cultural or social identities. If we do not have any prior knowledge, we tend to assign individuals to categories based on appearance, age, and the context in which the encounter takes place. This is normal human behavior, as we make sense of the world by putting objects and people into categories. We tend to categorize based on perceived similarities and differences. Obviously, our ability to make viable choices depends on our own degree of experience and knowledge. The less knowledge we have, the more likely we are to fall back on general information we may have acquired informally from friends, family, or media reports. Our mind tries to connect the dots in order to create a complete picture based on the information it already has, which may be scant or faulty. This can provide a very limited, narrowly focused, and potentially distorted impression of the other.

Relying on faulty information leads us to make generalizations that may be far removed from reality. We can overcome the distortion of the "[single story](#)", as Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie puts it, in a number of ways (Adichie, 2009). The most effective antidote is to gain greater real knowledge of other cultures through direct contact. That can come from travel, study abroad, service learning, online exchanges, or informal means of making contact. Following news reports on what's happening outside our immediate area can also be valuable, particularly if we seek out reliable, objective reporting. What can be helpful in that regard is to try to find multiple sources of information. Another way to gain insight into other cultures is through stories, told in novels, autobiographies, or movies. The more perspectives we have on a given culture, the less likely it is that we will extrapolate from a single experience to make generalizations about an entire group.

In addition to seeking out opportunities for gaining knowledge about other cultures, what is also needed is to engage with others in a spirit of openness and curiosity. An unwillingness to view others as individuals whose real identity is yet to be discovered, means that we are assuming that everyone in that perceived category is the same, with identical characteristics shared by all. **Stereotyping** can be positive or negative. There may be, for example, a perception that all members of a given community are smart and hard-working, as is sometimes said of Asian-American students. Indian immigrants to the US are often seen in that light, as a "**model minority**" (Lee, 2015). More common are negative stereotypes; in the US race and gender groups are often stereotyped. In other cultures, stereotypes may be attached to those from certain regions or who follow particular religions. Even positive stereotypes can be problematic, as they lead us to depersonalize people, treating them as members of a group, rather than as unique individuals. Stereotyping can lead to communication breakdowns, if ones stereotyping of a group is different from the view the group has of itself. We can distinguish between **ascribed identities** and **avowed identities**. The ascribed identity is one that we give to either people or groups. Ones avowed identity is the identity we claim as our own. Effective communication occurs when there is a match between the identity we ascribe to others and the identity they avow. Otherwise misunderstanding and conflict can arise.

Stereotyping in turn can lead to ethnocentric attitudes. **Ethnocentrism** is the tendency to place our own group above all others, while seeing out-groups negatively. Ethnocentrism can have positive effects, namely contributing toward solidarity and cooperation within a community and helping to build pride and patriotism. On the other hand, ethnocentrism can lead to prejudice and discrimination. In the most extreme cases, it can result in **racism**, which claims a biologically-based superiority for the in-group. While ethnocentrism is a universal and innate human behavior, racism is social and learned. We are more likely to see racism in difficult economic times, when out-groups such as immigrants become scapegoats. Modern science has shown that there is no biological basis for racial categories, as the genetic make-up among humans differs very little (Smedley & Smedley, 2005).



Figure 2.5.1: Protest against racism in the UK

Related to racism is xenophobia, the fear of strangers. Some scholars say that xenophobia is universal and biological. Others point to the fact that xenophobia is often racialized – it can be a fear of only those strangers with a particular racial profile. In German-speaking countries, the German equivalent of xenophobia, *Ausländerfeindlichkeit*, is used to the exclusion of the term racism (*Rassismus*). That is likely tied to the Nazi-era appropriation of the latter term. Teun van Dijk's research on racism in Europe points to the fact that although Europeans do admit there is xenophobia in their countries, they see it as a general reaction against foreigners (1987). In practice the xenophobia mostly arises for selected foreigners, namely those with different skin color and religions. The relations among different groups that give rise to prejudice and animosity often have historical causes. The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, for example, have roots in tribalism and colonialism (see sidebar).

Tribalism in the Middle East

The same north Arabian Bedouin tribes that accepted Islam and spread it by the sword also infused the region with a deeply tribal culture, impacting everything from family relations to governance and conflict. Tribal affiliation is based on descent from a common male ancestor; all descendants are deemed to share common interests and to have obligations of solidarity with one another. Descendants of other ancestors are deemed to have different interests and are seen to be opponents, sometimes enemies. The main principle of tribal life is absolute loyalty to one's lineage group visàvis other groups of the same order and scope: clan vs. clan, tribe vs. tribe, confederation vs. confederation, sect vs. sect, Muslim vs. infidels...Opposition, rivalry, and conflict are thus seen to be in the nature of social life. Success, power, wealth, and, above all, honour derives from triumphing over opposition groups. Failure to triumph means the loss of power, wealth, and, above all, honour. The pervasive and continuous conflict in the Middle East—between clans, tribes, sects, and religions—is a manifestation of this culture.

Salzman, 2016

Addressing prejudice and intolerance

Prejudice "involves making a prejudgment based on membership in a social category. While prejudice can be positive or negative, there is a tendency for most of us to think of it as negative" (Gudykunst, 2004, p. 134). We can be prejudiced in favor of a group or against. Prejudice is tied to group identification. We all tend to think of ourselves in terms of our group memberships, and it is natural to judge our own groups positively. The fact that prejudice is common and inborn is of course an explanation but not a justification. Prejudice can lead to **intolerance**, an active unwillingness to accept views or behavior different from one's own. Prejudice can take different forms. There is individual prejudice but also institutional prejudice, i.e. prejudice embedded in social policies or institutions. Today in the US we see less "overt prejudice", namely individuals expressing publically strong opinions against particular groups, and more "subtle prejudice", hidden in symbolic language, as when talking about gangs or welfare to really make racial comments. Hiding racism behind symbols or political attitudes is known as **symbolic racism** (Sears, 1988). Racism may be reflected in the language used by those in power, as in the repression of indigenous languages by colonial powers, for example, Arabic being suppressed in favor of French in Lebanon or in North Africa.

In recent years, there has also been attention paid to behaviors which may be unintended examples of prejudicial treatment, sometimes labeled **micro-aggressions** (Sue, 2010). [Examples in the US context](#) might include such questions as "Where are you

from or where were you born?" or "You speak English very well." Yet, in different cultural contexts, a question as to the interlocutor's origins or affinities may be seen as normal and inoffensive. In a community-oriented culture, such as that of India, such questions may indicate rapport building or a search for common ground on which to base future communication (Malik, 2017). The appropriateness of origins questions depends on context and individuals. It may be evident through intonation or body language that the question is well-intentioned and is being asked in a spirit of openness, curiosity, and good will.

Where are you from? Sometimes not easy to answer

"Where are you from?" As someone who was born and grew up in China, who has spent the last 15 years working in British higher education and lived in Newcastle and London, I often found it difficult to answer the above question in small talk. I can never get it right. If I say that I'm from London, I can guarantee that the next question would be 'But where are you really from?'. People expect to hear that I am from China or somewhere in Asia. But I feel that I am misleading them if I just give them what they want to hear. I am Chinese, but that is not all. I am a Chinese living in London, a professor in a British university and have two children of school age who were born and grew up in England.

Zhu, 2014

Racism can be seen as an individual trait or as institutional and societal. How we frame the issue can be important in finding ways to address it. If racism is seen as individual, that tends to absolve the individual from personal responsibility in doing anything about it, such as encouraging societal changes (reallocation of resources, changing laws). If racism is seen in social terms, that makes society as a whole responsible, including ourselves. Many of the efforts used to address prejudice and intolerance involve education, that is, increasing intercultural awareness or sensitizing individuals to difference. However, intolerance is complex, involving not only a cognitive side, but also affective (emotional), behavioral, and structural/political components. One approach for addressing intolerance is **contact theory**, originally the "contact hypothesis," as developed by US psychologist Gordon Allport (1979). Allport suggested that direct contact between members of different groups – under certain conditions – could lead to reducing prejudice and conflict. The conditions for success he laid out, are that 1) there be equal status between the groups, 2) both groups have common goals for the encounter, 3) both groups focus on cooperation rather than competition, and finally 4) the process be supported by an authority of some kind, such as a government agency. This approach has been used effectively in such conflicts as the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and in the reconciliation talks between whites and blacks in post-apartheid South Africa. It is the underlying assumption for the benefits derived from school exchanges.

Research by Allport and others has shown that bringing groups together into contact with one another does not in itself provide a guarantee of improved attitudes or enlightened views vis-à-vis the other group. Allport's contact theory shows that the context and conditions of the encounter will shape success or failure. Even encounters when conducted under ideal and carefully supervised conditions may still have mixed results. That might include benefits for some students and adverse reactions from others, including reactions bordering on culture shock. A story in the public radio show *This American Life* reports on just such an experience, in which students from an inner-city New York City school, with predominantly Hispanic students from low-income families, visit an elite private school located nearby (see sidebar).

Three miles away and worlds apart

There's a program that brings together kids from two schools. One school is public and in the country's poorest congressional district. The other is private and costs \$43,000/year...These two schools were three miles from each other, but the students basically needed a foreign exchange program to meet each other...Lisa, the public school teacher, says the moment her kids got off the bus at Fieldston, the private school, they had a dramatic reaction to what they saw: "They couldn't believe the campus. They felt like everyone was looking at them. And one of the students started screaming and crying. Like, this is unfair. This is-- I don't want to be here. I'm leaving. I'm leaving right now. I'm going home."

Melanie [the upset student]: "I know I looked at it and I said, well, I know that we're only being taught to flip burgers in Burger King or McDonald's or to hold doors for students like them that will probably live in those buildings on Madison Avenue. And we'll be wearing the uniform servicing these people."

So that's what she found so upsetting. It seemed that the people around her must believe that this was the natural order of things. Melanie knew there was no innate difference between her and a kid born into wealth. She could see that this division we're all so inured to was not a reflection of her inferior worth or ability..

Glass, 2015

One of the ways that as individuals we can contribute to understanding and tolerance towards other cultures is to engage in **critical reflectivity**, (Prayer, 1993), a practice often used in education and workplace settings. The idea is to leverage the knowledge of one's own value system to build a secure sense of identity, enabling greater willingness to accept others. The first step is to examine the norms and behaviors rising from her own racial/ethnic background, gender, and socio-economic status:

The process highlights areas in which assumptions and interactions between oneself and others result in behaviors that perpetuate the marginalization of people who have been oppressed. This process reveals how power and privilege are understood or misunderstood, and how assumptions make a difference in determining whether interactions are productive, hurtful, or destructive (Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner & Schmitz, 2008, p. 24).

A self-narrative on whiteness

The most influential factor in my lack of process for self-examination regarding my whiteness was what I now call the “luxury of whiteness.” Because I have never been subject to discrimination on the basis of my race, I have the luxury of being able to easily disengage or distance myself from a discussion on race or racism. The logic of luxury was clear – because I had no race, I did not have to do the self-examining work on my racial identity. That is the ultimate luxury of whiteness: the ability to see myself as neutral and thus excuse myself from any responsibility for addressing racial issues in education, society in general, and most importantly, myself.

Gorski, 2000

Developing a strong sense of self allows us to approach others with more understanding and empathy. This is especially important for those with a privileged status in a society.

Language and Identity

One of the ways we can have more understanding and appreciation of those with different cultures is to learn their language. This provides a view “from inside” that is difficult to achieve without knowledge of the language. In recent years, there has been substantial scholarly work on the relationship between language – especially second language or L2 – and identity. The common perception is that being proficient in another language can add a new personal identity which inherits traits from the culture in which the language is spoken. We may acquire, along with linguistic skills, nonverbal behaviors (i.e. learning how to bow in learning Japanese), cultural preferences in areas such as food or music, as well as a fundamental worldview shared by native speakers of the language. However, we should be aware of the complex relationship between language and culture, which is not the same for all languages. Learning English, for example, a language which encompasses many different cultures, is quite different culturally from learning Japanese, closely associated with just one country.

Modern theories of language and identity have moved away from the focus on the individual psychological effect of second language acquisition to a greater concern with sociological and cultural dimensions. Contemporary scholars study how language learners construct identity depending on the time and place in which they are using the L2. David Block, one of the leading scholars in the area of language and identity, points out that issues of self-identity arise often when individuals move across socio-cultural and language borders. In this sense, says Block, identity can be seen as “contested in nature as the new and varied input provided to the individual serves to disturb taken-for-granted points of reference” (Block, 2007, p. 20). Block and Cameron (2002) used the term “critical experience” to refer to such periods in one's life:

By critical experiences, I mean periods of time during which prolonged contact with an L2 and a new and different cultural setting causes irreversible destabilization of the individual sense of self. There is, in a sense, an element of before and after in critical experiences as the individual's socio-historical, cultural and linguistic environment, once well defined and delimited, becomes relatively ill-defined and open-ended (Block & Cameron, 2002, p. 4).

In such cases, argues Block, it's not a question of discarding one's identity and substituting something new. Rather the result is what has come to be known as “hybrid” or “third place” identities. This hybrid identity creates a subject position that provides insights into different linguistic and cultural worlds. However, it can also lead to feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence, in particular for migrants, who strive to keep aspects of their home culture while learning a new language and adapting to a new way of life. In order to construct a coherent life narrative, we seek to resolve internal conflict and assuage feelings of ambivalence. In that sense,

there is a recognition that as individuals we can make choices in terms of self-identity (see sidebar). We tend to take on different available identities depending on need and context. Block points out, however, that in contrast to the open choice of products in a supermarket, we are constrained in our choice of identity by factors such as social hierarchies, educational systems, or government policies. The language choices we make are influenced by a variety of factors. Socio-economic and historical contexts may play significant roles. In formally colonized nations, the language of the colonizer acquired a hegemony over the local languages, which continued even after the colonizer had left. This in turn left a significant impact on the identity that the speakers of the language of the colonizer assumed or were attributed. The speakers of the language of the colonizer were considered to be socially superior or higher up in society than speakers of the local language.

Shopping for identities at the "cultural supermarket"

The cultural anthropologist, Gordon Matthews, argues that identities are not entities into which one is "raised"; rather, one "assumes" an identity and then works on it. Identity is thus seen to develop in what Matthews calls the cultural supermarket: just as the modern supermarket offers foods from all over the world, in all shapes and sizes, so the international media and advanced technology together make available to individuals around the world a range of identities to be assumed.

Block, 2007, pp. 21-22

The dynamics of identity formation has led to an interest within applied linguistics in what is called the **imagined community** that language learners may aspire to join when they learn a new language (see Anderson, 1991). The imagined community may be a reconstruction of a past culture or a construct of the imagination, a desired community that offers a range of possible identities for the future. Often language learners are motivated by such imagined futures and may develop extensive fictional personae around these possible future selves: "An imagined community presupposes an imagined identity—one that offers an enhanced range of possibilities for the future" (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 598). Learners of French might envision a future in which they live in Paris and are fluent enough in French to converse in cafés and to read French poetry in the original. The "imagined self" available through a second language might involve personal growth (Dörnyei, 2009). Pavlenko & Norton (2007) cite research that has shown that "many young Japanese women consider English to be intrinsically linked to feminism and thus are motivated to learn it as a language of empowerment" (p. 597). In fact, in many parts of the world English has become the language which represents opportunities for personal growth and professional advancement (see Lin & Byram, 2016). At the same time, English may be seen as an instrument of colonialism and imperialism and as a repressive force on the development of indigenous cultures. The ambiguous attitude towards the social role of English is particularly evident in former colonial countries in Africa (see Miller, 1996).

Another intersection of language, place, and identity is represented in the concept of **linguistic landscapes**, the often multilingual urban signage now encountered in cities throughout the world (see Shohamy & Gorter, 2008). An analysis of signs in particular neighborhoods can reveal the dynamics of different language and ethnic communities. Examining the changes over time, as Dutch scholar Jan Blommaert has done for his neighborhood in Amsterdam, can show not only how neighborhoods change but also how they identify themselves linguistically (2013). This interest in signs is a branch of **semiotics**, the science of signs and their significance. Increasingly linguists are looking beyond traditional uses of language to "multimodal" understanding of how communication takes place and how identities are created through language use in context and in combination with other modes of communication.



Figure 2.5.2 Chinese sign and "Chinglish" translation

Food and Culture

Language offers an avenue for involvement in another culture. There are many other opportunities we have to gain insight into other cultures through observation or participation in cultural activities, artifacts, or practices common in these cultures. We might gain interest in learning more about Brazilian or Portuguese cultures, for example, by being fans of famous soccer (football) players such as Pele or Ronaldo. We might be led to want to learn Korean if we are immersed in the world of competitive video gaming. Listening to music from countries with rich musical traditions such as Mali or Argentina might be the path through which we become curious about other aspects of culture in those countries.

One of the things all cultures have in common is food. Eating has an important social function: "Food, like language, exists as a vehicle for expressing culture. It has the power of being both a biological necessity as well as a deeply symbolic cultural artifact, one that connects us to one another on several levels...Food is a mechanism for expressing identity that also has a social purpose" (Food & Identity, 2014). Our food choices are tied to our personal identities and our life trajectories: "The food choices made by people, either as individuals or as a group, can reveal views, passions, background knowledge, assumptions and personalities. Food choices tell stories of families, migrations, assimilation, resistance, changes over times, and personal as well as group identity." (Almerico, 2014). Food studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field of study which examines the relationship among food, culture, and society from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (Hauck-Lawson, 2004).

Common culinary traditions can be an essential component of national or regional cultures. Familiar meals or dishes that one cannot find when abroad can be a major contributor to homesickness. On the other hand, adapting to the eating habits and food choices of the host country can also be stressful. Individuals vary of course and some people are more accepting and adventurous than others in trying new dishes. The extent to which food represents something more than necessary human sustenance varies among cultures. In the rest of the world, US eating habits are seen as centered on fast food, such as hamburgers at McDonald's. In fact, home cooking in the US is varied and regional specialties abound, such as North Carolina barbecue, Maine lobster, or New England clam chowder. Well-known is the regional richness of culinary traditions in countries such as China, India, France, or Italy. In some cultures, culinary practices are so highly valued, that they even make their way into institutional settings such as school cafeterias. School lunches, for example, tend to be rather simple and basic. In France, school lunches are different: "The variety on the menus is astonishing: no single meal is repeated over the 32 school days in the period, and every meal includes an hors d'oeuvre, salad, main course, cheese plate and dessert." (Walt, 2010). In France, as in other cultures, meals have a particular structure along with must-have components. In addition, there may be certain ritualistic behaviors expected. In Japanese tea ceremonies, for example, there are expected actions for both host and guests.



Figure 2.5.3 McDonalds, a frequent stand-in for US culture and food

In many parts of the world modern transportation and distribution have significantly changed the availability of foods. It used to be that fresh foods had limited distribution, restricted to particular times of the year or regions. It is not the case, however, that all have sufficient access to food even in prosperous countries. In the US and the UK, for example, "**food deserts**" exist in economically disadvantaged urban communities (and sometimes in isolated rural areas as well), where there is insufficient access to affordable and nutritious food sources (Walker, Keane & Burke, 2010). This tends to be in minority or immigrant communities and often leads to health and longevity issues, as inhabitants resort to unhealthy convenience foods or fast food meals. The [TED talk by Mari Gallagher](#) discusses the situation in the context of discrimination and social justice. The nutrition situation can be even more severe in areas of the world where drought or civil strife have led to significant increases in malnutrition and famine.

In many cultures, there are hybrid food dishes that are popular, created out of domestic remixing of a foreign dish or culinary traditions. In the US and India, for example, "Chinese" food is very popular, but differs markedly from what is found in China. The TED talk by Jennifer Lee, the [Hunt for General Tso](#), recounts how Chinese food made its way into the US and how American inventions such as General Tso's chicken or fortune cookies are seen in the US as quintessentially Chinese. Another example is the popularity of Indian food in the UK. Then UK foreign minister Robin Cook extolled in a speech the multicultural significance of the Britons' fondness for chicken *tikka massala* (see sidebar). In Germany, the originally Turkish dish *doner kebab* has become one of the most popular street foods. Food can represent the kind of successful merging of cultures one hopes develop in communities as well.

"Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish"

It isn't just our economy that has been enriched by the arrival of new communities. Our lifestyles and cultural horizons have also been broadened in the process. This point is perhaps more readily understood by young Britons, who are more open to new influences and more likely to have been educated in a multi-ethnic environment. But it reaches into every aspect of our national life. Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Massala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy. Coming to terms with multiculturalism as a positive force for our economy and society will have significant implications for our understanding of Britishness.

Muir (2013).

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Communication and the Self

Learning Objectives

- How does self-perception and identity shape communication, and vice-versa?
- Why is an understanding of identity and self-perception important for interpersonal communication competence?

Successful students will be able to:

- explain three types of identities
- recognize six principles of identity
- describe how self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy shape our self-perception
- describe how family and media influence self-perception
- explain how self-perception, identity and communication are interrelated
- recognize how awareness of self-presentation, cultural context and self-fulfilling prophecy can help us build communication competence

Ask yourself the following questions: “Who am I?” and “What defines me?” We may think these are easy questions to answer and that we have a good grasp on our identity and what comprises it. However, our identities are not inherent and fixed. Who we are and what defines us changes throughout our lives. In addition, the way we communicate with others and vice-versa creates, shapes, and reshapes our identity in significant ways. While some people may assert “This is just who I am” or “I was born this way,” our identities are actually formed through a variety of processes and interactions, and, as such, are dynamic and never fully complete. In this chapter, we will learn about various types of identities, address the principles of identity, examine factors that shape our self-perception, explore the relationship between identity and communication, and discuss how to improve communication competence.



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3.1: Understanding the Self—Who You Are

Perceptions of Self

Just as our perception of others affects how we communicate, so too does our perception or view of ourselves. But what influences how we see ourselves? How much of ourselves is a product of our own making and how much of it is constructed based on how others react to us? How do we present ourselves to others in ways that maintain our sense of self or challenge how others see us?



Figure 3.1.1 [Reflecting Bullmatian](#) by [6SN7](#) from Flickr is licensed

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Self-Concept

If we said, “Tell me who you are,” your answers would be clues as to how you see yourself, and what you know about yourself. **Self-concept** refers to the overall idea of who a person thinks they are. We could say “I have brown hair,” “I am a professor,” and “I am short.” 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, your self-concept may be tied to a group or cultural membership. For example, you might consider yourself a member of a campus club, honor society, or athletic team. You also may consider your roles as part of your self-concept and this may include being a student, child, parent, co-worker, or friend. You may consider your heritage, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identification as integral to how you see yourself.

We are often asked in class, “Why am I the way I am?” The overall view you have of yourself is informed by both **nature** and **nurture**. The nature versus nurture debate involves the extent to which particular aspects of behavior are a product of either inherited (i.e., genetic) or acquired (i.e., learned) influences (McLeod, 2018). When considering the influence of nature, we recognize individuals as being “wired” a certain way based on their genetics, or biology. Personality traits would be considered part of nature, therefore people who are extroverted or introverted, agreeable or neurotic, show how self-concept is impacted by nature. It becomes important to understand this because these forces do impact how you see yourself, and thus how you communicate.

On the other hand, nurture takes external forces into account, such as what a person is exposed to, how they are treated, and what they are taught. For example, one of our authors shares their experience:

I am a first-generation American and a child of immigrants. My brother and I were the first in our family to graduate college and go on for higher-level degrees. We also grew up in an economically disadvantaged family. We learned that to get ahead in life we needed to work for it. *I know that I am a hard worker.* This knowledge is a result of the environment I grew up in, the lessons I was taught, and socialization. In sum, these influences are examples of how self-concept is impacted by nurture.



Figure 3.1.2 [How Do I Look?](#) By [Subharnab Majumdar](#) from Flickr is licensed [CC-BY 2.0](#)

Self-Esteem

Whereas self-concept answers the question about who we are, self-esteem lets us know how we *feel* about the answer. **Self-esteem** refers to the judgments and evaluations we make *about* our self-concept. If the feeling is negative, then we have low self-worth or self-esteem; if the feeling is positive, then we have high self-esteem. The broad categories we looked at in self-concept are assessed at a more micro level when considering self-esteem. These self-evaluations occur daily as you assess how you feel about yourself. If we again prompted you to “Tell me who you are,” and then asked you to evaluate each of the things you had listed about yourself, we would gain insight into your self-esteem. Labels such as good or bad, positive or negative, and desirable or undesirable are examples of how we assess ourselves.

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. One of our authors gives their own personal example here:

Not everyone may be a great Salsa dancer. While some may appreciate dancing as an art form, they may not consider an ability to Salsa to be a very big part of their self-concept. If someone critiqued that person’s dancing negatively, their self-esteem wouldn’t suffer too much. However, I consider myself a good professor and I have spent my entire career studying and expanding my knowledge of communication. If someone negatively critiqued my teaching knowledge and/or abilities, my self-esteem would 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. Periodically I am evaluated by my students, my dean, and my colleagues. Most of that feedback is in the form of praise and 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 my 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. In addition, they are less negatively affected by work stress, can handle workplace conflict better, and are better able to work independently and solve problems (Brockner, 1988). Most important to consider here is that you may not be viewing yourself as you truly are. That is why this chapter is so important in helping you become less judgmental about yourself.



Figure 3.1.3 Body Dysmorphia Cartoon is in the [Public Domain](#)

Self-Awareness

Awareness determines what you pay attention to, how you carry out your intentions, and what you remember of your activities and experiences each day. The way we take in information, give it order, and assign it meaning has long interested researchers from disciplines including Communication Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology. **Awareness** means consciously taking note of the world around us. **Self-awareness** is self-focused attention or knowledge (American Psychological Association, 2020). Self-awareness in infants has been studied to reveal that infants as young as two months can recognize that they are distinct from their environments (Lawrie, 2018; Morin, 2011; Rochat, 2011). If you have ever had an opportunity to watch babies play with their feet, this example from one of the authors might resonate with you:

When my daughter was an infant she was laying on her back while sticking her toes in her mouth. Some of her teeth had come through her gums, but she wasn’t aware of that until she bit down hard. There was a look of shock on her face before she burst into tears. It was then that I realized that she was “aware” that those toes were connected to her entire body.

Even if you don’t remember your infancy—and most of us don’t—we are sure that each of you has a moment when you first recognized something distinct about yourself. This could range from when you realized what color your eyes were to whether you were able to proficiently throw a ball. In other words, you were noticing your feelings, your reactions, your thoughts, your

behaviors, and more. According to sociologist George Herbert Mead (1934), it helps to have a strong sense of yourself, because you monitor your own behaviors and form impressions of who you are through self-observation.

Self-monitoring refers to the ability to regulate our communication and behavior to meet the demands or expectations of social situations. This means that people vary in the degree to which they manage their verbal and nonverbal behaviors and monitor how they present themselves in different situations. **High self-monitors** are particularly good at reading the emotions of others and therefore are better at fitting into social situations because they adapt their behaviors accordingly. They agree with statements such as “In different situations and with different people, ‘I often act differently.’” In addition, research suggests that people who self-monitor are generally better communicators (Day et al., 2002). **Low self-monitors**, on the other hand, are individuals who behave the same in all social situations even when the situation dictates that they behave differently. Low self-monitors are more likely to agree with statements such as “I don’t think I need to change who I am and I will just act the same in all situations.” In short, high self-monitors try to adapt to others by behaving in ways that others find desirable (they are good self-presenters), whereas low self-monitors do not (Oh et al., 2014; Tyler et al., 2016).

Self-Efficacy

Some people have a keen sense of their ability to succeed at things they attempt to do, while others may struggle in this area. **Self-efficacy** refers to a person's perception of their ability to perform a task and their expectation about the outcomes their behavior will have in a challenging situation (Bandura, 2012). Figure 3.1.4 illustrates the interconnections of self in its relationship to our self-concept, self-esteem, self-awareness, and our self-efficacy. It is important to keep in mind that all parts of the self will always be interconnected. It is impossible to remove even one of the parts of the self.



Figure 3.1.4

Relationship between the Self, Self-Awareness, Self-Concept, Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy by Victoria Leonard is licensed [CC-BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

One of the best ways to understand self-efficacy is to read a real-life story. In the following story, you will read one student’s journey to self-efficacy. We hope that as you read the story you might be able to think of your own self-efficacy.

Student Focus

Alejandro moved out of his parent’s home to attend college. For several months before he moved out, several family members questioned his ability to take care of himself. After all, for 18 years his parents helped him by providing meals, doing laundry, and helping him with car repairs. He began to doubt whether he would be successful, but he knew it was important to try. He and his roommate moved out in July to prepare for the fall semester. Alejandro began navigating his life as a college student away from home. He shopped for groceries, found recipes to cook, read up on the best way to do laundry, and found a local mechanic to take his car to. His parents came to visit him three months later and were impressed with the strides he had taken to become self-sufficient. When they complimented him on the meal he had prepared, Alejandro felt that he had finally grown up. His parents’ positive feedback boosted his self-esteem with regard to “adulthood.” This becomes an important aspect of his self-concept.

Reflection Questions

1. What did you notice about Alejandro’s journey from thinking that he did not have the skill set to take care of himself to growing in self-efficacy?
2. Have you ever felt that you did not have self-efficacy in an area of your life? How did you resolve what you felt?

3. What concrete steps can you take to become more efficacious in one area of your life?

Stories like this are important as they illustrate the interconnectedness of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-concept. Consider this example from one of the authors:

Until I took public speaking in college, I did not have a lot of confidence in myself. My instructor was so impactful that I changed my major after having almost completed a degree in Child Development. I learned that I did well in writing, and over the next semester I changed my major to Communication Studies. I completed my undergraduate degree and was cheered on by numerous professors who told me that I had what it took to go to graduate school—so I did. I went from a rather shy young woman who wasn't really into school to a straight-A student who mastered the curriculum and ultimately became a college professor!

Hopefully, you can see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles in our lives. While some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives. This is why the feedback we get from others can impact our self-esteem and self-concept.

Uppers, Downers, and Vultures

Communication scholar Julia Wood (2017) describes three types of individuals that can impact our self-esteem in positive or negative ways. **Uppers**, or ego-boosters, are “people who communicate positively about us and who reflect positive appraisals of our self-worth” (Wood, 2017, p. 189). Typically, these are people who are significant in our lives, such as family members, friends, teachers, coaches, and the like. If you were to get a 94% on your exam, an “upper” in your life would say “Great job! I’m so proud of you!” The opposite of someone who is an upper is a downer or ego buster. **Downers**, or ego busters, “are people who communicate negatively about us and our worth” (Wood, 2017, p. 189). Instead of a compliment on the exam score of 94%, a downer would say “94%? Why did you miss 6%?” You would feel deflated and the “A” you received would no longer matter. It’s important to keep in mind that your reaction will always be based on the importance of that person in your life. If someone is not significant, you will probably have a less negative reaction.



Figure 3.1.5 "In search of the Maltese Falcon #13 - White Backed Vulture, Malta Falconry Centre" by foxypar4 is licensed CC BY 2.0

Finally, some of us have vultures in our lives. **Vultures** are an *extreme* form of downer (Wood, 2017), and they act in ways to tear you down in ways that can cause lifelong damage. Whereas a downer may make a negative comment periodically, a vulture can speak in a more abusive way. When people are not important or significant to us, we may not feel impacted by what they say—but when they *are* important to us, what they say to us will be imprinted in our hearts and minds forever, for good or bad.

For example, one of our authors shares this story: When I was a college student I took care of a toddler named Audrey whose mom was going through a health crisis. We remained connected throughout her life, and when Audrey became a teenager, she came out to her mom as a lesbian. She was an only child and these women had a very close bond, therefore what Audrey’s mom said to her impacted her greatly. In essence, she told Audrey that she was “sick in the head and that no daughter of mine will live that lifestyle.” Audrey was emotionally destroyed.

Downers and vultures often think that what they are saying to someone is “for their own good,” and they truly believe they are not causing damage. What can be hard for us to understand is that we can be praised and uplifted by 99 people, but if the 100th person conveys negative and hurtful messages, we often negate the positive messages of the other 99 people simply because of the importance of that “one” person in our lives. Also keep in mind that we can be our own upper, downer, or vulture. The messages we tell ourselves can impact our self-worth. This will be discussed further in this chapter as we look at self-fulfilling prophecies.

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3.2: Forming the Self

How Others Affect the Self

Since it's impossible to develop into adults by ourselves, how do others play a role in creating the self? Who has a significant part to play and what are the communication processes that impact this formation? This section will examine not just how family or friends contribute to who you become, but also how society contributes to this process.

Symbolic Interactionism

One of the most significant theories in the social sciences to help us understand how the self is formed is **symbolic interactionism** (Mead, 1934). In short, this theory says that our understanding of ourselves, and indeed the world around us, is shaped by our interactions with others. This means that although we may believe objects, persons, or situations simply appear to have *natural* meanings, in truth all meanings are a result of communication between people. Even a simple bike ride in the park is based on social interactions from your past. Can you ride without considering actions or events from your past bike rides, or rides you have heard about, read about, or seen on television? Even the meaning of a “good ride” influences your perception. Indeed, the very idea of what constitutes “a bike ride in a park” depends upon all the varied meanings you have acquired through your exchanges with others.

To illustrate this principle, let's look at a study on the use of marijuana back in the 1950s. The research shows us how our shared meanings of objects and/or events are truly affected by social interaction (Becker, 1953). In the study, people who had never smoked pot were questioned to understand what they knew about marijuana. Becker, the study's author, found at least three things that new pot smokers learned by interacting with others: first, how to properly use the drug; second, how to recognize physical cues of being “high”; and third, how to judge these physical sensations as actually pleasurable. Becker explained that not only did new smokers not understand how to smoke, but they also did not automatically recognize the effects of the drug upon their bodies. That is, smokers did not know they were “high” until they learned, through interaction, to differentiate such sensations. They needed to be taught to consciously sense the effects of the drug. Perhaps most interesting, the research showed that smokers didn't immediately define the effects of smoking marijuana as gratifying. Beginners needed to be told they *ought to enjoy it*. Here then we see that meanings for marijuana—in this case, its use—are surely not natural. Becker shows us that marijuana is understood by smokers—if even enjoyed—because of the exchange of meanings about the drug through communication.

But how might this principle influence the idea of developing your own unique concept of self? Before we answer this question, think of a friend you may have had in the past that had an impact on your judgment of yourself as a person. Did interacting with this person add to your self-esteem? Detract? Did you feel empowered simply by spending time with them—or did you feel criticized, inferior or unimportant? This perspective of yourself, at least as a friend, is a function of what you believe this person believed about you, according to the theory of symbolic interactionism.

Reflected Appraisal

Mead suggests that our self-concept is developed by virtue of how we view ourselves through the “mirror” of others. This process is called **reflected appraisal** (Mead, 1934). We develop a self by taking on others' views, as if those other persons were like mirrors reflecting our selfhood back at us. Based upon the ways others communicate with us, the feedback we receive, and the labels others use to define us, we construct the self. In this process, we look at ourselves from the eyes of the “other.” We perceive what we *think* they think, and then absorb or internalize that picture of ourselves. In the case of a previous instructor, if you believed that they evaluated you as academically gifted, it is quite possible you might believe yourself to be just that.

Take a moment to consider the reflected appraisal you have experienced in your life thus far. It may be interesting to ask these questions: Whose version of myself have I absorbed? Who are my mirrors? Have the mirrors I have used to form myself been positive or negative?

Social Comparison

Social comparison (Festinger, 1954) is also key to how symbolic interactionism takes place. When we judge ourselves in terms of how we compare to others, we engage in such a process. The use of social media is one way to think about how we can constantly question if we “measure up” to others. If you have ever entered into a social situation like a party or a workplace event and compared yourself to your peers—either positively or negatively—you have experienced social comparison firsthand.



Figure 3.2.1: Comparison by ER0L is licensed CC BY 2.0

A **superior comparison** occurs when you make an assessment that you look better, are more intelligent, are more talented, or more athletic, or any category like this when comparing yourself to someone else. These are a few examples of how a superior comparison manifests. If you receive a performance review at work and one of your co-workers receives an evaluation that is less favorable, you may think you are a better employee than they are. However, we can also engage in an inferior comparison in the same fashion. **Inferior comparison** means that we feel we don't measure up to others. Looking at friends or even strangers on Instagram or TikTok may lead us to believe that we are not as intelligent, good, talented, or attractive as others. Our brains are hardwired to engage in comparison. So how can we manage social comparison in our day-to-day lives? When you find yourself comparing yourself to others, ask yourself two questions. First, is this comparison useful for my self-concept? If you compare yourself to your classmates when you get a paper returned from your instructor, comparing your grade to others may help you understand how you are performing in class. However, sometimes comparisons are not useful. If you compare yourself to the physique of other people, you may be setting yourself up for an unfair comparison. Second, ask yourself if the comparison is realistic. For example, are you comparing yourself to real images, or are you comparing yourself to filtered social media images that have been cultivated by media influencers? Ultimately, we can't stop ourselves from engaging in comparisons, but we can become aware of the process and use the questions from above to manage our expectations about ourselves.

When we engage in superior comparisons, we are less likely to tell others about it because to do so may gain us the title of being a braggart, conceited, or full of ourselves. Yet, isn't the idea that we *want* to have a positive view of ourselves? How do we strike this balance in having a healthy, positive self-concept, without appearing full of ourselves? There is a greater societal expectation of humility. Sometimes that can sound like you are putting yourself down or minimizing your positive qualities when you are complemented. When you are comfortable in who you are you will eventually be able to acknowledge compliments by simply saying "thank you" and not feeling as though you need to put yourself down.

The Self and Family

You have already learned that your self is formed through your interactions with others. We cannot talk about the formation of self without acknowledging the critical impact that family has on us. Family is not necessarily defined by blood relationships, but rather through a system of support and nurturing given to you by whatever family of origin you grow up with. From birth, your primary caretakers provide feedback that influences the development of your self-concept, and thus your self-esteem. Two factors that help to determine your worldview and view of self are **identity scripts** and **attachment styles**.



Figure 3.2.2 Mali Family by Ferdinand Reus is

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Identity Scripts

When we are young, our families begin the process of helping us understand what's important or expected. What becomes instilled in us at a young age can inform our communication behaviors throughout life. **Identity scripts** are social expectations regarding how members of a particular group behave and communicate as a part of their social identity (Wood, 2017). These scripts may be thought of as "life scripts" because they provide us with rules for living. These rules are important because they frame how we see the world and our role in it. Most often these scripts provide instructions on what a family stands for. These scripts are largely unconscious, even though we may hear them stated throughout the time we live with our families of origin. Identity scripts may sound like this:

- "Live life to the fullest."
- "Be a good person."
- "Always tell the truth."
- "Stand up for yourself."
- "Don't waste food."
- "Don't let opportunities pass you by."
- "Strive to be the best you can be."
- "Take care of others before you take care of yourself."

You could create an endless list of identity scripts for yourself—and we know that you get the point! Although these scripts seem straightforward, what happens if you violate one of the scripts you've been taught? Read this story by one of the authors:

When I was a child my mother used to make this amazing coffee cake. The only part about it we didn't like was the crust at the edge of the cake. When my mom wasn't looking, my brother and I would run to the bathroom and flush the crust down the toilet! To this day I think about that because I grew up hearing the script that it was "wrong to waste food." Another script I heard growing up is "always tell the truth because lying will get you into more trouble." I was not a perfect child and there were times I did lie, like telling my mom I didn't feel well so I could stay home from school. When we don't conform to the scripts we grow up with and we violate them, we may end up feeling bad about ourselves. However, there is also a multitude of scripts that I have lived my life by that give me peace and joy, and many of those were used in raising my own children, such as "always help others when you can." I spent 20 years financially supporting a child in the Dominican Republic as a way of fulfilling an important identity script.

Culture is also an integral part of identity scripts. You may have grown up in a religion where if you sin, you need to go to confession to be absolved of sin. Different religions will have identity scripts that shape you. Identity scripts are also influenced by race. Interviews conducted with young Black adults in one study focused on how identity was constructed by the internalization of racism. It revealed that

Black participants in this study did internalize racist scripts in early childhood, but were more adept at resisting negative racial messages in early adulthood. Parenting strategies could have contributed to the internalization of negative cultural

scripts given that each respondent reported that their parents did little to shield them from internalizing presumptions of their racial inferiority. Instead, college served as a time when participants were able to develop and redefine their sense of worth and belonging into a more positive racial identity. (Llaguno Velarde, 2018, p. 2)

I hope you understand identity scripts are quite often unique to an individual's culture. The impact of culture will be explored later in this chapter.

Attachment Styles

Family not only helps form your self-concept, but it also impacts the future relationships you may have as an adult. **Attachment theory** examines how our early attachments to primary caregivers affect us. In 1958, psychologist John Bowlby developed the concept of attachment theory based on the bond that infants form with their mother (McLeod, 1970). Although his research focused on the mother-child relationship, not all children are raised by their birth mother. We see the primary caregiver as integral to defining the attachment or bond to the infant. Bowlby's research defined healthy attachments as those in which a child is secure and has an overall sense of safety. Fulfilling a child's physical, social, and emotional needs is integral to a secure attachment. Thus, attachment theory explains how the caregiver-child relationship emerges and influences subsequent relationship development with others, and ultimately affects how we communicate with others.

Based on this early research, other scholars have continued to explore how romantic attachments develop. Early attachments impact adulthood: attachment styles in infancy influence a person's development of positive and/or negative views of self and others. Figure 3.2.3 describes four attachment styles that have been posited as evolving from these early attachments we form: secure, fearful-avoidant, anxious-preoccupied, and dismissive-avoidant attachment styles. As shown in the figure,

- Individuals with a secure attachment style have a positive view of self and a positive view of others.
- Individuals with a dismissive-avoidant attachment style have a positive view of self and a negative view of others.
- Individuals with an anxious-preoccupied attachment style have a negative view of self and a positive view of others.

Individuals with a fearful-avoidant attachment style have a negative view of self and a negative view of others.

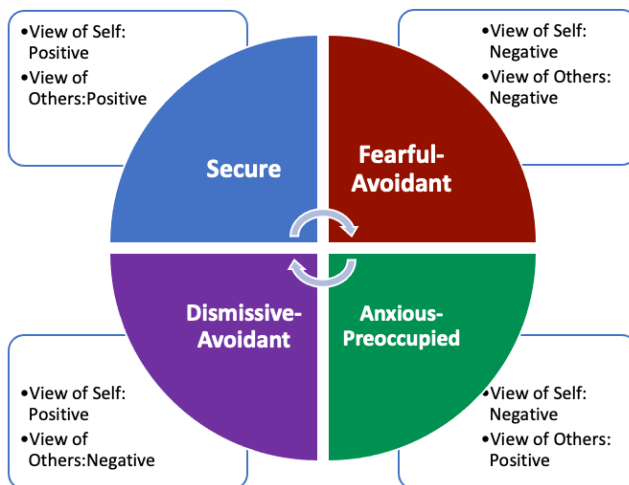


Figure 3.2.3 Attachment Styles by Victoria

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Secure Attachment

Individuals who have consistently caring and attentive parents or caregivers develop a **secure attachment style**. If the caregiving they receive is loving and stable, they develop a positive view of themselves and a positive view of others. Given this style, as people become adults, their approaches to romantic relationships are generally positive. Their communication behaviors mirror this positivity. They find it easy to become emotionally close to others and they report greater relationship satisfaction. Securely attached people are also comfortable being both independent and interdependent with their partners. In addition, when a relationship hits a bump, securely attached individuals have the capacity to communicate well and work on those relationships. However, if a relationship doesn't work out, they are able to grieve and move on rather than ruminate over the dissolution of the relationship for a long time.

Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment

One of the more difficult-to-understand attachment styles is the **dismissive-avoidant attachment style**. Here, individuals have a positive view of themselves, but a negative view of others. Early caregiving by parents is characterized by a lack of interest in the child, and the caregiver is more focused on their own needs and comfort than those of the child. Aside from being emotionally unavailable, parents may also be physically unavailable, such as not being at home much. If a parent is unavailable it could be by choice, or it might be by necessity. The parent could have made the choice not to be around by hiring a nanny or child sitter; or, it may be the child is raised by a single parent who cannot be around because they have to work. In any case, the child is encouraged to be particularly independent. The communication from the parent may sound like: "You can do it yourself," "buck up," or "get over it." Parents who foster this kind of attachment do not encourage their children to cry or express their vulnerabilities. Single parents may also be loving and consistent, so it is *not* the absence of the parent that dictates the outcome. Rather, the attachment style develops as a result of the interactions that occur when parent and child are together.

Interestingly, someone with this attachment style tends to view themselves positively. Why is this? Because the child was forced to be independent and autonomous, they often develop a positive view of self. They don't accept the view that *they* are unlovable, but rather dismiss *others* as unworthy. This makes relationships difficult for people that are dismissive-avoidant. Their early experiences were left wanting. They didn't experience closeness with their caregiver, so they avoid closeness with others. They may also deny needing anyone or may say that relationships are not important. Communicative behaviors might include phrases like "I don't really need an intimate partner or close relationship," or "I'm just not a relationship kind of person." If you think there is a tone of defensiveness in these statements, there often is. The desire that someone may have for a close relationship may be hidden or suppressed, making it harder to couple romantically. However, in the event that a dismissive-avoidant person does find a partner and later that relationship ends, they tend not to fall apart.

Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment

Children that grow up believing that their needs won't be met (even if that belief is subconscious), may develop an **anxious-preoccupied attachment style**. The caregiver is inconsistent in their treatment of the child. They may be nurturing one day, and insensitive or uncaring the next day. Children who grow up in homes where their primary caregiver struggles with substance abuse or alcohol might develop this attachment style. Under such conditions, the child has difficulty trusting the parent or might be clingy due to unpredictable behavior. The pattern for this attachment style produces adults who have negative thoughts of themselves, but positive thoughts of others. This may seem counterintuitive since the child experiences the treatment received by their caregiver as inconsistent. However, this result actually makes sense *because* of the inconsistency. Anxious-preoccupied attachment causes individuals to have negative thoughts about themselves because the caregiver was often insensitive or uncaring, so they feel they don't deserve love. But, as children, they also had days when they were treated with love and kindness. Thus, they are able to see enough positive behavior in their parent or primary caregiver that they can still form positive attachments.

The communicative outcome of the anxious-preoccupied attachment style is a person who experiences more anxiety and is less secure in relationships. This insecurity can manifest in behaviors such as neediness, possessiveness, and jealousy. They will need continual reassurance that they are loved, and will seek validation. They may also struggle to be alone and have a tendency to think negatively. If you are a person with this attachment style, or you are in a relationship with someone like this, you might see frequent texts to just check in, or questions such as, "Why haven't you answered my text?" There may be questions about who you communicate with, or a request to see your phone.

Fearful-Avoidant Attachment

The final attachment style we will examine is one that can have the most severe negative impact on one's sense of self. **Fearful-avoidant attachment styles** are created when a child experiences physical or emotional cruelty. There could be times when the "care" they receive is life-threatening. Clearly, this poses a dilemma for the child, who rightfully feels the parent should be their safety net. The only way a child can cope with the threat of verbal or physical abuse is to detach from the parent. As a result, they have a negative view of both themselves and others. Most people want intimate relationships in their lives. However, when someone has grown up in fear it is difficult to trust other people. An inner conflict exists in this person. The desire for intimacy is often resisted based on their inability to trust or rely on others. They are often suspicious of others' intentions or actions, so they push people away. This is why expressions of affection are not readily expressed.

Students always ask, "Can your attachment style change?" Yes, it can, for either better or worse. As you experience life and relationships, you can change your attachment style. If you have a dismissive-avoidant style and meet a wonderful person who has a secure attachment style, you can change over time as trust is built. Similarly, if you have a secure attachment style, and end up in

an abusive relationship, you can develop a fearful attachment style. Students also ask, “Can you have one attachment style with one person, and a different one with someone else?” The answer is yes, but most of us tend to have one dominant attachment style.

The Self and Society

We have acknowledged that the self is not something created in isolation, by a person alone. But are there aspects of who we are that are impacted by society more than others? One answer to this question might be an examination of social identity categories. **Social identity categories** set the stage for meaningful life experiences that have cumulative effects. Interpersonal relationships impact and are impacted by such social identity categories as race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and socioeconomics or class. In order to understand selfhood, we must examine how societies have a part to play in forming identities. While there are a variety of social identity categories, let’s examine these three.

Race and Ethnicity

It is not a well-known fact that each human being, no matter which racial category they might claim as their own, shares 99.9 percent of their genetic material. This means there are often more differences found between people of the *same racial category* than there are *between people of different racial categories*. The Human Genome Project asserts that race is a social construct, not a biological one (Bonham, n.d.). The American Anthropological Association agrees, stating that race is the product of “historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances” (Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association, 1998, May 17).

It would be an error, however, to argue there is no such thing as racial identity. Just because race is socially constructed does not mean it is not real. Rather, race is a concept that is meaningful only through human meaning-making—that is, through communication. We may talk about how someone living on Earth can stand still. But in reality, we are never actually standing still, given that the Earth is rotating at about 1,000 miles per hour. Of course, the notion of “standing still” is still a useful distinction when we communicate with others. The same can be said of race. While race is not a biologically accurate designation, it has real-world impacts on social perception—in fact, those impacts are undeniable.

Racial identity is a multidimensional construct that includes the strength of one's identification with one's racial group, a sense of attachment to other group members, and evaluation of group membership (e.g., how much the individual likes or dislikes being White, for example), and may include group-relevant attitudes and behaviors (Broman, 2008, March 18, para. 1). Indeed, at different times in history, the classification of race has shifted between race, ethnicity, culture, religion, geography, nationality, and language.

President Barack Obama's comments on racial identity may help us to see the complexities of talking about racial identity:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a depression to serve in Patton’s army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles, and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that and no other country on earth is my story even possible. (National Public Radio, 2008, March 18, para. 8)

The ways that individuals construct meanings around racial identity and its significance influence how one understands selfhood, as well as interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it makes sense to explore the meanings we give race—if only to consider how we want to grow, develop and unfold as a community.

A person’s sense of self may also be influenced by ethnic identity as well as race. Ethnic identity refers to traits that link to ancestry and heritage. To talk of one’s ethnicity we typically include several dimensions:

(1) self-identification, (2) knowledge about the ethnic culture (traditions, customs, values, and behaviors), and (3) feelings about belonging to a particular ethnic group. Ethnic identity often involves a shared sense of origin and history, which may link ethnic groups to distant cultures in Asia, Europe, Latin America, or other locations. (Martin & Nakayama, 2004, p. 160).

While our discussion here is limited, we would be remiss if we did not suggest that social perceptions about race and ethnicity—much like other social identities—can lead to prejudice and/or discrimination. When one considers the impacts of the social and political history of slavery and segregation, for example, Black and indigenous people still experience systematic racism.

Discussion: Impacts of Bias and Stereotypes on Identity Development and Self

“The Talk”: One Way Some Families Discuss Identity and Social Interaction

Depending on your identity, you will experience different social interactions from different perspectives. This can be especially true when it comes to your racial identity. If you are racially categorized as a member of a dominant or minority group, you may be stereotyped. (I define **stereotype** as a widely believed but generally fixed and oversimplified idea of a person or thing.) As a result, you may experience different types of privilege or disprivilege.

Have you ever talked with your parents or other members of your family or community about your racial identity, and the impact it could have on your interactions with other people? Why might certain people, with certain identities—racial or otherwise (like gender or sexual orientation)—have had these conversations, while others might not?

Consider listening to the “Today Explained” podcast, linked below, which illustrates how two different families have talked about police brutality in the United States shortly after the brutal killing of George Floyd in 2020. Mr. Floyd was a Black man who died while a White male police officer held his knee on his neck for more than eight minutes. Most of that interaction was caught on camera. As you listen to the podcast, consider the similarities and differences between the conversations.

- Audio (24 minutes): [Podcast: Today Explained, “The Talk”](#)
- Transcript: [Podcast: Today Explained, “The Talk”](#)

Questions for Journaling or Discussion

- What identities were present in this podcast?
- What did you notice about how the people in this episode discussed identity?
- Have you ever had similar conversations?
- Can you relate to any of the people involved in this story?
- Jot down any other thoughts you have from listening to this podcast, esp. as they relate to terms you learned this chapter and experiences you have had with identity, race, class, and communication.

Finally, racial identities, and how we talk about them, might ultimately be the best example of symbolic interactionism. Researchers note that “52 percent of folks who self-categorize as nonwhite in the Census Bureau’s projections for America’s 2060 racial makeup will also think of themselves as white.” Another 40 percent of those who self-categorize as White “will also claim minority racial identity” (Brooks, 2021, July 22, p. A-18). This means the distinctions between races and ethnic identities seem to be blurring. In some ways, they are taking on different social meanings which complicate our very ways of thinking about these classifications.

Gender and Sexuality

Concepts and definitions that refer to sexual orientation and gender identity are evolving. Many of the terms used in the past to describe LGBTQIA+ people, for example, namely in the mental health field, are now considered to be outdated and offensive. Because identity is such a sensitive area of personhood, the terms we use to describe it seem to shift year to year. This means we must stay attuned to these changes, especially as interpersonal communication creates shifts in how identities are understood and expressed.

The term **gender identity** was coined in the middle 1960s to describe one’s persistent inner sense of femininity, masculinity, a unique blend of both, or neither. One’s gender identity may be the same as or different from the sex assigned at birth. **Gender fluidity** describes a person who does not identify with a single fixed gender or has a fluid or unfixed gender identity. **Transgender identity** is an umbrella term used to account for one whose gender identity does not correspond to one’s birth sex (American Psychological Association, Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance (2009) para. 6; [The Human Rights Campaign](#)).



Figure 3.2.4 Day 31 - Gender by David Wallace is licensed CC-BY 2.0

Alternatively, according to the American Psychological Association, “**Sexual orientation** refers to the sex of those to whom one is romantically attracted” (American Psychological Association, 2012, para. 4). The terms “lesbian” and “gay” are used to refer to people who experience attraction to members of the same sex, and the term “bisexual” describes people who experience attraction to members of both sexes. It should be noted that, although these categories continue to be widely used, sexual orientation does not always appear in such definable categories and, instead, occurs on a continuum, or in a more fluid way (ibid., para. 3). Although social views of gender are shifting in the 21st century, it is still true that children are taught different ways of understanding selfhood on the basis of gender identity and gender expression. We experience powerful communication messages that socialize us by way of television, school, play, and family. By and large, we are taught how to be “masculine” or “feminine,” what those categories mean, and the rewards or punishments we may experience if we violate the expectations aligned with them.

Socioeconomics or Class

Perhaps class identity is the least talked about of the three social categories mentioned in this section. Most people do not discuss class, but it certainly plays an important part in how our selfhood develops. We send and read others’ communicative messages about class in part through objects like high-priced automobiles, fashion, or food. If you think about the question “Where do you live?” you recognize that part of the meaning of such a question can be related to where a person comes from—and this information tells us a bit about the community of people that form the context for our development of self. To say you are from Beverly Hills or Pacific Heights sends a very particular communicative cue. Beyond what types of objects you own or where you live, we also judge an individual’s class identity upon the vocabulary a person uses when speaking, their use of slang, and even linguistic accents.

Our celebrity culture encourages us to aspire to wealth as a key to happiness and self-realization. Counselors report that children today, when asked what they want to be when they grow up, often simply answer, “rich.” Materialism and consumer culture are celebrated in Western/American culture even while we admit that money can’t buy satisfaction. Popular films, television shows, and social media posts often criticize the rich, but declare—albeit covertly—that the opportunities and lifestyles of those at the upper end of the class hierarchy are still the most desirable. In short, we seem to get mixed messages about the value of class status, even though most people aspire to be wealthy.

A number of signs point to the fact that our class hierarchy is becoming less flexible. The American Dream—the notion that hard work and persistence will surely result in prosperity and plentitude—is attractive, but largely a myth when we examine the numbers of people who move from poverty to the top echelons of wealth. In fact, the disparity in the United States between the top income earners and those at the bottom, far from moving toward equalization, is presently increasing each year. Executive pay and the wages earned by an average worker provide a snapshot of this condition. Chief executives of large corporations earn on average 320 times the amount of a typical employee, according to the Economic Policy Institute: “In 1989, that ratio was 61 to 1. From 1978 to 2019, compensation grew 14 percent for typical workers. It rose 1,167 percent for C.E.O.s” (Gelles, 2021, p. 24).

As our society moves toward a greater divide between those who are affluent and those who are not, the promise of opportunities and protections for all—regardless of economic standing—can seem uncertain. In any case, wealth and income play a role in shaping identity since they influence life experiences and thus attitudes and values.

Race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status all influence our sense of self and communication with others—and certainly impact the context within which interpersonal relationships develop and thrive. These social categories also overlap and are interrelated. The concept of **intersectionality**, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, is key to recognizing how forms of inequality that may accompany social identities can overlap, compound, and affect a person’s privilege or disprivilege (Crenshaw, 1995). Crenshaw suggests that often when we view racism, for example, we may not realize how other social identities like gender or sexuality can combine to create complicated webs of prejudice or discrimination. Stereotypes about LGBTQIA+ people, for

instance, may merge with those about working class or impoverished people. This “intersection” can multiply inequality—meaning it can become a complicated matrix of prejudice or discrimination.

Intersectionality as a concept is also valuable as a tool to show us how an individual may be privileged by virtue of *some* social identities but not by others. One may have high socioeconomic status, for example, and be able to afford to lobby for favors from government officials in power. That same person, however, may also be transgender and experience discrimination while inhabiting government institutions. As you can see, privilege and disprivilege do not always materialize in easily recognizable patterns. Intersectionality demonstrates how social identities are complex and their meanings can often shift as social perspectives move, evolve, and challenge the status quo.

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3.3: Communicating the Self

Presentation of Self: Communication and Identity Management

So far, we have explained how communication plays a part in how the self develops. But how do we use communication to influence how others view us? In his classic text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Erving Goffman describes a new way of thinking about how we attempt to form the self and simultaneously influence others' perspectives of that self we perform. This process is often called **identity management**, and it draws upon a dramaturgical approach. A **dramaturgical approach** is one where we see life as a drama or stage play unfolding. Everyday life is not just an experience we individually perceive and make sense of; rather, we collaborate with one another to act out a series of events as if we were characters in a story. As Shakespeare declared: "All the world's a stage," and it is this notion that helps Goffman frame the concept of identity management.

The idea of "single secret behavior," from an episode of the cable television show *Sex and the City*, demonstrates how we may think about self-presentation in a social setting. The made-up term was used in the show to describe behavior that's private, what we do when nobody is around, or what we would not do in front of other people. The character, Carrie, cited her compulsion to stack saltine crackers with jelly while her friend Charlotte reported her tendency to stare at a magnifying mirror and examine her pores. Clearly, it's not necessary to be single to have private or secret behaviors, indeed, we all have private selves at each stage of our lives. But as Goffman explains, our public selves and private selves must be managed as we navigate interpersonal relationships.

In social situations, we rely upon a "script" that tells us what is expected in that situation. For example, we know what behavior is expected at a funeral, on a first date, or inside a classroom. Goffman (1959) explains we have both a perceived self and a presenting self. The term **perceived self** describes the person you believe yourself to be. When you reflect upon who you are, whether that reflection is indeed objectively true or not, you conceive of your perceived self. This self is not typically shared with others, and it contains some of your most private and intimate perceptions. If you have ever kept a journal, you may be able to observe how you see yourself. It is interesting to reread old journal entries since often you can detect changes in your view of yourself over periods of time.



Figure 3.3.1: "Day 165: 2 Self Portraits" by Sodanie Chea is licensed CC-BY 2.0

On the other hand, the **presenting self** is that public self we perform for others. It is our representation of the self we want to project to others, a self that typically conforms to approved social norms. When you go into a job interview, for example, you cultivate a public image—a presenting self. Rarely do you show up in your slippers, without a shower, and use profanity.

The perceived self and the presenting self may help us to understand Goffman's concepts of **front stage** vs. **back stage**. When we think of a stage play, we see that there are at least two different locations for actors: out in front of the audience and back behind the stage sets. Impression management occurs out in front of the "audience." When we are in front of others whose impressions of us are important, we may feel a greater pressure to manage our behaviors. This is what we might call being front stage. However, according to Goffman (1959), the back stage is "where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude" (ibid., p. 113). Thus, we are in the backstage area when we are away from others and don't have to consider their judgments.

One of our authors provides an example:

I can remember being in graduate school years ago and having my first teaching experience. After I taught class one day, I went to the gym. As I was changing into my gym clothes in the women's locker room, I turned to see one of my students, who coincidentally I had been speaking with about an assignment that very day. As our eyes met, it was clear we were both embarrassed. Why? Not only was our relationship at that time forged frontstage, and removing one's clothes is a *backstage activity*, but also our relationship of student-instructor signified a difference in power (since in my role I was responsible to assign grades). While we ignored one another and pretended in class that the locker-room event never happened, I learned a

great deal about social roles and the differences between frontstage and backstage. Have you ever had an experience in which these two clashed?

More often than not, within interpersonal interactions, we constantly construct **face**, which refers to the positive impression we would like to make upon others. If we fail to maintain face—for example, if we make an embarrassing remark or act out in some way—it may cause others to have a bad impression of us. Social anxiety derives from the fear of such an event. After all, we are just humans who want to feel good about ourselves. However, to maintain face or repair some damage done to lost face we engage in what Goffman calls facework. **Facework** describes the communicative behavior that we use, both verbal and nonverbal, to enact and maintain our own presenting image or that of another. It is any work that one does in order to construct, or save face (Goffman, 1967). Although most of the time we are not aware we are doing facework, since it is such a familiar activity, we constantly coordinate our identities with others to legitimize our version of self.

Insight into our desire to shape others' views of who we are (even when this desire is unconscious) is helpful when we consider that social interactions are the basis of successful interpersonal relationships. If others do not accept our social performances, we are unable to coordinate with others to achieve our goals—even if those goals involve simply being liked. Perhaps more interesting is that Goffman theorized that the process of impression management is actually a way we form and reform selfhood. By interacting with others, we *realize* the roles we play for others—that is, we become those roles. When you go to your workplace and perform your job, you recognize yourself as the working role you play in that social situation. Thus, from Goffman's perspective, your selfhood is born in and through performances with/for others.

Discussion: Identity and Face Negotiation Theory

Have You Ever “Saved Face?”

Being in control of how we are perceived and feeling respected for our identities is crucial to our self-esteem and confidence. So what happens when that self-assurance is threatened? For instance, what do we do when we are embarrassed? Or how would you behave after you are caught in a lie? Typically we try to “save face,” in other words, as we learned earlier, we perform facework. We communicate in a way that either explains the behavior or compensates for the behavior. According to **conflict face-negotiation theory** (Ting-Toomey, 2004), a perspective that overlaps in many ways with identity management, we are actually doing things every day to save face and attempting to manage how we, and others, are being perceived. The act of saving face, or doing facework, might sound simple since essentially we are just trying to uphold our pride and ego—but it often happens unconsciously, meaning we aren't even fully aware we are doing it because it is so automatic and habitual.

However, depending on our identity and background, saving face can actually get quite complicated: we may feel pressure to not only save our own face, but also to represent ourselves in a way that promotes a positive image for our entire culture or community. There might be certain behaviors that are expected of you based on your identity within a culture, and as part of facework, you may have to struggle to uphold those standards. Furthermore, if we consider our **intersectionality** (our multiple overlapping identities) as we discussed earlier, we have to juggle a lot of potentially competing identities or stereotypes associated with those identities, all at once!

For example, imagine someone who identifies as a woman and as Asian American. If she is on a women's soccer team where she does not have many Asian American teammates, she might feel more protective of her cultural identity since she is part of a minority within this context. She would most likely perform facework to promote a positive image of Asian Americans. Conversely, if she is on a soccer team that is co-ed (mixed gendered), but made up of mostly Asian American players, she might perform facework to promote a positive self-image of women.

As you can see, the precise identities that we prioritize often depend upon the context within which we find ourselves. Our choices are often fluid, unconscious, and quite subjective (after all, there is no right or wrong way to save face), which only complicates how we perform facework.

Reflection

- Can you think of a time when you behaved in a certain way to “save face?”
- What parts of your identity were most prominent or salient at that time, and which were less significant or more muted at that time? Why?

Presentation of Self: Communication in the Virtual World

We have already learned how impactful social comparison can be when we hold ourselves up to others in our lives. Today, we are finding that social comparison is even more magnified in the virtual world. There is a fine line between social media and social networking sites. Social media broadcasts, or relays content without a necessary interactive component, like YouTube. Social networking sites (SNS) can be interactive so that users have the option to communicate directly with others, like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat, to name a few. With the increase in popularity across the globe, there is a greater tendency to engage in social comparison as more personal information is disclosed on these sites. The use of social media and social networking connects to our sense of self as we engage in social comparison through these sites. **Social comparison** relies on having information about others readily available. All you have to do is open any of these apps to look at others' posts. Recent research suggests that the use of social media and social networking leads to a greater degree of social comparison and depression (Nguyen, et al., 2020). Why do you think that is?



Figure 3.3.2 **Social Media Addiction** by **Today Testing** is licensed **CC-BY-SA 4.0**

Most of what we see online is **idealistic**, given that most people tend to post positive things about themselves, such as successes or attractive photos. The “norms,” or “standards” for attractiveness, success, intelligence, etc., become the basis for social comparison. It is not surprising that people who spend more time on these sites are more likely to agree that others have “better lives” and are “happier” than themselves. Individuals’ self-perceptions and self-evaluations tend to suffer after being exposed to profiles of attractive others on social media and social networking sites.

The way in which we engage online also impacts our self-esteem. Some people are **passive users** and simply read what others post, whereas others are **active users** in that they post and interact with others. Individuals who are active users find their worth primarily from feedback given to them by others, and this includes the number of “likes” and/or comments they receive. Upward social comparison, (thinking that others are superior to you), is associated with decreased life satisfaction and other negative feelings like envy and jealousy among SNS users. By disabling the “Like” feature, one might be able to avoid some of these negative feelings. However, like many addictions, it is difficult for us to consider disabling this feature, since each time we see that our post is liked, our brain releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter that is responsible, in part, for our moods. Why would we want to give up the high that we get while actively using social networking sites?

According to Nguyen, et al., as cited in Casale and Banshi (2020), “Social media addiction (or problematic social media use) classified into DSM V is a proposed form of psychological or behavioral dependence on social media platforms” (p. 257). Meanwhile, mental disorders (or mental illnesses) are conditions that affect your thinking, feeling, mood, and behavior (Medlineplus, 2020). It is hard for physicians to diagnose the disease if the addict does not report their problem. Young people and students are considered to be most vulnerable to problematic internet use (Kuss et al., 2013; Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016; Loannidis et al., 2018). A study in India showed that the rate of social media addiction was 36.9% among 1,389 social media users who were pre-university college students (Ramesh et al., 2018). Furthermore, the problem of social media use in children and young people is often associated with symptoms of mental disorder, for example, anxiety and depression (Hoge et al., 2017). In the United States, approximately 25% of college students surveyed showed signs of depression when using Facebook (Moreno et al., 2011). A 2013 survey from the American Psychological Association found that psychological problems were increasing among college students, such as anxiety (41.6%), depression (36.4%), and relationship problems (35.8%) (American Psychological Association, 2013).

We can also see how social media platforms and networking can lead to positive outcomes. Individuals who would normally not interact with others due to social anxiety find their voice through social media. They will be more interactive and communicate with others positively because they feel safer. In addition, social media can be used to promote a cause or event that is for the betterment of society.

In short, findings on social media use suggest that first, symptoms of depression and anxiety are associated with excessive social media use. Second, people who have a passive lifestyle are at a higher risk of depression. Third, excessive social media usage time (over three hours a day), is a significant risk to users' anxiety and depression. Finally, social comparison habits are likely to cause depression and psychological disorders because users often feel lost when others share positive experiences. Do you or people you know use social media? Most likely, the answer is “yes.” Given the research discussed in the sidebar that follows, it is worth your time to consider how social media may play a role in your self-concept and/or self-esteem. I am not advocating you simply cease using electronic platforms; rather, I urge you to be mindful of the ways you use them, and how they impact your interpersonal relationships.

Explore: Social Media Use and Politics

A recent article by writer Brooke Auxier posits that “From global protests against racial injustice to the 2020 election, some Americans who use social media are taking to these platforms to mobilize others and show their support for causes or issues. But experiences and attitudes related to political activities on social media vary by race and ethnicity, age, and party, according to a Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020 (Auxier, 2020). Auxier further notes that individuals use social media to post pictures in support of a cause, look up information about events like rallies or protests nearby, or encourage others to take action. The data reveal significant differences between the use of social media based on race, age, and political affiliation. For example, the Pew Research Center found that “Black users stand out: 48% of Black social media users say they have posted a picture on social media to show their support for a cause in the past month, compared with 37% of Hispanic users and 33% of white users. Black adults who use social media (45%) are also more likely than their Hispanic (33%) or white (30%) counterparts to say that in the past month they’ve taken to social media to encourage others to take action on issues that are important to them” (Auxier, 2020).

Reflection

- Would you agree with these results based on your own experience with social media?

Try this: Read the rest of the [Pew Research Center report](#) on differences in age and political affiliation. Would you agree with the data that are presented? How does this make you feel about your race, age, and political views? Is this one aspect of yourself that you are particularly pleased with, or one that you might hope to change?

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3.4: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Confirmation Bias

When we hold a stereotype about a person, we have expectations that he or she will fulfill that stereotype. A **self-fulfilling prophecy** is an expectation held by a person that alters his or her behavior in a way that tends to make it true. When we hold stereotypes about a person, we tend to treat the person according to our expectations. This treatment can influence the person to act according to our stereotypic expectations, thus confirming our stereotypic beliefs. Research by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found that disadvantaged students whose teachers expected them to perform well had higher grades than disadvantaged students whose teachers expected them to do poorly.

Consider this example of cause and effect in a self-fulfilling prophecy: If an employer expects an openly gay male job applicant to be incompetent, the potential employer might treat the applicant negatively during the interview by engaging in less conversation, making little eye contact, and generally behaving coldly toward the applicant (Hebl et al., 2002). In turn, the job applicant will perceive that the potential employer dislikes him, and he will respond by giving shorter responses to interview questions, making less eye contact, and generally disengaging from the interview. After the interview, the employer will reflect on the applicant's behavior, which seemed cold and distant, and the employer will conclude, based on the applicant's poor performance during the interview, that the applicant was in fact incompetent. Thus, the employer's stereotype—gay men are incompetent and do not make good employees—is reinforced. Do you think this job applicant is likely to be hired? Treating individuals according to stereotypic beliefs can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

Another dynamic that can reinforce stereotypes is confirmation bias. When interacting with the target of our prejudice, we tend to pay attention to information that is consistent with our stereotypic expectations and ignore information that is inconsistent with our expectations. In this process, known as **confirmation bias**, we seek out information that supports our stereotypes and ignore information that is inconsistent with our stereotypes (Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). In the job interview example, the employer may not have noticed that the job applicant was friendly and engaging, and that he provided competent responses to the interview questions in the beginning of the interview. Instead, the employer focused on the job applicant's performance in the later part of the interview, after the applicant changed his demeanor and behavior to match the interviewer's negative treatment.

Have you ever fallen prey to the self-fulfilling prophecy or confirmation bias, either as the source or target of such bias? How might we stop the cycle of the self-fulfilling prophecy? Social class stereotypes of individuals tend to arise when information about the individual is ambiguous. If information is unambiguous, stereotypes do not tend to arise (Baron et al., 1995).

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3.5: Changing the Self

Set Yourself Up to Succeed

We have examined a number of aspects of self throughout this chapter. But perhaps surprisingly, we *cannot* simply give you a definitive set of instructions to alter your self-concept or improve your self-esteem. Often, the influences that shape us are precisely those that prevent us from simply deciding we are going to think positively about ourselves and then enact that change. We are not perfect, and to expect perfection leads us down a dangerous path. It may be more fruitful to become aware of how we often stand in our own way when we truly desire change. Here we discuss ways we might set ourselves up to succeed when changing the self is our goal.

Commit to Personal Growth with Small Steps

This guideline sounds like a no-brainer, but you might be surprised by how many of us believe we can simply alter our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors without resistance (both from ourselves and others). One important step, therefore, is to slow down and be deliberate. As we discussed, the self-concept resists new ways of being—that is, we learn a “dance” of being who we are, and then it becomes habitual. Thus, we need to be willing to take baby steps. That means if we truly want to make a change, we must focus on one small aspect we want to transform, and then engage in a limited number of new practices at a time to bring about a change.

For example, when Marla was enrolled in a Communication Studies class at her local community college, she decided it was the time in her life to try and manage her shyness. She set small communication goals for herself for the semester. First, she decided to try and make one new friend in each of her classes. In order to do this, she sat next to someone friendly and introduced herself. Her second goal was to raise her hand in class at least once a week to ask a question. As a result of her goals and simple action steps, she not only made new friends, but she also developed a mentorship relationship with one of her professors. In short, what we do need is to show ourselves grace and set small goals. If you do not set goals that you can reasonably accomplish, you are bound to get discouraged and quit. It has taken you this many years to become the person you are, right? It’s wise not to expect that you can transform overnight.

Create and Maintain Healthy Relationships

Oprah Winfrey once said we should surround ourselves only with those who will lift us higher. Although that may not always be possible, her point is that we are greatly impacted by the people we interact with. Surrounding ourselves with good people who support a positive version of our self-concept will help us develop a healthy sense of self. Perhaps Winfrey knew about the concept of **emotional contagion**. It suggests that as people express their emotional states, others around them are likely to “catch” those states (Goleman, 1995). In other words, emotions may be transferred from one person to another. This will be explored further in Chapter 7. Such a finding has at least one implication for this chapter on self: the people you surround yourself with will impact how you feel, and more importantly how you feel about yourself. If you live day-to-day near those who are negative, unsupportive, criticize you, or create drama, you are bound to draw your perceptions—at least in part—from that negativity.

Our self-esteem as well as our ability to make changes in ourselves flourishes in an environment where we are nourished and may sustain a sense of well-being. Working to create healthy relationships with others and then maintain those support systems is an integral part of change. As you transform, you will see your relationships change. This is because of the fact that relationships are interrelated systems: you cannot change one part of a system without causing changes in all other parts. An anonymous author once noted, “When things change inside you, things change around you.” In fact, as you grow, you often tend to meet others that are on a similar path, and you feel a kinship with one another. Simultaneously, as you feel more empowered and confident, other relationships you’ve been in for a while may stagnate and feel like more work because you are not the same person you once were. Since changing aspects of one’s self is helped by relationships that you can lean into, these shifts in who you feel close to only aid the process. Keep in mind those who nurture you, give you the strength you need to stay positive, and motivate you to be your greatest yet-to-be self.

Recognize the Subjective Nature of Self

If you have ever watched a movie with someone and the first thing you say after is “That was a great movie!” but the person you watched it with said, “I hated it,” you will understand how everything we see is relative or subjective, meaning evaluated on the basis of personal perspectives. What we may find attractive, you may not. Through the years of teaching Communication classes, we have asked students to identify an attractive celebrity, and then we ask the rest of the class if they agree with these perceptions.

There has never been a time when everyone felt the same way about someone. This same dynamic is true about perceptions of selfhood as well. We may view ourselves very differently than others do. In fact, we generally do not see ourselves the way others see us, and at times, we may not even be able to judge ourselves accurately even though the truth of our behavior may be staring us in the face.

For example, individuals sometimes view themselves more harshly than is warranted. There have been times when students have remarked they do not want to turn their cameras on in a Zoom class session because they are self-conscious about how they look. In fact, they look fabulous when we get the chance to interface with these same people privately later in the same session. On the other hand, research shows that many people overestimate their own knowledge or capabilities in specific situations or fields of expertise. The Dunning–Kruger effect (Schlösser, et al., 2013) is a cognitive bias wherein people are unaware of their own deficiencies. A person might believe they are truly likable or socially appropriate, for instance, when in fact they are offensive or off-putting. It is not that we are all unable to evaluate our abilities or behaviors, but rather our conclusions are highly dependent upon the context within which we judge ourselves.

Challenge: Try This

Make a list of ten adjectives you believe describe you. Then, ask someone you feel close to, to write their own list. How close are the words you each selected? Do the adjectives on the list you received from another have items on it that surprised you? Why, or why not? What does a comparison of your two lists reveal to you?

Recognize that the Self-Concept Resists Change

It may sound counterintuitive to say that the self-concept resists change when our aim *is* to change. As humans, change is hard even when we know it is good for us! If you went through the COVID-19 pandemic spending a lot of time on your sofa, this will resonate with you. An APA Stress in America survey conducted in late February 2021 found that a little less than half of all adults reported undesired weight gain since the start of the pandemic (APA, 2021). The stress brought on by being isolated, bored, depressed, or anxious led to an abundance of eating. Wouldn't it be wise then to begin eating healthfully if you are one of the people in the United States who gained weight during the pandemic? It would seem to be a simple decision to get off of the sofa and just change. But change is not easy, and there is a part of us that just likes the “comfortable sofas” we have in our lives. In short, the self is a construct that is obstinate: like a rubber band, it may be pulled or stretched into different shapes, but it typically will return to its original form. This means that to truly transform our behavior or shift an attitude, we have to recognize our own resistance to change. Furthermore, the challenges of changing yourself can be compounded in an interpersonal relationship. Relationships create their own patterns and habits that may be hard to break free from, especially when they are in sync with someone else. We may face our own resistance to change, but we also often experience resistance from others unless they are also interested in making a shift.

The term **cognitive conservatism** has been coined to account for the way we tend to seek out and notice information that conforms to our existing self-concept. Does that surprise you? Studies reveal that our own self-concept is incredibly biased! If we believe a given political viewpoint and that perspective is a part of our self-concept, we are often more inclined to notice a bumper sticker on a car that represents that view or even seek out radio broadcasts featuring commentators who espouse our views. It is perhaps even more worrying, however, that algorithms operating on social media platforms use our own cognitive conservatism to keep us glued to those platforms. The longer we stay, the more data they can collect and sell to aid in marketing and advertising.

Be Mindful of the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

One challenge to changing the self can be found in the concept of **self-fulfilling prophecy**, introduced by the sociologist Robert Merton. The phenomenon suggests that our own expectations—and also those that others may place upon us—can shift our behaviors. When such a shift occurs, expectations we entertained may actually come to be. As Merton put it, a “false definition ... evoking a new behavior...” can cause an “originally false conception [to] come true” (Merton, 1948, p. 193).

There are generally four phases of a self-fulfilling prophecy. First, we form an expectation, often without even knowing we have done so. Second, we behave in ways that align with that expectation. Third, we experience the expectation we formed as coming to fruition. Finally, the original expectation we held is strengthened or reinforced. One of our authors shares their own example:

My experience with my brother several years ago is a telling example. I believed my brother was not interested in having a close relationship with me (Phase 1). I, therefore, avoided calling him or reaching out in any tangible way. I figured, “Well, he is simply busy with his own life and I guess that’s the way it is.” I neglected to invite closeness with him; I behaved as if

he did not want to know me or was unconcerned with my well-being (Phase 2). In a year or so our relationship had not only become more distant (Phase 3), but I also became even more sure that my original belief about his disinterest in me was true (Phase 4). Later, I found out he was experiencing some truly difficult health issues and was unable to communicate to me about these. I was completely wrong in my assumptions—but I sure believed them with gusto! It is noteworthy that I believed the distance between me and my brother was simply something *happening* to me, and yet I was the impetus. My expectation about my brother's intentions, in my mind, were proven true until I realized I had misperceived the situation.

Others' expectations may also lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. "The term *Pygmalion effect* refers broadly to the effects of interpersonal expectations, that is, the finding that what one person expects of another can come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Rosenthal, 2010). Here is another personal example:

I was an average student throughout my education. As a child, I had some negative feedback from teachers. It peaked one day in a high school Chemistry class when I raised my hand and asked a question. My teacher's response was "That was a stupid question, Victoria, and you won't succeed in chemistry if you don't know that answer." I went to the Counseling office and begged to be put in a more remedial class. I knew I would never succeed in science. However, upon finishing graduate school I wanted to go into pharmaceutical sales where one needs to have a strong understanding of all sciences. I was hired, went into training, and my mentors told me I was doing brilliantly. I ended up completing training as the highest-scoring trainee for the company. I went on to become a successful pharmaceutical rep, and to this day I remember much of what I learned.

Your mind is a complicated tool that, according to Higgins (1989), influences your self-esteem in ways you may be unaware of. In fact, most of us are unsure of the roots of self-esteem and how to effectively build it in our own selves or our children. The **self-discrepancy theory** suggests that we use specific standards to understand our own worth—even though these standards, or "self-guides," as he named them, may not be accurate potentialities of what we can or even should become. There are two basic types of standards: the ideal self and the ought self.

The **ideal self** is a standard related to physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual hopes or wishes a person may have. This is the self you dream about becoming. For instance, you may envision yourself as a talented pianist in the future and hope that you may have what it takes to be famous and well-known for your musical talent. The achievement of this vision would be the standard from which you measure your self-worth. The **ought self** is the person the outside world might expect from you. This is the self one feels obligated to become to meet others' expectations; it may also include social norms or cultural standards. An example of an ought self may stem from what your mother, father, or even boss believes you should be. Perhaps your mother or father believes you should be married or be more involved in family life; your supervisor thinks you need to work harder or be more ambitious.

In short, these standards affect how you may judge yourself. Unsurprisingly, when you meet the standards, Higgins (1989) argues that you experience positive feelings, and you are elated or relieved; when you do not, you experience negative feelings like irritation, guilt, and even depression. In fact, Strauman (1992) found that individuals who suffered from depression were much more likely to perceive themselves as further away from their ideal self. Those who reported higher levels of anxiety seemed to believe they were not meeting the standards of their ought self. The point to understand is that our self-esteem can be altered by ideal and ought self discrepancies. Nonetheless, research shows our sense of self is affected by such variables. In our quest to become better versions of ourselves, we need to become aware of the ideals we treasure and ask ourselves: Is this goal practical? Am I putting undue pressure upon myself?

Similarly, we must be clear about how other people have an effect on our perceived obligations. An autonomous person must make their own independent choices, recognize when these stray from what's reasonable, and ultimately be responsible to continue learning and growing.

Beware of Distorted Patterns of Thinking



Figure 3.5.1: "Distorted / undistorted" by Carlos ZGZ is licensed CC BY 2.0

All of us have habits or patterns of thinking that may derail our ability to change. These often are so ingrained in us that we do not even notice when the debilitating ideas that we hold sabotage healthy behaviors. Often these patterns are like a broken record we listen to constantly, but forget it's even playing. Someone once told me, "You do not need to *add* anything to yourself to improve, you simply need to *release* that which is not serving you anymore." This means our real challenge is to let go of distorted viewpoints as opposed to adding new knowledge. If this is true, being watchful of *how* you think and feel may be one of the most powerful tools for making changes in yourself. But how do we do this? One way is to become a witness to your own thoughts and feelings. Slow down and simply become present enough to observe what is going on in your mind and body. You are not trying to change anything in this process, you simply watch calmly with no judgment. There is plenty of time for evaluation later! For the time being, become still, watch, listen, and feel. Pretend you are sitting upon your own shoulder and noticing the events as they unfold moment to moment. You may want to write down some of your self-talk as you are learning to witness. **Self-talk** is what you silently say to yourself as you experience everyday life; this talk may be positive or negative. Many scholars suggest it accounts for our thinking process (Galanis et al., 2016). At any time, you can tune in to this small voice in your head. What does it say? Is it giving you positive messages? Negative feedback?

We have found by engaging in this process that we uncover a lot of taken-for-granted perspectives that cause trouble in interpersonal relationships—not to mention our own self-concept. One of our authors provides this example:

Once I was in a debate with a friend about which action movies were the best: those which created a character that was more "human" or those that emphasized a character's survival and fight to win at any cost. As we continued that argument, it began to feel more personal—I wanted to prove my point. I noticed how I was getting annoyed and even attacking my friend. I felt triggered! Noticing this, I went into "witness" mode. What was I doing? Why was I so heated about this silly and ultimately meaningless argument? I could see that I was invested not in an exchange of ideas, but in a battle to triumph over my friend. Did it really matter if *either* of our ideas were right? The more important thing was our friendship, of course. My ability to step back from the actual interaction and watch my thoughts and feelings aided me in becoming aware of the truth in the situation. From this, I learned about my own distorted thinking. Unless we are able to notice our own thoughts, we cannot change them. Witnessing is one step to starting this process!

Challenge: Try This

Take one whole day to simply be a witness to your thoughts, feelings (both physical and emotional), and others' reactions to you. Do not judge! Just be interested and curious about what you observe and how you react. Write down any reflections you have. Pay attention to thoughts or reactions that trigger you. Do you notice any debilitating reactions that interfere with effective communication? Is there a commonality to the moments you experience anger, sadness, or fear?

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3.6: Social Penetration Theory

Learning Objectives

1. Discuss social penetration theory, self-disclosure, and the principles of self-disclosure
2. Describe interpersonal relations

How do you get to know other people? If the answer springs immediately to mind, we're getting somewhere: communication. Communication allows us to share experiences, come to know ourselves and others, and form relationships, but it requires time and effort. You don't get to know someone in a day, a month, or even a year. At the same time, you are coming to know them, they are changing, adapting, and growing—and so are you. When groups come together people get to know each other and start the trust-building process. When we do not take the time to get to know each other, and focus simply on the task at hand, the group often suffers.

Altman and Taylor, Altman, I., & Taylor, D. (1973). *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. describe this progression from superficial to intimate levels of communication in social penetration theory, which is often called the Onion Theory because the model looks like an onion and involves layers that are peeled away. According to the social penetration theory, we fear that which we do not know. That includes people. Strangers go from being unknown to known through a series of steps that we can observe through conversational interactions. People come together in groups and teams and do amazing things.

If we didn't have the weather to talk about, what would we say? People across cultures use a variety of signals to indicate neutral or submissive stances in relation to each other. A wave, a nod, or a spoken reference about a beautiful day can indicate an open, approachable stance rather than a guarded, defensive posture. At the outermost layer of the onion, in this model, there is only that which we can observe. We can observe the characteristics of each other and make judgments, but they are educated guesses at best. Our nonverbal displays of affiliation, like a team jacket, a uniform, or a badge, may communicate something about us, but we only peel away a layer when we engage in conversation, oral or written.

As we move from public to private information we make the transition from small talk to substantial, and eventually intimate, conversations. Communication requires trust and that often takes time. Beginnings are fragile times and when expectations, roles, and ways of communicating are not clear, misunderstandings can occur. Some relationships may never proceed past observations on the weather, while others may explore controversial topics like politics or religion. A married couple that has spent countless years together may be able to finish each other's sentences, and as memory fades, the retelling of stories may serve to bond and reinforce the relationship. Increasingly intimate knowledge and levels of trust are achieved over time, involving frequency of interaction and well as length and quality. Positive interactions may lead to more positive interactions, while negative ones may lead to less overall interaction.

This may appear to be common sense at first, but let's examine an example. You are new to a position and your supervisor has been in his or her role for a number of years. Some people at the same level as you within the organization enjoy a level of knowledge and ease of interaction with your supervisor that you lack. They may have had more time and interactions with the supervisor, but you can still use this theory to gain trust and build a healthy relationship. Recognize that you are unknown to your supervisor, and they to you. Start with superficial conversations that are neutral and non-threatening, but that demonstrate a willingness to engage in communication. Silence early in a relationship can be a sign of respect, but it can also send the message that you are fearful, shy, or lack confidence. It can be interpreted as an unwillingness to communicate, and may actually discourage interaction. If the supervisor picks up the conversation, keep your responses short and light. If not, keep an upbeat attitude and mention the weather.

Over time the conversations may gradually grow to cross topics beyond the scope of the office, and a relationship may form that involves trust. To a degree, you and your co-workers learn to predict one another's responses and relax in the knowledge of mutual respect. If, however, you skip from superficial to intimate topics too quickly, you run the risk of violating normative expectations. Trust takes time, and with can come empathy and understanding, but if you share with your supervisor your personal struggles on day one, it may erode your credibility. According to the social penetration theory, people go from superficial to intimate conversations as trust develops through repeated, positive interactions. Self-disclosure is "information, thoughts, or feelings we tell others about ourselves that they would not otherwise know." McLean, S. (2005). *The basics of interpersonal communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. pp. 112 Taking it step by step, and not rushing to self-disclose or asking personal questions too soon, can help develop positive business relationships.

Principles of Self-Disclosure

Write down five terms that describe your personal self, and five terms that describe your professional self. Once you have completed your two lists, compare the results. They may have points that overlap or may have words that describe you in your distinct roles that are quite different. This difference can be easy to address, but at times it can be a challenge to maintain. How much of “you” do you share in the workplace? Our personal and professional lives don’t exist independently, and in many ways are interdependent.

How do people know more about us? We communicate information about ourselves, whether or not we are aware of it. You cannot not communicate. Watzlawick, P. (1993). *The language of change: elements of therapeutic communication*. New York, NY: Norton & Company. From your internal monologue and intrapersonal to communication, to verbal and nonverbal communication, communication is constantly occurring. What do you communicate about yourself by the clothes (or brands) you wear, the tattoos you display, or the piercing you remove before you enter the workplace? Self-disclosure is a process by which you intentionally communicate information to others, but can involve unintentional, but revealing slips. Beebe, Beebe, and RedmondBeebe, S., Beebe, S., & Redmond, M. (2002). *Interpersonal communication relating to others* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. offer us five principles of self-disclosure that remind us that communication is an integral part of any business or organizational setting. Let’s discuss them one by one.

Self-Disclosure Usually Moves in Small Steps

Would you come to work on your first day wearing a large purple hat? If you knew that office attire was primarily brown and gray suits? Most people would say, “of course not!” as there is a normative expectation for dress, sometimes called a dress code. After you have worked within the organization, earned trust and established credibility, and earned your place in the community, the purple hat might be positively received with a sense of humor. But if you haven’t yet earned your place, your fashion statement may be poorly received. In the same way, personal information is normally reserved for those of confidence, and earned over time. Take small steps as you come to know your colleagues, taking care to make sure who you are does not speak louder than what you say.

Self-Disclosure Moves from Impersonal to Intimate Information

So you decided against wearing the purple hat to work on your first day, but after a successful first week you went out with friends from your college days. You shut down the bar late in the evening and paid for it on Sunday. At work on Monday, is it a wise strategy to share the finer tips of the drinking games you played on Saturday night? Again, most people would say, “of course not!” It has nothing to do with work and only makes you look immature. Some people have serious substance abuse issues, and your stories could sound insensitive, producing a negative impact. How would you know, as you don’t really know your co-workers yet? In the same way, it is not a wise strategy to post photos from the weekend’s escapades on your MySpace, Facebook, or similar social networking web page. Employers are increasingly aware of their employees’ web pages, and the picture of you looking stupid may come to mind when your supervisor is considering you for a promotion. You represent yourself, but you also represent your company and its reputation. If you don’t represent it well, you run the risk of not representing it at all.

Self-Disclosure Is Reciprocal

Monday morning brings the opportunity to tell all sorts of stories about the weekend, and since you’ve wisely decided to leave any references to the bar in the past, you may instead choose the wise conversational strategy of asking questions. You may ask your co-workers what they did, what it was like, who they met, and where they went, but eventually, all conversations form a circle that comes back to you. The dance between source and receiver isn’t linear, it’s transactional. After a couple of stories, sooner or later, you’ll hear the question “What did you do this weekend?” It’s now your turn. This aspect of conversation is universal. We expect when we reveal something about ourselves that others will reciprocate. The dyadic effect is the formal term for this process and is often thought to meet the need to reduce uncertainty about conversational partners. If you stay quiet or decline to answer after everyone else has taken a turn, what will happen? They may be put off at first, they may invent stories and let their imaginations run wild, or they may reject you. It may be subtle at first, but reciprocity is expected.

You have the choice of what to reveal, and when. You may choose to describe your weekend by describing friends and conversations while omitting any reference to the bar. You may choose to focus on your Sunday afternoon gardening activities. You may just say you read a good book and mention the title of the one you are reading. Regardless of what option you choose, you have the freedom and responsibility within the dyadic effect to reciprocate, but you have a degree of control. You can learn to anticipate when your turn will come and to give some thought to what you will say before the moment arrives.

Self-Disclosure Involves Risk

If you decided to go with the “good book” option, or perhaps mention that you watched a movie, you just ran the risk that whatever you are reading or watching may be criticized. If the book you are enjoying is controversial, you might anticipate a bit of a debate, but if you mentioned a romance novel or one that has a science fiction theme, you may have thought it wouldn’t generate criticism. Sometimes the most innocent reference or comment can produce conflict when the conversational partners have little prior history. At the same time, nothing ventured, nothing gained. How are you going to discover that the person you work with appreciates the same author or genre if you don’t share that information? Self-disclosure involves risk but can produce positive results.

Self-Disclosure Involves Trust

Before you mention the title of the book or movie you saw this weekend, you may consider your audience and what you know about them. If you’ve only known them for a week, your awareness of their habits, quirks, likes, and dislikes may be limited. At the same time, if you feel safe and relatively secure, you may test the waters with a reference to the genre but not the author. You may also decide that it is just a book, and they can take it or leave it.

“Trust is the ability to place confidence in or rely on the character or truth of someone.” McLean, S. (2005). *The basics of interpersonal communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. pp 114 Trust is a process, not a badge to be earned. It takes time to develop and can be lost in a moment. Even if you don’t agree with your co-worker, understand that self-revelation communicates a measure of trust and confidence. Respect that confidence, and respect yourself.

Also, consider the nature of the information. Some information communicated in confidence must see the light of day. Sexual harassment, fraud, theft, and abuse are all issues in the workplace, and if you become aware of these behaviors you will have a responsibility to report them according to your organization’s procedures. A professional understands that trust is built over time and understands how valuable this intangible commodity can be to success.

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal communication can be defined as communication between two people, but the definition fails to capture the essence of a relationship. This broad definition is useful when we compare it to intrapersonal communication, or communication with ourselves, as opposed to mass communication, or communication with a large audience, but it requires clarification. The developmental view of interpersonal communication places emphasis on the relationship, rather than the size of the audience, and draws a distinction between impersonal and personal interactions.

For example, one day your co-worker and best friend, Iris, whom you’ve come to know on a personal as well as a professional level, gets promoted to the position of manager. She didn’t tell you ahead of time because it wasn’t certain, and she didn’t know how to bring up the possible change of roles. Your relationship with Iris will change as your roles transform. Her perspective will change, and so will yours. You may stay friends, or she may not have as much time for after-hours activities as she once did. Over time you and Iris gradually grow apart, spending less time together. You eventually lose touch. What is the status of your relationship?

If you have ever had even a minor interpersonal transaction such as buying a cup of coffee from a clerk, you know that some people can be personable, but does that mean you’ve developed a relationship within the transaction process? For many people, the transaction is an impersonal experience, however pleasant. What is the difference between the brief interaction of a transaction and the interactions you periodically have with your colleague Iris who is now your manager?

The developmental view places an emphasis on the prior history but also focuses on the level of familiarity and trust. Over time and with increased frequency, we form bonds or relationships with people, and if that time and frequency are diminished, we lose that familiarity. The relationship with the clerk may be impersonal, but so can the relationship with the manager after time has passed and the familiarity is lost. From a developmental view, interpersonal communication can exist across this range of experience and interaction.

Review the lists you made for Introductory Exercise #3 at the beginning of this chapter. If you evaluate your list of what is important to you, will you find objects or relationships? You may value your home or vehicle, but for most people, relationships with friends and family are at the top of the list. Interpersonal relationships take time and effort to form, and they can be challenging. All relationships are dynamic, meaning that they transform and adapt to changes within the context and environment. They require effort and sacrifice, and at times give rise to the question: why bother? A short answer may be that we as humans are compelled to form bonds, but it still fails to answer the question, why?

Uncertainty theory states that we choose to know more about others with whom we have interactions in order to reduce or resolve the anxiety associated with the unknown. Berger, C., & Calabrese, R. (1975). Some explorations in initial interactions and beyond: toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, 1, 99–112. Berger, C. (1986). Response uncertain outcome values in predicted relationships: uncertainty reduction theory then and now. *Human Communication Research*, 13, 34–38. Gudykunst, W. (1995). Anxiety/uncertainty management theory. In R. W. Wiseman (Ed.), *Intercultural communication theory* (pp. 8–58). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. The more we know about others, and become accustomed to how they communicate, the better we can predict how they will interact with us in future contexts. If you learn that Monday mornings are never a good time for your supervisor, you quickly learn to schedule meetings later in the week. The predicted outcome value theory asserts that not only do we want to reduce uncertainty, we also want to maximize our possible benefit from the association. Sunnafrank, M. (1986). Predicted outcome value during initial interactions: a reformulation of uncertainty reduction theory. *Human Communication Research*, 3–33. Sunnafrank, M. (1990). Predicted outcome value and uncertainty reduction theory: a test of competing perspective. *Human Communication Theory*, 17, 76–150. Kellerman, K., & Reynolds, R. (1990). when ignorance is bliss: the role of motivation to reduce uncertainty in uncertainty reduction theory. *Human Communication Research*, 17, 5–75. This theory would predict that you would choose Tuesday or later for a meeting in order to maximize the potential for positive interaction and any possible rewards that may result. One theory involves the avoidance of fear while the other focuses on the pursuit of a reward, and together they provide a point of reference as we continue our discussion on interpersonal relationships.

Regardless of whether we focus on collaboration or competition, we can see that interpersonal communication is necessary for the business environment. We want to know our place and role within the organization, accurately predict those within our proximity, and create a sense of safety and belonging. Family for many is the first experience in interpersonal relationships, but as we develop professionally, our relationships at work may take on many of the attributes we associate with family communication. We look to each other with similar sibling rivalries, competition for attention and resources, and support. The workplace and our peers can become as close, or closer, than our birth families, with similar challenges and rewards.

Key Takeaways

- Interpersonal relationships are an important part of the work environment.
- We come to know one another gradually.
- Self-disclosure involves risk and reward and is a normal part of communication.

Exercise 3.6.1

1. Write down five terms that describe your personal self, and five terms that describe your professional self. Compare your results with a classmate.
2. Think of someone you trust and who trusts you. How did you come to have a mutually trusting relationship? Did it take effort on both people's part? Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.
3. How important do you think self-disclosure is in business settings? Give some examples. Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Perception

Take a moment do a quick inventory of your senses: What do you see? Smell? Hear? Feel? Every second of every minute of every hour of every day, we are exposed to stimuli. Yet, what we choose to attend to and how we interpret it varies greatly from person to person. In this chapter, we will learn about the perception process and how we interpret a wide range of stimuli, from objects to people to behaviors. We will also address cultural and personality differences, and we will discuss how to improve communication competence.

Learning Objectives

- How does the perception process work?
- How and why can we improve the role of perception in interpersonal communication?

Successful students will be able to:

- explain three parts of the perception process
- describe how we form impressions of people and make attributions for behaviors
- recognize ways that culture and personality may affect perception
- demonstrate the skill of perception checking
- explain the roles of context and reflection in improving perception

[4.1: Perception Process—Parts 1 and 2 \(Selection and Organization\)](#)

[4.2: Perception Process - Part 3 \(Interpretation\)](#)

[4.3: Influences on Perception](#)

[4.4: Stereotyping, Microaggressions, and Bias](#)

[4.5: Perception Checking](#)

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4.1: Perception Process—Parts 1 and 2 (Selection and Organization)

Basic Components of the Perception Process

The perception process has three stages: selection, organization, and interpretation (Knudsen, et al., 2021). As shown in Figure 4.1.1, the **perception process** is both cognitive and psychological. It can influence how we communicate with ourselves and others. Look at any number of objects around you. What you choose to focus on, how you would describe it, and finally what you think about that object is unique to you. In this section, we walk you through some of the basic components of the perception process. The goal here is to gain a better understanding of how our perceptions are formed, giving us some unique insights into how those impact our interpersonal relationships.

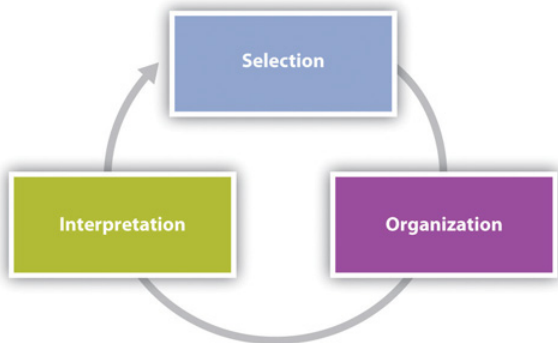


Figure 4.1.1: The Perception Process by Alex Mata licensed as [CC-BY](#)

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Figure 4.1.1 shows a continuous interaction of the three stages of the perception process. Selection influences organization; organization influences interpretation; interpretation goes back into selection; then the process starts over again.

Selection

The first step in the perception process is **selection**. To build a foundation for selection, we must first attend to the senses. On any given day, our senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell) are bombarded with stimuli. Because we cannot respond to them all, we will choose what to pay attention to and when. This process is called **sensory selection**. Sensory selection is a process for determining which stimulus gets our attention. This often occurs subconsciously and with little effort on our behalf (Knudsen, et al. 2021). So in our very busy lives, how do we choose? Let's dive deeper to see how the selection process is influenced by salience, needs, interests, and expectations to shape our perceptions.

Salience

Salience is a key component of understanding how and why we pay attention to. Salience is defined as anything that attracts our attention (Perception Process, 2020). Based on context, anything from an object, an idea, a quote, a concept, or a particular person can be salient to us. For example, say you are looking at the Instagram feed of your local news organization. There is a story about the rise in college tuition. As a current college student, you would likely stop and read that article. However, your friend, a recent college graduate, may not even take note of the headline. The post is not inherently more important than anything else on your feed. The importance lies in the salience to you, the viewer. With so much information at our fingertips, our brains will pick and choose, or select, the information we pay attention to and what to ignore. This will directly impact our unique perceptions. Let's look at some influences that make stimuli salient.

Needs

Our basic needs often drive our perception. If you are hungry, you will mostly see opportunities to eat. You might notice restaurant fronts, hear ads for takeout on the radio, or see a person eating an ice cream cone walking down the street. You are selecting (most likely unconsciously) stimuli related to your basic need of hunger. Now let's consider needs as they relate to relationships. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), humans have a need for love and belongingness. In times when we might feel lonely or isolated, we may be especially in tune to the nonverbal cues of our friends or significant other. Or we might take special note of someone in class who goes above and beyond to give us special attention and care. These cues may not be relevant to those around us, but at times when this need is triggered, we may select to note the actions of others that may otherwise seem mundane.

Let's consider how we could use our understanding of needs in the selection process to communicate with our loved ones more effectively. Take for example that we are feeling particularly disconnected from a friend. Because our perception of what is happening is based on our own needs at that time, our perception may not match up with our friend's perception of the situation. As an example, imagine a friend in a hurry to get to work, but doing their best to be kind and communicative. This friend may not notice that because they are in a hurry, their communication seems terse or abrupt. Should you communicate to that friend that you are feeling especially lonely or isolated? Communicating our needs and perceptions of the situation with each other is a positive step. If your friend knows you feel unsure or concerned about the relationship, perhaps they will take extra care to check in with you or make an effort to not be so short on replies via text. Effective communication means that instead of jumping to conclusions, we recognize our needs, identify what would help fulfill them, and then use interpersonal communication. This will help to avoid hurt feelings, and instead go towards building maintaining a healthy relationship. Other influences on our perceptions include our interests and expectations.

Checking In: Basic Needs

Let's take a moment to check in with ourselves as we read this chapter.

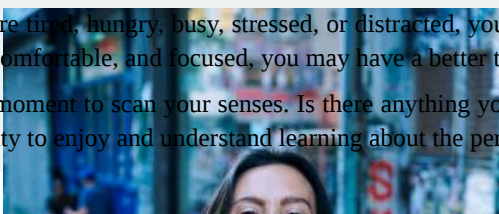
Figure 4.1.2a [Eating ice Cream](#) by [Megan Bucknall](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Figure 4.1.2b [Asleep on books](#) by [Matheus Farias](#) on [Unsplash](#)

How Are You Feeling?

If you are tired, hungry, busy, stressed, or distracted, you may be having a hard time focusing on this chapter. If you are calm, warm, comfortable, and focused, you may have a better time tuning in with our concepts.

Take a moment to scan your senses. Is there anything you could do at this moment to alter your state for a favorable outcome: the ability to enjoy and understand learning about the perception process as you read more?



Expectations

Perhaps one of the most powerful and truly impactful aspects of selection is **expectations**. Expectations can be seen as a two-sided coin. On one hand, we pay attention to those things we think should happen, and on the other hand, we pay attention to things that violate our expectations.



Figure 4.1.3 Selfie by June Aye on Unsplash

Let's look at an example of how we select to pay attention to what should *not* have happened. Say you get up earlier than normal one day just to send your significant other a quick "I love you, have a great day" message before they head to work. You don't hear back. Hours go by. When your inbox is still empty, you are on high alert. There was nothing to signal the silence, no fight or argument the day before that would warrant no response, so it is unexpected. You jump on social media and they're tagged in a video with a friend, laughing and singing. Now you know they are OK, and apparently in good spirits, so this lack of response is even more unexpected. You begin to feel angry, anxious, hurt, and confused. You start to pay attention to things you would have otherwise found mundane: the time the video was posted, who else is around, what your significant other is wearing, etc. You decide to leave an angry comment on the social media post. Your significant other calls you, clearly upset by your post. You learn in your conversation that they not only left their phone at home in a rush to make it to work on time but weren't expecting to hear from you until after their shift, per your normal routine. You realize that your anger is not necessarily based on objective facts, but on your perception of what your partner should have done.

The trick is learning how to separate our expectations from our reality. Can we objectively measure anything, really? Our perceptions influence our reality, not the other way around. Therefore, the goal is not to void ourselves of past experiences, but to be aware of how our needs, interests, and expectations shape our perceptions.

Organization

Now that we understand how we select which stimuli to pay attention to, let's look at how we organize that information. How we understand the process of organization comes from **gestalt theory**. *Gestalt* is German for "pattern" or "shape," and the theory

asserts that we process stimuli by blending external stimuli with internal processes (Rock & Palmer, 1990). In essence, how we perceive stimuli is a combination of external and internal influences. To break this down further, we will look at how we organize stimuli based on the three most common factors: similarity, difference, and proximity (Coren, 1980).

Assumed Similarity and Difference

When we believe or sense that someone is similar to us, we are more likely to be attracted to them as friends and give them the benefit of the doubt. The opposite is also true: if we find someone to be different from us, we will distance ourselves. It would be very hard to start this section off by not blatantly acknowledging that assumed similarities and differences often stem from stereotypes. So let me start with why we might stereotype in the first place: To put it simply, because it is easy. As we mentioned earlier, we are bombarded by stimuli on a daily basis. To be efficient—which many of us know is not always advantageous—we may stereotype because of its appeal to simplicity.

Stereotypes have been described in psychology as “allowing easier and more efficient processing of information” (Hilton & Hippel, 1996, p. 240). Our brains are trained, from early childhood on, to function in this way. Whether it’s learning about animals, shapes, colors, or letters, we are taught to group similar-looking objects together as a means of understanding our environment. Through repetition of such activities, our perceptions based on similarities and differences are formed, reinforced, and encouraged. Although stereotyping can serve as a path of least resistance, we know that it can also create barriers for our ability to create healthy relationships with others. Now that we understand why we may stereotype subconsciously, and how that can be dangerous, let us continue to build these assumed realities.

Proximity

Proximity refers to how we perceive one object based on its surroundings. So, as we go about our day, we do not see objects, situations, or scenarios as isolated, but in context to the surroundings. This concept has been highlighted in the figure-ground relationship, which argues that our focus, whether it be on the object or the background, will change our perception (Knudsen, et al., 2021). This is highlighted in the classic faces/vase image displayed in Figure 4.1.4. Depending on whether you focus on the black or white portions of the image, this determines which figure becomes prominent. Try for yourself. Do you see different the vase or the profiles?

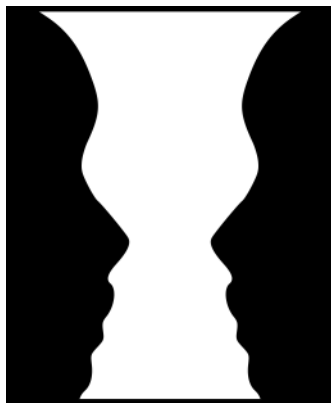


Figure 4.1.4 Profiles/face by Bryan Derksen licensed CC0 1.0

Let’s add a layer here, building on our past key terms: salience and selection. Let’s say that you see a couple on a busy commercial street arguing, perhaps screaming. You may look at them and think, “wow, that is strange.” You may attribute their behaviors to many factors, but you continue to drive, as you do not know the individuals or the situation. Now, let’s say you turn onto your street, get very close to your home, and see two people arguing, perhaps screaming. This is very close to where you live. These people could be your neighbors. You now feel that, because of the proximity of this confrontation to your home, it is more salient. You may also select to pay close attention to the two people arguing; you may even decide to take action, such as stepping in or calling the police, because you may organize the event as a threat to you and your family’s safety. The situation is the same, but the surroundings of the people in conflict have changed, thus making your perception of the situation different.

Before we leave this section on proximity, let’s acknowledge how commonly we, and others, use proximity to organize the intentions of those around us. Have you ever been out with a friend to have someone assume you were together, or on a date? Or if you encounter the scene in Figure 4.1.5, where one child stands over another, who is on the ground and crying, could there be an assumption that one child hit or caused the other to be upset? Based on proximity, your physical immediacy to another person, object, or location could lead to false perceptions about you and others. Perhaps these perceptions are harmless, but they can cause

significant harm to one or more parties involved, particularly when it comes to how we manage our relationships with others. Asking questions and consistently examining our biases as we move through the world can help us avoid making assumptions.



Figure 4.1.5 Young boy crying on the floor. Photo by

[yang miao](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Primacy and Recency Effects

It has frequently been said that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Social psychologists use the term **primacy effect** to describe the phenomenon that people weigh what they see/learn first more heavily, seeing it as more salient than what comes later. To understand this further, let's put the primacy effect into context with studies by Solomon Asch (1946) and Edward Jones (1968).

Asch (1946) conducted a study that asked participants to share their overall impression of a person based on a list of characteristics that he read off. All participants were given the same set of characteristics: intelligent, critical, impulsive, industrious, stubborn, envious. However, the order in which the characteristics were listed was changed. Asch's findings led him to conclude that when the list of characteristics started with the more positive traits, the participants were more likely to rate a person more positively. Conversely, when the negative characteristics were shared first, the overall impression was negative. In a related study by Jones (1968), participants were asked to watch one of two videotapes of a woman taking an intelligence test. Reading these studies, you might think that first is always best. The answer is much more complicated than that.

To demonstrate just how complex the human mind is, in some cases, the information that comes last is influential. **Recency effect**, though less common than primacy effect, explains the phenomenon that people give more weight to the last thing they see or hear. In a study by Wändi Bruine de Bruin (2005), higher marks were given to competitors who performed last in particular competitions (ice skating was one). So the question remains, what is best? As you might have guessed based on the theme of this chapter: it depends.

Now that we have a foundation for how influential similarities and differences, proximity, and primacy and recency can be in how we organize stimuli, let's take a deeper dive into how we might interpret our perceptions.

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4.2: Perception Process - Part 3 (Interpretation)

Interpretation

The third stage of our perception process is **interpretation**. To close this loop, let us take a moment to review the perception process (Figure 4.2.1).

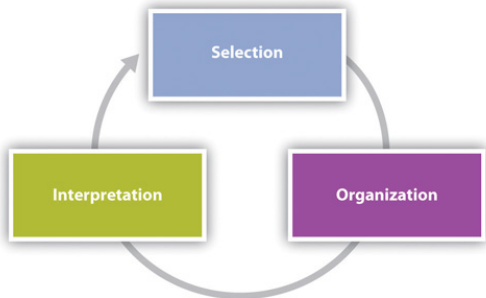


Figure 4.2.1: Perception Process by [Alex Mata](#) licensed as [CC-BY 4.0](#)

Once we have selected what to pay attention to, we organize it into a preconceived pattern or category, and then we interpret its meaning. This is essentially the outcome of our perceptions. Though all the stages in this process are important, this last stage will serve as the tangible consequence of this process. We can also note here that, as we have learned so far about perceptions, our brain is essentially trying to make sense of the world around us. One way to maintain simplicity is to confirm what we already think we know. Changing our minds can be challenging, painful, and/or complicated. Therefore, we will start with confirmation bias.

Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias is our tendency to attend to evidence that supports preconceived notions while ignoring or disregarding evidence that is contrary to our desired reality (Gray, 2010). This can make it challenging for us to see things as they really are; instead, we see things as we are.

Interpretation: An Interpersonal Example

Let's say you hear a rumor that your best friend, who is married, is having an affair. You know your friend. He is a great guy, a loving husband, and a devoted father. You dismiss the rumor. Of course, you could see why it seems like he might be texting more or missing regularly scheduled get-togethers, and yes, he seems to be a bit distant. But you know your friend has been very busy. A mutual friend then shows you a picture on a social media platform that seems to be your best friend and a person other than his spouse. You respond with denial and even get angry at others who ask you to talk to him, or approach him about it. Your friend would never engage in an affair. You start to look for cues to confirm your stance. He did say work was picking up; he is probably dealing with a lot of emails and meetings related to that. He tells you he has a friend from college in town and you find comfort in believing that is probably who is in the picture with him on social media.

In this scenario, your interpretation might be viewed as noble or loyal—but in other scenarios, you may be confirming biases that are harmful or inaccurate, like stereotypes, preconceived opinions, or assumptions.



Figure 4.2.2 Man Kissing a Woman by Anthony Tran on Unsplash

As we move through this stage of the perception process, let's continue to consider confirmation bias, noting its power to reinforce our preconceived notions, while at the same time avoiding anything that would challenge those. Let us continue to be aware of our brain's desire to be right, even at the cost of disregarding facts.

So let us dive into the most prominent facet of interpretation: making attributions.

Attributions

Attribution is defined as “the interpretive process by which people make judgments about the causes of their own behavior and the behavior of others” (Heider, 1958, para. 3). When we engage in interpersonal communication, how we interpret messages directly influences the quality of the interaction as well as the relationship. In this section, we explore the psychological tendencies associated with perception and how they affect our communication interactions.

Fundamental Attribution Error

Fundamental attribution error is the tendency to attribute others' behavior to internal, rather than external, factors (Ross, 1977). For example, Sam is in a hurry to get to work on time and accidentally blocks wheelchair access to a sidewalk when they park. When Sam gets to their car after a long shift, they see a ticket. Their initial reaction is “Those parking jerks have nothing better to do than to give me a ticket. They love ruining people's day!” Now, let's break this down. Sam is attributing the parking enforcement officer's action (writing a ticket) to their desire to ruin someone's day and has labeled this officer as a jerk. There is no acknowledgement of a parking violation, the hurry to make it to work on time, or the possible inconvenience to others. We could continue and consider that the officer, while noting the violation, labeled Sam as selfish and not a law-abiding citizen. Say that a person in a wheelchair was unable to access the sidewalk and thought of Sam as a person who is uncaring of those with physical limitations. These attributions happen quickly, and they attribute a person's behavior to who that person is, rather than to external factors. Some of these assumptions—or all of them—could be true. However, we can see how miscommunication and conflict could arise quite quickly if we used attributions as the basis for our interactions with others.

Self-Serving Bias

Have you ever been driving on the freeway when your lane suddenly merges with another and you hear a loud honk? Whoa, that car came from out of nowhere! “Geeze,” you think. “Calm down, everyone is fine.” You may find yourself feeling overwhelmingly frustrated that someone got so upset when you didn't see them in your mirrors. Later that day, you are driving and someone cuts you off. You honk loudly and think, “Pay attention to the road, you idiot!” The hypocrisy of the situation is most likely sinking in already.

Self-serving bias is essentially an attribution process that we engage in to portray ourselves in the most desirable light. Although research shows that we do this almost effortlessly for ourselves, we do not offer those same grace so easily to others.



Figure 4.2.3 Driver Looking In Rearview Window by Joshua

Wordel on Unsplash

So how does self-serving bias work, exactly? We can start by understanding where we likely place blame for undesirable behavior. Research shows us that when we are the perpetrators of undesirable behavior, we will likely place blame on external attributions (we are tired, it was an accident, it happened because someone does not like us). Conversely, when we are the victims of undesirable behavior, we place blame on the internal attributions of others (that is their character, they are inconsiderate, they did it on purpose). This was illustrated in research by Baumeister, Stillwell, and Wotman (1990), in which participants were asked to describe an experience when they angered someone else (i.e., when they were the perpetrator of an undesirable behavior) and then asked to describe an experience where someone angered them (i.e., when they were a victim of the undesirable behavior). As you might imagine, participants were quick to identify situational factors, and external attributions, as the source of their own undesirable behavior, asserting that their actions caused no lasting harm to the other. However, when describing the undesirable behavior of another, in which they were a victim, participants often cited character flaws and internal attributions, and noted the lasting damage of the interaction. These findings are quite significant if put into the context of the harm that attribution biases can have on interpersonal relationships. A good reminder here can be to check perceptions, acknowledge biases, and extend some grace to those we interact with.

Halo and Horn Effects

We have learned so far that our brains are wired to conserve energy and opt for simplicity. We also learned that initial interactions (first impressions) hold strong and for a long time. So, what happens when our first perceptions of someone are positive? What happens when they are negative? These initial perceptions stay with us for quite some time. In fact, this occurrence is so prominent that researchers have coined the terms **halo** and **horn effects** to identify them as interpersonal communication phenomena. The **halo effect** occurs when initial positive perceptions lead us to view later interactions as positive (Hargie, 2011). The **horn effect** occurs when initial negative perceptions lead us to view later interactions as negative (Hargie, 2011). Just as the metaphor suggests, you can imagine these initial interactions as creating mini halos or horns above those around you, guiding your interpretations of subsequent interactions (discussed in the [section on the primacy and regency effects on page 3.2](#)).

Halo Effect

Let's say your sister wants the family to meet her new boyfriend, Damien. Your mom hosts at her house, and all your immediate family is in attendance. Your sister and Damien show up right on time. Damien brings flowers for your mom a bottle of wine to share and immediately asks if he should remove his shoes because they are wet from the rain outside. He introduces himself to everyone in the room and offers to help cook and set up for dinner. Damien has earned himself a **halo**.

The next time you meet Damien, he and your sister are running late. "This is so unlike Damien," you think to yourself. They must have gotten stuck in traffic. Damien gives you a big hug and you think, "He is so friendly." However, for much of the night, Damien is on his phone. That halo will have you thinking he must be busy with work, or you may feel bad that he seems distracted by something else. You think you know who Damien is, based on your initial interaction with him; therefore, any negative interactions after that are attributed to external factors.



Figure 4.2.4 Woman Holding a Cow's Skull in

Front of Face by Mallory Johndrow on Unsplash.

Horn Effect

If we flip the script, you could imagine another introduction where your sister and Damien show up late for dinner at your mom's house. Damien is more reserved or shy with introductions, and perhaps he walks into the house wearing wet shoes. He does not bring anything to contribute to dinner and he certainly does not offer to help. In this scenario, perhaps Damien has earned a **horn**. In any subsequent meetings, that initial introduction guides your perceptions of Damien's behavior. Say Damien offers you a hug. You might find this "out of character," even though you have only met him once. While he is on his phone at dinner, you reconfirm that he is distant, introverted, and not particularly interested in interacting.

You can see how the initial interaction shapes how you perceive future interactions with someone new. Though you may have many subsequent interactions, research shows us that it takes some time to shake that halo or horn (Hargie, 2011).

Understanding how perceptions are formed can be a very powerful tool in helping us navigate our interpersonal relationships. Acknowledging our tendencies to make snap judgments might help us pause and reassess how accurate those judgments are.

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4.3: Influences on Perception

How Physiology and Culture Influence Perception

There are many factors that influence how we perceive others. Our own health and physiology, the culture or cultures we are raised within, the social/professional roles we take on, our cognitions, and the physical and environmental surroundings are just some of the circumstances that affect how we see, hear, feel, and react to other people. In this section, we focus on how physiology and culture influence our perception.

Physiology

Our health or physical well-being, in a given moment, influences our perception of others we come into contact with. When we are healthy or feel generally good, we have more patience, we can listen effectively, and we can process complex information. However, when pain, hunger, breathing issues, or stress are present, our bodies are compromised. Have you had to go back to work or school after getting a vaccination or having work done on your teeth? Even a small bit of pain can be distracting. Physical hurt and discomfort may negatively affect our ability to focus and pay attention (Gong, et al., 2019). Additionally, an inverse relationship between pain and executive function seems to indicate that our judgment and decision-making are not at their best when our bodies experience discomfort or suffering (Abeare, et al., 2010). These physiological effects go beyond pain.

Culture

For the purposes of this online educational resource, **culture** is defined as a group of people who share values, beliefs, norms, and a common language. Due to this shared way of thinking and behaving, people from the same culture often share similar perspectives on the world. Although we are likely to associate culture with a specific country or part of the world (for example, Western vs. Eastern culture), even within a specific country, there are often smaller groups of like-minded individuals that develop into co-cultures. Co-cultures may be a group of people from a specific religious or ethnic group. Other examples of co-cultures include the LGBTQIA+ community, those who subscribe to a specific political affiliation, or even community college students. Marginalized groups often form co-cultures, as this allows people to maintain strong bonds and unique shared experiences with which to build relationships within a larger cultural context. (The term **co-culture** replaced the formerly used term **subculture**, in order to emphasize that no one culture is superior or inferior to another.)



Figure 4.3.1 Final Dance at Pamplona City Hall by

San Fermin Pamplona - Navarra on [Unsplash](#)

Our cultural groups or cultural identities shape our perceptions of others. This includes the groups we belong to or are assigned to based on our race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability. Most of us are steeped in the teachings of the cultural groups that we belong to from a very young age. Paraphrasing Bonn (2015), children gradually learn to make sense of their existence in the world through ideas about identity and what purposes their lives serve; they depend upon the symbols that hold society together. For example, **CODA** is a term that hearing children of deaf adults have chosen to represent the “unique heritage and multicultural identities of adult hearing individuals with deaf parents” (CODA International, 2022).

We know that a strong cultural identity correlates positively with self-esteem (Phinney, et al., 1997; Bracey, et al., 2004). So it follows that people in the same cultural groups or with the same cultural identities would benefit from the link they share to beliefs and values. It is important for us to name some of these cultural groups and consider how membership might impact perception.

Race

Race refers to a category of people who may share certain inherited physical characteristics, such as skin color, facial features, and stature. Although race is a social construct, people often make assumptions about others that are based on their perceived racial category. When was the last time you were asked to self-identify your race? Chances are that you have filled out an online form or answered this question recently. When you open a credit card account, fill out a form at your doctor's office, or even sign up for a social media account, you are generally asked about your race. How does our perception of our own and others racial identities affect communication?

This is obviously a complex subject and not something that can be adequately explained in a few paragraphs. In fact, the University of Connecticut offers a semester-long course called "People of Color and Interpersonal Communication" to address a greater number of issues and situations than is possible in this short section. For now, it is important to state that our perception of our own race, as well our perception of the racial identity of the person we interact with, influences the quality and outcomes of the interaction.

📌 Pros and Cons of Racial Categories

According to the 2020 US Census, the largest shift in how Americans self-identified in terms of race was the increase in people who self-identify as "more than one racial category" from 2.9% (9 million people) in 2010 to 10.2% (33.8 million people) in 2020 (Jones, et al., 2021, August 12). Although we have complex understandings of our own multiple identities, this does not protect us from other people's quick perceptions. In real-life situations, we are sized up very quickly by those we meet for the first time. They look at our facial features, skin color, and clothing; and they listen to how we speak. Then they decide which racial category we belong to.

Comedian Trevor Noah, in a February 2016 show he did for Comedy Central, talked about opening his first bank account in the United States. Trevor Noah was born in South Africa, during the era of apartheid. He is the child of an Black African mother and a White European father. When he sat down with the banker, he recalled the woman who helped him to open his account stating that he could "just go with whatever race you want." He said that when he told the woman that he was going to choose White, it was obvious she had no idea what to do but was clearly having trouble accepting that choice. (You may watch the two-minute video clip on Comedy Central.)



Figure 4.3.2 *Child With Mom* by Tyson on Unsplash

We do not have a choice when other people categorize us into racial categories. Please use the following questions to reflect and discuss your thoughts on racial categories and how they affect us.

Reflection Questions

1. Discuss the pros and cons of using racial categories in your own life. How do you think we, as the United States, should move forward regarding race as a label?
2. When you are asked to state your race, what feelings come up for you?
3. Perhaps you identify with more than one racial background or the race you identify with is questioned by others. How can we effectively communicate our self-identified race or cultural group(s) to others?

4. Has anyone ever misidentified your cultural background or race? How did you react to this?
5. How can we communicate most effectively to give individuals the right to self-identify their cultural background?

Ethnicity/Regionalism

Where we are from, and the people we are surrounded by as we develop from infancy to adulthood, impact the way we see the world and thus how we engage in interpersonal relationships. Often the terms *race* and *ethnicity* are used interchangeably (SAMHSA, 2014). At other times, ethnic groups are identified by a shared heritage. In other words, **ethnicity** refers to people with the same country of origin. Of course, many ethnic groups speak a common language and practice shared behavioral norms, meaning they also share culture.

Regionalism refers to geographic areas made up of multiple states, communities, or countries that work in concert or have common goals (Nye, 1968). Within the United States, you might be familiar with the regions such as the South, Midwest, or New England. Whether we are talking about what ethnic group or region someone is from, we know that our perceptions are influenced by our families, communities, in some cases religious institutions, and even by the language that we speak.

For example, if Chiara grows up in Italy, she likely speaks Italian and practices Catholicism, and she may consider spaghetti and meatballs to be a staple of her diet. She may encounter Rajit from India, who practices Sikhism and is vegetarian. Due to Chiara's ethnic group and her upbringing, particularly if she is from a homogenous region, her perception of Rajit will be of someone who is outside of her group and she will recognize their differences. This is in contrast to when she meets Carlo (another Italian from her region), and notices their similarities.

Sex Assigned at Birth, and Gender

In the United States, a **gender binary** perspective has been imposed as a norm for the majority of the population since the country's founding. Within the gender binary perspective, not only are there only two possibilities for gender expression (male and female), there are also very set characteristics (often opposing) for each gender. Here are some examples you may be familiar with: Females are assumed to have long hair, whereas males are assumed to have short hair; males are strong and females are weak; females are emotional and males are unemotional. It may be obvious to you that these exaggerated differences between genders are stereotypes and often untrue. However, these societal assumptions guide our perceptions of others, as well as our interpersonal interactions.



Figure 4.3.3 Two Students in a Gender Neutral

Bathroom by Zackary Drucker licensed as CC BY NC ND 4.0

When you see a baby dressed in pink, do you automatically assume the baby is female? If a baby is crying, would you treat that baby differently, based solely on your assumption of their gender? Many research studies have found that parents interact differently with a baby based on whether they perceive the baby to be a boy or a girl. From the amount of touch to the quality of the caretaker's voice and how the caretaker demonstrates affection are influenced by the caretaker's perception of the baby's gender (Fausto-Sterling, 2015). These differences in how we talk with and treat people based on our perception of their sex or gender continues into adulthood.

Sexualities

There are many different sexualities, and none is more “normal” or “abnormal” than any other. We live in a **heteronormative** culture, where through politics and social pressure, heterosexuality is viewed as the “norm.” Unfortunately, having a perspective where one sexuality is seen as the norm leads to discrimination of people who identify and/or practice other sexualities. In terms of interpersonal communication, let’s consider how this discrimination affects real-world interaction.

In 1993, the Clinton administration signed the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Department of Defense directive, which stipulated that anyone, regardless of sexuality, had a right to serve in the military—so long as they did not disclose their sexuality. However, this was not exactly true. Anyone who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or otherwise queer would be discharged from military service if they openly discussed their relationships, while people in heterosexual relationships were free to discuss dating, partnerships, and thoughts about sex. “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” was repealed in 2010, after 17 years, but discrimination still limits safe and free speech for LGBTQIA+ community members in the military.

In more positive news, limits on interpersonal interactions based on sexuality have seen some progress. In 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States (in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, reaching a 5–4 decision) found that the right to marry is a fundamental right, regardless of the sex or gender identity of the two partners. This decision, along with changing and more accepting attitudes in younger generations, has resulted in an increase of Americans who openly identify as **queer** (or anything outside of straight and cisgender). In fact, in 2020 15.9% or one in six 18–23 year olds (Generation Z) self-identified as other than straight. For these young adults, it is easier to self-identify as queer and speak freely regarding their sexualities, as there is less stigma and discrimination among others in their generation. Discrimination still exists, however, as evidenced by [Florida House Bill 1557](#), which became effective in July 1, 2022. Also known as “Don’t Say Gay,” this legislation limits discussion of sexuality in elementary schools.

Abilities

Quote

"Inclusion is about willingness to take a unique difference and develop it as a gift to others. It is not about disability." — Judith Snow

One in four (26%) adults in the United States live with a disability (Okoro, et al., 2018). Despite how commonplace disability is among US citizens, discrimination against people with disabilities occurs regularly. Able-bodied people may see a person who uses a wheelchair and imagine how difficult or terrible it would be to not be able to walk. For a person with a physical disability, using a wheelchair may equate to freedom of movement.

There is a strong international disability movement that recognizes “disability” is actually created by environmental barriers, as opposed to any person's physical issues. For example, someone who is deaf communicates as well or better with sign language than with the spoken word. The limits on this person’s communication are due to a lack of people who use sign language or a skilled translator. In healthcare, to determine pain level, many hospitals and doctors offices use a number of measures, including a number scale and the Facial Action Coding System (Kripke, 2018). However there is still work to be done to improve communication with neurodiverse patients, who may have different interpretations of facial expressions (Dildine & Atlas, 2019).

Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution (2020)

The documentary *Crip Camp* features teenagers who participate in a summer camp (Camp Jened) for disabled adolescents, and it looks into their futures as adult advocates for accessibility and disability rights. Perhaps you watched this documentary, or the movie *CODA*. (The acronym CODA stands for “child of deaf adults.”) Each of these Oscar-nominated films features people living with disabilities who lead multifaceted lives, speak and act with power and leadership, and look at disability as a culture or community. In both of these films, we see disability as one aspect of identity, and how intersectionality—the different parts of our identities, including race, gender, age, sexuality, ability, etc.—plays a role in power, privilege, and the way we are treated and function in our everyday lives.



Figure 4.3.4 CampJened by [Steve Honigsbaum](#)

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Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), **intersectionality** sees the various human identities as connected, shaped by, and influenced by one another. What this means is that as multifaceted human beings, we experience these multiple aspects of our human identity concurrently. Please read the following questions to consider, reflect and discuss your own experiences with the disability community.

Reflection Questions

1. Are you someone who lives with a disability? Or do you have a friend or relative who lives with a disability? Please discuss how other people's perceptions of disability may be different from people who live with disabilities.
2. How can we be more mindful and aware of the intersectionality of other people's identities in our everyday perception of others?
3. The creators of the film *Crip Camp* chose this title. Discuss how using terminology that may be perceived as offensive by some, acts as a way of taking power when it is used by a marginalized group.
4. Please take a moment to read this [blog on disability-affected speech](#) by disability advocate Denise Sherer Jacobson. How can each of us work to eliminate barriers to inclusivity for people with disability-affected speech?
5. Movies like *Crip Camp* and *CODA* provide a way to increase inclusivity and representation of people with disabilities on a wider scale. What are other ways that each of us can increase inclusivity and representation for people with disabilities?

References:

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Social Cognitive Abilities

Cognition or thinking processes are in some ways interwoven with the perception process. Here we focus specifically on social **cognitive abilities**. "Social cognition is a set of cognitive processes applied to the recognition, understanding, accurate processing, and effective use of social cues in real-world situations" (Harvey & Penn, 2010). If our ability to engage in social cognition is impaired, this inevitably affects our power to perceive others and the situation. When we are physically and mentally unimpaired, we have a full range of experiences and sensory feelers that help us to determine who is safe, what is going on, and how we fit into a potential interaction. However, when our senses are diminished or damaged, or our cognitive abilities are functioning at less than 100%, our internal radar is negatively affected.

Face Blindness



Figure 4.3.5 Who Are You? by Afif Kusuma on Unsplash

Known in the medical literature as **prosopagnosia**, people who have **face blindness** have difficulty recognizing the face of another person and connecting that with a name or personality. A neurotypical individual recognizes approximately 5,000 different faces (Jenkins, et al., 2018). “Accurate and rapid recognition of a face is critical for social [interaction] because it allows one to gauge behavior, intent, and appropriate social response, based on previous experiences” (Avery, et al., 2016). Without the ability to connect a name to a face of someone familiar, people with face blindness must depend on other cues, including hair, voice, height, and dress. Receiving or recognizing a diagnosis of face blindness can be very helpful for those who live with it. Shelly Beaser, an individual with face blindness, stated that she previously thought she was a “lazy observer,” until her condition was named (Altman, 2021).

Age

Perception is both physical and psychological. Let’s start with how physical perception is affected by age. Very few children (two to three of every 1000) are born with detectable hearing loss (CDC, 2010). However, as we age and are exposed to environmental factors such as loud noises at work (airport workers, for example) or self-select to listen to music at a high volume using earbuds, more of us will experience auditory declines. Approximately 15% of adults in the United States experience some hearing loss (Blackwell, et al., 2014). As we age, the percentage of people who experience hearing loss increases, with the highest rate of hearing loss occurring over age 60 (Hoffman, et al., 2016).

Hearing is not the only sense that declines with aging and helps us with our ability to perceive the world. Many people also experience a decline in their ability to see. Although many people use corrective lenses to improve their vision (even at a young age), non-correctable visual impairment increases with age, with the highest rates occurring over age 60. With hearing and/or vision issues, it becomes more difficult to get an accurate perception of other people, the environment, and our physical surroundings.



Figure 4.3.6 [Lima market](#) by Juan Arrondodo licensed as [CC BY NC 4.0](#)

Beyond the physical issues that occur with aging and perception, there are also cognitive or psychological elements. Processing speed and memory decline with age (Salthouse, 2010). However, it is said that as people get older, they also exhibit wisdom. The definition of "wisdom" varies widely, but most often it is associated with the ability to carefully consider information in the context of experience, as well as making decisions based on knowledge, as opposed to instinct. If we consider the integration of life experience and increased interpersonal communication skills that come with aging, it may well be that there are some cognitive advantages to aging that contribute to perception.

Obviously, regardless of the statistics on physical or cognitive abilities or loss and their association with a specific age range, there is individual variation. In other words, it is more likely that a 20 year old will have better vision and hearing than a 55 or 70 year old. However, a 20-year-old marine veteran may have damaged hearing from exposure to gunfire and loud jet engines.

Attributions

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4.4: Stereotyping, Microaggressions, and Bias

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is the opposite of seeing a person as an individual. There are many reasons that humans may depend on stereotyping: We engage in hundreds (sometimes thousands) of interpersonal interactions in a given day and need to be efficient; humans are wired for survival, and quick judgments upon first meeting others are meant to protect us from those who may be dangerous; humans register basic information about others' faces in milliseconds after first meeting them (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Perhaps it is only natural for humans to make judgments about these faces (and the people who wear them), given our natural tendency to scan and inspect new visual information.

No matter the reason, humans seem to have a natural propensity to stereotype others upon first meeting them. Stereotyping involves seeing someone primarily as a member of a group as opposed to an individual, and assuming that the person shares all social, cultural, and behavioral traits with others in that group. In this section we explore both the processes involved in stereotyping and the effects.

Schemas and Scripts

If you think about the human brain like a computer, you can imagine that information storage is an important part of the brain's function. On a computer, there are file folders, within which we can store relevant files. In the human brain, scientists posit that there is a similar situation. **Schemas** are like file folders or categories, where relevant memories, experience, and knowledge about a specific subject area are stored. For example, you might have a schema for Thanksgiving. Within the schema, you might have memories of air travel, eating turkey, gathering with relatives, Uncle James drinking a little too much, laughter, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie. Any time one of these memories is triggered by a new stimulus (e.g., a television commercial showing a large family gathering), your "Thanksgiving" schema will be triggered. You may incorporate new information into this schema or, based on how well this new information "fits in" with what is already included, decide that it does not belong.

Scripts (also called **event schemata**) are sequences of events related to a specific schema. Most people have a script for taking an elevator. A typical elevator script might go something like this:

1. I press the elevator button and wait.
2. The elevator door opens.
3. I step into the elevator, then turn around to face the elevator door.
4. I do not engage in conversation with others on the elevator.
5. When the elevator reaches my floor, the door opens and I exit.

We like when actual events follow our scripts (or expectations of how the event will go); humans become uncomfortable when any part of the script is violated. For example, let's say one day you wait for the elevator, but when you step inside, everyone else is facing away from the door. In this case, it would be confusing to know whether you should follow what the others in the elevator are doing or whether you should face the door as you always do.



Figure 4.4.1 *Going Up!* by Clyde Robinson licensed as CC BY 2.0

Microaggressions

Remember back to [Section 3.4](#) in this chapter, where we discussed how race, gender, age, sexuality, and ability affect perception? In the United States, and in many other societies, there is a social structure that provides power and access to some people—based on race, gender, age, sexuality, and ability—while denying access and power to others. The word **power** here implies the processes of privileging, normalizing, and valuing certain identities over others. This definition of power highlights the ways in which culture works in the creation and privileging of certain categories of people. Power in US society is organized along the axes of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, age, nation, and religious identities. Some identities are more highly valued, or more normalized, than others—typically because they are contrasted to identities thought to be less valuable or less “normal.” Thus, identities are not only descriptors of individuals, but also grant a certain amount of collective access to the institutions of social life. It is important to understand that some people have more or less power than others in our society, due to their race, gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, or ability.



Figure 4.4.2 Photo by [Alexis Brown](#) on [Unsplash](#).

A microaggression is a statement or action that is made by a person with more power and privilege and delivered to a person who has less power and privilege. For example, an able-bodied interviewer might say to an interviewee using a wheelchair: “I’m impressed that you got here on time.” Notice that the statement itself may not seem offensive at all. According to Derald Wing Sue, who coined the term, microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults. ... Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communication” (Sue, et al., 2007) The statement “I’m impressed that you got here on time” carries the implication that due to using a wheelchair, the interviewee may have more difficulty navigating the travel from home to the office where the interview is held. Although this may be the case, the wheelchair user may hear the message that the interviewer has low expectations of their performance, before they have even had an opportunity to discuss the job itself.

It may not be obvious when you deliver a microaggression. However, if someone lets you know they felt diminished or harmed by a statement that you have made, this is an opportunity to apologize and move forward. Our first reaction to being told we have made a microaggression may be defensiveness. This is especially true given that microaggressions may be unintentional and ambiguous. However, taking responsibility and apologizing for a microaggression allows both people who participated in the interaction to heal their relationship. Here are three steps to apologize for a microaggression:

1. Take responsibility. If you need more information about how your statement or action negatively impacted the other person, it’s OK to ask. Allow the other person to clearly explain their perspective—and take it seriously.
2. Apologize with sincerity and acknowledge how the microaggression may have impacted the other person. For example: “I’m sorry that my statement made you feel I don’t value or respect you.”
3. Let the other person know you want to repair the relationship and move forward. Working through a microaggression can feel awkward and embarrassing for both parties. A simple statement can be helpful to let the other person know you want to move forward: “I appreciate that you were honest with me about how my statement negatively impacted you. Please let me know, in the future, if I cross any lines or say something insensitive or disrespectful.”

✓ Reflection Questions

1. What microaggressions do you experience in your day-to-day interactions with your friends, classmates, fellow employees, teachers, managers, family members, etc.?
2. Reflecting back, what microaggressions have you verbally or nonverbally expressed toward others?
3. Have you ever clutched your purse, bag, or wallet when a person of a specific race, gender, nationality, or age walks by you?
4. What are ways you can combat microaggressions using communication?
5. How can you challenge your own microaggressions?

Stereotype Threat

“Stereotype threat is being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group.” Coined by researchers Steele and Aronson (1995), the term **stereotype threat** refers to the effects that negative stereotypes have on the people who are members of specific groups. The original study (conducted with Stanford University undergraduates) looked at how Black and White students scored on an exam in two different scenarios. In Scenario 1, the students were told that the exam would rate their intellectual ability. In Scenario 2, students were instead told that the exam was a “laboratory problem-solving task” and not diagnostic of intellectual ability. To further distance participants from having the negative stereotype triggered in Scenario 2, participants were asked to “please take this challenge seriously even though we will not be evaluating your ability.”

The results of the study clearly demonstrated the negative effects of stereotype threat. When presented with Scenario 1, where students were told intellectual ability was being measured, Black students scored significantly lower than White students. However, with Scenario 2, which used the same exact test, but indicated the exam was a way to measure problem-solving (not intellectual ability), there was not a significant difference in test scores by race. Although stereotype threat is not 100% responsible for testing variability between students who identify with different racial backgrounds, it does partially explain why people from groups that society places negative stereotypes on often underperform on tests that measure academic aptitude (Sackett, et al., 2004).

 Listen to this Podcast on Stereotype Threat



Figure 4.4.3: Stereotype Threat by [Yasin Yusuf](#) on [Unsplash](#)

This podcast from Hidden Brain Media talks about how the stereotypes we hold impact every part of our lives, from parent–teacher conferences to workplace interviews, all the way to romantic relationships. Please listen to the podcast linked below, or read the transcript that appears on the podcast's web page.

Podcast: [How They See Us](#) | [Hidden Brain Media](#)

Now, use the Reflection Questions to have an immersive small group, classroom, or discussion board conversation.

Reflection Questions

1. The podcast begins with a story that describes when Claude Steele (the person being interviewed) first realized that he, as a Black person, was treated differently. Think about your various human identities: gender, socio-economic status, race, sexuality, nationality, ability, education, kin, etc. Discuss a time when you were treated differently, due to one of your human identities. You may have been treated better, worse, differently, etc. What happened and what did you experience?
2. Thinking of college and academia, what types of stereotypes are highlighted through the course content, assignments, lectures, and readings, etc.
3. What ways could college and universities be more inclusive and break away from stereotypes?
4. Did any of the stories and information within the Podcast resonate with you? Could you relate to any of the stories? How has the Podcast adjusted your understanding of perception?

Reducing the Effects of Stereotype Threat

Importantly, stereotype threat occurs not only across racial identity, but also with gender, sexuality, age, disability, and even ethnicity and religion. Recently, there has been more research devoted to strategies for reducing the effects of stereotype threat in academic settings. Beyond removing terms that trigger the stereotype, empirically validated research suggests that the following is helpful:

- Emphasize the value of diversity (Purdie-Vaughns, et al., 2008).
- Improve minority representation, especially when there's underrepresentation in that specific field (Carrell et al., 2010; Dee, 2004; Massey & Fischer, 2005).
- Highlight that classroom tests are for the purpose of facilitating learning, as opposed to measuring ability (Good et al., 2008; Spencer et al., 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995).
- Make students aware of stereotype threat and work with them to attribute the anxiety brought on by this social-psychological condition to the stereotype threat itself, rather than other internal factors (Johns, et al., 2005; Johns, et al., 2008).

Implicit Bias and Discrimination

Human beings value a sense of belonging. We enjoy being members of a group, where we are treated with respect and kindness. At times, people become attached to their group in such a way that they believe the group they belong to is better than other groups. If you think about it, this is pretty normal in some scenarios. For example, if you play on a baseball team, you and your teammates may talk about your team members' talents, while dismissing the players on the other team. In this scenario, you can see how this would boost team morale. Unfortunately, in the real world, this type of thinking often goes beyond cognitive considerations or conversations. People may exhibit bias, or "attitudes, behaviors, and actions that are prejudiced in favor of or against one person or group compared to another" in how they treat others, when those others come from a different group (US Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

Bias can be explicit, meaning the people who hold these attitudes are conscious that they have these beliefs. However, bias can also be implicit. Implicit bias occurs when people favor one group over another, in thoughts and actions, however, they are unaware that this bias exists. Bias often occurs in societies where there is a majority group that is more powerful than a less powerful cultural minority group. When the group who has power uses laws, rules, or actions to hurt, diminish quality of life, or take power away from a group who lacks power, this is called discrimination. The United States has a long history of discriminating against Black and Brown people. Beginning in 1619, the United States kidnapped, sold, and enslaved people from Africa. Slavery, which included horrific traumas such as rape, separation of families, erasure of family history, and murder, was legal until the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. Slavery continued in some parts of Texas through June 19, 1865, or Juneteenth, when Federal troops ensured that any remaining enslaved people in Galveston, Texas were set free. Juneteenth was declared a federal holiday in 2021.

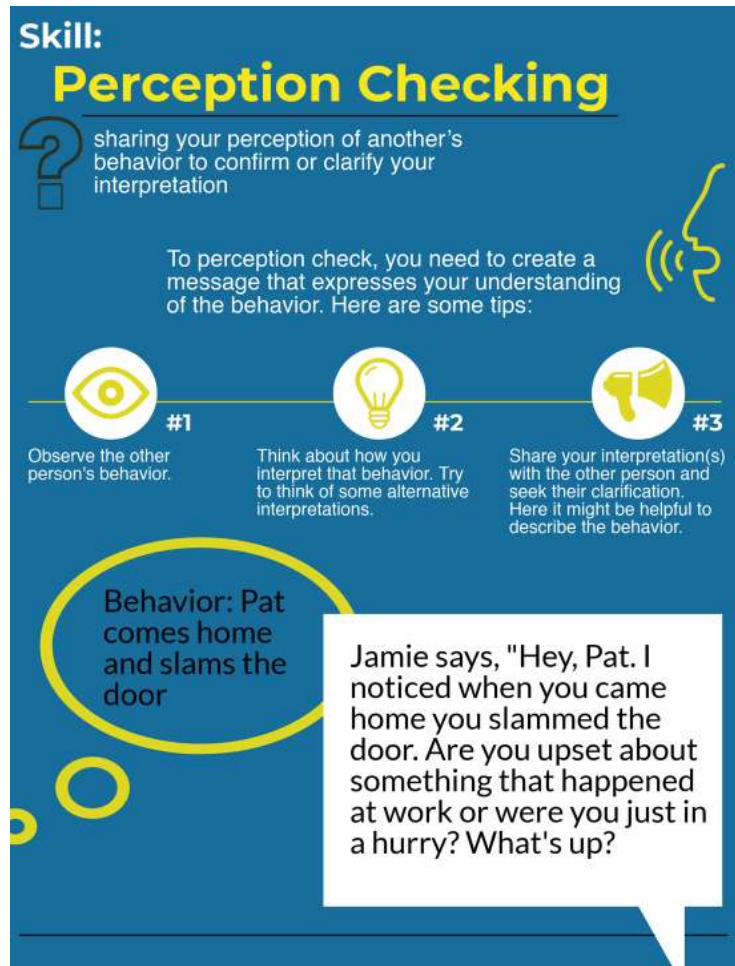
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4.5: Perception Checking

In this section, we will cover the skill of perception checking, address contextual nuances that influence perception(s), and discuss the need for self-reflecting on our own perceptions.

Effective Communication: Perception Checking



Skill:
Perception Checking

? sharing your perception of another's behavior to confirm or clarify your interpretation

To perception check, you need to create a message that expresses your understanding of the behavior. Here are some tips:

- #1** Observe the other person's behavior.
- #2** Think about how you interpret that behavior. Try to think of some alternative interpretations.
- #3** Share your interpretation(s) with the other person and seek their clarification. Here it might be helpful to describe the behavior.

Behavior: Pat comes home and slams the door

Jamie says, "Hey, Pat. I noticed when you came home you slammed the door. Are you upset about something that happened at work or were you just in a hurry? What's up?"

The skill of perception checking is useful for managing our impressions. Perception checking is a strategy to help us monitor our reactions to and perceptions about people and communication. Perception Checking helps us slow down perception and communication processes and allows us to have more control over both. There are some internal and external strategies we can use to engage in perception checking. In terms of internal strategies, review the various influences on perception that we have learned about in this chapter and always be willing to ask yourself, “What is influencing the perceptions I am making right now?” Even being aware of what influences are acting on our perceptions makes us more aware of what is happening in the perception process. In terms of external strategies, we can use other people to help verify our perceptions. The cautionary adage “Things aren’t always as they appear” is useful when evaluating your own perceptions of another’s behavior.

You can also share your interpretation(s) of that behavior with the other person in order to check the accuracy of your perceptions. Perception checking involves being able to describe what is happening in a given situation, provide multiple interpretations of events or behaviors, and ask yourself and others questions for clarification. Some of this process happens inside our heads, and some happens through interaction.

Let’s take an interpersonal conflict as an example. Miguel and Edgardo are roommates. Miguel is in the living room playing a video game when they see Edgardo walk through the room with a suitcase and walk out the front door. Since Edgardo didn’t say or wave good-bye, Miguel has to make sense of this encounter, and perception checking can help with that. First, Miguel needs to try to describe (not evaluate yet) what just happened. This can be done by asking yourself, “What is going on?” In this case, Edgardo

left without speaking or waving good-bye. Next, Miguel needs to think of some possible interpretations of what just happened. One interpretation could be that Edgardo is mad about something (at Miguel or someone else). Others could be that Edgardo was in a hurry and simply forgot or that they didn't want to interrupt the video game. In this step of perception checking, it is good to be aware of the attributions you are making. You might try to determine if you are over attributing internal or external causes. Lastly, you will want to verify and clarify. So Miguel may want to call, text, or speak to Edgardo. During this step, it's important to be aware of that the other person likely experienced the event differently than you. Even though Miguel has already been thinking about this incident, and is experiencing some conflict, Patrick may have no idea that their actions caused Miguel to worry. If Miguel texts and asks why Edgardo's mad (which wouldn't be a good idea because it's expressed as an assumption) Edgardo may become defensive, which could escalate the conflict. Miguel could just describe the behavior (without judging Edgardo) and ask for clarification by saying, "When you left today you didn't say bye or let me know where you were going. I just wanted to check to see if things are OK."

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

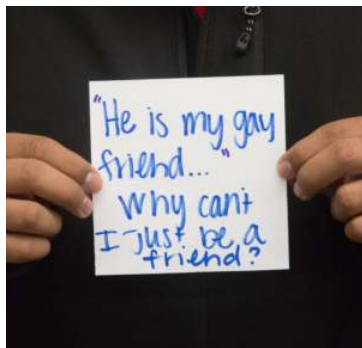
- **Step 1:** Describe the behavior or situation without evaluating or judging it (either internally or aloud).
- **Step 2:** Think of some possible interpretations of the behavior, being aware of attributions and other influences on the perception process.
- **Step 3:** Verify what happened and ask for clarification from the other person's perspective. Also, be aware that the other person likely experienced the event differently than you.

Contextual Communication: Contextual Nuances that Influence Perception

Since all communication is contextual, we must be mindful of the role that context plays in our interpretations. As contextual factors change, so might our interpretations of a specific behavior. For example, the physical context (where the communicative interaction is physically taking place) could change the meaning we attribute to a behavior, such as fidgeting. If our partner was fidgeting while watching T.V. one night, we might interpret their behavior to mean they were nervous because they had something serious they want to discuss with us. However, if they were fidgeting at a party, we might think instead they were trying to avoid someone or feeling anxious about being around too many people.

The relational context (the relationship we have with another), will also influence our perceptions. If our supervisor speaks to us in short, clipped sentences then we may think they are having a bad day or in a hurry. But if our best friend were to do the same, we might instead think are mad at us. Cultural and individual frames, such as our personalities and previous experiences, also play a key role in our interpretations and perceptions. When communicating with others and decoding/interpreting their messages and behaviors, we need to be cognizant of not just the physical and relational contexts, but also of cultural and individual nuances.

Reflective Communication: Reflecting on Perceptions, Stereotypes, and Biases



(Image: [Texas Tech University Student Housing](#), CC BY 2.0)

Often times, we may not realize that the things that we say are actually microaggressions.

The final way to increase communication competence is to be self-reflective of our own perceptions. Specifically, it is important to reflect on how we perceive others and how these perceptions may be influenced by stereotypes and biases. Stereotypes are sets of beliefs that people have about a group of people, based on factors like race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, ableness, physical appearance, speech, beliefs, etc. They serve to essentialize people based on group membership, rather than looking at individual and multiple facets of their identities. Stereotypes can make us biased and prejudiced towards a certain group, especially if we perceive them as being "not like us" or inferior in some way.

When it comes to stereotypes, it is important to note that they can be negative, positive or neutral. For example, Mexicans have historically been stereotyped negatively as “lazy” whereas some Asians have been stereotyped positively as “smart” or “good at math.” While negative stereotypes devalue and often render people who fall into a particular group inferior or deficient, even positive stereotypes can be harmful in that they objectify people and place unfair expectations on them. Moreover, stereotypes surrounding our co-cultural group memberships and identities, such as those related to gender, can lead to double standards. Think about all the double standards between women and men. The interpretations of a behavior, such as being sexually active, and the words used to describe it are typically negative for women, whereas the words used to describe sexually active men are positive. For example, a female who has had multiple sexual partners may be called a ‘slut,’ ‘thot’ or a ‘ho’ whereas a male may be called a ‘pimp,’ ‘player’ or ‘stud.’

📌 Double Standards

When it comes to terms used to describe sexually active women and men, there is a double standard. Terms used to describe women are usually negative, while those used to describe men are positive to neutral. Here are some definitions of common slang terms, according to dictionary.com (2019):

- **“THOT (that-hoe-over-there):** Slang: Disparaging and Offensive. a woman considered to be sexually provocative or promiscuous; a slut or whore.”
- **“Slut:** Disparaging and Offensive. a sexually promiscuous woman, or a woman who behaves or dresses in an overtly sexual way.”
- **“Stud:** a virile or sexually active man.”

Stereotypes can influence our interactions in both blatant and subtle ways, and often times we may not even realize our communication is influenced by stereotypes. We may even engage in a variety of unconscious macroaggressions in our everyday interactions without ever realizing it until they are pointed out to us. Microaggressions are verbal and nonverbal behaviors, intentional and unintentional, that communicate some sort of stereotype, bias, prejudice, and/or others another person based off of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ableness, and/or immigration status. For example, a woman walking down the street might unconsciously clutch her purse closer when she sees a large black man because of the prevalent stereotype of black males as ‘thugs.’ An Asian person may be complemented on their English or asked “Where are you really from?” (even if they were born in the U.S) reinforcing the stereotype that they are not ‘real’ Americans.



(Image: Kiyun Kim, used according to [license](#))

Microaggressions are verbal and nonverbal behaviors, intentional and unintentional, that communicate some sort of stereotype, bias, prejudice, and/or others another person based off of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ableness,

and/or immigration status. The photos above were taken as part of a Racial Microaggressions photo series; you can view more on [Kiyun Kim's tumblr](#).

While we may not be aware that we are enacting microaggressions or think they are harmless behaviors and questions, they can take a serious psychological toll on the people who receive them. Consider how Graciella might feel after being admitted to Harvard, only to have a classmate exclaim “That’s great! Affirmative action really helped you- you’re so lucky that you get to benefit from it!”, rather than attributing Graciella’s acceptance to intelligence and hard work. While most people like to think they are fair-minded and judge everyone equally, we all hold stereotypes and biases. Even though it can make us feel uncomfortable, guilty, or even ashamed to reflect on our own biases and stereotypes, it important to examine how they creep into our communication and affect our interactions with others.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Verbal Communication

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Most of us have heard these lyrics from the old children’s rhyme, yet assertions such as these are problematic because names and words have tremendous influence on our lives. Words are not just used to communicate content- but feelings, attitudes, judgments, values, and perspectives. In this chapter, we will explore the verbal symbols- words and language- that we use to communicate with others. Specifically, we will cover what verbal communication is, its characteristics and function, and how to improve verbal communication competence.



Toothpaste For Dinner.com

(Image: © Drew Fairweather/ToothpasteForDinner.com, printed with permission for use in I.C.A.T.)

Learning Objectives

- How is meaning conveyed through verbal messages?
- How can we improve communication competence with verbal strategies?

Successful students will be able to:

- define verbal communication
- explain how meaning is conveyed through verbal messages
- describe the characteristics and functions of verbal communication
- apply strategies to improve message clarity
- analyze verbal messages and describe how meaning depends on the context (physical, relational, individual, and/or cultural)
- recognize the biases words can communicate and the power of words in communicative interactions

5.1: The Nature of Language

5.2: Characteristics of Verbal Communication

5.3: Language Barriers

5.4: Language of Responsibility (You vs. I Language)

Contributors and Attributions

- Sections 5.0, 5.4.1, & 5.4.2: Interpersonal Communication Abridged Textbook (I.C.A.T.); Central New Mexico Community College; 2019; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](#)
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5.1: The Nature of Language

Qualities of Symbolic Communication

Our language is **symbolic**, meaning it is made up of symbols. A **symbol** is something that stands for something else. The symbols that we use stand in for something else, like a physical object or idea; they do not actually correspond to the thing in any direct way. For example, there is nothing fundamental about a cat that leads to calling it a "cat." The use of symbolic communication is uniquely human, and it allows us to have abstract conversations about things that are not in our immediate reality. Our use of symbolic language has three distinct qualities: it is arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract.

Symbolic Language Is Arbitrary

We use symbols to encode what is in our heads, the thoughts, emotions, concepts, etc. so we can share them. The symbols we use are **arbitrary**: there is nothing inherent about the things we are sharing and the symbols that we use to represent them. If symbols are arbitrary, then how do we use them to communicate? Communication is only possible because speakers of the same language have agreed on these arbitrary meanings. We understand that when someone uses a particular word (symbol) that it represents a specific thing. This agreement is what makes communication via language possible. Ogden and Richards (1923) illustrated this idea with their triangle of meaning (Figure 5.1.1). In this example, the word *cat* represents both the concept of a cat and an actual cat. Communication is successful when the meaning attached to the symbol is shared.

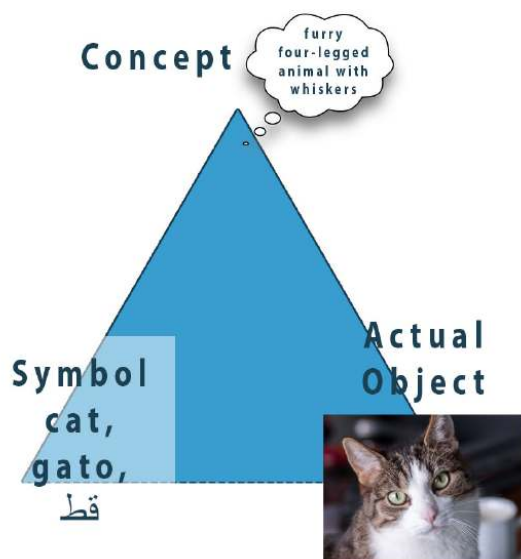


Figure 5.1.1: Triangle of Meaning by H. Rayl is licensed [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Symbolic Language Is Ambiguous

In addition to being arbitrary, symbols are **ambiguous** because they have several potential meanings. If you are hanging out with a friend and she says “check out that girl” and you respond, “she’s fine.” What do you mean? You could mean, she is alright. But you might also mean that she is really good looking. In this case the symbol alone is ambiguous; we would have to rely on the context to find meaning. Meanings also change over time. One of our authors shares their own experience as an example:

When I was headed to college I got my first cell phone. At that time, most people still had landline phones—so we distinguished between our “phones” and our “cells.” These days most of us have cut the cord and now our cell phone is just our phone. If I asked my kids to help me find my “cell” they would have no idea what I was looking for.

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 which 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.

Symbolic Language Is Abstract

Finally, symbols are **abstract**. The verbal symbols we use are not material. Because they are only representations of objects and ideas, a level of abstraction is inherent. In 1941, linguist S. I. Hayakawa created what is called the **abstraction ladder**. The

abstraction ladder starts with the most abstract at the top and then moves toward the bottom rung, which is the most concrete. For example, we could start with the most abstract (animal), moving to more concrete (fox), to the most concrete (a specific American Red Fox). As we move down the ladder, the symbol becomes more concrete and less abstract. In addition to relying on arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract symbols, the language we use is also governed by rules.

Language Is Rule-Governed

Verbal communication is rule-governed. Remember in order for communication to succeed we have to have shared meaning. One way to help facilitate shared meaning is to follow agreed-upon rules to make sense of the symbols we use. What would happen if there were no rules for using the symbols (letters) that make up different words?

If placing letters in a 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? (Hahn & Paynton, 2021).

As you can see, it is important to have rules to guide our use of verbal communication. In this section we focus on three general rules: **semantic**, **syntactic**, and **pragmatic**.

Semantic Rules

Semantic rules are those that help us with meaning. We would not be able to communicate with others if we did not have semantic rules. When we look a word up in the dictionary, the definition provides the semantic rules for that symbol. The dictionary definition is the general meaning of the word, but that meaning can also vary based on the context in which it is used. Even though a word has a definition, its meaning can change based on the particular context.

Take the word *run* for example. Most of us would claim to know what this word means and we could look it up in a dictionary if we needed to, but on its own we can't know what it means. We need to know in what context it is being used. "I'm going for a run," "I need to *run* an errand," "He is giving me the *runaround*," or "I am feeling *rundown* today," all imply different meanings based on the context.

Syntactic Rules

Syntactic rules are those that help us with language structure and symbol arrangement. How we combine words into sentences is governed by syntax. These rules are what make meaning coherent and understandable.

In English, most basic syntax follows a subject–verb–direct object formula. For example, "Charlie kicked the soccer ball." The structure of the sentence is fundamental to how we make shared meaning. The other aspect of syntax that influences our verbal communication is grammar. For example, a comma can make a big difference in how people understand a message. As shown in Figure 5.1.2, "Let's eat grandma!" is quite different from saying "Let's eat, grandma!" The first implies cannibalism and the second a family dinner.

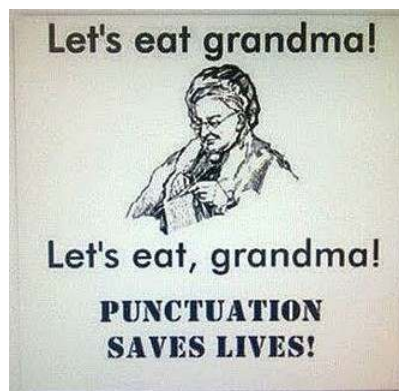


Figure 5.1.2 [Punctuation Saves Lives](#) by [Darin McClure](#) on [Flickr](#)

Pragmatic Rules

Finally, **pragmatic rules** help us use language appropriately. What is appropriate in one circumstance may not be in another. While you are working, you are likely to be more formal with your boss and customers than you are with your co-workers. Think about the terms *bowel movement*, *poop*, *crap*, and *shit*. While all of these words have essentially the same denotative meaning, people

make choices based on context and audience regarding which word they feel comfortable using. These differences illustrate the pragmatics of our verbal communication.

We learn pragmatic rules from our lived experience within our larger culture. A recent anecdote that we saw on Twitter helps illustrate this idea. “In Australia we often have a meal where people are invited to bring some food to share. It’s referred to as ‘bring a plate.’ A friend from Scotland literally brought an empty plate and was very confused, thinking we didn’t own enough dinnerware” (Sarah Harris @sarah_sirrah).

Language Creates Meaning

Miscommunication often occurs when individuals assign different meanings to the same symbol. We think about communication in terms of finding the right words—but this view of language assumes that the meaning is in the words, and it is not. Meaning is in *us*. We assign meaning to the symbols we use, and there are many potential meanings that we could draw upon. As you have learned, symbols are arbitrary and their meaning is not inherent. While dictionaries can help us with standardized definitions—a word’s denotative meaning—shared meanings are not always standard and vary contextually.

Language Shapes Our Worldview

Verbal communication helps us define reality. “We use verbal communication to define everything from ideas, emotions, experiences, thoughts, objects, and people” (Hahn & Paynton, 2021). Think about what you are doing right now. How would you describe this experience? Are you reading, learning, studying? Are you engaged, bored, stressed, motivated? There are a variety of different ways we can make sense of our experiences, and we use verbal communication to label and define our reality.

Verbal communication helps us organize complex ideas and experiences into meaningful categories. It would be impossible for us to focus our attention on the overwhelming stimuli that we encounter every day. Instead, we use verbal communication to help us make sense of the world through simplified categories that help to establish meaning.

For example, think about how you organize your physical space. We organize things based on estimates: for example, your friend’s house might be close, but a favorite hangout spot is far away. We may categorize them based on another location: for example, perhaps you could walk to the grocery store from your house, but you have to take the bus to get to campus. In the United States, we tend to give directions using egocentric language and coordinates: “From our classroom you go left to the quad, then take a right and you will see the library.” We could just as easily give these directions using fixed geographical coordinates: “Exit the classroom and head east. When you get to the quad turn north and you will see the library.” Both of these directions are correct, but they vary in how the speaker categorizes their physical space with language (Deutscher, 2010).



Figure 5.1.3 Shelli Getting Directions by Alan Levine on Flickr

Verbal communication helps us think, and to engage in abstract thought. 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. Animals can communicate about what is present. Many animals have sounds used to designate the presence of food or to warn of a threat. What they lack is the ability to discuss complex ideas. Humans can talk not only about a visible and present threat but also the potential for threat and how to prepare for it. It is this capacity of verbal communication that allows humans to reflect on the past, consider the present, and plan for the future.

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; Sapir; Mandelbaum; Maxwell; Perlovsky; Lucy; Simpson; Hussein).

In recent years, various experiments have shown that grammatical genders can shape the feelings and associations of speakers toward objects around them. In the 1990s, for example, psychologists compared associations between speakers of German and Spanish. There are many inanimate nouns whose genders in the two languages are reversed. A German bridge is feminine (*die Brücke*), for instance, but *el puente* is masculine in Spanish. The same goes for *clock*, *apartment*, *fork*, *newspaper*, *pockets*, *shoulders*, *stamps*, *ticket*, *violin*, *the sun*, *the world*, and *love*. *Apple* is masculine for Germans but feminine in Spanish, and so is *chair*, *broom*, *butterfly*, *keys*, *mountains*, *stars*, *table*, *war*, *rain*, and *garbage*. When speakers were asked to grade various objects on a range of characteristics, Spanish speakers deemed bridges, clocks, and violins to have more "manly properties" like strength, but Germans tended to think of them as more slender or elegant. With objects like mountains or chairs, which are masculine in German but feminine in Spanish, the effect was reversed (Deutscher, 2010).

Those of us who speak English are entirely oblivious to this phenomenon because our language does not create these associations; nonetheless our language still shapes our attitudes and impacts how we perceive the world.

Language Is Impactful

One of our authors shares this example:

At the end of the day, I ask my children what they want for "supper." If it is my husband asking, he will inquire about what they want for "dinner." If we are going to have eggs or pancakes or the like, we might comment that we are having "breakfast" for dinner.

The language choices we make help us make sense of our world. As we explained earlier in the chapter, meaning is not in the words that we use, it is in the people. The author's children know that supper and dinner both refer to the last meal of the day, but in the case of "breakfast for dinner" they are more interested in the kind of food and not when we are eating it. In this section we focus on how verbal communication defines reality, shapes relationships, evolves, and conveys power.

Language Defines and Labels our Reality

Verbal communication helps us define reality. If you ever played organized sports as a child, you know how difficult it can be to process a hard loss. It is easy to be sad and frustrated that your team was not victorious, but a good coach will redirect those feelings by reminding the team of how hard they tried and the fun they had playing regardless of the outcome. We have choices in 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 those choices shape our understanding of the world we live in.

One area of language and identity that has taken on prominence is the use of pronouns. A pronoun is a word that can function by itself as a noun phrase and that refers either to the participants in the discourse (e.g., I, you) or to someone or something mentioned elsewhere in the discourse (e.g., she, it, this). Pronouns are essential in our communication with one another. In English we have historically relied on gendered pronouns that reference someone's perceived gender (he/him/his or she/her/hers). When we use gendered pronouns, we are identifying someone's gender and those part of their identity.

"Pronouns are basically how we identify ourselves apart from our name. It's how someone refers to you in conversation," says Mary Emily O'Hara, a communications officer at GLAAD. "And when you're speaking to people, it's a really simple way to affirm their identity." (Wamsley, 2021).

Pronouns have historically related singularly to a person's gender. Over time, with the help of language, this has evolved to be more inclusive.

Table 5.1.1: Pronoun Table (by Tiffany Ruggeri, licensed CC BY 4.0)

Subject	Object	Possessive Adjective	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive
She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself
She has a tree.	Her tree is in the yard.	Her tree is tall.	The tree is hers.	She planted the tree by herself.
He	Him	His	His	Himself

Subject	Object	Possessive Adjective	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive
He has a tree.	His tree is in the yard.	His tree is tall.	This tree is his.	He planted the tree by himself.
They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themselves
They have a tree.	I saw them water the tree.	Their tree is tall.	The tree is theirs.	They planted the tree by themselves.
Ze	Hir	Hir	Hirs	Hirself
Ze has a tree.	I saw hir water the tree.	Hir tree is tall.	The tree is hirs.	Ze planted the tree by hirself.
Ze	Zir	Zir	Zirs	Zirself
Ze has a tree	I saw zir water the tree.	Zir tree is tall.	The tree is zirs.	Ze planted the tree by zirself.

Using someone’s preferred pronouns demonstrates respect and acceptance. If you are unsure of what pronouns to use, simply ask. Start by sharing your own, for example, “I’m Kristine, my pronouns are she/her. What about you?” This may seem awkward at first, but the more we do this the more regular it will become. How someone presents their gender doesn’t indicate their gender identity, so asking about pronouns helps us get to know someone better and ensures that we are affirming and respectful in our interactions with others.

📌 Consider This: “What’s the Deal with Gender Pronouns?”

“And just because my family loves me, does not mean they are not confused, okay?”

—Che Diaz

This quote comes from Che Diaz, a nonbinary character played by actor Sara Ramirez on the 2021 *Sex and the City* reboot *And Just Like That...* It captures the essence of the recently resurfaced debate about gender pronouns. Sociolinguist Archie Crowley, who identifies as nonbinary, dedicated their research to identifying harmful and incorrect beliefs about language that create barriers to building and strengthening relationships with people in the LGBTQIA+ community.

In Crowley’s TED Talk (2020), they discussed three mistaken beliefs that have contributed to the difficulty in embracing new pronouns and new uses of familiar pronouns.

Grammar Rules Don’t Change

Today we use *you* as both singular and plural. However, back in the 1600s *thou* was used as the singular and *you* referred to more than one person. When some began using *you* to refer to a single person, many people had a problem with that because it wasn’t grammatically correct. Sound familiar? Nowadays, people are having a hard time wrapping their minds around using *they* to refer to a single person, which is the exact same problem people had with *thou* and *you*. Here we are today, comfortable using *you* as singular and plural—proving that grammar rules can and have changed.

Dictionaries Provide Official and Unchanging Definitions

Dictionaries are actually “living documents that track how some people are using language. Language doesn’t originate in dictionaries. Language originates with people and dictionaries are documents that chronicle that language use” (Crowley, 2020). Living documents are continually changing and updated. Therefore, dictionaries not only record a history of how a word has been used, but they also show the fluidity and adaptability of words by reflecting their most current usage and meaning.

You Can’t Just Make Up Words

Language is like music: there are endless combinations of notes (letters and sounds) that create all sorts of utterances. These utterances become words, and words are assigned meaning by their users. Consider these new words that have made their way into dictionaries: *binge watch*, *mansplain*, *twerk*, *upcycle*, and *vlog*. They didn’t exist when 1999 turned into 2000.

Crowley has established that pronouns and new vocabulary represent a way for trans people to “understand their own identities” (Crowley, 2020). Language, like life, is ever-changing. Right now, it may still be confusing: we are all learning to adapt the tool of language to help us define who we are and appreciate everyone around us. The biggest takeaway from Crowley’s TED Talk? When in doubt simply ask, “What is your preferred pronoun?”

Discussion Question/Journal Prompts

1. What is the role of pronouns in recognizing/acknowledging someone’s gender identity?
2. What is your appropriate pronoun(s)? How does this help define who you are? This short video on [“Why Pronouns Matter for Trans People”](#) might give you some further insight.

Additional Resources

- A Brief History of Singular “They”
- [Why Gender Pronouns Matter](#)
- [A Guide to Gender Identity Terms](#)
- [Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Gender-Neutral Pronouns](#)
- [Gender-Neutral Pronouns Make Headlines](#)

Language Shapes and Reflects Relationships

How we use language shapes and reflects our relationships. Our group affiliations are evident in the language choices we make. For example, if you were catching up with a friend at a coffee shop and complaining about an upcoming assignment that wasn’t clearly explained or not included in the syllabus, your verbal communication demonstrates that you are a student. In addition to highlighting the groups that we affiliate with, our language also shifts depending on who we are communicating with. We can see this in action through convergence/divergence, the use of idioms and slang, and a phenomenon known as **code-switching**.

Communication accommodation theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles, focuses on the ways in which individuals adjust their communication with others. When you tell the story of a college party to a friend and to a parent, do you tell it the same way? Do you leave out or highlight certain details? The kinds of decisions you make when telling a story reflect the ways in which you accommodate your communication to your specific audience.

In general, there are two types of accommodation: **convergence** and **divergence**. When we **converge** our communication we make it more like the person or persons with whom we are speaking. We attempt to show our similarity with them through our speech patterns. When we **diverge**, we attempt to create distance between our audience and ourselves. Here, we want to stress our difference from others or our uniqueness.

Sometimes our ability to decode others’ language is dependent on our relationships. Take, for example, “cat got your tongue?” If you understand that this question is not literally asking about a feline holding the large muscular organ in your mouth, then you are likely part of the larger US culture in which this idiom is used. An **idiom** is a phrase or expression that typically presents a figurative, non-literal meaning attached to the phrase. In this case, if someone is asking you this question, they want to know why you are being unusually quiet or disengaged. The ability to engage in this kind of verbal communication is dependent upon your participation in the larger culture in which it is used. Similarly, **slang** is informal language used by members of a particular group. One of our authors shares this example:

“Are you a Blackpink stan?” The only reason I can even ask a question like this is because my Gen Z students have shared their K-Pop obsessions with me in class. Otherwise this is not the kind of language I would use or understand.

There are some additional examples of regional slang in Table 5.1.2.

Table 5.1.2: Examples of Regional Slang

Region and Saying	What It Means	What Other Regions Say
West Coast: “Animal Style”	The famous In-N-Out burger chain started out in California. Ordering something “Animal Style” meant ordering your fries or burger with cheese, Thousand Island dressing, and grilled onions.	No such thing as “Animal Style,” but In-N-Out has been expanding east...
New England: “Clicker”	Remote control for TV or other entertainment units.	“The remote” or remote

Region and Saying	What It Means	What Other Regions Say
South: "It doesn't amount to a hill of beans."	Whatever you're talking about isn't worth much.	"Don't waste your time."
Midwest: "Puppy Chow"	Homemade sugary snack like Chex Mix with peanut butter and chocolate	"Muddy buddies" or "Monkey Munch"

Finally, we occupy many different identities and cultivate a number of different relationships in our lives, so our language choices are constantly changing depending on the context and who we are talking to. This process is referred to formally as **code-switching**. Code-switching involves changing from one way of speaking to another between or within interactions and includes changes in accent, dialect, and language (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Code-switching can also refer to the process of multicultural individuals using more than one language in conversation or other communicative acts. When you use different languages at the same time, your brain switches back and forth between transmitting and receiving messages. Code-switching among multicultural individuals creates a dual communication system in which people are able to maintain their identities with their in-group but can still acquire tools and gain access needed to function in a larger dominant society (Yancy, 2011).

People who work or live in multilingual settings may code-switch many times throughout the day, or even within a single conversation. Some cultural linguists have argued that, as a result of social media, the majority of Americans engage in code-switching regularly. Words like *text*, *tweet*, *liked*, and *googled*, and communicating with symbols (e.g., emojis) are used every day, across technological platforms and by individuals of all ages. Also, within the United States, some people of color may engage in code-switching when communicating with dominant group members because they fear they may be negatively judged. Code-switching may minimize perceived differences; it may also signal a shift from formal interactions to more informal interactions. Individuals may code-switch to reinforce their ingroup identity (Heller, 1992).

Language Conveys Power

As you can see there is a strong relationship between language and identity, including in our relationships. One additional aspect that we want to talk about in this relationship is power.

Language conveys power in a variety of ways, including who gets to speak, to whom they may communicate, how we address others. Withholding speech also conveys power. Children should only speak when spoken to. Did you ever hear this when you were younger? This view of language is all about power, in this case the power dynamic between adults and children. Denying children the ability to speak is about emphasizing their place in the larger societal hierarchy. This is also evident in our primary school classrooms where students are required to raise their hands if they wish to speak, then wait to be acknowledged. They are shushed and at times punished for speaking out of turn. In addition to who gets to speak, we can also see power dynamics in our relationships when we examine who gets to speak to whom. As we have just explored, adults may speak to children but children need permission to speak to adults. Can you think of other relationships that have explicit or implicit rules about to whom we may communicate? What about work: are you allowed to speak directly to the owner or CEO?

Beyond whom we may speak to, we also see power in how we address others. When we go to see a physician, we generally refer to them as "doctor." Doing so is a sign of respect, and it also highlights the disparity in our relationships. In the classroom our students may call me "doctor" because we have a Ph.D. in our field, but when we go to our primary-care physician we don't introduce ourselves as "doctor": in that setting, our professional credentials are not relevant the same way that our physician's are. The United States is considered a low-power-distance culture, so generally speaking we are not very formal in our use of titles. However, the military is a high-power-distance culture within the United States, and you can see that in the formality of rank and greetings. When in uniform, you salute when you meet and recognize an officer entitled to a salute by rank, except when it would be inappropriate or impractical. Generally, in any case not covered by specific situations, a salute is the respectful, appropriate way to acknowledge a superior officer.

Finally, withholding speech is another way we use language to convey power. Sometimes we are silent because we don't have anything to say, but to be clear while silence is the absence of speech, it is not the absence of communication. Deliberately withholding our verbal communication is a choice and one that can convey power. Not speaking is a point of privilege and doing so to deny others the connection that comes from communication is only possible when we have power and we choose to employ it. Giving someone the silent treatment is a way to deploy power even when we have very little.

Consider This: The Last-Name Game—Defining Women's Identities

In many cultures, traditionally women take on their husband's last name when they marry. This is a historically patriarchal act where upon marriage the woman becomes the man's possession. Even as we are becoming more gender aware, and the idea of "owning" wives has been antiquated for over a century, most women still adhere to the tradition of taking on their husband's last name.

In 2015, *The New York Times* conducted and analyzed three Google Consumer Surveys and almost 8,000 opposite-sex wedding announcements from selected years between 1985 and 2014 (Miller & Willis, 2015). They found that about 70% of women who married adopted their husband's family name. While the statistics for this romanticized tradition is still rather high, it is lower than it was a century ago.



Figure 5.1.4 *Thinking* by [Starlit Beaches](#) from [Flickr](#) is licensed [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

There are many reasons why a woman might want to shed her last name for a new one when she marries, from disliking how her maiden name sounds to wanting to distance herself from her family. Simon Duncan (2019) from the University of Bradford, UK, is a professor in family life who has done extensive research on name-taking after marriage. He and his team have identified two core reasons women continue the tradition of taking their husband's last name. The first being the "persistence of patriarchal power." The second perpetuates the idea that it's good for the family.

The "persistence of patriarchal power" can be found idealized all over the media in the form of romance novels, rom-com movies, social media postings of fancy proposals and men asking a woman's father for her hand in marriage—just to name a few. Depictions of these traditions help to maintain the romanticized dreams that girls can be swept away by a knight in shining armor for their "happily ever after." The second core reason is more about maintaining the public optics of commitment to the family. Everyone having the same last name represents family unity. Duncan's study also found that parents were concerned their children would be confused if parents had different last names. However, Davies (2011) found children to be much more adaptable and accepting than adults.

Women who choose not to adopt their husband's last name also have a variety of reasons. Back in 1855, Lucy Stone, a pioneer for the women's rights movement, made headlines by deciding to keep her maiden name upon marriage to make a political statement. Since then, keeping one's last name upon marriage has become a symbol of the women's rights movement. Other factors influencing women's decisions to keep their maiden names include becoming better educated and gaining professional careers. As a result, women are marrying later in life and have established careers that identify them by their maiden names.

All in all, even though the tradition of assuming the husband's surname is antiquated, it is a relentless and persistent social norm that doesn't seem to be going away any time soon. However, as is reflective of the times, people have become quite creative with their names. Some women hyphenate their maiden name with their married name, while choose to use their maiden name as their middle name. Yet others merge their last names with their husband's to create a whole new name. For example, the married actors Alexa Vega and Carlos Pena both go by the last name "PenaVega." Former Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa was Antonio Villa prior to marrying Corina Raigosa. Do men adopt their wives family names? Yes, but only 3%, according to Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer and Mackenzie Christensen (2018) in a study done at Portland State University. This result supports the strength of this archaic gender social norm.

Discussion Questions/Journal Prompts

1. Regardless of your gender, would you change your last name if/when you marry? Explain why/why not.
2. It's a "patriarchal tradition" to adopt the husband's last name upon marriage. How do you think the issue of last names is negotiated amongst same-sex couples?

3. What is the origin or back story to your last name?
4. Is there a difference in the importance placed on last names in different cultures? For example, Chinese culture is collectivistic, therefore your surname/last name is placed first. In the individualistic US culture, you're identified by your given name first.

Language Evolves

As you may have noticed through much of what we have already discussed, language is not static: rather, it evolves as it is used. Language that was once used regularly is now rarely used, while new words come into popularity all the time. One easy way to see this in action is to look at the difference in language use across age groups. Think about some language that your parents or grandparents still use that you would never hear from a peer. One of our authors gives this example: "My mom still refers to her purse as a *pocketbook*. Even *purse* is starting to lose footing in my experience, as most of the time I and those around me would just say *bag*." Another change we see is the evolving definition of individual words. The word *literally* used to mean "in a literal manner or sense; exactly." For example, "Until I get paid next week, I literally have no money." Now the word is used more regularly in a figurative sense, to add emphasis. For example, "I'm literally starving." This use has become so common that it was added as an accepted definition for the term, much to the chagrin of older generations. Language does change, and young people are the drivers of that change. Language evolution is random; it is not objectively better or worse, just different.



Figure 5.1.5 Father Taking a Selfie with His Son, by August de Richelieu on Pexels

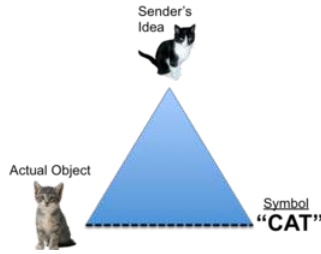
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5.2: Characteristics of Verbal Communication

In order to understand how we use verbal communication to create shared meaning in interactions, we first must become familiar with its characteristics. In this section, we will discuss how verbal messages are made of up of a system of symbols, are learned, are rule-governed, and have both denotative and connotative meanings.

Verbal Messages are a System of Symbols

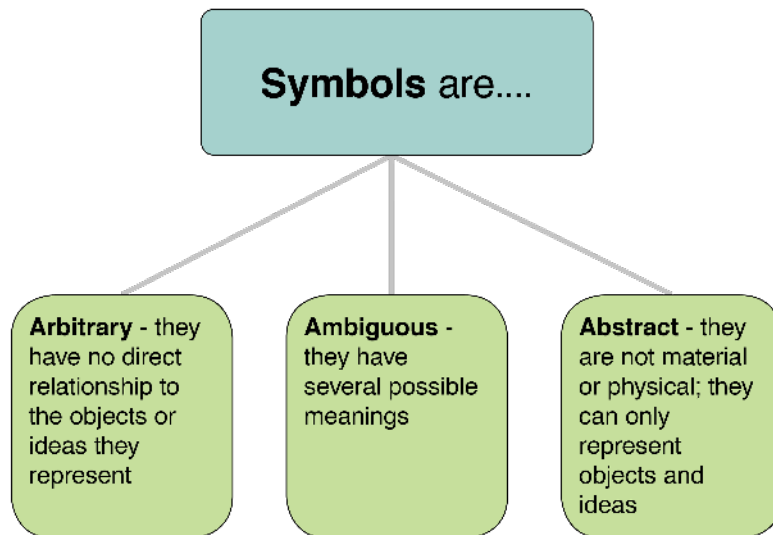


(Image: [Wikimedia Commons](#), CC BY-SA 4.0)

Our language system is primarily made up of symbols. A symbol is something that stands in for or represents something else. Symbols can be communicated verbally (speaking the word hello), in writing (putting the letters H-E-L-L-O together), or nonverbally (waving your hand back and forth). In any case, the symbols we use stand in for something else, like a physical object or an idea; they do not actually correspond to the thing being referenced in any direct way. For example, there is nothing inherent 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. Richards'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.

The verbal symbols that we use to communicate have three distinct qualities: they are arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract. Notice that the picture of the cat on the left 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.

Not only are symbols arbitrary, they are ambiguous- that is, they have several possible meanings. For example, when the word "cat" is uttered alone and without context, most people might envision a small, house cat. However, "cat" has other possible meanings. Lion? Nickname for Catherine? Cool person? Heavy construction machinery? Imagine your friend tells you they have an apple on their desk. Are they referring to a piece of fruit or their computer? If a friend says that a person they met is cool, do they mean that person is cold or awesome? The meanings of symbols change over time due to changes in social norms, values, and advances in technology. We are able to communicate because there are a finite number of possible meanings for our symbols, a range of meanings which 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.



Symbols are Arbitrary, Ambiguous, &

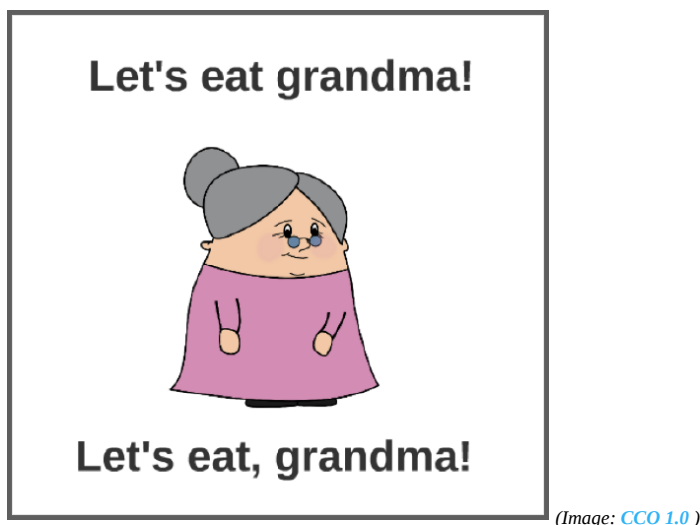
Abstract

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 U.S. population. Similarly, in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter book series, wizards and witches call the non-magical 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. Saying “cat” is not as abstract as saying “animal,” but also will not necessarily bring an image of a much more specific white cat named “Calliope” to the mind of your listener, if that is your intention.

Verbal Messages are Learned

As we just learned, the relationship between the symbols that make up our language and their referents is arbitrary, which means they have no meaning until we assign it to them. In order to effectively use a language system, we have to learn, over time, which symbols go with which referents, since we can’t just tell by looking at the symbol. Like me, you probably learned what the word apple meant by looking at the letters A-P-P-L-E and a picture of an apple and having a teacher or caregiver help you sound out the letters until you said the whole word. Over time, we associated that combination of letters with an apple. Similarly, in a Spanish-speaking community, students assigned meaning to a different symbol for this fruity referent. The symbol is M-A-N-Z-A-N-A. Same referent, different symbol.

Verbal Messages are Rule-Governed



When using written channels to communicate verbally, spelling and punctuation can be an important part of creating shared understanding.

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 a proper order was not important, then cta, tac, tca, act, or atc could all mean cat. Any language system has to have rules to make it learnable and usable. Grammar refers to the rules that govern how words are used to make phrases and sentences. Someone would likely know what you mean by the question "Where's the remote control?" But "The control remote where's?" is likely to be unintelligible or at least confusing (Crystal, 2005). Knowing the rules of grammar is important in order to be able to write and speak to be understood. However, those rules are also open and flexible, allowing a person to make choices to determine meaning (Eco, 1976).

In addition, the rules that guide our verbal messages can differ through different communication channels, such as academic papers, face-to-face interactions, text messages, or social media. When writing an academic paper, grammatical rules are important to follow, and spelling and punctuation play an important role in conveying meaning. For example, "Let's eat Grandma" is different in meaning from "Let's eat, Grandma." However, when communicating through a text message, the rules are usually more relaxed, flexible, and dynamic; communicators will often use abbreviations, acronyms, and slang to convey meaning, and may forgo punctuation or use it strategically to modify word meaning.

Verbal Messages Have Both Denotative and Connotative Meanings

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. While we can always look to a dictionary to find a standardized definition of a word, or its denotative meaning, meanings 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. For example, take the word 'hippie', the denotative meaning or dictionary definition is "a usually young person who rejects the mores of established society (as by dressing unconventionally or favoring communal living) and advocates a nonviolent ethic" (Webster, 2019). However, what comes to mind when you think of the word hippie? Long hair? Tye-dye shirts? Drugs? This is the connotative meaning, the things you associate with that particular world. Connotative meanings can be positive, negative, and/or neutral and what WE associate with word may change over time and vary based on individual experiences. For example, a person who liked road trips as child may have a positive association with that phrase, while a person who disliked them may have a negative association.

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5.3: Language Barriers

Increasing Communication Competence

We encounter many language barriers. How we address or work with these barriers can increase our communication competence. Conversational skills are learned. Despite what we may have learned in the past, these skills are something we are consistently working on. We assume that because we have been communicating our whole lives that we have attained skills. However, communication does not mean that we simply get “better” with experience, without knowledge and practicing specific skills. In fact, when employers describe their ideal candidate, “communication skills” is on the top of the list. Therefore, it is important for us to learn about barriers we experience, skills that will improve our communication competence, and putting those skills to practice. One of the many barriers we experience is related to apprehension.

Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension is the hesitancy or discomfort surrounding our communication events. This is common in oral communication (Loureiro, et al., 2020). One of our authors gives this example:

As a professor, I feel comfortable lecturing. However, when my family and I are ordering food at a restaurant, I am uncomfortable. In part, this is my lived experience. People can be rude when they are hungry and take it out on food servers.

Those who have worked in the food industry have been on the receiving end of this incivility. Our lived experience is one of many reasons for our communication apprehension. We may not fully understand the reason(s) that we have high communication apprehension in some realms but not others. However, James McCroskey designed an assessment tool, the PRCA-24, to help us determine where we experience different levels of communication apprehension in different spheres (public, interpersonal, group, and meetings). Knowing where we experience communication apprehension helps us appreciate the way we typically react and how to change these behaviors in an attempt to lower our communication apprehension.

Jung and McCroskey (2004) found that non-native English speakers experience communication apprehension at an increased rate. Moderating factors included the number of years that participants had lived in the US and the number of years of that they had spoken English. This means that when we communicate interculturally, communication apprehension is higher and that becomes a barrier. We can utilize intercultural communication competence tools to help us achieve a positive communication event.

Culture

There are many skills at our disposal that relate to culture. Culture is influenced by communication and our perceptions (Balakrishnan, et al., 2021). We can start by becoming more culturally empathetic. “Cultural empathy requires a perception of the needs of others, as well as the knowledge of their cultural specificities” (Gonçalves, et al., 2020, p. 246). We should try to be attuned to the emotional needs of others and be able to practice perspective-taking—that is, attempt to understand the other person’s perspective.

Social intelligence and cultural sensitivity can help mitigate language barriers. **Social intelligence** in this context means that we seek understanding of someone’s language and culture in an attempt to reach communication competence. For example, we can learn about the rituals and customs of someone’s culture, which would help us to understand our communication partners and avoid language barriers. **Cultural sensitivity** relates to how we are open minded and overcome these barriers. When we seek out information about a culture without preconceived notions, we can be both culturally sensitive and more socially intelligent.

We can also avoid ethnocentric behaviors. **Ethnocentrism** is when we tend to see the world through our own cultural lens and judge others’ behaviors by the standards we hold. When we hold other people to our own standards, we are asserting our dominance and superiority, and we not taking into account cultural differences or barriers that exist. While it may sound straightforward to avoid ethnocentric behaviors, we must begin by becoming aware of what ethnocentric ideals we have and when we apply them. Only then can we start to eliminate our ethnocentric behaviors. This relates to the way we communicate and taking responsibility with our language use.

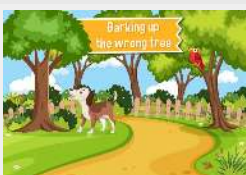
Consider This: Introducing English Idioms to Second-Language Speakers

One of our authors shares this example:

Since English is my second language, I translated *very literally* when I first began to learn English. I was confused by many of these strange American sayings—and I wasn't the only one! A good friend of mine from graduate school was an international student from Japan who spoke very proficient English. She went to one of her advisor's classes to talk about her thesis. Before leaving, her advisor asked her to come back and share the results of her thesis when she had finished. She agreed, and he responded, "It's a date!" She was utterly baffled, but she did not want to disrespect her advisor. With a slow and reluctant nod, she answered, "OK... but I will have to ask my boyfriend first." I later learned that some of these "strange American sayings" are referred to as *idioms*.

Idioms are figurative-language phrases that require understanding of cultural context to determine meaning—which is never the literal, dictionary definition of the strung-together phrases. Table 5.3.1 lists some common idioms that may cause confusion for English language learners.

Table 5.3.1: Common English Idioms

Idiom	What a Non-native English Speaker Might Be Picturing	Actual Meaning
Beat around the bush		To avoid getting to the point of an issue Example: "Stop beating around the bush, and tell me the bad news."
Let the cat out of the bag		To disclose a secret Example: "I accidentally let the cat out of the bag, and now everyone knows you won the lottery!"
Break the ice		To get to know people; get a conversation going Example: "Let me break the ice and tell you a little something about myself and our company."
Pull someone's leg		To exaggerate the truth, usually as a joke Example: "I was pulling his leg when I told him I swallowed a fly. I didn't think he would be so grossed out."
Beat a dead horse		To waste time on something that cannot be changed Example: "There is no point in beating a dead horse. It's time to buy a new car."
Barking up the wrong tree		To waste time by going after the wrong thing Example: "You're barking up the wrong tree begging for money, because I'm broke!"

Idiom	What a Non-native English Speaker Might Be Picturing	Actual Meaning
Bite the bullet		To force oneself to do something difficult or unpleasant Example: "I had to bite the bullet and attend traffic school."
On the ball		Describes people who are efficient, effective, talented, and aware of what's around them Example: "Danny was on top of the ball and graduated in three years instead of four."
Straight from the horse's mouth		Getting information directly from the source who has direct knowledge of something Example: "Unless I hear it straight from the horse's mouth, I won't believe she is retiring."
Kill two birds with one stone		To do two things with one action Example: "We can kill two birds with one stone by using the soup base in two different recipes."

Table created by Kim Yee [CC BY-NC-SA](#)

Clipart source: English idioms by Graphics RF from Vecteezy (Free License)

Discussion Questions/Journal Prompts:

1. What other English idioms might confuse English language learners?
2. If you speak another language, are there idioms used in your language you'd like to share?
3. Why do we use idioms instead of saying what we mean?

Activities with Idioms:

1. Pick an idiom and draw its literal and figurative meanings.
2. Pick an idiom and act it out as a charade.
3. Use idioms as discussion starters. For example:
 - Tell us about a time you had to "burn the midnight oil."
 - Describe something that "gets under your skin."
 - Tell about a time when you were able to "kill two birds with one stone."
 - Describe a situation where you had to "bite the bullet."
 - What is the best way to "break the ice" when meeting new people?
 - Describe a situation where "beating around the bush" is necessary.
4. What are some idioms you can use to give advice? For example:
 - Take what someone says with a grain of salt.
 - You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar.
 - You should bury the hatchet.
5. What are some idioms we use during holidays?
 - Valentine's Day (to pop the question)

- Halloween (skeleton in the closet)
- Christmas (snowball effect)

Responsibility

When we are participating in a communication event, it is important to understand our role. In doing so, we must accept responsibility for the role that we play. We call this the **language of responsibility**. We know that using the language of responsibility in a corporate setting facilitates relationships (Joutsenvirta, 2009).

We can act responsibly by using **it statements**, and avoiding **but statements** and **you statements**. The use of pronouns confers blame; the language of responsibility aids us in avoiding blaming others while accepting responsibility for our own actions. When we remove pronouns completely and use the term “it,” we avoid pointing the finger at others and state the facts. For instance, instead of stating, “you forgot to take out the garbage,” I could state, “the garbage was not taken out,” or even “we forgot to take out the trash.” The latter infers that “we” are in this together and the issue is not about who did or did not take an action. This helps us to avoid “you statements.” Is there a way to reframe our language to avoid pointing fingers? By removing “you,” we can accept responsibility and not make someone else responsible for an action. With “but statements,” we essentially negate everything that came before the word but. For instance, a spouse states to another spouse, “I love you, but I really need you to take out the trash.” The way this is stated assumes that the idea of “love” is not the point, but rather that who takes out the trash is the pivotal part of the phrase. It can even infer that “love” is contingent on this action being taken. If we are on the opposite end of this statement, we may in fact, be concerned that the way this is exclaimed, points to the fact that the trash is more important than the relationship. We see this in many areas, specifically politics. Have you been on the opposite end of a non-apology? “I am sorry you feel that way.” I am not sorry for the action itself, but rather your reaction. By utilizing the language of responsibility, we can avoid hurting the relationship and promote relational and professional growth.



Figure 5.3.1: Relationship Couple Conflict, Amarpreet Singh,

Pixabay

Defensive Communication

Defensiveness is the opposite of the language of responsibility, so it is important to start by recognizing when we use defensive language and then ensure we focus on the issue at hand instead of on the other person or their actions. John Gottman (2012), a leading researcher in marital relationships, found that defensive communication is one of the most destructive relationship behaviors and in fact a leading indicator of future divorce. This research has been extended to communication in a broad setting. **Defensiveness** is defined by the perception of threat or threatening behavior (Gibbs, 1965). Avoiding defensiveness and airing grievances can spur relational growth and relational satisfaction (Gottman & Silver, 1994). I focus on four main types of defensive communication in this section: dogmatism, superiority, indifference, and control messages.

Dogmatism

Dogmatism is when we use emotional justification rather than evidence-based justification (Harrison, 2021). We typically do not notice when we respond using a dogmatic perspective. We are inextricably connected to our emotions, and with dogmatism we are operating from our sense of self. This is defensive behavior: when we use emotions to justify our stance, we leave out empirical evidence. We lack connection to our relational communication partners. This dismissive behavior hurts the relationships involved. For example, in a professional environment I was explaining why I process I had developed was a better option than our previous

process. Another person said to me, “Why does that make you correct?” I realized I was using my emotions rather than logic in my explanation. I switched my tone and focused on the evidence that I had. Focusing on evidence and the argument itself can be a strong skill to develop.

Superiority

According to Gottman (2012), any time we “act superior,” we are saying that we are correct and that the other(s) must be “damaged.” Therefore, **superiority** is a form of defensiveness. We can start by recognizing when we are using judging language and attempt to use the language of responsibility in its place. We can also try to focus on why we think our stance is superior and focus on those traits, using a discussion communication style rather than prescriptive communication style. If we create a habit of challenging why we believe we are correct, we can then focus on the issue at hand and avoid superiority.

Indifference

We display **indifference** when we show a lack of caring or connection to the other person(s) and/or the content of the message. At times we do not show our interest to our communication partners, which results in harm to the relationship(s). Indifference can take many forms. At times it is intentional and meant to be understood by our relational partners, and other times we simply do not see that we lack caring or connection. This is related to the different contexts of communication: culture, relational, and situational. These contexts play a role in how involved we are in the communication event. For example, if we are communicating with someone whom we do not care to continue in relationship with, we may intentionally use indifference. Whereas, perhaps our cultural lens is different than our communication partner and we do not see our communication behavior as indifferent, but culturally we are giving space to avoid being rude or engaging in cultural clashes. If we care about the relationship, we can show caring within these contexts. By engaging in a way that shows that we care, we promote the relationship—if we also keep in mind what is appropriate culturally, and what is appropriate for the situation.

Control Messages

Control messages are meant to coerce rather than persuade relational partners to an action. We have seen this in history. If you look at the Milgram experiment, participants were asked to shock people, by use of control and authoritarian messages. Participants did not know that there was no shock being administered. The experiment showed that humans are susceptible to control messages. When we are told what to do using manipulative or coercive messages, we tend to obey. This lack of critical thinking focuses on superiority and hurts all involved. The participants in the experiment disclosed being unable to resist the commands they received, and as a result became distraught and experienced trauma. This reflects what happens to us when we receive control messages. Therefore, we can avoid control messages and use ethical means of persuasion instead. For instance, when my son exhibits “bad behavior,” instead of focusing on consequences of his actions, I can focus on the benefits of positive behavior.

Bias

When discussing language barriers, we include our understanding of culture and our perceptions, which are ingrained in the language we use and its implications. When we discuss bias, we tend to focus on the negative connotations. Simply put, **bias** relates to our preferences. If I ask you for your favorite color, favorite musical artist, or favorite podcaster, you likely have a response.

When we discuss bias when it comes to culture, we are talking about when those preferences become negative. Perhaps you prefer to have your hair or romantic partner’s hair blond. This is a preference. When this becomes negative is when we think of and treat others differently as a result. When we put people into classifications, that is **stereotyping**. Is this negative? It depends on what transpires. If I am your professor, and I assume you are brilliant because you wear glasses and then hold you to a higher standard than other students, that is negative (and should never happen). This stereotyping could be positive, too: for example, perhaps you wear glasses and do identify as a brilliant person.

However, stereotyping is largely negative. We don’t like being put into boxes. These boxes can be understood as a wide array of categories from our race and ethnicity to our demographics and personality. It would be unfortunate if being put into a certain box prevented us from potential employment. For instance, if I choose a box that states that I have a disability, will that prevent potential employers from hiring me? Therefore, we must acknowledge our biases and try to avoid negative stereotypes.



Figure 5.3.2 Two people, man, woman, working at a

table, Amanda Mills, USCDP, Pixnio

Prejudice

Prejudice is when our stereotyping has turned from preferences into hate and hateful actions. **Prejudice** is defined as “a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information” (Tatum, 2017, p. 85). Many prejudices are influenced by misinformation. We have prejudiced action when we use hostile statements based on group membership (Cary & Chasteen, 2021). Prejudice is experienced in face-to-face interactions as well as online. As we are communicating more through online means, we see prejudice in many platforms and contexts. Recent research has shown that prejudice is found in gaming (Cary & Chasteen, 2022), television news (Takano, et al., 2021), social media (Capobianco, 2020), and even academia (Hurd, et al., 2022; Ruf, 2020). On gaming platforms, gamers communicate. As this is an open forum, prejudicial comments are made and are in fact commonplace. Cary, Axt, and Chasteen (2020) found that early interventions reduced these actions. Let’s say you are gaming and someone says something prejudicial (i.e., a comment about you that relates to your group membership). If the comments are confronted, there is a better chance that prejudicial actions will be reduced. If the comments are not confronted, then the other person may feel like this is banter and playful instead of hurtful, thereby continuing prejudicial actions. Prejudice often turns into hate speech.

Hate Speech

Marginalized people are people that are excluded and discriminated against due to their group membership, typically related to race, sexual orientation, gender and/or gender identity, socioeconomic status, age, disability, and others. Microaggressions are hostile or negative messages towards people within marginalized groups. **Microaggressions** are defined as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults (Wing, 2007). These microaggressions can grow into hate speech. Hate speech consists of abhorrent messages used to hurt, incite violence, and inflict psychological harm (ȘtefĂniĂ & Buf, 2021). It is used in multiple contexts and against many types of targets, but most commonly against marginalized people. The receipt of hate speech results in fear and anxiety, which ultimately increases stress (Crichton, 2019). Targeted marginalized groups are often subject to violent acts, known as **hate crimes**. While hate speech in many forms is protected under the First Amendment, hate crimes are not.

Racism and Sexism

Stereotyping can lead to racism and sexism. **Racism** is a systemic form of oppression using power dominance to control people based on race. **Cultural racism** is defined as “cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color” (Tatum, 2017, p. 86). Racism is rooted in oppression and oppressive systems put in place by dominant groups to control marginalized groups. Oppression occurs when the dominant group reinforces their power while withholding or suppressing marginalized groups from power. This may start with **ethnocentrism**, when we unconsciously see the world through our personal lens and fail to perspective take or see things from another’s perspective. These unconscious biases and assumptions are reinforced through structural processes. This occurs through institutional practices and policies based on cultural images and ideals that affirms systemic racism. When we pair oppression and racism with hierarchical structures, we reinforce systemic racism.



Figure 5.3.3 Child Mother Work From Home, [Max Pixel](#)

Sexism is defined as discrimination or prejudice based on gender. When we discuss sexism we are often talking about women being treated with less respect than would a male counterpart. This can start with a generalization that turns into discrimination or prejudice. We have heard the joke that women are “bad” drivers. This may have started as a joke but become prejudicial quickly.

Sexism is pervasive and widespread, especially in the workplace. There is a disparity in wages between males and females. We are seeing more discriminatory sexist acts in the workplaces that take other forms, such as who gets parental leave when a child is born, how much time, the argument of fairness to childless persons, or the assumption that in a two-person relationship if a child is sick, a female in the relationship is responsible and thereby is a riskier hire than a male. Sexism affects those in the LGBTQIA+ community as well.

When we discuss gender, a lot of the time we discuss it in terms of biological sex, but it includes gender expression and identity. Take for instance a person who is transgender and how they may be treated in terms of biological sex norms. These “traditional” and antiquated views lead to the mistreatment of individuals based on their gender. Sexism is prevalent and we can begin to stem the tide by reviewing the language we use and exclude language rooted in negative and potentially untrue stereotypes and sexist language.

Muted group theory studies the differences in dominant and subdominant groups and explains how subdominant groups have less power and access than the dominant group. In the development of this theory, researchers started out by examining gender differences and the power dynamics in males versus females. However, muted group theory was not intended to primarily be about gender, but to lay the foundation to understand differences in the power of dominant and subdominant groups (Smith Barkman, 2018). Essentially, we are looking at why some people have power, and when they do, how they use it to keep that power and “mute” or prevent subdominant groups from attaining the same power. Marginalized or muted groups often do not see themselves as muted or do not feel they have power to change their position. According to Linda Smith Barkman (2018), there are four primary ways we can avoid people being muted:

1. We have different forms of expression, which also relates to power and how it is perceived. When we do not understand others’ forms of expression, divides are created in our communication. We can learn about different forms of expression to avoid these pitfalls.
2. We can start to recognize and understand others’ cultures and group membership and how that relates to their power or lack thereof.
3. Speaking up for marginalized others in an appropriate and nuanced way can benefit both dominant and muted groups.
4. It is sometimes difficult to see that a group is marginalized. It is therefore imperative to stay open-minded and ask ourselves what is happening related to group membership and power.

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5.4: Language of Responsibility (You vs. I Language)

Language of Responsibility: I Language

When we are participating in a communication event, it is important to understand our role. In doing so, we must accept responsibility for the role that we play. We call this the **language of responsibility**. We know that using the language of responsibility in a corporate setting facilitates relationships (Joutsenvirta, 2009).

We can act responsibly by using **it statements**, and avoiding **but statements** and **you statements**. The use of pronouns confers blame; the language of responsibility aids us in avoiding blaming others while accepting responsibility for our own actions. When we remove pronouns completely and use the term “it,” we avoid pointing the finger at others and state the facts. For instance, instead of stating, “you forgot to take out the garbage,” I could state, “the garbage was not taken out,” or even “we forgot to take out the trash.” The latter infers that “we” are in this together and the issue is not about who did or did not take an action. This helps us to avoid “you statements.” Is there a way to reframe our language to avoid pointing fingers? By removing “you,” we can accept responsibility and not make someone else responsible for an action. With “but statements,” we essentially negate everything that came before the word but. For instance, a spouse states to another spouse, “I love you, but I really need you to take out the trash.” The way this is stated assumes that the idea of “love” is not the point, but rather that who takes out the trash is the pivotal part of the phrase. It can even infer that “love” is contingent on this action being taken. If we are on the opposite end of this statement, we may in fact, be concerned that the way this is exclaimed, points to the fact that the trash is more important than the relationship. We see this in many areas, specifically politics. Have you been on the opposite end of a non-apology? “I am sorry you feel that way.” I am not sorry for the action itself, but rather your reaction. By utilizing the language of responsibility, we can avoid hurting the relationship and promote relational and professional growth.



Figure 5.4.1: Relationship Couple Conflict, Amarpreet Singh, Pixabay

The Gordon model claims that effective I-Statements contain **three essential components**:

1. A brief, non-blameful description of the behavior you find unacceptable.
2. Your *feelings*.
3. The tangible and concrete *effect* of the behavior on you.

An **I-Language statement** has three parts that help you express your feelings and needs clearly and respectfully, without blaming the other person. Here's how it works:

1. Describe the Behavior

Start by objectively stating what the other person did that affected you. Avoid judgment or blame—just focus on the facts.

Example:

"When you don't respond to my texts about our group project..."

2. Express Your Feelings

Share how the behavior makes you feel. Use "I feel" statements to own your emotions and avoid making the other person defensive.

Example:

"I feel frustrated and worried..."

3. Explain Why It Matters (Impact)

Explain how the behavior affects you or the situation, so the other person understands your perspective.

Example:

"...because I'm unsure if you're able to meet the deadline, and it makes it harder to plan."

Complete I-Language Statement Example:

"When you don't respond to my texts about our group project, I feel frustrated and worried because I'm unsure if you're able to meet the deadline, and it makes it harder to plan."

Using this method can help you communicate assertively and resolve conflicts effectively.

Use **You-Language** when giving **positive feedback** or **recognizing accomplishments** because it focuses on the other person and highlights their actions or contributions.

Example:

- "You did a great job organizing the group project!"
- "You were really helpful during the meeting."

This makes people feel appreciated and valued.

When to Use I-Language

Use **I-Language** when addressing **problems, disagreements, or emotions** because it focuses on your feelings and experiences without blaming the other person. It helps keep the conversation constructive and reduces defensiveness.

Example:

- Instead of saying, "You never help with group work," say, "I feel frustrated when I end up doing most of the work on my own."
- Instead of saying, "You're being rude," say, "I feel hurt when I'm interrupted during a conversation."

This approach encourages open communication and helps solve issues without escalating conflict.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Nonverbal Communication

Scholars suggest that up to 60-90% of the meaning we get from communicative interactions comes to us nonverbally (DeVito, 2014; Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016). Whether it's facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, vocal characteristics, or clothing, we use nonverbal communication to send messages to others, and others interpret both our intentional and unintentional nonverbal messages. In this chapter, we will cover what nonverbal communication is and the nonverbal communication channels we use to communicate information. Specifically, we will explain what nonverbal communication is and its functions, types, and principles. Last, we will discuss strategies for improving and reflecting on your own nonverbal communication competence.



(Image: Kevin Kuramura/pearshapedcomics.com, printed with permission for use in Interpersonal Communication Abridged Textbook I.C.A.T.)

Learning Objectives

- How is meaning conveyed through nonverbal messages?
- What influences the way nonverbal messages are perceived?
- How can we improve our encoding and decoding of nonverbal messages?

Successful students will be able to:

- define nonverbal communication.
- recognize functions and types of nonverbal communication.
- explain principles of nonverbal communication.
- describe ways to improve encoding and decoding of nonverbal messages.
- explain the roles of context and reflection in improving nonverbal communication

6.1: Nonverbal Communication Defined

6.2: Principles of Nonverbal Communication

6.3: Channels of Nonverbal Communication

Contributors and Attributions

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6.1: Nonverbal Communication Defined

The Importance of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in our daily interactions with others. As you can see in Figure 6.1.1, there is a lot of nonverbal expression on a baby's face. How directly or indirectly we look at someone communicates a message. Speaking loudly or softly can change the meaning of a phrase. A touch may send a comforting message, make a connection with someone, or even serve as a display of power. Smells may remind us of a favorite holiday (such as the smell of vanilla) or encourage us to relax (such as the smell of lavender). Even taste might communicate a message. For example, a root beer float on a hot, sunny day could bring back good memories of childhood.



Figure 6.1.1: [Baby displaying a facial expression of unhappiness](#) by Ryan Franco on [Unsplash](#).

Nonverbals [sic] is everything that communicates but is not a word. This beautiful theater, it's communicating to us. How you sit is communicating to us. The things that you attach to yourself—a purse, a pen, a fancy car—all these things are communicating. How you look at others communicates. And all day long, we are communicating nonverbally. All day long. (TED, 2020)

This excerpt is from the transcript for the TEDxManchester talk titled “[The Power of Nonverbal Communication](#),” delivered by Joe Navarro. Who is Navarro and why consider what he has to say about nonverbal communication? Navarro has spent his career using and sharing his knowledge of nonverbal communication:

For 25 years, Joe used nonverbal communication as his primary professional tool in the FBI to catch and interview spies, criminals, and terrorists. Since leaving the FBI his life's work has been in building awareness about the power of nonverbal communication, debunking myths and falsehoods about nonverbals and giving people insight in how to better utilize nonverbals to enhance their communication skills. (TED, 2020)

It's just not professionals working for the FBI who care about nonverbal communication. A search of TED Talks on the topic of nonverbal communication came up with a list of 11 videos. Two of the top 25 TED Talks are focused on nonverbal communication: “[Your body language may shape who you are](#)” and “[How to spot a liar](#).”

So what is nonverbal communication? Why is it such a popular topic?

Defining Nonverbal Communication

According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology (n.d.), **nonverbal communication** is “the act of conveying information without the use of words. Nonverbal communication occurs through facial expressions, gestures, body language, tone of voice, and other physical indications of mood, attitude, approbation, and so forth, some of which may require knowledge of the culture or subculture to understand.” That definition covers a lot of factors!

Many scholars use the term *nonverbal communication* to designate those communication cues that express ideas and the meanings of our words (our “verbal communication”). Matsumoto et. al (2012) define “nonverbal communication as the transfer and exchange of messages in any and all modalities that do not involve words.” Hall and Knapp (2013) identify “all potentially informative behaviors that are not purely linguistic in content” as nonverbal cues.”

When we introduce nonverbal communication in our Communication courses, we make the distinction between verbal communication (the words) and nonverbal communication (everything else!). That even includes how we say the words. We will discuss this in more detail later on in the chapter, but here is an example for you to think about:

I see that you have a new backpack. I say “Wow, that's a great backpack.” I could say this in a positive way with my facial expression and my voice. I could say the same words with a “skeptical” look on my face in a sarcastic tone of voice. I am using the same set of words, but, with a different nonverbal delivery of those words, I am sending you a different message.

For the purposes of this textbook, we define nonverbal communication as everything that conveys meaning beyond the words themselves. Nonverbal communication includes the use of all five senses—seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling—in creating meaning by the speaker/writer and how that meaning is interpreted by the listener/reader.

Many of these nonverbal cues may be visible or auditory. According to Hall and Knapp (2013):

Visible nonverbal cues include facial expressions, head movements, posture, body and hand movements, self and other-touching, leg positions and movements, interpersonal gaze, directness of interpersonal orientation, interpersonal distance, and synchrony or mimicry between people. Auditory nonverbal cues include discrete nonlinguistic vocal sounds (e.g., sighs) as well as qualities of the voice such as pitch and pitch variation, loudness, speed and speed variation, and tonal qualities. This list does not exhaust the many kinds of nonverbal communication that are present in the human behavioral repertoire.

As stated earlier, even how we say words—vocally or in print—communicate nonverbal messages. For example, we could say something in a way that shows respect, or we could say the same thing in a disconfirming or even angry tone of voice. We could also do this in print by the USE OF CAPITALS, which suggest that we are shouting at you. We will talk more about this later on in the chapter.



Figure 6.1.2 [Emoji thinking](#) by [Markus Winkler](#) on [Unsplash](#).

Figure 6.1.2 shows an emoji “thinking” by a hand is placed on the chin while the eyebrows are pointing down. We can look at this image and interpret those nonverbal cues as communicating that little yellow face as “deep in thought.” So much of our communication is now “computer-mediated communication.” We are all familiar with the use of :-) (smiley face) and the :-((unhappy face). According to the definition in Encyclopedia Britannica (2022), an emoticon “is meant to represent a facial expression in order to communicate the emotional state of the author.... The word *emoticon* comes from a combination of the words *emotion* and *icon*.” Figure 6.1.3 shows different of emojis.



Figure 6.1.3 Assorted emojis by Pixaline on Pixabay

During the pandemic, wore a face mask, which had an impact on our nonverbal communication. Even emojis joined in on this trend. What do the emojis wearing face masks in Figure 6.1.4 represent to you? What do they communicate?

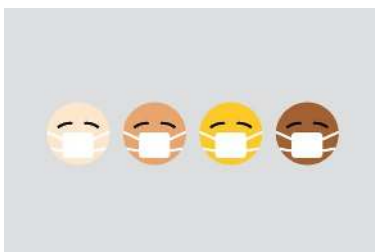


Figure 6.1.4 [Coronavirus has no race](#) by [visuals](#) on [Unsplash](#).

Here are a few more questions to think about: Are emoticons and emojis nonverbal communication, verbal communication, or both? Are they almost a “universal language” that transcends verbal languages because of their common nonverbal meanings? What

cultural differences are there in the use of these images? What do you think?

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6.2: Principles of Nonverbal Communication

In this section, we will address the five principles of nonverbal communication: our nonverbal communication is continuous, multichanneled, conscious/intentional and unconscious/unintentional, ambiguous, and can occur both face-to-face and through mediated platforms.

Nonverbal Communication is Continuous

In face-to-face interactions, nonverbal communication is continuous, ongoing, and in constant motion. While we can stop talking to end verbal communication, we can't turn off nonverbal communication. Our posture, eye contact (or lack of eye contact), facial expressions, and physical appearance are always communicating something about us, whether intentional or unintentional.

Nonverbal Communication is Multi-channeled

A nonverbal message is rarely sent through just one channel in isolation, rather it accompanies multiple channels and occurs in clusters. For example, squinted eyes might be accompanied with a furrowed brow and/of a pursing of the lips. Because of this, we need to be aware of the entire cluster when decoding a particular message and look for nonverbal congruence. Nonverbal congruence is the consistency among the cluster of nonverbals we are observing, which influences our understanding of what message is being conveyed. For example, someone crossing their arms usually has a negative interpretation. However, since nonverbal communication is multichanneled, this particular body language should not be read in isolation; instead, other nonverbal cues should be considered. If someone is standing with their arms crossed and their eyebrows are furrowed, you might assume they are angry or upset based on nonverbal congruence. However, if someone has their arms crossed but they are smiling, then they likely are not angry.

Nonverbal Communication is Conscious/Intentional and Unconscious/Unintentional

Nonverbal communication is both conscious and unconscious, which means we use it both intentionally and unintentionally. Conscious communication means that we think about our communication before we communicate. Unconscious communication means that we do not think about every message we communicate. For example, 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 nonverbal behaviors. Nonverbal communication can occur as unconscious reactions to situations. However, 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, and in a job interview you are making conscious decisions about your wardrobe, posture, and eye contact.

Nonverbal Communication is Ambiguous

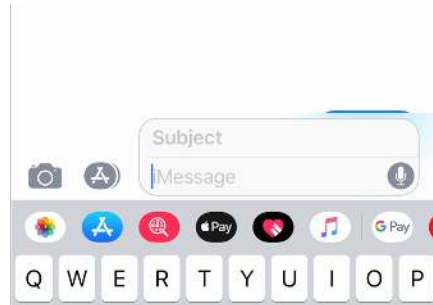
While the symbolic and abstract nature of verbal language can often lead to misunderstandings, nonverbal communication is even more ambiguous. As with verbal communication, most of our nonverbal signals can be linked to multiple meanings, but unlike words, many nonverbal signals do not have any one specific meaning. If you've ever had someone wink at you and didn't know why, you've probably experienced this uncertainty. Did they wink to express their affection for you, their pleasure with something you just did, or because you share some inside knowledge or joke? Just as we look at context clues in a sentence or paragraph to derive meaning from a particular word, we can look for context clues in various sources of information like the physical environment, other nonverbal signals, or verbal communication to make sense of a particular nonverbal cue. Unlike verbal communication, however, nonverbal communication doesn't have explicit rules of grammar that bring structure, order, and agreed on patterns of usage. Instead, we implicitly learn norms of nonverbal communication, which leads to greater variance. In general, we exhibit more idiosyncrasies in our usage of nonverbal communication than we do with verbal communication, which also increases the ambiguity of nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal communication occurs face-to-face and through mediated communication channels

When most people think of nonverbal communication, they think of behaviors and actions directly connected to the body, such as gestures and facial expressions. And when most people think of the type of communication that takes place through mediated platforms, like text messaging and social media posts, they usually think of it as verbal communication. However, technology has changed and reshaped our conceptualization and definitions of what communication is and looks like in a variety of contexts.

Scholars have equated communication such as text messages to ‘fingered speech’ (McWhorter, 2013) and these types of communication have transcended past our traditional definitions as they exhibit characteristics of both verbal and nonverbal communication simultaneously.

Due to the dynamic and ambiguous nature of this type of communication, we may use a variety of strategies to emphasize, substitute for, modify, and/or contradict the accompanying verbal message, which aligns with the definition of nonverbal communication. For example, facial expressions, gestures, and movement can be relayed through emojis, emoticons, and gifs. We can change, modify, and contradict the meaning of verbal messages through punctuation, the spelling of a word, and word elongation. Consider how the following message sent through a text message might be interpreted a variety of different ways based on these strategies:



On the decoding end, mediated messages can present more opportunities for misunderstanding than do face-to-face messages. This form of communication is not only light on nonverbal information, but it lacks opportunity for immediate feedback that may help to clarify intentions in order to achieve shared meaning. Have you ever heard someone talk about the need for a “sarcasm font?” Visuals can help, but the pitch and tone of intended sarcasm is difficult to convey through technology. Additionally, consider how lack of response to a text message can easily be misunderstood. We all have different norms and expectations for reply time. Consider how someone who checks their phone every few minutes might unintentionally misunderstand a less timely reply (a lengthy silence) from another person who only checks their phone every few hours.

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6.3: Channels of Nonverbal Communication

Seven Types of Nonverbal Communication

Have you ever seen a mime perform? They never speak one single word yet you are able to understand what they say. That is because they use general nonverbal codes that we all can interpret. For example, Marcel Marceau was a very famous French actor and mime. He referred to mime as the "art of silence."

One reason that nonverbal communication is so rich with information is that humans use so many different aspects of behavior, appearance, and environment to convey meaning. These types of nonverbal communication can vary considerably across cultures. Figure 6.3.1 identifies the seven types of nonverbal communication that we will examine in this section:

1. Kinesics
2. Vocalics (Paralanguage)
3. Haptics
4. Proxemics
5. Artifacts and Environment
6. Olfactics (Eye Contact)
7. Chronemics

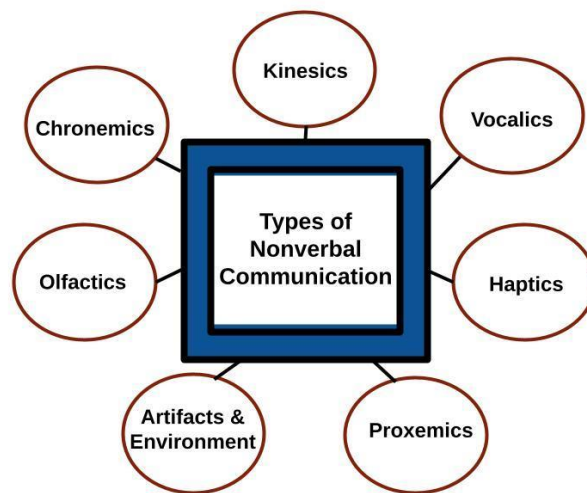


Figure 6.3.1: Types of nonverbal communication by Armeda C. Reitzel is licensed [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

As you read through this section, remember that the cultural patterns embedded in nonverbal codes should be used not as stereotypes for all members of particular cultures, but rather as tentative guidelines or examples to help you understand the great variation of nonverbal behavior in humans. Culture influences what nonverbal behaviors mean and how these meanings are displayed.

Kinesics

Kinesics refers to the study of hand, arm, body, and face movements. We will look specifically at three different types of kinesics: facial expressions, eye behavior (oculesics) and gestures.

Facial Expressions

You may have heard the expression "a smile is worth a thousand words." We have been smiling most of our lives, ever since the fourth week of life. These spontaneous smiles turn into smiles of genuine enjoyment known as **Duchenne smiles**. What is a Duchenne smile? According to the Paul Eckmann Group (2022):

FACS [Facial Action Coding System] research has shown that in a true enjoyment smile, the skin above and below the eye is pulled in towards the eyeball, and this makes for the following changes in appearance: the cheeks are pulled up; the skin below the eye may bag or bulge; the lower eyelid moves up; crows feet wrinkles may appear at the outer corner of the eye socket; the skin above the eye is pulled slightly down and inwards; and the eyebrows move down very slightly. A non-

enjoyment smile, in contrast, features the same movement of the lip corners as the enjoyment smile but does not involve the changes due to the muscles around the eyes.

The photograph in Figure 6.3.2 shows a great example of a Duchenne smile, that “genuine smile.”



Figure 6.3.2: [Smiling girl](#) by [Jonathan Borba](#) on [Unsplash](#)

One of the first foundational studies of culture and emotion was conducted by Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen in the 1970s. The research conducted across the world led to the development of the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) that we mentioned earlier. FACS analyzed specific facial muscle movement associated with specific emotions (Tsai, 2021). Across cultures, individuals were able to correlate facial movements to specific emotions, leading to the development of what is now known as the seven “universal” facial expressions. These seven facial expressions include happiness, surprise, contempt, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger. Examples are depicted in Figure 6.3.3. You might consider the acronym SADFISH as a way to remember these seven universal facial expressions.

The Seven Universal Facial Expressions of Emotion



Figure 6.3.3: The Seven Universal Facial Expression of Emotion from the US Department of Justice [CC0](#)

While these universal facial expressions were recognized across cultural groups, research also showed that there were distinct differences in how each culture interprets and displays these emotions (Tsai, 2021). These became known as **cultural display rules**. Cultural display rules are intrinsically held within a culture's norms and standards of behaviors. They help to govern the types and frequencies of acceptable emotions (Spielman, et al., 2014). Different cultures have different structures of behavior and, therefore, different rules regarding how they display their emotions.

Research has shown that collectivistic cultures, where social harmony is emphasized, are less likely to showcase negative emotions, such as disgust or anger, in social settings. Individualistic cultures, where personal self-concept is emphasized, are more likely to showcase emotions of anger or disgust no matter the social context (Dzokoto et al., 2018). Research suggests that people from individualistic cultures, like the United States, use exaggerated facial expressions to showcase emotion as a way to influence others and gain attention from those around them (which is accepted within an individualistic culture). This is opposed to the actions of people from collectivistic cultures, such as Japan, where the tendency is to suppress or not show their emotional expressions as a way to observe the social context and interaction between interpersonal relationships. Because collectivistic cultures put primary

concern on the interdependence of the cultural group, emotional displays are direct reflections of the family system, and the primary driver is to maintain relationships (Anonymous, 2022).

Understanding emotions in the context of culture is important to making sure we are aware of the ways that differences in communicating emotions may occur. The perception of emotional display rules differs between cultures, where different rules and norms are established and subconsciously understood amongst members. While these elements are rarely spoken about explicitly between cultural group members, they impact the way we interpret and communicate emotions in our relationships. Knowing the ways in which a person may express or not express an emotion will allow us to better regulate our own emotional reaction as well.

We rely on reading facial expressions so much in our interpersonal interactions. This was quite a challenge when we needed to wear face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. About 50% of our face was covered with some sort of cloth or covering. This often created some ambiguity when it came to deciphering what a person might be saying. In addition, Deaf individuals were not able to see the movement of the lips, face, or tongue to engage in lip reading when their conversation partner's nose and mouth were covered. Some people, such as the person in Figure 6.3.4, started wearing masks with a clear mouth window so that at least their mouth could be seen.



Figure 6.3.4: Showing a smile under a COVID-19 face mask by Armeda C. Reitzel is licensed [CCBY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

Oculesics

The study of eye contact is known as **oculesics**. Eye contact provides indications of social and emotional information. People, perhaps without consciously doing so, probe each other's eyes and faces for signs of positive or negative mood. Eye contact can establish a sense of intimacy between two individuals, such as the gazes of lovers or the eye contact involved in flirting. Alternatively, avoiding eye contact can establish distance between people. When in crowds, people tend to avoid eye contact in order to maintain privacy. The customs involving eye contact vary widely between cultures. Muslims are taught to lower their gazes and try not to focus on the features of the opposite sex, except for the hands and face. Japanese children are taught to direct their gaze at the region of their teacher's Adam's apple or tie knot. As adults, Japanese tend to lower their eyes when speaking to a superior as a gesture of respect. In Eastern Africa, it is respectful not to look the dominant person in the eye, whereas such avoidance of eye contact is negatively interpreted in Western cultures. It is important to keep in mind that eye contact is culturally determined (LibreTexts, 2021).

Gestures

Gestures are movements of the body that carry meaning. Gestures may be categorized as emblems, illustrators, affect displays, or regulators.

Emblems

Emblems are gestures that correspond to a word and an agreed-on meaning. Many gestures are emblems that have a verbal equivalent in a culture. Since emblems are culturally determined, you might run into instances of ambiguity or miscommunication. For example, in the United States the "everything is OK or good" is represented by the index finger touching the thumb so that a "ring" is made. When we teach classes to international students, we avoid using this nonverbal gesture because it could mean very different things in different cultures, from "money" in Japanese culture to offensive meanings in other cultures.

Illustrators

While emblems can be used as direct substitutions for words, **illustrators** help emphasize or explain an idea. Think about a person who went fishing and then shows how big that fish that they caught was by extending their arms to show its size.

Affect Displays

Affect displays show feelings and emotions. Consider how music and sports fans show enthusiasm. It is not uncommon to see people jumping up and down at sports events during a particularly exciting moment in a game. However, there are different norms depending on the sport. It would be inappropriate to demonstrate the same nonverbal gestures at a golf or tennis game as a football game. The gesture displayed in Figure 6.3.5 shows the “pure joy” of a person who just made a strike.



Figure 6.3.5: A man smiling in a bowling alley by Pavel Danilyuk on Pexels

Regulators

Gestures that help coordinate the flow of conversation, such as when you shrug your shoulders or wink, are called **regulators**. Raising your hand during class indicates that you want to say something. Even the Zoom videoconferencing platform uses a “raise hand” icon to help regulate communication during a session. Regulators often include head nods, eye contact or aversion and changes in posture. They are considered to be turn-taking cues in conversation. Individuals may sit back when listening but shift forward to indicate a desire to speak. Eye contact shifts frequently during a conversation to indicate listening or a desire to speak. Head nods are used as a sign of listening and often indicate that the speaker should continue speaking.

Consider This: Five Common US Hand Gestures that Are Insulting in Other Cultures

We think nothing of using the following gestures in our everyday interactions with each other here in the United States. Like words, these gestures don’t mean anything until we assign meanings to them. In the United States, these gestures have harmless interpretations. However, in other countries, using these very same gestures can have dire consequences as they have very different meanings.

Gesture Meanings and Contexts

Graphic of Nonverbal	Meaning in United States	Meaning Elsewhere
 Thumbs-Up by Tumisu from Pixabay	Positive meanings including: everything is good/OK, and good going.	Considered a very rude gesture in the following countries: Australia, Sardinia, Iran, Nigeria, Ghana, and Soviet Union. If counting - In Germany “thumbs up” = !; in Japan “thumbs up” = 5
 Fingers-Crossed by Evan-Amos from Wikimedia Commons	Wish for luck or good results. Sometimes used by children as an excuse to tell a little lie or break a promise made.	This same gesture in Vietnam is equivalent to us “giving someone the bird.”

Graphic of Nonverbal	Meaning in United States	Meaning Elsewhere
 Kid saying OK from Freesgv.org Public Domain	OK; good; everything is fine.	- In the South of France this means “zero” or “worthless.” - In Japan, this is a symbol for money because it looks like the shape of a coin. - In Brazil, this indicates female private parts and is considered extremely rude. - It is also insulting in Malta, Sardinia, Greece, Tunisia, Italy, Turkey, and Paraguay.
 Sign of the horns from Freesgv.org Public Domain  Hand sign by ChininiProductions from Pixabay	- Hang loose = chill; be relaxed; don't take things too seriously - Rock on = positive exclamation expressing enthusiasm, excitement - Hook 'em Horns = official hand sign of various universities in the United States whose mascot has some kind of horns (University of Texas, Austin, Texas Christian University, North Carolina State, North Dakota State).	- In Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Spain, Italy and Portugal this is a sign that tells someone their spouse is cheating. - In some African countries, flashing this gesture indicates you're placing a curse on them.
 Hand-man-number from pxhere.com CC0	In the United States, this sign (with the palm facing in or out) can have several meanings, none of which are negative. It could mean “peace.” It could also signal “V” for victory, or it could signal the number “2.”	In Ireland, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, displaying this same gesture with the back of the hand facing outward is an obscene and insulting gesture.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you come across misunderstandings as a result of using one of the above gestures? Briefly discuss what happened.
2. What are some other nonverbals you have come across that could have very different meanings and/or cause confusion/misunderstandings from culture to culture?
3. Do you know of any universal gestures? Explain.

Video Resources

- [American Hand Gestures in Different Cultures: 7 Ways to Get Yourself in Trouble Abroad](#)
- [How to Describe Hand Gestures in English](#)
- [Gestures Around the World](#)
- [Handshake Etiquette Around the World](#)

Vocalics (Paralanguage)

Vocalics focuses not on the words that we choose, but the manner in which we say the words using our vocal cords. It includes the study of **paralanguage**, which is the set of physical mechanisms that we use to produce sounds orally. These mechanisms involve the throat, nasal cavities, tongue, lips, mouth, and jaw. The specific aspects of vocalics that we will focus on are pitch, pace, disfluencies, and volume.

Pitch

Pitch is how harmonically high or low you say something. The rate at which your vocal folds vibrate in your throat are responsible for the pitch of your voice. Low-frequency vibrations make for a lower-pitched sound, while higher frequency vibrations make for

a higher-pitched sound. If you end the sentence on a high note (known as “uptalk”), you might be perceived as sounding uncertain about the claim (Linneman, 2013). If you end it on a low pitch, it might sound like you are stating a fact confidently.

Pace

Pace refers to how quickly you utter your words. Often, beginning public speakers will talk fast out of nervousness or too much excitement. Their area of improvement then is learning to slow down to allow the audience to “digest” the words. In high-energy humorous speeches, the speaker might talk faster, whereas in more serious dramatic speeches, the speaker would slow down to build the drama.

The use of pauses is a natural aspect of pacing. There are two types of pauses: grammatical and non-grammatical. Grammatical pauses are used to highlight something in a sentence or to build suspense. An example would be a host saying, “And the winner is ... Corey,” where the ellipsis (...) is a pause to build suspense. Non-grammatical pauses are not planned and may occur when a speaker loses their train of thought or is self-correcting.

Disfluencies

Both grammatical and non-grammatical pauses can either be filled or unfilled. Unfilled pauses have no sounds associated with them; they are pure silence. Filled pauses have some kind of noise associated with them, typically “uhh” and “umm.” The use of these non-grammatical sounds as pauses are known as **disfluencies**. Disfluencies can also include the repetitive use of a word during a pause, such as “like,” “so,” or “and.”

Volume

Volume refers to the loudness (**prosody**) of the language being spoken. You might have a friend who is a “loud talker” and can be heard from far distances having conversations with someone within social distance. On the opposite end of the spectrum, you may have a friend who is a “soft talker” who may be hard to hear in loud settings. In any case, we may have expectations for volume in certain settings. At a football game, loudness is encouraged by fellow fans. In a fine-dining romantic restaurant, soft-talking is expected by fellow patrons.

Haptics

Haptics is the study of communication by touch. Touch may indicate liking, attraction, or dominance. It is a form of communication that can be used to initiate, regulate, and maintain relationships. It is a very powerful form of communication that can be used to communicate messages ranging from comfort to power. Duration, frequency, and intensity of touch can be used to convey liking, attraction, or dominance. Duration refers to the length of time of a touch. Frequency is how often touch is used. Intensity is the amount of pressure that is applied. Touch is a powerful interpersonal tool along with voice and body movement.

Proxemics

The study of **proxemics**, which is the study of communication through space, was strongly influenced by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall back in the 1968. He categorized space into four “distances” based on observations of the use of space in cultures, such as the United States.

1. **Intimate space:** The intimate zone is typically reserved for only the closest friends, family, and romantic/intimate partners. It involves any communication that is 18 inches or less from a person’s body. It is impossible to completely ignore people when they are in this space, even if we are trying to pretend that we’re ignoring them. While some people are comfortable engaging in or watching others engage in PDAs (public displays of affection) others are not.
2. **Personal space:** The personal zone is typically reserved for friends, close acquaintances, and significant others. Much of our communication occurs in the personal zone, which is what we typically think of as our “personal space bubble” and extends from 18 inches to 4 feet away from our body.
3. **Social distance:** Communication that occurs in the social zone, which is 4 to 12 feet away from our body, is typically in the context of a professional or casual interaction. This distance is preferred in many professional settings because it reduces the suspicion of any impropriety. The expression “keep someone at an arm’s length” means that someone is kept out of the personal space and kept in the social/professional space. If two people held up their arms and stood so that just the tips of their fingers were touching, they would be around 4 feet away from each other, which is perceived as a safe distance. Students in large lecture classes should consider sitting within the social zone of the professor, since students who sit within this zone are more likely to be remembered by the professor, be acknowledged in class, and retain more information because they are close enough to take in important nonverbal and visual cues.

4. **Public distance:** Public space starts about 12 feet from a person and extends out from there. This is the least personal of the four zones. It is typically used when a person is engaging in a formal speech. It would be difficult to have a deep conversation with someone at this level because you have to speak louder and don't have the physical closeness that is often needed to promote emotional closeness and/or establish rapport.

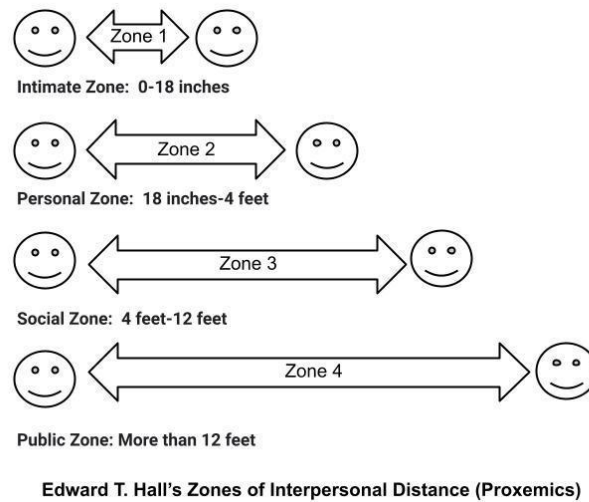


Figure 6.3.6: Hall's Zones of Interpersonal Distance created by Armeda Reitzel [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#).

You may read a full description here: [Hall's Four Zones of Interpersonal Distance](#)

You might be questioning Hall's "social" zone of distance, because a new phrase entered our everyday vocabulary in 2020: **social distancing**. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing became a that concept we saw and talked about. That term has been replaced with the phrase **physical distancing**.

What is physical distancing? "Physical distancing is the practice of staying at least 6 feet away from others to avoid catching a disease such as COVID-19" (Maragakis, 2020). Figure 6.3.7 displays the outline of two shoe prints along with the verbal explanation to "Please help by keeping a safe distance of 6 feet. Thank you for social distancing."



Figure 6.3.7: Please help by keeping a safe distance of 6 feet. Thank you for social distancing. by Elizabeth McDaniel on [Unsplash](#).

A song that became popular again during the early days of the pandemic was "Don't Stand So Close to Me." There was a remix of the song done by Sting, Jimmy Fallon, and The Roots using the Zoom conferencing platform and at-home instruments in April 2020. You might consider checking it out at ["Jimmy Fallon, Sting & The Roots Remix 'Don't Stand So Close to Me' \(At-Home Instruments\)."](#)

Territoriality refers to the instinctive or socially constructed behavior of individuals or groups to claim and defend a specific physical or psychological space as their own. This behavior can manifest in personal, social, or cultural contexts and often involves maintaining boundaries, protecting resources, or asserting control over a particular area. Basically, it is when someone claims a space or area as their own and wants to keep control over it. It's like setting boundaries to show, "This is my space."

In a workplace setting, an employee may personalize their desk by decorating it with family photos, plants, or other items. This act signals ownership of that space and can discourage others from intruding without permission. If a colleague repeatedly uses this desk or moves items without asking, the desk's owner might feel their territoriality has been violated.

In college, you might have a favorite spot in the library where you like to study. You've gotten comfortable there, and you feel it's "your spot." If someone else takes it, you might feel annoyed or uncomfortable, even though it's technically open for anyone to use.

Artifacts and Environment

Artifacts are items with which we adorn our bodies or that we carry with us. Artifacts include glasses, jewelry, canes, shoes, clothing, or any object associated with our body that communicates meaning. That includes tattoos and piercings!

Tattoos have become mainstream among young people in the United States and elsewhere. Now there are policies for each branch of the military as to what and where tattoos are permitted (DePastino, 2021). Even Disney has updated its policy, according to Josh D'Amaro, chairman of Disney Parks, Experiences and Products:

Our new approach provides greater flexibility with respect to forms of personal expression surrounding gender-inclusive hairstyles, jewelry, nail styles, and costume choices; and allowing appropriate visible tattoos. We're updating them to not only remain relevant in today's workplace, but also enable our cast members to better express their cultures and individuality at work. (D'Amaro, 2021)

Keep in mind that tattoos in different cultures, communities, and countries may still have a negative connotation. What do the tattoos in Figure 6.3.8 communicate to you nonverbally?



Figure 6.3.8: [Woman with Tattoo](#) by [Annie Spratt](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Clothing stimulates meaning. For example, my father always asked me, “How do you know if someone is a priest, painter, judge, police officer, or doctor?” It is because they have a uniform that represents that profession. Dress and physical appearance can be important identifiers for membership in particular groups. What do the casual sweatshirt and shorts worn by the person in Figure 6.3.9 say to you? How does the environment that this person is in affect your reading of their clothing?



Figure 6.3.9: [Appearance](#) by [Aiman Zenn](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Differences in power and status may be seen in the size and location of an office. Even the presence or absence of a window might influence perceptions. Think about your reactions to someone with a spacious office with expensive-looking furniture and wall-hangings and a huge window overlooking a great view versus someone in a tiny, cramped cubicle with cheap particle-board furniture and no windows. Even classrooms are designed in different ways that may encourage group interactions or keep the students' focus on the front of the room and the instructor.

Olfactics

The sense of smell communicates messages. The term **olfactics** refers to the influence of scent on perceptions. Does the smell of gingerbread bring back fond, positive memories of holidays when the kitchen was full of those delicious cookies that you used to make (and eat!) when you visited your grandparents? Have you ever purchased a candle or a particular type of bubble bath because of its scent, which perhaps reminded you of something positive?

Scent can draw others in or repel them, and the same scent can have different affects on different people. The United States places a lot of emphasis on smell. Consider the impact of failing to manage one's natural scent in the workplace. Countless articles in the popular media address how to deal with a “smelly coworker.” Thus, it is crucial to be aware of one's scent, including the ones we wear in an effort not to offend those around us. Although smelling “bad” may end a relationship or at least create distance, an

attractive scent may help individuals begin a new relationship. Have you ever purchased a new scent before a first date? If so, you are aware of the power of scent to attract a mate.

Although we regularly try to cover our scent, we also attempt to control the scent of our environments. The air freshener market in 2016 was valued at \$1.62 billion US dollars. Go to your local grocery store and investigate the number of products available to enhance environmental scents. Be prepared to spend a significant amount of time taking in the many products to keep our environments “fresh.” Remember that what is considered “pleasant” or “smelly” is culturally based.

Chronemics

Chronemics refers to the study of how time affects communication. Time can be classified into several different categories, including biological, personal, and cultural time (Andersen, 1999).

Biological Time

The rhythms of living things are referred to as **biological time**. When our natural rhythms are disturbed, by all-nighters or jet lag, our physical and mental health and our communication competence and personal relationships can suffer. Keep biological time in mind as you communicate with others. Early morning conversations and speeches may require more preparation to get yourself awake enough to communicate well. A more energetic delivery may be needed to accommodate others who may still be getting warmed up for their day.

Personal Time

The way we experience time is referred to as **personal time**. This varies based on our mood, interest level, and other factors. Think about how quickly time passes when you are engaged in something that really interests you. People with past-time orientations may want to reminisce about the past, reunite with old friends, and put considerable time into preserving memories in scrapbooks, photo albums and on Instagram. People with future-time orientations may spend their time making career and personal plans, writing to-do lists, researching future vacation spots or deciding what program they’re going to binge-watch next month.

Cultural Time

How a large group of people view time is called **cultural time**. There are cultures that tend to value **polychronic time**. There are other cultures that operate on **monochronic time**. The term **polychronic** contains the idea of “many” (poly) and refers to the idea of many things happening in a fluid, flexible fashion. Polychronic people tend to engage in multiple activities at the same time and do not create specific time frames to work on particular tasks. We might view such people as “simultaneous multitaskers” who juggle multiple activities and people at the same time. Time is not seen as linear, and schedules may be regarded as only suggestions. For example, polychronic people tend to “go with the flow.” They would never think of telling someone when a party is scheduled to end. Why? They would say that it is because a party ends when it is over.

Monochronic people tend to schedule their time more rigidly and focus on one task at a time. They make schedules and stick to them as much as possible. Events begin at a specific time and they end at a specific time. An invitation to a party hosted by a monochronic person might even announce an ending time as well as a start time for the festivities. A monochronic person might interpret the behavior of a polychronic person as rude or uncaring because they did not bother to show up on time. A polychronic person may perceive a monochronic person as uptight or harsh because they seem to care more about time than about people. As you can see, our concepts about time influences our social realities and how we perceive and interact with others.

Our status may influence the way that we view and use time. For example, doctors can make their patients wait, and executives and celebrities may run consistently behind schedule, making others wait for them. Promptness and the amount of time that is socially acceptable for lateness and waiting varies among individuals and contexts. One of the authors is an English as a second language teacher-trainer who has traveled all over the globe, and can share the following: “The sense of time definitely differs from culture to culture. I learned to be flexible about the start time for my workshop sessions in Nicaragua. When I was in Germany, a train conductor apologized to the whole trainload of passengers for arriving one minute late to a stop.”

What instances of time differences have you experienced that may have been influenced by culture?

Nonverbal Communication in Different Settings

Nonverbal communication covers a lot of territory. It’s important to consider our nonverbal communication in different contexts: from the classroom to the grocery store to the courtroom to the job interview. Think about the different situations that you find yourself in and how you might need to adjust your nonverbal communication to fit the circumstances. How would you characterize

the role of nonverbal communication with friends and family? How is that the same or different from the nonverbal communication appropriate in a professional setting? Let's take a quick look at recommendations to healthcare professionals in interacting with their patients for a context-specific example.



Figure 6.3.10: A doctor looking forward and thinking by Usman Yousaf on Unsplash.

✓ Example 6.3.1: Example of nonverbal communication in a specific context: Healthcare settings

There is great interest in the study and teaching of confirming nonverbal behaviors in interpersonal communication in healthcare contexts.

In addition to effective verbal communication, nonverbal behavior is critically important for achieving patient satisfaction, adherence to treatment, and shared medical decisions. Patients are calling for more compassionate care, and the government and third-party payers are now basing hospital reimbursement on patient satisfaction ratings. (Reiss & Kraft-Todd, 2014)

For example, a doctor will focus on a patient's facial expressions and tone of voice to tap into their concerns while a patient relies on a doctor's nonverbal behavior to figure out what the doctor means (Ishikawa, et al., 2006). Patients have identified eye contact as being significant in their interactions with their doctors. According to Timmermann, Uhrenfeldt, and Birkelund, "Eye contact substantiated the patients' experience of being confirmed. Simultaneously, it became apparent that eye contact alone was not enough for the patients to feel confirmed. It was the body language as a whole that the patients interpreted" (2017).

There are two acronyms that address how nonverbal communication might be used effectively in healthcare settings: EMPATHY is one; SOFTEN is the other. As suggested by Reiss and Kraft-Todd (2014), a healthcare professional should show empathy by paying attention and listening to the nonverbal communication of their patients:

- **E** = Eye contact
- **M** = Muscles of facial expression
- **P** = Posture
- **A** = Affect
- **T** = Tone of voice
- **H** = Hearing the whole patient
- **Y** = Your response).

Roger (2002) shared a framework proposed by Joan Damsey for making patients feel more comfortable through positive nonverbal communication behavior. The acronym SOFTEN captures the key suggestions:

- **S** = Smile. This can create a positive interactional climate that can lead to more open communication between the healthcare professional and the patient.
- **O** = Open posture. An open posture (no crossed arms or legs) indicates a willingness to listen to what the patient has to share.

- **F** = Forward lean. This may suggest to the patient that you want to listen to them.
- **T** = Touch. A touch can signal a positive nonverbal message and provide some information about how the patient is feeling.
- **E** = Eye contact. Maintaining eye contact for about 80% of the time may make the patient feel as if you are focusing your attention and efforts on them.
- **N** = Nod. Nodding occasionally tells the patients that the healthcare professional is listening to them and what they have to say.

These specific suggested nonverbal cues tend to be confirming communication behaviors and can actually lead to a faster, more productive exchange of information.

So, as you can see, nonverbal communication is important in establishing a positive communication climate between patients and healthcare professionals. Would you like to learn more about this topic? Then check out this resource on “[Basic Non-verbal Communication Skills](#)” in a healthcare setting.



Figure 6.3.11: Healthcare professional with a patient by the National Cancer Institute on Unsplash.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Listening

In this section, we will explain the importance of listening.

The Importance of Listening

If you were to break up the various types of communication you use throughout your day, listening would make up about 42 – 60 percent. Problematically, many people engage in passive versus active listening, which can cause miscommunication and have a negative effect on relationships. Listening is an important skill to cultivate, both personally and professionally. In this chapter, we will explain the importance of listening, the stages of the listening process, listening styles, some common listening barriers, and ways to improve our listening skills.



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Learning Objectives

- How does the listening process work?
- What are some of the challenges to effective listening?
- How can we improve our listening, and why might it be important to do so?

Successful students will be able to:

- explain the importance of listening
- differentiate between five stages of the listening process
- identify four listening styles
- describe six barriers to effective listening
- demonstrate ways to improve listening in all stages of the process
- recognize contextual influences on listening
- recognize the value of reflection on listening and relationships

[7.1: The Listening Process](#)

[7.2: Functions of Listening](#)

[7.3: Barriers to Listening](#)

[7.4: Ineffective Listening Practices \(Types of Nonlistening\)](#)

[7.5: Becoming a Better Listener](#)

[7.6: Listening Responses](#)

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7.1: The Listening Process

Learning Outcomes

1. Differentiate between hearing and listening.
2. Understand how to listen effectively.
3. Recognize the different types of listening.

When it comes to daily communication, we spend about 45% of our listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading, and 9% writing.³⁶ However, most people are not entirely sure what the word “listening” is or how to do it effectively.

Hearing Is Not Listening

Hearing refers to a passive activity where an individual perceives sound by detecting vibrations through an ear. Hearing is a physiological process that is continuously happening. We are bombarded by sounds all the time. Unless you are in a sound-proof room or are 100% deaf, we are constantly hearing sounds. Even in a sound-proof room, other sounds that are normally not heard like a beating heart or breathing will become more apparent as a result of the blocked background noise.

Listening, on the other hand, is generally seen as an active process. Listening is “focused, concentrated attention for the purpose of understanding the meanings expressed by a [source].”³⁷ From this perspective, hearing is more of an automatic response when your ear perceives information; whereas, listening is what happens when we purposefully attend to different messages.

We can even take this a step further and differentiate normal listening from critical listening. **Critical listening** is the “careful, systematic thinking and reasoning to see whether a message makes sense in light of factual evidence.”³⁸ From this perspective, it’s one thing to attend to someone’s message, but something very different to analyze what the person is saying based on known facts and evidence.

Let’s apply these ideas to a typical interpersonal situation. Let’s say that you and your best friend are having dinner at a crowded restaurant. Your ear is going to be attending to a lot of different messages all the time in that environment, but most of those messages get filtered out as “background noise,” or information we don’t listen to at all. Maybe then your favorite song comes on the speaker system the restaurant is playing, and you and your best friend both attend to the song because you both like it. A minute earlier, another song could have been playing, but you tuned it out (hearing) instead of taking a moment to enjoy and attend to the song itself (listen). Next, let’s say you and your friend get into a discussion about the issues of campus parking. Your friend states, “There’s never any parking on campus. What gives?” Now, if you’re critically listening to what your friend says, you’ll question the basis of this argument. For example, the word “never” in this statement is problematic because it would mean that the campus has zero available parking, which is probably not the case. Now, it may be difficult for your friend to find a parking spot on campus, but that doesn’t mean that there’s “never any parking.” In this case, you’ve gone from just listening to critically evaluating the argument your friend is making.

Model of Listening

Judi Brownell created one of the most commonly used models for listening.³⁹ Although not the only model of listening that exists, we like this model because it breaks the process of hearing down into clearly differentiated stages: hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding (Figure 7.3.1).

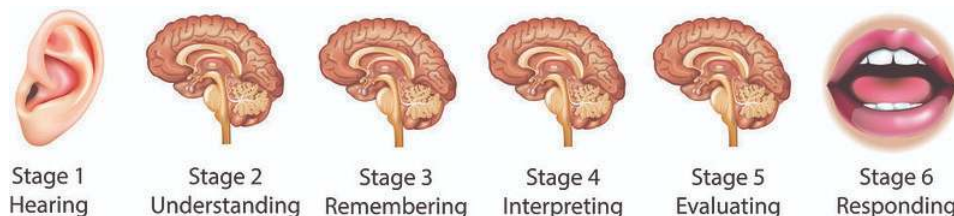


Figure 7.1.1: HURIER Model of Listening

Hearing

From a fundamental perspective, for listening to occur, an individual must attend to some kind of communicated message. Now, one can argue that hearing should not be equated with listening (as we did above), but it is the first step in the model of listening.

Simply, if we don't attend to the message at all, then communication never occurred from the receiver's perspective.

Imagine you're standing in a crowded bar with your friends on a Friday night. You see your friend Darry and yell her name. In that instant, you, as a source of a message, have attempted to send a message. If Darry is too far away, or if the bar is too loud and she doesn't hear you call her name, then Darry has not engaged in stage one of the listening model. You may have tried to initiate communication, but the receiver, Darry, did not know that you initiated communication.

Now, to engage in mindful listening, it's important to take hearing seriously because of the issue of intention. If we go into an interaction with another person without really intending to listening to what they have to say, we may end up being a passive listener who does nothing more than hear and nod our heads. Remember, mindful communication starts with the premise that we must think about our intentions and be aware of them.

Understanding

The second stage of the listening model is understanding, or the ability to comprehend or decode the source's message. When we discussed the basic models of human communication in Chapter 2, we discussed the idea of decoding a message. Simply, decoding is when we attempt to break down the message we've heard into comprehensible meanings. For example, imagine someone coming up to you asking if you know, "Tintinnabulation of vacillating pendulums in inverted, metallic resonant cups." Even if you recognize all of the words, you may not completely comprehend what the person is even trying to say. In this case, you cannot decode the message. Just as an FYI, that means "jingle bells."

Remembering

Once we've decoded a message, we have to actually remember the message itself, or the ability to recall a message that was sent. We are bombarded by messages throughout our day, so it's completely possible to attend to a message and decode it and then forget it about two seconds later.

For example, I always warn my students that my brain is like a sieve. If you tell me something when I'm leaving the class, I could easily have forgotten what you told me three seconds later because my brain switches gear to what I'm doing next: I run into another student into in the hallway; another thought pops into my head; etc. As such, I always recommend emailing me important things, so I don't forget them. In this case, it's not that I don't understand the message; I just get distracted, and my remembering process fails me. This problem plagues all of us.

Interpreting

The next stage in the HURIER Model of Listening is interpreting. "Interpreting messages involves attention to all of the various speaker and contextual variables that provide a background for accurately perceived messages."⁴⁰ So, what do we mean by contextual variables? A lot of the interpreting process is being aware of the nonverbal cues (both oral and physical) that accompany a message to accurately assign meaning to the message.

Imagine you're having a conversation with one of your peers, and he says, "I love math." Well, the text itself is demonstrating an overwhelming joy and calculating mathematical problems. However, if the message is accompanied by an eye roll or is said in a manner that makes it sound sarcastic, then the meaning of the oral phrase changes. Part of interpreting a message then is being sensitive to nonverbal cues.

Evaluating

The next stage is the evaluating stage, or judging the message itself. One of the biggest hurdles many people have with listening is the evaluative stage. Our personal biases, values, and beliefs can prevent us from effectively listening to someone else's message.

Let's imagine that you despise a specific politician. It's gotten to the point where if you hear this politician's voice, you immediately change the television channel. Even hearing other people talk about this politician causes you to tune out completely. In this case, your own bias against this politician prevents you from effectively listening to their message or even others' messages involving this politician. Overcoming our own biases against the source of a message or the content of a message in an effort to truly listen to a message is not easy. One of the reasons listening is a difficult process is because of our inherent desire to evaluate people and ideas.

When it comes to evaluating another person's message, it's important to remember to be mindful. As we discussed in Chapter 1, to be a mindful communicator, you must listen with an open ear that is nonjudging. Too often, we start to evaluate others' messages with an analytical or cold quality that is antithetical to being mindful.

Responding

In Figure 7.3.1, hearing is represented by an ear, the brain represents the next four stages, and a person's mouth represents the final stage. It's important to realize that effective listening starts with the ear and centers in the brain, and only then should someone provide feedback to the message itself. Often, people jump from hearing and understanding to responding, which can cause problems as they jump to conclusions that have arisen by truncated interpretation and evaluation.

Ultimately, how we respond to a source's message will dictate how the rest of that interaction will progress. If we outright dismiss what someone is saying, we put up a roadblock that says, "I don't want to hear anything else." On the other hand, if we nod our heads and say, "tell me more," then we are encouraging the speaker to continue the interaction. For effective communication to occur, it's essential to consider how our responses will impact the other person and our relationship with that other person.

Overall, when it comes to being a mindful listener, it's vital to remember COAL: curiosity, openness, acceptance, and love.⁴¹ We need to go into our interactions with others and try to see things from their points of view. When we engage in COAL, we can listen mindfully and be in the moment.

Taxonomy of Listening

Now that we've introduced the basic concepts of listening, let's examine a simple taxonomy of listening that was created by Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Coakley.⁴² The basic premise of the Wolvin and Coakley taxonomy of listening is that there are fundamental parts to listening and then higher-order aspects of listening (Figure 7.3.2). Let's look at each of these parts separately.

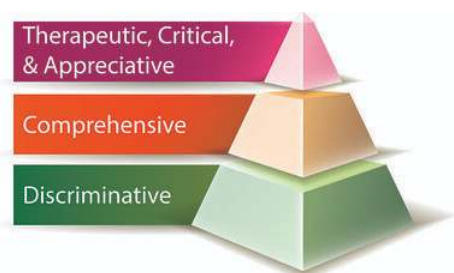


Figure 7.1.2 Taxonomy of Listening

Discriminative

The base level of listening is what Wolvin and Coakley called discriminative listening, or distinguishing between auditory and visual stimuli and determining which to actually pay attention to. In many ways, discriminative listening focuses on how hearing and seeing a wide range of different stimuli can be filtered and used.

We're constantly bombarded by a variety of messages in our day-to-day lives. We have to discriminate between which messages we want to pay attention to and which ones we won't. As a metaphor, think of discrimination as your email inbox. Every day you have to filter out messages (aka spam) to find the messages you want to actually read. In the same way, our brains are constantly bombarded by messages, and we have to filter some in and most of them out.

Comprehensive

If we achieve discriminative listening, then we can progress to comprehensive listening. "Comprehensive listening requires the listener to use the discriminative skills while functioning to understand and recall the speaker's information."⁴³ If we go back and look at Figure 7.3.1, we can see that comprehensive listening essentially aligns with understanding and remembering.

Wolvin and Coakley argued that discriminative and comprehensive listening are foundational levels of listening. If these foundational levels of listening are met, then they can progress to the other three, higher-order levels of listening: therapeutic, critical, and appreciative.

Therapeutic

Therapeutic listening occurs when an individual is a sounding board for another person during an interaction. For example, your best friend just fought with their significant other and they've come to you to talk through the situation.

Critical

The next aspect of listening is critical listening, or really analyzing the message that is being sent. Instead of just being a passive receiver of information, the essential goal of listening is to determine the acceptability or validity of the message(s) someone is

sending.

Appreciative

Lastly, we have appreciative listening, which is when someone simply enjoys the act of listening or the message being sent. For example, let's say you're watching a Broadway musical or play or even a new movie at the cinema. While you may be engaged critically, you also may be simply appreciative and enjoying the act of listening to the message.

Listening Styles

Now that we have a better understanding of how listening works, let's talk about four different styles of listening researchers have identified. Kittie Watson, Larry Barker, and James Weaver defined listening styles as "attitudes, beliefs, and predispositions about the how, where, when, who, and what of the information reception and encoding process."⁴⁴ Watson et al. identified four distinct listening styles: people, content, action, and time. Before progressing to learning about the different listening styles, take a minute to complete the measure in Table 7.3.1, The Listening Style Questionnaire. The Listening Style Questionnaire is based on the original work of Watson, Barker, and Weaver.⁴⁵

Table 7.3.1 Listening Style Questionnaire

Instructions: Read the following questions and select the answer that corresponds with how you tend to listen to public speeches. Do not be concerned if some of the items appear similar. Please use the scale below to rate the degree to which each statement applies to you:

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
---------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

1. I am very attuned to public speaker's emotions while listening to them.
2. I keep my attention on a public speaker's feelings why they speak.
3. I listen for areas of similarity and difference between me and a public speaker.
4. I generally don't pay attention to a speaker's emotions.
5. When listening to a speaker's problems, I find myself very attentive.
6. I prefer to listen to people's arguments while they are speaking.
7. I tend to tune out technical information when a speaker is speaking.
8. I wait until all of the arguments and evidence is presented before judging a speaker's message.
9. I always fact check a speaker before forming an opinion about their message.
10. When it comes to public speaking, I want a speaker to keep their opinions to themselves and just give me the facts.
11. A speaker needs to get to the point and tell me why I should care.
12. Unorganized speakers drive me crazy.
13. Speakers need to stand up, say what they need to say, and sit down.
14. If a speaker wants me to do something, they should just say it directly.
15. When a speaker starts to ramble on, I really start to get irritated.
16. I have a problem listening to someone give a speech when I have other things to do, places to be, or people to see.
17. When I don't have time to listen to a speech, I have no problem telling someone.
18. When someone is giving a speech, I'm constantly looking at my watch or clocks in the room.
19. I avoid speeches when I don't have the time to listen to them.
20. I have no problem listening to a speech even when I'm in a hurry.

Scoring

People-Oriented Listener

A: Add scores for items 1, 2, 3, 5 and place total on line. _____

B: Place score for item 4 on the line. _____

C: Take the total from A and add 6 to the score. Place the new number on the line. _____

Step Four: Now subtract B from C. Place your final score on the line. _____

Content-Oriented Listener

A: Add scores for items 6, 8, 9, 10 and place total on line. _____

B: Place score for item 7 on the line. _____

Take the total from A and add 6 to the score. Place the new number on the line. _____

Final Score: Now subtract B from C. Place your final score on the line. _____

Time-Oriented Listener

Final Score: Add items 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 _____

Content-Oriented Listener

A: Add scores for items 16, 17, 19 and place total on line. _____

B: Add scores for items 18 & 20 and place total on line. _____

C: Take the total from A and add 12 to the score. Place the new number on the line. _____

Final Score: Now subtract B from C. Place your final score on the line. _____

Interpretation

For each of the four subscales, scores should be between 5 and 25. If your score is above 18, you are considered to have high levels of that specific listening style. If your score is below 12, you're considered to have low levels of that specific listening style.

Based On

Watson, K. W., Barker, L. L., & Weaver, J. B., III. (1992, March). *Development and validation of the Listener Preference Profile*. Paper presented at the International Listening Association in Seattle, WA.

The Four Listening Styles

People

The first listening style is the people-oriented listening style. People-oriented listeners tend to be more focused on the person sending the message than the content of the message. As such, people-oriented listeners focus on the emotional states of senders of information. One way to think about people-oriented listeners is to see them as highly compassionate, empathic, and sensitive, which allows them to put themselves in the shoes of the person sending the message.

People-oriented listeners often work well in helping professions where listening to the person and understanding their feelings is very important (e.g., therapist, counselor, social worker). People-oriented listeners are also very focused on maintaining relationships, so they are good at casual conversation where they can focus on the person.

Action

The second listening style is the action-oriented listener. Action-oriented listeners are focused on what the source wants. The action-oriented listener wants a source to get to the point quickly. Instead of long, drawn-out lectures, the action-oriented speaker would prefer quick bullet points that get to what the source desires. Action-oriented listeners “tend to preference speakers that construct organized, direct, and logical presentations.”⁴⁶

When dealing with an action-oriented listener, it's important to realize that they want you to be logical and get to the point. One of the things action-oriented listeners commonly do is search for errors and inconsistencies in someone's message, so it's important to be organized and have your facts straight.

Content

The third type of listener is the content-oriented listener, or a listener who focuses on the content of the message and process that message in a systematic way. Of the four different listening styles, content-oriented listeners are more adept at listening to complex information. Content-oriented listeners “believe it is important to listen fully to a speaker's message prior to forming an opinion about it (while action listeners tend to become frustrated if the speaker is ‘wasting time’).”⁴⁷

When it comes to analyzing messages, content-oriented listeners really want to dig into the message itself. They want as much information as possible in order to make the best evaluation of the message. As such, “they want to look at the time, the place, the people, the who, the what, the where, the when, the how ... all of that. They don’t want to leave anything out.”⁴⁸

Time

The final listening style is the time-oriented listening style. Time-oriented listeners are sometimes referred to as “clock watchers” because they’re always in a hurry and want a source of a message to speed things up a bit. Time-oriented listeners “tend to verbalize the limited amount of time they are willing or able to devote to listening and are likely to interrupt others and openly signal disinterest.”⁴⁹

They often feel that they are overwhelmed by so many different tasks that need to be completed (whether real or not), so they usually try to accomplish multiple tasks while they are listening to a source. Of course, multitasking often leads to someone’s attention being divided, and information being missed.

Thinking About the Four Listening Types

Kina Mallard broke down the four listening styles and examined some of the common positive characteristics, negative characteristics, and strategies for communicating with the different listening styles (Table 7.3.2).⁵⁰

Table 7.3.2 Understanding the Four Listening Styles

People-Oriented Listener		
<i>Positive Characteristics</i>	<i>Negative Characteristics</i>	<i>Strategies for Communicating with People-Oriented Listeners</i>
Show care and concern for others	Over involved in feelings of others	Use stories and illustrations to make points
Are nonjudgmental	Avoid seeing faults in others	Use “we” rather than “I” in conversations
Provide clear verbal and nonverbal feedback signals	Internalize/adopt emotional states of others	Use emotional examples and appeals
Are interested in building relationships	Are overly expressive when giving feedback	Show some vulnerability when possible
Notice others’ moods quickly	Are nondiscriminating in building relationships	Use self-effacing humor or illustrations
Action-Oriented Listeners		
<i>Positive Characteristics</i>	<i>Negative Characteristics</i>	<i>Strategies for Communicating with People-Oriented Listeners</i>
Get to the point quickly	Tend to be impatient with rambling speakers	Keep main points to three or fewer
Give clear feedback concerning expectations	Jump ahead and reach conclusions quickly	Keep presentations short and concise
Concentrate on understanding task	Jump ahead or finishes thoughts of speakers	Have a step-by-step plan and label each step
Action-Oriented Listeners		
<i>Positive Characteristics</i>	<i>Negative Characteristics</i>	<i>Strategies for Communicating with People-Oriented Listeners</i>
Help others focus on what’s important	Minimize relationship issues and concerns	Watch for cues of disinterest and pick up vocal pace at those points or change subjects
Encourage others to be organized and concise	Ask blunt questions and appear overly critical	Speak at a rapid but controlled rate

Content-Oriented Listeners		
<i>Positive Characteristics</i>	<i>Negative Characteristics</i>	<i>Strategies for Communicating with People-Oriented Listeners</i>
Value technical information	Are overly detail oriented	Use two-side arguments when possible
Test for clarity and understanding	May intimidate others by asking pointed questions	Provide hard data when available
Encourage others to provide support for their ideas	Minimize the value of nontechnical information	Quote credible experts
Welcome complex and challenging information	Discount information from nonexperts	Suggest logical sequences and plan
Look at all sides of an issue	Take a long time to make decisions	Use charts and graphs
Time-Oriented Listeners		
<i>Positive Characteristics</i>	<i>Negative Characteristics</i>	<i>Strategies for Communicating with People-Oriented Listeners</i>
Manage and save time	Tend to be impatient with time wasters	Ask how much time the person has to listen
Set time guidelines for meeting and conversations	Interrupt others	Try to go under time limits when possible
Let others know listening-time requirements	Let time affect their ability to concentrate	Be ready to cut out necessary examples and information
Discourage wordy speakers	Rush speakers by frequently looking at watches/clock	Be sensitive to nonverbal cues indicating impatience or a desire to leave
Time-Oriented Listeners		
<i>Positive Characteristics</i>	<i>Negative Characteristics</i>	<i>Strategies for Communicating with People-Oriented Listeners</i>
Give cues to others when time is being wasted	Limit creativity in others by imposing time pressures	Get to the bottom line quickly
Original Source: Mallard, K. S. (1999). Lending an ear: The chair's role as listener. The Department Chair, 9(3), 1-13.		

Hopefully, this section has helped you further understand the complexity of listening. We should mention that many people are not just one listening style or another. It's possible to be a combination of different listening styles. However, some of the listening style combinations are more common. For example, someone who is action-oriented and time-oriented will want the bare-bones information so they can make a decision. On the other hand, it's hard to be a people-oriented listener and time-oriented listener because being empathic and attending to someone's feelings takes time and effort.

Mindfulness Activity



One of the hardest skills to master when it comes to mindfulness is mindful listening. To engage in mindful listening, Elaine Smookler recommends using the HEAR method:

1. **HALT** — Halt whatever you are doing and offer your full attention.
2. **ENJOY** — Enjoy a breath as you choose to receive whatever is being communicated to you—wanted or unwanted.
3. **ASK** — Ask yourself if you really know what they mean, and if you don't, ask for clarification. Instead of making assumptions, bring openness and curiosity to the interaction. You might be surprised at what you discover.
4. **REFLECT** — Reflect back to them what you heard. This tells them that you were really listening.⁵¹

For this mindfulness activity, we want you to engage in mindful listening. Start by having a conversation with a friend, romantic partner, or family member. Before beginning the conversation, find a location that has minimal distractions, so try not to engage in this activity in a public space. Also, turn off the television and radio. The goal is to focus your attention on the other person. Start by employing the HEAR method for listening during your conversation. After you have finished this conversation, try to answer the following questions:

1. How easy was it for you to provide your conversational partner your full attention? When stray thoughts entered your head, how did you refocus yourself?
2. Were you able to pay attention to your breathing while engaged in this conversation? Were you breathing lightly or heavily? Did your breathing get in the way of you listening mindfully? If yes, what happened?
3. Did you attempt to empathize with your conversational partner? How easy was it to understand where they were coming from? Was it still easy to empathize if you didn't agree with something they said or didn't like something they said?
4. How did your listening style impact your ability to stay mindful while listening? Do you think all four listening styles are suited for mindful listening? Why?

Key Takeaways

- Hearing happens when sound waves hit our eardrums. Listening involves processing these sounds into something meaningful.
- The listening process includes: having the motivation to listen, clearly hearing the message, paying attention, interpreting the message, evaluating the message, remembering and responding appropriately.
- There are many types of listening styles: comprehension, evaluative, empathetic, and appreciative.

Exercises

- Do a few listening activities. Go to: www.medel.com/resources-for-successsoundscape/
- For the next week, do a listening diary. Take notes of all the things you listen to and analyze to see if you are truly a good listener. Do you ask people to repeat things? Do you paraphrase?
- After completing the Listening Styles Questionnaire, think about your own listening style and how it impacts how you interact with others. What should you think about when communicating with people who have a different listening style?

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7.2: Functions of Listening

Listen Skills Vary by Context

We might assume that many of you have noticed that when you are watching a movie, or listening to music, you are engaged differently than when you are listening to one of your professors. Similarly, we think that when you are having a heart-to-heart conversation with a friend, family member, or partner, you might be tuned in with more intensity than you are in class. We listen differently in different situations, and that is entirely appropriate! There is value in understanding that there are different functions of listening because we can then use the most appropriate listening skills to meet the purpose or occasion. Using these functions appropriately will lead to better engagement and understanding.

Comprehensive Listening

Victoria was not the best student until she was at university. It was as though a light bulb went off in her head that said, “if you want good grades, you better listen.” Being a student, employee, friend, or partner in a relationship may require that you engage in comprehensive listening. **Comprehensive listening** is the type of listening we engage in with the goal of understanding information. We all listen to messages throughout the day that require comprehensive listening. If you listen to a podcast, national or local news, or attend work meetings, you would still want to understand what you heard. This function of listening is what you would access if you were listening to a lecture in class, an employer giving you instructions on how to learn to use the POS (point of sale) system, or your partner telling you what their needs are in a relationship. Numerous careers place a heavy demand on this type of listening. Physicians need to understand the area of pharmacology to prescribe medication correctly. If physicians didn't listen well while in medical school or retain and recall that information, they could make life-threatening mistakes in prescribing if the medications one might be taking are incompatible. Depending on the context you are in, you may find that it would be difficult to have information repeated to you so listening well is important. At the deepest level of interpersonal communication, comprehensive listening may impact a relationship for better, or worse.

Evaluative Listening

In the stages of listening you learned that you need to assess the credibility of what you hear, and this means you will need to analyze what you hear. **Evaluative listening** is a function of listening that fulfills the goal of analysis and evaluation of messages. We engage in evaluative listening in many of the same contexts where we engage in comprehensive listening. Evaluation allows us to determine whether a message is true, or logical. Whether you are a juror on a murder trial or listening to your partner's excuse regarding why they were late coming home, you will analyze the messages that you hear. Although not all evaluative listening may be a matter of life and death, it may still impact another person.



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Figure 7.2.1: Vice Presidential Debate - by [Lawrence Jackson](#) is licensed [CC-](#)

How we engage in evaluative listening can also impact us at the relational level. If you have ever disagreed with a parent, friend, partner, or co-worker, you might find that you have had to analyze the messages you are listening to quite intently. Or perhaps as you offer an explanation of your behavior to someone in your life you have noticed their reactions as you are speaking. Are they making eye contact with you or looking down? As you learned in Chapter 5, looking into a person's eyes helps us interpret messages because we rely on nonverbal behaviors to assess the truth of a message. Evaluative listening allows us to assess whether people in our lives are being candid, genuine, and truthful.

Discriminative Listening

At different times we may hear our partner tell us a story, and their voice just sounds different. You might perceive that they sound sad or distressed. What is it about their tone that made you so sure something was wrong? Although this next function of listening may not be used as much as others, it still serves an important function. **Discriminative listening** is a unique function of listening that occurs during the receiving stage of the listening process and involves the ability to discern sounds. This form of listening is physiological, and if you can hear, then you can access this function of listening. For example, an automotive mechanic may be quite skilled at listening to the sounds of a car that someone brings in to be repaired and they can discern which part of the car needs repair. If you are sitting on a jury listening to testimony, would you be able to tell if someone is lying? Communication scholar Judee Burgoon notes that it is difficult to speak using complex utterances when you are attempting to provide a fraudulent story (Burgoon, et al., 2015). If you have ever caught someone in a lie, your first clue may have been the way that person stammered while speaking. As you can see, we listen by using all of the stimuli available to us including our voice, tone, and other nonverbal behaviors.



Figure 7.2.2 Herbert Doyle by Defense Visual

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Appreciative Listening

Do you think that all forms of listening must be connected to your ability to understand or recall information? No! **Appreciative listening** is our ability to listen for enjoyment and is considered the easiest of all listening functions. Listening to music, watching a television show, attending a concert, or even listening to a great speech or classroom lecture are examples of appreciative listening. There are times when we are listening purely for enjoyment, but there are also occasions when we might be combining listening functions. If you consider the example of a great classroom lecture by your professor, you might be listening for comprehension, evaluation, and appreciation all at the same time! One of these functions of listening will be the dominant form based on the occasion.



Figure 7.2.3 Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett by J. Breschoten is licensed CC-

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Relational maintenance often requires appreciative listening. Focusing on the words you are hearing, the sound of someone's voice that brings you joy, or listening to someone important to you tell a story would be examples of appreciative listening. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us were forced to rely on technology such as FaceTime, Messenger Video, or Zoom to communicate with loved ones. Although it was not in-person communication, we were still able to keep our connection with others during such a difficult time.

Empathetic Listening

Have you ever just needed to vent, or have someone listen to you because you needed a friend? Or have you been placed in that position where someone needed *you*? **Empathetic listening** occurs when we try to feel what another person is feeling, and this can be considered the most challenging of all listening functions. Empathy means listening to understand the other person's feelings and/or emotions with the goal of validating them. Empathic listening is a higher-level listening skill and therefore requires more energy. It has often been described as "putting yourself in someone else's shoes."



Figure 7.2.4 [Listening Attentively](#) by Beatrice Murch is licensed CC-BY-SA 4.0

One of my students described her sadness over the cancellation of her sister's *quinceañera* due to local public health guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are unfamiliar with this custom, it is described as follows:

[The] celebration of a girl's 15th birthday, marking her passage from girlhood to womanhood; the term is also used for the celebrant herself. The *quinceañera* is both a religious and a social event that emphasizes the importance of family and society in the life of a young woman. It is celebrated in Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean, as well as in Latino communities in the United States and elsewhere. (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.)

Based on students' facial reactions, even in Zoom, it was evident that many students were able to empathize with the student. Let's look at one student's story that helps illustrate the importance of empathetic listening.

Student Voice

One of our authors shares her experience:

In teaching Interpersonal Communication for many years I have always appreciated students who are willing to share their experiences. To provide you with some context for what you will read, I'd like to remind you of the shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012. While he was visiting his father in Florida, he was spotted by George Zimmerman, who was a Neighborhood Watch volunteer. Zimmerman thought Martin was up to something criminal, and in his report, he described Trayvon Martin as wearing a hoodie. Zimmerman used one single shot to gun down Martin, and since that day, the hoodie has been a symbol that reminds us that even the clothing we wear can be a life-or-death matter. Now, recall the murder of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, who was fatally shot in a racially motivated hate crime while jogging in Satilla Shores in Georgia on February 23, 2020, a mere eight years after the murder of Trayvon Martin.

In June 2020, I invited one of my former students to speak at a campus-wide panel on racism. Brandon, who is Black, shared his experience of living in Georgia for a while when he went to stay with family during the pandemic: "You will see how I am dressed today. I am wearing a shirt and tie with a pullover sweater. I no longer leave the house wearing a hoodie. I will never wear a hoodie again because I *can't*. I can't risk being out in public and looked at as a thug or criminal because of how I'm dressed."

Why do you think I felt that this story was important enough to share with you? This powerful student story is emblematic of two important aspects of interpersonal communication. First, this story demonstrates that not all listening functions *require* a response, and this was one example where someone just needed to be heard. Brandon's story is sadly not unique, but it conveyed the importance of when it is more important to listen and not speak. What this story also represents is the *imperative* that we have in our society to listen so that we can help create the change that needs to happen to improve race relations. As

educated as we, and as much as we think we know, this story is one of several that day that pierces our hearts. We can be better by listening to others.

Reflection Questions

1. Has there been a time when someone needed you to listen and you didn't realize the importance of their need until later?
2. Did this story help you better understand how empathetic listening can impact individuals and society as well?

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7.3: Barriers to Listening

Understanding Barriers for Better Listening

Now that you have a better understanding of the functions and styles of listening, we will discuss the barriers to listening. A **barrier to listening** is anything that is hindering you from recognizing, understanding, and accurately interpreting the message that you are receiving. We'll discuss four barriers to effective listening: information overload, prejudice or prejudging, rate of speech and thought, and internal and external distractions. When you have a better understanding of the potential barriers to effective listening, you can pinpoint your weaknesses and work on building them up to make you a better listener.

Information Overload

We now know that a majority of our time communicating is spent listening. With all the listening we are doing, there are going to be times when we experience information overload. **Information overload** is when you have so much information coming at you, it's easy to become overwhelmed. In a Public Speaking class, for example, you can experience this when listening to your classmates give speeches, especially if you're hearing 20 speeches, one after the other. You become overwhelmed and you'll probably find yourself tuning out at some point. Or what if a speaker condenses so many statistics into the presentation that you cannot keep track of all the numbers? That's information overload.

To cope with information overload, you might consider taking notes to increase focus and your ability to process the information being delivered. If appropriate in the circumstances, such as in a business meeting or professional training, you might politely ask the speaker to repeat a point you missed, briefly paraphrase what they've said to ensure you've gathered the key points accurately, or even simply ask clarifying questions. You might also ask for resources or recordings that you can reference later at your own pace.

Prejudging

We, as humans, tend to be closed-minded at times. If you have an emotional reaction to a person or disagree with their ideas personally, you might be allowing personal prejudices to distract you. There are various ways we **prejudge** others. We may unconsciously prejudge a speaker because of their age, race, sexual identity, appearance, occupation, or political affiliation. Keeping an open mind when speaking with others is optimal but often challenging, because you may not even know this barrier is preventing you from fully showing up as a listener. Furthermore, you might have a hard time listening because you disagree with the speaker.

One way to identify some unconscious biases you may have towards others is to take the free [Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#). This test measures "attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report" (Rudman, Greenwald, & McGhee, 1998). There are a variety of tests one can take, and the results are anonymous and allow you to examine unknown biases you may have toward others. Taking the time to examine your biases can help you become a better listener because you can suspend judgment and listen with an open mind. While you may disagree with the person's perspective, you may learn more about them, yourself, or the topic they are sharing. You'll never know unless you hear them out.

Journal Exercise: Try this!

It can be a struggle to open ourselves up to opinions, perspectives, or people with whom we adamantly disagree. These differences can create real problems in our relationships, at home, and at work. Deliberate listening can be a powerful tool in learning to connect more effectively with the people in your life.

For this entry, sit down with someone that you know who has an opinion or idea you find ridiculous or simply disagree with ... and spend at least 10 minutes engaged in listening to them.

After your conversation, take some time to reflect on your experience as a listener and let your insights sink in. Consider questions like:

- In what ways did you find listening to the other person challenging?
- How did you prejudge the speaker?
- What strategies did you use to suspend judgment while listening?
- What did you learn about the other person by listening to them?
- What did you learn about yourself as a listener?

Rate of Speech and Thought

A recent study suggests that most people speak at a rate of 100 to 150 words per minute (wpm) in everyday conversation or when presenting. However, voice readers of audiobooks, radio hosts, and podcasters were found to speak at rates of 150-160 wpm. In the same study, auctioneers' speech rate was 250 wpm, and commentators came in at 250-400 wpm. (Barnard, 2022). So why does this matter? Ideally, the speaker's rate of speech would line up with the listener's speed of thought in processing the words spoken. A consideration is that the speech rate changes depending on who or what we are listening to. The question becomes "Can our brains keep up?"

A 2019 study conducted by Muller, et. al. that analyzed listening efforts in conjunction with varying rates of speech found that "the brain adapts to the auditory input for an optimal stimulus processing...show[ing] a clear influence of speech rate averaged across participants." In other words, our brains will automatically adjust to increased speech rate. So, yes, our brains can keep up. Furthermore, it has been found that most people process between 400 and 800 words per minute (Hargie, 2011). But our brains can process information several times faster than the speed at which words are typically spoken. As a result, a **mental lag** can occur. Since we listen and process information much faster than the average rate of speech, including the high rate at which commentators speak, we tend to fill the void with other thoughts and cognitive biases. In turn, this speaking-listening differential can halt our listening altogether. We find ourselves tuning in and out while our minds are busy making predictions, perhaps prejudging and veering off into other related thoughts, or even simply slipping into a daydream.

To be an effective listener, one has to be mindful of this differential and use strategies to prevent the mind from veering off for too long. One strategy to prevent this mental lag is to mentally summarize the speaker's ideas from time to time to keep yourself engaged. Taking notes, doodling images or symbols of things you are hearing, or visualizing what the speaker is sharing might also help to fill the void while still remaining engaged as a listener. The point is that awareness of this mental lag can help you build your mindfulness around your capacity as a listener and develop strategies that take advantage of the thought-speech differential.

Internal and External Distractions

Let's face it, you have a lot going on in your life. You attend school, you probably work, you might be raising a family, and you have your own issues to work through every day. Sometimes when we are absorbed in our own thoughts and concerns, we can't focus on what someone else is saying. We have all experienced moments of being physically present but mentally absent. Instead of truly listening, your mind is worried about something happening at work or feeling excited about an upcoming event scheduled later in the day with friends. You could also simply be thinking about your to-do list or reflecting on a conversation you had with a partner the previous night. When you allow those thoughts to take your focus, you will find that you become a less effective listener. Such distracting thoughts and feelings are your **internal distractions**.

In addition to internal distractions, we also experience **external distractions** as a listening barrier. External distractions come from the physical environment and involve any visual, auditory, or other sensorial elements within the space that captures your attention. Perhaps the most prominent external listening barrier today involves technology. The powerhouse technological distractor that most of us carry around is a smartphone. We use our cell phones to send a text message to a friend, make a call to a significant other, record a video on Tik Tok, post a thought of the day or special photo on social media, surf the web, and use the calculator, only to name the basics.

We have created a culture of cell phone dependency and seek out personal connections through our technological devices, which has increased exponentially due to the significant worldwide impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Entire communities around the world shut down and moved to technology to stay connected. However, our dependency has become so great that it is a frequent source of external distraction. For example, when someone is trying to communicate with you, and you hear the notification chime go off on your phone, immediately picking it up to see what it was before the other person has finished speaking, you have just experienced an external listening barrier. Next time, you might consider silencing your phone and placing it out of reach, especially when someone is trying to emotionally connect or engage in an important conversation with you. That being said, putting the phone down for every conversation is ideal for improving communication overall.

Furthermore, external technological distractions may occur when you are on a virtual platform (such as Zoom) for a meeting, college class, or even a virtual video call with a friend. You might experience technical issues with the audio or video components that disrupt the listening process, such as the microphone not working, losing internet connection, or even the video feature malfunctioning. This can be especially frustrating for both parties if, let's say, your mother is telling you something that is important to her and you don't hear everything because the audio cut out. Testing these components beforehand could alleviate the potential for distraction and avoid such frustrations. We know we can't control all of the technical difficulties that could arise;

however, taking time to test for issues in advance is one way of being mindful and intentional in your listening practice. Likewise, working, reading, or typing in other applications or browser tabs, checking notifications from Facebook, or checking the email that just came in while you are on a video call would be considered, in part, external distractors. To avoid this, you might consider closing all the tabs you have open and either temporarily disable or plan to ignore notifications that come through while you're on a video call.

The physical environment can also be a source of disruption to listening. Classroom doors slamming, cell phones ringing, or students having conversations outside in the hall are some examples. When working from home, you can experience extensive environmental listening barriers from the mess around you that still needs cleaning, the temptation of grabbing a snack in the refrigerator, the dog barking, the baby crying, a strong odor, the pain in your back, cell phones chiming (there they are again), the glare of the light on your screen ... the list goes on and on. When all of these distractions are happening, it is easy for your ability to listen to be dramatically reduced. Consider planning ahead for these things to maximize your ability to listen fully. Play with the dog right before your virtual meeting to tire them out. Turn your cell phone to silent mode. Have a snack beforehand. You get the idea.

Given the numerous internal and external distractions that are likely to occur frequently in your everyday life, the question becomes "How can I minimize these distractions to become a better listener?" More often than not, the answer is mindfulness. A little planning, preparation, and practice can help you to prevent these types of listening barriers effectively.

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7.4: Ineffective Listening Practices (Types of Nonlistening)

Habits and Pitfalls to Avoid

Not only do we have barriers to listening that we must pay attention to, but also we have all developed some habits in listening that we can change with hard work. Being aware or conscious of the habits we have is the first step to improving how we listen. At the minimum, we can lessen how much we fall into these habits, and with dedicated work, we may be able to eliminate them. These listening pitfalls include pseudo-listening, selective listening, defensive listening, aggressive listening, narcissistic listening, insensitive listening, interrupting, and eavesdropping.

Pseudo-Listening

If you have ever listened to a professor, friend, or family member tell a story while nodding your head politely while your mind was a million miles away, then you have engaged in pseudo-listening. **Pseudo-listening** is pretending to listen (Adler et al., 2018). It includes behaving as if you are listening by providing nonverbal or even verbal feedback (back-channel cues) and showing you are paying attention when you are not. Most often pseudo-listening is a pitfall that can lead to negative consequences, but the reason for engaging in this practice is not typically done out of malice. Hearing a story repeated, complaints you have heard before or suffering from fatigue or preoccupation can all lead to this. Therefore, pseudo-listening is often used as a politeness strategy.

Imagine a scenario where you have shared something important with a friend and found out that they had not listened to you at all. Although they may have felt they were trying to be a good friend by showing you they were listening, it can cause more harm than good. We should avoid pseudo-listening when possible and should avoid making it a listening habit. Although we may get away with it in some situations, each time we risk being “found out” there could be negative relational consequences. On the other hand, if you catch yourself pseudo-listening, a mindful practice involves admitting to the person speaking to you that you were not being fully attentive and kindly asking them to repeat themselves (while re-engaging your full attention on them).

Selective Listening

Do you have a favorite color? If so, when you look at clothing when shopping do you find yourself drawn to the color that you like most? If so, what you are exhibiting is a preference to stick to something that you already favor. Selective listening is an ineffective listening practice that operates in much the same way. **Selective listening** means only paying attention to the points someone makes that are important to you, that impact you, or that you agree with. Children may not pay attention to their parents’ conversation until one of them says “You need to have a B average if you want us to pay your car insurance.” Only then do you attend to what your parents are saying. Even friends, roommates, or romantic partners engage in selective listening. If you were sitting and scrolling through Instagram while someone was talking to you, you may not be paying a lot of attention to what is being said until you hear “It’s your turn to do the laundry.” You may have no interest in doing the laundry. You don’t *want* to do the laundry! But, because the statement has a direct impact on you, you now listen to what is being said. Although this is a relatively benign example that doesn’t have significant depth, selective listening can still lead to conflict as someone may feel that you don’t find it important to listen to what they have to say.

Defensive Listening

Have you ever been told you were being defensive about something? I think we all know what that means in general, but we don’t often realize it is tied to our listening practices. **Defensive listening** is a practice of listening where you perceive an attack where one does not really exist. Sometimes this occurs when we feel guilty, or even insecure. We tend to personalize a comment that might be made innocently. For example, imagine that you have a roommate, and they make the following comment: “Gosh, the shower in here sure gets moldy easily.” If you are a defensive listener, you would assume that your roommate was somehow accusing you of not taking better care of the shower. If you both had a rule that said you would wipe the shower down each time you used it, but you had neglected to do so several times, then some guilt might be at work as well!

Student Voice

Recently, one of our students, Reynaldo, shared a great example of defensive listening. He wrote:

I recently began a job at a local fast-food restaurant. One of my main tasks is making tacos and burritos. Lots of tacos and burritos! When I started, my manager and trainer explained how important it was to build these in a specific order. It seemed really easy, but I made a mistake on my first day because I confused the order of the taco and the burrito. I was told that I had made a mistake, and I was pretty upset by it. I wrote notes to myself to bring in and put on the wall where

I was working. By the end of my second week, the manager called me into her office. As soon as she said my name, I felt myself start to shake and knew I was going to get in trouble, if not fired. Then she said, "Reynaldo, I just wanted to tell you how impressed I've been with your work these past two weeks. You've really got this down." I felt so stupid because I realized that I had already started listening defensively.

As with many ineffective forms of listening, we may not even realize we are engaged in defensive listening.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of an example where you engaged in defensive listening at work, at home, or with friends?
2. What did you feel when you were listening, and what triggered the defensiveness? How did you react?
3. Looking back, what might you have done instead of engaging in this ineffective listening practice?

Aggressive Listening

You might be familiar with the term **aggression**. Oftentimes people view this as a way that someone can use words or actions that are mean-spirited or violent, as you will see in later chapters. Although somewhat different, there is an ineffective listening practice that holds some similar characteristics to aggression. **Aggressive listening**, also referred to as ambushing, is an ineffective listening practice where individuals listen specifically so that they can attack back. It is likened to "lying in wait," so you can pounce. People who engage in aggressive listening are prone to attack someone based on their ideas, personality, or other factors that give them a reason to attack. One can see aggressive listening in politics during political debates. Reasons that this type of listening occurs in interpersonal relationships are often centered around a build-up of tension or frustration. Unfortunately, there are times when things come to a head if people don't communicate with each other.

The following scenario shows how egregious aggressive listening can be. Let's assume Crystal wanted to go away for a weekend, so she found Antonio's calendar and looked at what he had planned for the next few weekends. She was able to see that he had made plans for a getaway with someone else and had written in code.

Crystal: "I was wondering if you were planning to book a reservation for a weekend getaway next weekend."

Antonio: "Well babe, I really want to go away with you, but I am not sure what my workload will be."

Crystal: "Really? Do you have a lot of work that you can't get done during the week?"

Antonio: "It's still early in the week, so I'm not going to know until at least Thursday."

Crystal: "Hmmm. Well, do you think that we could talk about this Thursday night?"

Antonio: "Yeah, sure, we can talk Thursday about making a weekend trip, whether we can go over the weekend. If not this weekend, maybe another weekend."

Crystal: "Antonio, that's a load of crap. You *already* have plans with someone else this weekend and you totally lied, you jerk. Who is 'FS'? I'm done with you. You're a liar and a cheat."

As you can see, Crystal perceived that Antonio was cheating on her and that led to aggressive listening on her part. Her perception put her into a mode of attack. Little did Crystal know that Antonio was meeting with FS Catering Company to plan her surprise 21st birthday party. Instead, Crystal's aggressive listening style potentially had detrimental effects on her relationship with Antonio. Do you think a more positive outcome could be achieved had she gotten more information? Asking clarifying questions before making assumptions would have been more productive, and both Crystal and Antonio might have felt better about the exchange and the outcome.

Narcissistic Listening



Figure 7.4.1: [Narcissistic Personality Disorder](#) by [Henry T.](#)

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Some individuals struggle with listening to others because they prefer to be the center of attention. **Narcissistic listening** is a form of self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them (McCornack, 2019, p. 212). You might consider this type of listener a “stage-hog.” The narcissistic listener will do one of two things to take over the conversation and bring the focus back to them. They might interrupt and re-route the conversation back to themselves, or they might change the topic completely. Being the center of attention is important to them. They may look away from you as though they are bored, they may frown or pout, or they may ignore you or excuse themselves and leave the conversation. When engaging in a **shift response**—turning the conversation back to themselves—it might seem that they are trying to outdo you or “one-up” you.

Perhaps the following type of conversation sounds familiar:

Constance: “I was really proud of myself! I wanted to paint my dresser because it was so old, so I bought this stuff called ‘chalk paint’ and I painted my dresser blue this past weekend. It was challenging, but I did it! It came out really well and...”

Brenda (interrupts): “Oh, I’ve done loads of chalk painting. I actually painted every piece of furniture in my room, and even painted some pieces for my mom. It was so easy.”

At times, this type of response is not done maliciously. A conversation may genuinely remind you of something you have done that is similar. A more appropriate response would be to wait until the speaker has finished. Using back-channel cues, you can easily acknowledge the person speaking. When they have finished making their point, acknowledge what you heard and then you might add your contribution to the conversation.

Habitual narcissistic listeners can be identified by continued comments when you are speaking. They may say, “Oh, that reminds me of the time that,” or “I went through the exact same thing,” or “Wait until you hear this one!” An occasional interruption of this type does not mean someone is a narcissistic listener. It is when there are repeated offenses that you see the pattern of this type of listener.

Sometimes you might notice the narcissistic listener changes the topic completely:

Hunter: “Hey, did you see the game Friday night? We scored two touchdowns in the first ten minutes of the game!”

Jacques: “Dude, I now have over 5,000 followers on Tik Tok! I’ve been changing up my workout routine and now I’m getting at least 50 new followers a day!”

At times like this, it would feel appropriate to address the listener's shift response, so that you can continue the conversation or topic you tried to initiate. However, be mindful that too much work on your part to understand the narcissistic listener puts an extra burden on you. If the listener is a true narcissist, you might consider having a conversation with them about their listening habits and how it affects you. If your attempt is unsuccessful, then you might suggest they seek professional help to learn best practices in communication.

[Insensitive Listening](#)

If you recall the definition of **empathic listening**, you will find that insensitive listening is the opposite. Often referred to as “literal listening,” **insensitive listening** focuses only on the content level of meaning. In insensitive listeners do not explore the nonverbal cues that accompany the message. Imagine if your friend did not pass an exam, and then tells you. Rather than asking questions, or

providing an empathetic response, your response is “I guess you didn’t study” or “Yeah, school can be hard.” Neither response will allow your friend to feel positive about the exchange. One’s tone of voice alone can let you know how someone is feeling or we can also look into someone’s eyes to discern sadness or other emotions because insensitive listening can be hurtful.

One of our students shared this story in class: “When I told my mother that I forgot to do my quizzes last week, she just glared at me without saying a word. She didn’t have to say anything because this is how she typically responds to me. I’m a Japanese American student, and our culture is a high-context culture. Most of what I understand about my mom’s feelings is through her nonverbal communication.”

Focus on Culture

Does your culture impact the type of listening practices you engage in? There is a wealth of research in the area of culture that demonstrates that our communication patterns are learned. Let’s look at how culture can influence messages.

Culture can often impact whether you pay attention to the relational, or underlying meaning of a message or just the words of a message. Low-context cultures emphasize explicit meaning (Hall & Hall, 2001). For example, US culture places great emphasis on words, or literal meaning. We are taught from an early age to “Say what you mean,” or “Use your words.” This can contribute to misunderstanding or not seeing the nonverbal cues that give greater meaning to a message. On the other hand, high-context cultures rely on information that is implicit and nonverbal (Hall & Hall, 2001). Individuals from high-context cultures rely on the context, tone, or other nonverbal behaviors to understand a message, which can then affect the interaction. It is important to note that if you were born in the United States, but your family of origin is from a high-context culture, your method of communication will be largely influenced by your family’s culture.

One of our authors, Professor Leonard, comes from a high-context culture where indicators of listening meant that when she was young she only nodded as a response to her parents, rather than commenting back. She also did not make direct eye contact when listening because at times that could appear to be disrespectful to her parents. This example is probably the opposite of your professor’s expectations of you in a classroom. When you listen in class, your professor might expect you to look them in the eye and participate verbally as a sign of respect. These two scenarios involve very different interpretations of nonverbal communication based on the context of the culture in each situation. These examples demonstrate how culture plays an important role in listening. Great communicators learn to adapt their communication behaviors according to cultural context of the setting and who they are communicating with.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you come from a high-context or low-context culture?
2. How does your family communicate meaning? Is it through direct communication (words), or more through the nonverbal channel (such as eye contact, or silence?).
3. How might you adapt your listening now that you know more about the importance of culture?

Interrupting

Most of us understand what an interruption is, even when we have not defined the term. Simply, **interrupting** is the unintentional or intentional act of delaying or preventing communication. One of the first communication rules that we remember teaching our children was not to interrupt. It was so important to us to instill proper manners in them, that we developed a code for when they wanted to tell us something if we were talking to other people, either on the phone or in person. We told our children to approach us and put their hand on our arm, or leg, depending on how tall they were at the time. In response, we would take one of our hands and cover their hand. This served as a nonverbal acknowledgment that we were aware that they had something to say. They both learned to wait until there was a break in the conversation, then we would turn to them and ask, “What did you want to tell me?” Sometimes our hands remained in the same place for several long minutes! As you learned in Chapter 5, the regulating function of nonverbal communication means that conversations are based on turn-taking. Whether the turn-taking cues are overt or not, we know when it is our turn to speak.

We try not to interrupt while others are speaking, but sometimes we do unintentionally interrupt. We may have accidentally misinterpreted the turn-taking cue and thought someone was done speaking. In a case like this, it is not a pitfall of listening. There are other times when people are talking excitedly about something and their words or sentences overlap. Back-channel cues can sound like an interruption even if they are just designed to show support.

Occasionally, interruptions are intentional and appropriate. This happened to one of the authors once when a nursing student was giving them a shot, and she was interrupted by her supervisor to tell her that she was inserting the needle at the incorrect angle! Although we are sure that the result would have been no more than an uncomfortable shot, not all situations are the same. These are the times when intentional interrupting is appropriate. Other interruptions are intentional and *inappropriate* when they are used to control or dominate the conversation.

Consider assessing your own patterns of interrupting. Are you afraid you are going to forget what you want to say? If this is a reason for interrupting, the appropriate course of action is to tell the person you are speaking to that you are sorry to interrupt, and that you just want to get your thoughts out before you forget them. After, you should immediately give the platform back to the other person.

Eavesdropping



Figure 7.4.2 Eavesdropping By A. Strakey on Flickr is

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You have probably seen at least one television show or comedy where someone is standing with a glass held up to a wall in an attempt to listen to a conversation in the next room. As humorous as these kinds of depictions might be, there can be serious consequences of this ineffective listening practice. **Eavesdropping** is an ineffective listening practice that involves a strategic attempt to listen to a conversation that you are not a part of. The important distinction between eavesdropping and accidentally overhearing a conversation is the strategy, or plan, to listen to a conversation you are not meant to overhear. If you have ever been out at a restaurant, shopping, or even walking on campus next to someone who is on their cell phone having a conversation, you may have experienced the discomfort or embarrassment of listening to someone arguing with another person. This type of listening situation is circumstantial and not planned.

Eavesdropping, however, means that a person positions themselves physically or technologically closer to a conversation in the hope of listening to what others are saying. There may be a variety of reasons that people eavesdrop, and some of those reasons are altruistic. If you heard someone say “bomb” you might position yourself closer to eavesdrop. However, to simply engage in eavesdropping because you find a conversation interesting or titillating would be violating the privacy of others. When caught, not only would you be embarrassed, but also others could easily be angry with you.

One of our authors shares this example:

I remember a time when a friend told me that she was worried about some of the things her daughter might be doing, so she would routinely position herself outside her daughter’s bedroom to try and listen to her conversations. On more than one occasion the parent listened at the door while her daughter was in a therapy session with her psychologist.

Although a parent may have cause to be concerned about their child, listening at the door could easily lead to a violation of trust and this could harm the relationship greatly. Finally, eavesdropping could lead to you hearing something that is said about you. Although we don’t condone people talking behind others’ backs, there may be reasons to do so before that information is presented to someone.

If you, or someone in your life, has engaged in an ineffective listening practice, it can be beneficial to learn how journaling can help you process the emotions that arise from these practices.

Journal Exercise: Try This!

Spend the next week journaling as much of the communication as you can between you and the individuals you live with. If you live alone, you can try this with co-workers or friends.

1. Describe the communication interactions that took place and whether you believe they exemplified an ineffective listening practice.
2. Interpret what you believe the communicator wanted to convey as you were listening.
3. Evaluate how the interaction made you feel.
4. Assess what you learned from your evaluation.

The reason that journaling is so important is because it can help us reflect on not only our listening behaviors, but that of others as well. You can use this journal prompt for any of the ineffective listening practices described in this textbook.

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7.5: Becoming a Better Listener

Active Listening Is Key

Listening is an essential part of communication and is often the weakest link in the communication process. People usually love to be heard but are often not as excited about listening. To be a better listener, one must be *actively* listening. **Active listening** is being engaged as a listener, not just hearing the words. It is one of the most important learning tools you can have that will benefit you on the job and help your relationships with others. Active listening requires purposefully focusing on what a speaker is saying with the objective of understanding.



Figure 7.5.1 By [Mimi Thian](#) on [Unsplash](#)

This concept may appear straightforward, but there are some important ideas that deserve a closer look. “Purposefully focusing” implies that you are actively processing what the speaker is saying, not just letting the sounds of their voice register in your senses. “With the objective of understanding” means that you will learn enough about what the speaker is saying to be able to form your own thoughts about the speaker’s message. As discussed earlier, listening is an active process, as opposed to hearing, which is passive.

Being an active listener takes concentration and work. The principles of active listening are not hard to understand, but they are hard to implement and require practice to use them effectively.

Principles of Active Listening

To implement active listening effectively, you must first understand the primary purpose behind it. Active listening should accomplish two things. The first intent you must set is to **listen for understanding**, ensuring that you as a listener *fully* understand the speaker. The second goal is to **convey to the speaker that you are really listening**. So part of your role is to make sure that the speaker *feels* understood. Again, this will take concentration and work on the part of the listener, but you can fulfill these two intents of active listening by using the following **five principles**:

Give the speaker your undivided attention. Clear your mind of anything else and avoid distractions, such as checking your phone, texting, surfing the web, watching television, or maintaining a high volume of the tv, music, or other environmental sounds, to name a few. If you are focused on the distractors, you are nonverbally communicating that you are uninterested in what the speaker is saying.

Instead, to communicate that you are interested and focused, attend to the speaker through eye contact, body language, and facial expressions. Putting your phone down or turning the tv volume down indicates you are preparing to listen. Leaning in toward the speaker shows interest in what the speaker is saying. Smiling, eye contact and nodding indicate that you are following what the speaker is saying and that you are interested to hear more.

Furthermore, don’t prejudge. You want to understand what the person is saying; it doesn’t mean that you need to agree with them. Wait for the speaker to finish speaking before responding and don’t interrupt.

Principle 2: Repeat What You Just Heard

Reiterate what you heard to clarify meaning and understand intentions. Confirm with the speaker that what you heard is what they said: “So what I hear you saying is...”. Paraphrasing the speaker’s message into your own words is effective for helping the speaker feel heard and thereby solidifies your reception of their message. Avoid parroting what they said word-for-word, as this can come off as disinterest.

Principle 3: Ask the Speaker to Expand or Clarify

Ask questions to clarify what the speaker is saying, especially if you are unsure whether or not you understand. Always ask questions; don't assume. While doing so, show sensitivity to the speaker's point of view. For example, you might say "It sounds like you are feeling hurt, which is understandable. Can you tell me more about...?".

Nonverbal signals are essential to interpreting a speaker's message. They manifest as facial expressions, body positioning, arm or hand gestures, and tone of voice. Confirm these body language messages just as you would verbal messages by saying things like, "You seem very excited about this idea" or "It appears you are not very happy with this situation."

In addition, be mindful of the nonverbal signals you are sending. If you are saying the words but staring vaguely into the distance, you are conveying disinterest and inauthenticity to the speaker.

Principle 5: Listen for Requests

A speaker will often hide a request as a statement of a problem. If a friend says, "I hate math!" this may mean, "Can you help me figure out a solution to this problem?" Again, once you identify what you believe to be a request, don't assume. Ask. You can ask for clarification and offer support simultaneously by saying things like, "Would you like some help with your math? I know a great tutor I could refer you to" or "I hate math, too! I'm going to get help from our math teacher after school tomorrow. Do you want to join me?"

Exercise: Try this!

Listening With Your Whole Body

For your first list, think of a person you consider an excellent listener. Picture that person clearly in your mind. Focus on what they do, not what they are saying. Describe what actions and postures they use to show they are listening. What are they doing with their eyes, hands, and body?

For your second list, think of a person you consider a poor listener. Picture that person clearly in your mind. Focus on what they do, not what they are saying. Describe what actions and postures they use to show they are *not* listening.

Now compare these lists with your behavior. How many of the body language signals from each side do you think you exhibit? How can you add more of the attitudes and actions in the first list to your behaviors? How can you control those behaviors you recognize in yourself from the second list?

Even if the listener doesn't agree with the speaker, it is important to acknowledge that the speaker has a right to their point of view, their ideas, and their feelings. Be respectful of others' opinions, and keep in mind that cultural differences can impact beliefs, values, and communication styles. Meaningful conversations cannot happen effectively if one side is not listening actively. The following are some examples of responses that stimulate meaningful understanding.

- **Show interest** to encourage further discussion. Use expressions like
 - I haven't looked at it like that before...
 - That's a great point...
 - Can you tell me more about...?
- **Show empathy** by being sensitive to the speaker's feelings. Use expressions like
 - It appears that you...
 - I get the feeling that you...
 - I can see you feel quite strongly about this...
 - I can imagine how upsetting (frustrating/hard/emotional) that must have been...
- **Demonstrate understanding** of what has been said by rephrasing the message in your own words. Use expressions like
 - So what I think you're saying is...
 - Tell me if I'm understanding what you mean. I think you're ultimately saying that...
 - So you mean that...
- **Avoid evaluating** the message unless you are asked for your opinion. Evaluative comments can put the speaker in a defensive mode. They can be insulting and can inhibit further discussion. Avoid expressions like
 - Well, that seems a bit over the top.

- That's ridiculous.
- I think you are overreacting.

In general, you want to encourage speakers to be able to openly share their message. The more strategies that you use for active listening, the more the speaker will be able to freely share the message, and the more likely you will be able to truly understand the message.

Let's look at the following scenario. One friend, let's call them "S," comes to their friend, "D," upset about a recent breakup. Observe how the following examples of effective listening and ineffective listening change the conversation and the outcome. Consider how the relationship between these two friends is affected in each example.

Effective versus Ineffective Listening

Effective (Active Listening)

S: "I can't believe they lied to me!"

D: "It sounds like you're really hurt and upset. Do you want to tell me what happened?"

S: "They told me they were going to a movie with a friend, but they were out all night at the club and didn't even text."

D: "So you're feeling betrayed because they didn't tell you the whole truth."

S: "Yes! I can't stand being lied to, so I just broke up with them."

D: "I'm sorry you're going through this. Have they lied to you before?"

S: "Not to my knowledge. But that's a deal-breaker for me."

D: "So you're saying that honesty and full disclosure are extremely important to you in a relationship?"

S: "Yes! 100 percent. I just don't think people should have anything to hide in a relationship. (sighs) I can't believe this is happening. Thank you for being here and listening."

Ineffective

S: "I can't believe they lied to me!"

D: (while scrolling on phone) "Yeah, that sucks."

S: "They told me they were going to a movie with a friend, but they were out all night at the club and didn't even text."

D: (laughs while looking at phone) "Ha ha ha! Have you seen this cat video? It's hilarious! Sorry, what were you saying?"

S: "Forget it! You clearly don't care."

D: "You're just overreacting."

S: "What do you *mean* I'm overreacting? They *lied* to me!"

D: "I just don't see the big deal. You probably misunderstood them."

S: "You're not listening to me. They didn't even tell me they were going out to the club. I thought they were going to be home way earlier. And I got no phone call or text or anything. That's *not* a misunderstanding. You know what? Forget it. I need to go."

Notice how the effective listener acknowledged the speaker's feelings, asked clarifying questions and paraphrased their message. In the end, the speaker expressed gratitude to the listener, implying that they were feeling truly heard. However, in the ineffective listening example, the listener is not fully engaged. They are scrolling on their phone, looking at an unrelated video, interrupting, and making judgmental statements. These actions leave the speaker feeling defensive and unheard, causing a rift in the relationship. Reflecting on the exercise you completed earlier, identify your strengths and weaknesses with active listening, and consider how your actions as a listener affect your relationships. What might you change in your listening habits to better support someone important in your life and potentially strengthen that interpersonal relationship?

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7.6: Listening Responses

Learning Outcomes

1. Discuss different types of listening responses.
2. Discern different types of questioning.
3. Analyze perception checking.

Who do you think is a great listener? Why did you name that particular person? How can you tell that person is a good listener? You probably recognize a good listener based on the nonverbal and verbal cues that they display. In this section, we will discuss different types of listening responses. We all don't listen in the same way. Also, each situation is different and requires a distinct style that is appropriate for that situation.

Types of Listening Responses

Ronald Adler, Lawrence Rosenfeld, and Russell Proctor are three interpersonal scholars who have done quite a bit with listening.⁵² Based on their research, they have found different types of listening responses: silent listening, questioning, paraphrasing, empathizing, supporting, analyzing, evaluating, and advising (Figure 7.4.1).⁵³

Silent Listening	
Questioning	Asking questions to understand the situation better.
Paraphrasing	Rephrasing in your own words what the speaker said.
Empathizing	Putting yourself in the same situation to understand what the speaker means.
Supporting	Showing that you endorse the speaker.
Analyzing	Considering possible solutions to what the speaker has said.
Evaluating	Assessing the best courses of action.
Advising	Counseling, Recommending, and offering information that will help the speaker.

Figure 7.6.1: Types of Listening Responses

Responses

Silent Listening

Silent listening occurs when you say nothing. It is ideal in certain situations and awful in other situations. However, when used correctly, it can be very powerful. If misused, you could give the wrong impression to someone. It is appropriate to use when you don't want to encourage more talking. It also shows that you are open to the speaker's ideas.

Sometimes people get angry when someone doesn't respond. They might think that this person is not listening or trying to avoid the situation. But it might be due to the fact that the person is just trying to gather their thoughts, or perhaps it would be inappropriate to respond. There are certain situations such as in counseling, where silent listening can be beneficial because it can help that person figure out their feelings and emotions.

Questioning

In situations where you want to get answers, it might be beneficial to use questioning. You can do this in a variety of ways. There are several ways to **question** in a sincere, nondirective way (see Table 7.4.1):

Table 7.4.1 Types of Nondirective Questioning

Reason	Example
To clarify meanings	A young child might mumble something and you want to make sure you understand what they said.
To learn about others' thoughts, feelings, and wants (open/closed questions)	When you ask your partner where they see your relationship going in the next few years.
To encourage elaboration	Nathan says "That's interesting!" Jonna has to ask him further if he means interesting in a positive or negative way.
To encourage discovery	Ask your parents how they met because you never knew.
To gather more facts and details	Police officers at the scene of the crime will question any witnesses to get a better understanding of what happened.

You might have different types of questions. Sincere questions are ones that are created to find a genuine answer. Counterfeit questions are disguised attempts to send a message, not to receive one. Sometimes, counterfeit questions can cause the listener to be defensive. For instance, if someone asks you, "Tell me how often you used crystal meth." The speaker implies that you have used meth, even though that has not been established. A speaker can use questions that make statements by emphasizing specific words or phrases, stating an opinion or feeling on the subject. They can ask questions that carry hidden agendas, like "Do you have \$5?" because the person would like to borrow that money. Some questions seek "correct" answers. For instance, when a friend says, "Do I look fat?" You probably have a correct or ideal answer. There are questions that are based on unchecked assumptions. An example would be, "Why aren't you listening?" This example implies that the person wasn't listening, when in fact they are listening.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is defined as restating in your own words, the message you think the speaker just sent. There are three types of paraphrasing. First, you can change the speaker's wording to indicate what you think they meant. Second, you can offer an example of what you think the speaker is talking about. Third, you can reflect on the underlying theme of a speaker's remarks. Paraphrasing represents mindful listening in the way that you are trying to analyze and understand the speaker's information. Paraphrasing can be used to summarize facts and to gain consensus in essential discussions. This could be used in a business meeting to make sure that all details were discussed and agreed upon. Paraphrasing can also be used to understand personal information more accurately. Think about being in a counselor's office. Counselors often paraphrase information to understand better exactly how you are feeling and to be able to analyze the information better.

Empathizing

Empathizing is used to show that you identify with a speaker's information. You are not empathizing when you deny others the rights to their feelings. Examples of this are statements such as, "It's really not a big deal" or "Who cares?" This indicates that the listener is trying to make the speaker feel a different way. In minimizing the significance of the situation, you are interpreting the situation in your perspective and passing judgment.

Supporting

Sometimes, in a discussion, people want to know how you feel about them instead of a reflection on the content. Several types of supportive responses are: agreement, offers to help, praise, reassurance, and diversion. The value of receiving support when faced with personal problems is very important. This has been shown to enhance psychological, physical, and relational health. To effectively support others, you must meet certain criteria. You have to make sure that your expression of support is sincere, be sure that other person can accept your support, and focus on "here and now" rather than "then and there."

Analyzing

Analyzing is helpful in gaining different alternatives and perspectives by offering an interpretation of the speaker's message. However, this can be problematic at times. Sometimes the speaker might not be able to understand your perspective or may become more confused by accepting it. To avoid this, steps must be taken in advance. These include tentatively offering your interpretation instead of as an absolute fact. By being more sensitive about it, it might be more comfortable for the speaker to accept. You can

also make sure that your analysis has a reasonable chance of being correct. If it were inaccurate, it would leave the person more confused than before. Also, you must make sure the person will be receptive to your analysis and that your motive for offering is to truly help the other person. An analysis offered under any other circumstances is useless.

Evaluating

Evaluating appraises the speaker's thoughts or behaviors. The evaluation can be favorable ("That makes sense") or negative (passing judgment). Negative evaluations can be critical or non-critical (constructive criticism). Two conditions offer the best chance for evaluations to be received: if the person with the problem requested an evaluation, and if it is genuinely constructive and not designed as a putdown.

Advising

Advising differs from evaluations. It is not always the best solution and can sometimes be harmful. In order to avoid this, you must make sure four conditions are present: be sure the person is receptive to your suggestions, make sure they are truly ready to accept it, be confident in the correctness of your advice, and be sure the receiver won't blame you if it doesn't work out.

Perception Checking

Perceptions change in a relationship. Initially, people can view others positively (for example, confident, thrifty, funny), then later in the relationship that person changes (arrogant, cheap, childish). The person hasn't changed. Only our perceptions of them have changed. That is why we focus on perception in a communication book because often, our perception affects how we communicate. It also has an impact on what we listen to and how we listen. For instance, when people get married, one person might say, "I love you! I would die for you," then a couple of years later, that same person might say, "I hate you! I am going to kill you!" Their perceptions about the other person will change.⁵⁴

Even when people break up, men typically will think about the physical aspects of the relationship (I gave her a watch, she wasn't that hot) and women will think about the emotional aspects of the relationship (I gave him my heart, I really cared about him.). Perception is an interesting thing because sometimes we think other people have a similar perspective, but as we will see, that is not always the case.

Selection

What we pay attention to varies from one person to another. The first step in the perception process is selection. It determines what things we focus on compared to what things we ignore. What we select to focus on depends on:

1. Intensity – if it is bigger, brighter, louder in some way. Think about all the advertisements that you view. If the words are bigger or if the sound is louder, you are more likely to pay attention to it. Advertisers know that intensity is very important to get people to pay attention.
2. Repetition–It has been said that to get someone to do something, they have to be told three different ways and three different times. People pay attention to things that repeat because you can remember it easier. In school, we learn to do things over and over again, because it teaches us mastery of a skill.
3. Differences – We will pay attention to differences, especially if it is a disparity or dissimilarity to what commonly occurs. Think about changes or adjustments that you had to deal with in life. These transformations made you notice the comparisons. For instance, children who go through a divorce will talk about the differences that they encountered. Children will focus on how things are different and how it is not the same.
4. Motives/Goals. We tend to pay attention to things for which have a strong interest or desire. If you love cars, you will probably notice cars more closely than someone else who has no interest in cars. Another example might be if you are single, then you might notice who is married and who is not more than someone in a committed relationship.
5. Emotions. Our emotional state has a strong impact on how we view life in general. If we are sad, we will probably notice other sad faces. The same thing happens when we are happy; we will tend to notice other happy people. Our emotions can impact how we feel. If we are angry, we might say things we don't mean and not perceive how we come across to other people.

Organization

The second phase in the perception process is organization, or how we arrange information in our minds. So, once we have selected what information we pay attention to, our minds try to process it. Sometimes when this occurs, we engage in stereotyping or attribute certain characteristics to a certain set of individuals. In other words, we classify or label others based on certain qualities.

Also, when people organize information in their mind, they can also engage in punctuation, or establishing the effects and causes in communication behavior. It is more useful to realize that a conflict situation can be perceived differently by each person, and it is important to focus on “What we can do to make this situation better?”

Interpretation

The third phase of the perception process is interpretation. In this phase, we try to understand the information or make sense of it. This depends on a few factors:

1. Degree of involvement—If we were in the middle of an accident, we would probably have more information regarding what event occurred compared to a bystander. The more involved we are with something, the more we can make sense of what is actually happening. For instance, in cults, the members understand the rules and rituals, but an outsider would not understand, because they are not exposed to the rules and rituals.
2. Relational satisfaction – If we are happy in a relationship, we tend to think that everything is wonderful. However, if you are dissatisfied in the relationship, you might second guess the behaviors and actions of your partner.
3. Past experiences – If you had a good past experience with a certain company, you might think that everything they do is wonderful. However, if your first experience was horrible, you may think that they are always horrible. In turn, you will interpret that company’s actions as justified because you already encountered a horrible experience.
4. Assumptions about human behavior – If you believed that most people do not lie, then you would probably be very hurt if someone important to you lied to you. Our assumptions about others help us understand their behaviors and actions. If you had a significant other cheats on you, you would probably be suspicious of future interactions with other significant others.
5. Expectations – Our behaviors are also influenced by our expectations of others. If we expect a party to be fun and it isn’t, then we will be let down. However, if we have no expectations about a party, it may not affect how we feel about it.
6. Knowledge of others – If you know that someone close to you has a health problem, then it will not be a shock if they need medical attention. However, if you had no clue that this person was unhealthy, it would come as a complete surprise. How you interpret a given situation is oftentimes based on what you know about a certain situation.⁵⁵

Negotiation

The last phase of the perception process is called negotiation. In this phase, people are trying to understand what is happening. People often use narratives or stories to explain and depict their life. For instance, a disagreement between a teacher and student might look very different depending on which perspective you take. The student might perceive that they are hard-working and very studious. The student thinks they deserve a high grade. However, the teacher might feel that their job is to challenge all students to their highest levels and be fair to all students. By listening to both sides, we can better understand what is going on and what needs to be done in certain situations. Think about car accidents and how police officers have to listen to both sides. Police officers have to determine what happened and who is at fault. Sometimes it is not an easy task.

Influences on Perception

All of us don’t perceive the same things. One person might find something beautiful, but another person might think it is horrible. When it comes to our perception, there are four primary influences we should understand: physiological, psychological, social, and cultural.

Physiological Influences

Some of the reasons why we don’t interpret things, in the same way are due to physiology. Hence, biology has an impact on what we do and do not perceive. In this section, we will discuss the various physiological influences.

1. Senses – Our senses can have an impact on what and where we focus our attention. For instance, if you have a strong sense of smell, you might be more sensitive to a foul-smelling odor compared to someone who cannot smell anything due to sinus problems. Our senses give us a different perception of the world.
2. Age – Age can impact what we perceive. Have you ever noticed that children have so much energy, and the elderly do not? Children may perceive that there is so much to do in a day, and the elderly may perceive that there is nothing to do. Our age influences how we think about things.
3. Health – when we are healthy, we have the stamina and endurance to do many things. However, when we are sick, our bodies may be more inclined to rest. Thus, we will perceive a lot of information differently. For instance, when you are healthy, some of your favorite meals will taste really good, but when you are sick, it might not taste so good, because you cannot smell things due to a stuffy nose.

4. Hunger – When you are hungry, it is tough to concentrate on anything except food. Studies have shown that when people are hungry, all they focus on is something to eat.
5. Biological cycles – Some people are “morning larks” and some are “night owls.” In other words, there are peaks where people perform at their highest level. For some individuals, it is late at night, and for others, it is early in the morning. When people perform at their peak times, they are likely to be more perceptive of information. If you are a person who loves getting up early, you would probably hate night classes, because you are not able to absorb as much information as you could if the class was in the morning.

Psychological Influences

Sometimes the influences on perception are not physiological but psychological. These influences include mood and self-concept. These influences are based in our mind, and we can't detect them in others.

1. Mood – Whether we are happy or sad can affect how we view the world. For instance, if we are happy, then anything that happens, we might view it more positively.
2. Self-concept – If we have a healthy self-concept of ourselves, we may not be offended if someone makes a negative remark. Yet, if we have a poor self-concept of ourselves, then we are probably going to be more influenced by negative remarks. The stronger our self-concept is, the more likely it will affect how we view perceive other people's communication behaviors toward us.

Social Influences

Social influences include sex and gender roles, as well as occupational roles. These roles can impact our perceptions. Because we are in these roles, we might be likely to think differently than others in different roles.

1. Sex and gender roles – We have certain expectations in our culture regarding how men and women should behave in public. Women are expected to be more nurturing than men. Moreover, men and women are viewed differently concerning their marital status and age.
2. Occupational roles – Our jobs have an influence on how we perceive the world. If you were a lawyer, you might be more inclined to take action on civil cases than your average member of the public, because you know how to handle these kinds of situations. Moreover, if you are a nurse or medical specialist, you are more likely to perceive the health of other individuals. You would be able to tell if someone needed urgent medical care or not.

Research Spotlight



In 2015, Karina J. Lloyd, Diana Boer, Avraham N. Kluger, and Sven C. Voelpel conducted an experiment to examine the relationship between perceived listening trust and wellbeing. In this study, the researchers recruited pairs of strangers. They had one of the participants tell the other about a positive experience in their life for seven minutes (the talker) and one who sat and listened to the story without comment (the listener).

The researchers found that talkers who perceived the listener to be listening intently to be very important for effective communication. First, perceived listening led to a greater sense of social attraction towards the listener, which in turn, led to a greater sense of trust for the listener. Second, talkers who perceived the listener as listening intently felt their messages were clearer, which in turn, led to a greater sense of the talker's overall wellbeing (positive affect).

As you can see, simply perceiving that the other person is listening intently to you is very important on a number of fronts. For this reason, it's very important to remember to focus your attention when you're listening to someone.

Lloyd, K. J., Boer, D., Kluger, A. N., & Voelpel, S. C. (2015). Building trust and feeling well: Examining intraindividual and interpersonal outcomes and underlying mechanisms of listening. *International Journal of Listening*, 29(1), 12–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2014.928211>

Cultural Influences

In a recent meeting, the boss said, “Remember the Golden Rule,” and a coworker from India asked the staff about the meaning of that phrase. He wondered if there was a silver rule or a bronze rule. The reason he didn't understand this concept is due to cultural influences. We know that everyone doesn't perceive things in the same fashion.

In some countries, the elderly are highly respected individuals, where the youth go to for advice and wisdom. Yet, in other countries, the elderly are seen as lazy and worthless. Hence, our culture has an impact on how we perceive the world and others. Communication is different across cultures. Western cultures, like the United States, value talk and view it as very important to function and conduct business. Thus, they do not like silence because it can be perceived as shyness, frustration, and intimidating.⁵⁶ Western culture dislikes silence because it is uncomfortable and problematic. Asian cultures have different perceptions of communication. Silence is seen as valuable to reflect on one's thinking. Asians might view someone who is talkative very negatively. Based on this example, we can see that cultural perceptions can lead to problems, because, to an American, silence is considered rude and to an Asian, silence is good. To effectively communicate, we need to understand cultural perceptions.

Perception Checking

To judge others more accurately, we need to engage in perception checking.

Perception checking involves three steps:

1. Describe your perception of the event
2. Offer three different interpretations of that behavior
3. Seek clarification about the interpretations
4. That's it! I know this sounds easy, but it's definitely much harder than it looks.

Key Takeaways

- The different types of listening responses are silent listening, questioning, paraphrasing, empathizing, supporting, analyzing, evaluating, and advising.
- Questioning can be to clarify meanings, encourage elaboration, learn about others, increase discovery, or obtain more information.
- Perception checking involves describing the situation, offering three possible interpretations, and then seeking information.

Exercises

- Write down an example of each of the listening responses and why it is appropriate for that situation. Why did you write down what you did?
- Create a chart with the different types of questions and give at least two examples for each type. Compare with a friend in class.
- Watch a movie or television show with your friends, then ask them to write down the three most notable moments. Compare what you wrote to others. Was it similar or different? Why or why not? Did you all have the same perceptions? Why?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Emotions

Have you ever been at a movie and let out a bellowing laugh and snort only to realize no one else is laughing? Have you ever gotten uncomfortable when someone cries in class or in a public place? Emotions are clearly personal because they often project what we're feeling on the inside to those around us, whether we want it to show or not. Emotions are also interpersonal in that another person's show of emotion usually triggers a reaction from us—perhaps support if the person is a close friend or awkwardness if the person is a stranger. Emotions are central to any interpersonal relationship, and it's important to know what causes and influences emotions so we can better understand and express our own emotions and better respond to others when they display emotions. In this chapter, we will discuss the dimensions of emotions, perspectives on emotions, and ways to more effectively understand, express, and respond to emotions. We will also explore some contextual considerations, and reflect on the impact of our own emotional expression.

Learning Objectives

- What is the relationship between emotions and interpersonal communication?
- How can we express and respond to emotions effectively?

Successful students will be able to:

- recognize dimensions of emotions
- identify perspective on emotions
- demonstrate skills of understanding, expressing and responding to emotions
- explain how culture influences emotional expressions
- recognize several ways emotional expression affects us, others and our relationships

[8.1: Influences on Emotional Expression](#)

[8.2: Emotions in Relationships](#)

[8.3: Managing Emotions](#)

[8.4: Guidelines for Communicating Emotions Effectively](#)

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8.1: Influences on Emotional Expression

Emotions and Experience

There are many influences on our emotional expression. These influences help shape the way we perceive and interact with our emotions. We may think that our emotions are singular and not attached to other emotions and experiences. In this section we clarify how our emotions affect other emotions and experiences. We focus on how we interpret and react differently based on our own personality traits, our cultural background, and how our culture and society itself shape not only the emotions we experience, but how we react in communication events.

Personality

Emotions are an important aspect in how we build our social interactions with people around us. Whether strangers or people who have a significant impact on our lives, people tend to consciously or unconsciously work at monitoring, observing, and regulating emotions around others. Our interactions with others help to shape our own emotions as well as aspects of our personalities and moods. But what is the difference between these terms? We've defined emotion earlier in this chapter, but how do we know the distinction between what is an emotion, what is a mood, and what is part of our personality?

The biggest difference is the longevity of the feeling. Where **emotions** may last seconds to minutes, moods can last hours to days. A **mood** is built from the collection of emotions and feelings, whereas **personality** is built from stable sets of moods and traits such as social interactions, behaviors, and values, as well as cultural and environmental factors.

One of our authors shares her example:

I can confidently say that I have a “grumpy” personality. Even photos of me as a young child showcase that I tend to have a pout on my face, and I pride myself in being able to think of the “glass as half empty” more often than not. This is part of my personality that I own and accept. Although I may have what I consider a “grumpy” personality, that does not mean every day of my life is lived in a bad mood. I, like all of us, have days, weeks and months filled with good moods, but I also experience bad moods from time to time. I share laughter and joyful emotions with friends and loved ones regularly, as well as feeling emotions of love and grief equally. While I may say my personality is “grumpy” I would say my mood tends to be positive, and my emotions tend to be neutral.

Consider This: The Big Five Personality Traits

Personality can be seen as a dimension of an individual, where the aspects of what we think, feel, and the ways in which we behave based on our emotions are constructed to make up our unique personality in specific ways (Filipiak & Łubianka, 2021). When looking at personality, research has consistently found that there tends to be five major dimensions called Big Five personality traits.

The Big Five personality traits are an important aspect when understanding emotion and interpersonal communication. The outcomes of this model are used to help make important predictions on individual behaviors and outcomes. The Big Five personality traits shown in Figure 8.1.1 (and listed following the figure), help us not only to understand our individual experiences and allow us to put into words and categorizations how our emotions interact with our behaviors, but it has also given researchers reliable associations and predictions in life outcomes such as “health, political participation, personal and romantic relationships, purchasing behaviors, and academic and job performances” (Sachl et. al, 2020).

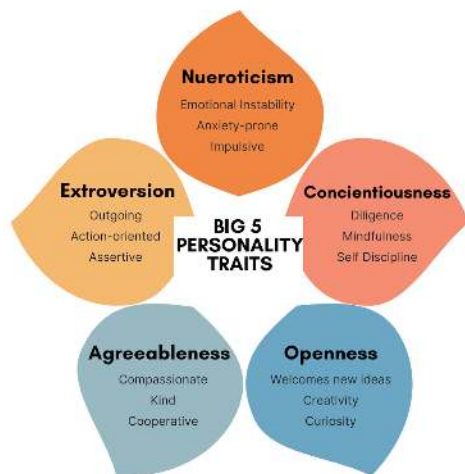


Figure 8.1.1: Big 5 Personality Traits by

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The Big Five Personality Traits

1. **Neuroticism:** Neuroticism refers to a person's vulnerability to debilitating emotions such as anger, anxiety, or depression. It is characterized by emotional instability, and being anxiety prone and impulsive. The ability to maintain balance and maintain internal support through these notable emotional charges is the skill of emotional stability.
2. **Conscientiousness:** Conscientiousness includes aspects of personality such as organization, planning, and dependability. It includes characteristics of being diligent, careful and mindful of the work one is doing, and having self-discipline. The key characteristic of this personality is the aspect of working towards these characteristics and having them as a goal to achieve, even if that may not always be the outcome. For example, we may not always be the best at organizing and keeping our room clean, but it's something that we strive to be diligent and hold value towards.
3. **Openness:** *Openness to experiences* and *open-mindedness* are terms that are used to describe the ability to welcome new ideas, information, and even arguments that may differ from our own. Being open to experiences includes curiosity and creativity. It allows for critical and rational thinking to make judgments and come to conclusions from these new ideas.
4. **Agreeableness:** Agreeableness is the habit of being kind, compassionate, warm, and cooperative. This is in contrast to traits such as suspicion, mistrust, combative, and unfriendly.
5. **Extraversion:** Extraversion refers to how outgoing or sociable a person is. Extroverted personality traits include high energy, talkative, assertiveness, and being action-oriented. This is in contrast to introversion, where the personality is focused on internal thoughts and feelings as opposed to external social interactions.

These personality traits are meant to be broad and open categorizations that are relatively stable throughout a person's life and universally applicable (Stachl et. al, 2020; Filipiak & Łubianka, 2021). When looking at these five personality traits in relation to how we interact with others, they can help us see patterns and help us to interpret behaviors influenced by social expectations and societal norms. For example, research has shown that nurses and other members of the medical field who score low in neuroticism are less likely to experience burn-out and report job-related stress. Traits such as openness, agreeableness, and extraversion are strong indicators of engagement and empathy in the nursing profession (Martinez et. al, 2021). Individuals are more drawn to certain professions over others given their personality trait characteristics, and a variety of different combinations of personality traits are found in the wide variety of professional careers.

Discussion Questions

1. What role of the Big Five personality traits do you see in your communication with others? Do you have significant others with some of these traits?
2. Out of all five personality traits, is there one that stands out to you that is predominant in your own identity? How do you think this personality trait impacts your communication with others?

Culture

Our culture is based on the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a given group, and includes rules and norms that members of the culture follow. The way in which we display, recognize, and interpret emotions is heavily influenced by our social environments and cultural worldview because of their norms and rules (Course Hero, n.d.c). Different cultures have different structures of

behavior and therefore different rules regarding how they display their emotions, which are connected to the cultural display rules discussed in Chapter 5. Research has shown that cultures that are more collectivistic, and where social harmony is emphasized, are less likely to showcase negative emotions such as disgust or anger in social settings. In contrast, individualistic cultures, where personal self concept is emphasized, are more likely to showcase emotions of anger or disgust no matter the social context (Dzokoto et. al, 2018). For example, research demonstrated that people from individualistic cultures, like the United States, used exaggerated facial expressions to showcase emotion as a way to influence others and gain attention from those around them, which is accepted within an individualistic culture (University of Minnesota, n.d.). This is opposed to people from collectivistic cultures, such as Japan, where the tendency is to suppress or not show their emotional expressions as a way to observe the social context and interaction between interpersonal relationships. Because collectivistic cultures put the primary concern on the interdependence of the cultural group, emotional displays are direct reflections of the family system and the primary driver is to maintain relationships (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

Understanding emotions in the context of culture is important to making sure we are aware of the ways that differences in communicating emotions may occur. The perception of emotional display rules differs between cultures, where different rules and norms are established and subconsciously understood amongst members. While these elements are rarely spoken about explicitly between cultural group members, they impact the way we interpret and communicate emotions in our relationships. In order to prevent miscommunication within our social relationships, knowing the ways in which a person may express or not express an emotion will allow us to better regulate our own emotional reaction as well.



Figure 8.1.7 Standing man wearing blue v-neck shirt by Elevate on Unsplash

Social Conventions and Roles

There are many unwritten rules of communication that discourage direct expressions of most emotions. As we said earlier, “being emotional” is largely seen as negative, and our roles in certain contexts are affected. For example, do you curse in the workplace? We attempt to be professional in workplace environments. This includes presenting ourselves as professionals, avoiding unacceptable language for that climate, and preserving face. **Face** concerns how we present ourselves to others and how we are seen by others. In the workplace, face is an important aspect of the climate. We want to preserve the face of others and avoid **face-threatening behaviors** (actions that would result in our communication partner losing face). Perhaps you have heard the phrase “saving face” used in this context before. Therefore, there are not only social expectations of us, but we also have processes of self-protection and protection of others.

We have many social and professional roles. How we interact within these roles relates to our environment and our relationships with our communication partners. **Gender roles** have a lot to do with how we interact with others as well as how we perceive

ourselves internally. Keep in mind that biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression are different constructs. **Gender identity** refers to our internal perception of self, and how we see ourselves. **Gender expression** refers to how we showcase our gender identity through our appearance, clothing, and verbal and nonverbal expression. These traits relate to how we mask (when, why, and to preserve face) and our reluctance or openness to engage in conversations related to our emotions. Gender expression is also related to the cultural climate we were raised in and our lived experiences.

In a professional setting, we may mask more or avoid dialogue related to emotions, in an attempt to be seen as fulfilling a professional role. In a social setting or role, we may use masking or our decision to engage in discourse related to emotions to promote relational growth. For example, there are certain emotions that may be more often avoided by certain people in the workplace for a variety of reasons. Women, particularly women of color, are less likely to overtly showcase emotions of confidence, assuredness, or even sadness or anger in the workplace so as to not be deemed “too emotional,” because perceptions of assertiveness can turn into aggressiveness or confidence can be misconstrued as arrogance. When we deconstruct how different individuals are or are not “allowed” to experience emotions in different settings, we can start to draw out the stereotypes and biases within our social conventions and society roles.

With the many roles we take on, we utilize these tools to be communication competent. We should beware of **emotional labor**, the expectation to manage emotions in work environments. Some settings require a lot of masking, which can take a toll on us as individuals and within our interpersonal relationships. If we mask at work all day, we become exhausted. The more we mask or avoid engagement in our emotions, the more we experience emotional labor. Later in this chapter we will discuss identifying our emotions and using reappraisal as a strategy. The capacity to recognize and act on certain emotions decreases without practice.

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8.2: Emotions in Relationships

Emotional Intelligence, Awareness, and Contagion

Emotions are deeply rooted within our relationships. In some relationships certain language is faux pas, whereas in another relationship the language is acceptable or even wanted. We will discuss the **relational context** in this section. We know that suppressing our emotions facilitates negative emotions, but we are connected to our emotions. Therefore, we discuss **facilitative** and **debilitative emotions**. In this section we discuss the role of emotional intelligence, emotional awareness, and emotional contagion.

Emotional Intelligence

Many of us are familiar with the term **IQ** ("intelligence quota") that research has historically used to study the standards of human intelligence. In parallel to our IQ, researchers also study our **emotional intelligence**, or **EI**, which measures our ability to process emotions and emotional information (Alegre, et al., 2019). EI is a social intelligence that helps us manage our emotions within our social interactions. It helps us dictate aspects of our expression of emotions, as well as works to help regulate our emotions. Having a high emotional intelligence means that you are not only able to showcase self-awareness of your own emotions to control and balance them, but also able to monitor and accurately understand the emotions within others (Connor et. al, 2019). Psychologist Daniel Goleman conducted extensive research into categorizing what are now known as the **five key elements of emotional intelligence**: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skill (Issah, 2018). Table 8.2.1 describes each key element of emotional intelligence as well as highlights specific communicative elements that emotional intelligence is enacted through.

Table 8.2.1: Varying Intensities of Central Emotion

Component	Description
Self-awareness	The conscious understanding of our character, feeling, emotions, desires, personality, and individuality. Includes elements of humility, self-confidence, and our impact on others.
Self-regulation	The ability to respond to emotional stimuli in ways that promote facilitative control over feelings, thoughts, and physiological responses. Includes elements of emotional flexibility, comfort with ambiguity, and openness to change.
Self-motivation	The drive to set attainable goals using personal desire as opposed to external influence. Includes elements of organization, commitment, and optimism.
Empathy	Listening for understanding of the other person's feelings and/or emotion with the goal of validating. Empathic listening is higher-level listening and therefore requires more energy. Includes elements of intercultural communication competence, and nonverbal awareness.
Social skill	The ability to build and maintain relationships. Effectively interacting with others, managing social norms, and rules within communication. Includes elements of verbal and nonverbal communication norms, intercultural communication competence, and active listening.

Source: This work is a derivative of Change Leadership: The Role of Emotional Intelligence by Mohammad Issah, under a CC BY. Figure 7.4.8 by Elizabeth Encarnacion is licensed [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Emotional Awareness

Although relationships affect our emotions, relationships themselves don't experience the emotions, we do—as the interpersonal members of the relationship. Within the study of EI, researchers have expanded their understanding into more precise applications. One area that has been expanded upon from original research in EI is the concept of emotional awareness. **Emotional awareness** is the conscious understanding and recognition of one's own and others' emotions (Agnoli et al., 2019; Alegre, et al., 2019). This is an important aspect of emotional intelligence. In order to act, or communicate effectively within a given range of emotional interactions, we must first be acutely aware of what emotions are present to begin with.

Emotional awareness is often experienced at its height during adolescence, when we are experiencing puberty and our understanding of ourselves in relation to other people. During this time period in our age and development, as many of us probably remember all too well, it can also be difficult to regulate emotions (Agnoli et al., 2019). Because of the changes that are occurring in our physiological and emotional selves, this time period of learning and growing is usually met with lots of bumps and bruises (both physically and metaphorically). This rocky road into adulthood is beneficial for our emotional intelligence and emotional awareness, and it is crucial in our development of self-concept and self-esteem, which help to mold our emotional intelligence and awareness as well (Agnoli et al., 2019).

We are constantly being affected by the people around us and managing the emotional responses in those interactions. When looking at the communicative interaction of our emotions with other people, there are two primary ways we classify emotions: **emotion traits** and **emotion states**. Trait emotional awareness exists when we experience a specific emotion during person-to-person interactions regardless of whom we are interacting with (Alegre, et al., 2019). **Emotion traits** are connected to our personality and demonstrate our habitual and prolonged set of baseline emotions. Emotion traits are inherently linked to the theoretical framework of the Big Five personality traits we discussed earlier in this chapter (Alegre, et al., 2019). For example, specifically looking at conscientiousness and neuroticism, and agreeableness, an emotional trait we may label ourselves as could be as an “anxious person,” where we may not be effective in regulating the feelings of worry or fear. Or we may define ourselves as a “people-pleaser” if we are consistently focused on other people's needs and attending to them as opposed to ourselves.

Emotion states exist in smaller “windows” of time; experiencing them is much less dependent on our personality. Emotion states are emotions that we experience in a specific moment of time and are generally impacted by the conversations, interactions, and individuals we are in the presence of. Emotion states come and go much more easily than moods or personality, and they can change from one moment to the next. Some emotion states we experience are connected “directly to other people, like anger, envy, jealousy, hate and shame” (The Libarynth. n.d.). For example, we may find that we feel joy and comfort in the presence of certain people in our lives, while we may feel a sense of annoyance or frustration when interacting with others. Our emotional awareness that allows us to tune in to these different sets of emotional states and understand the connection and the reasoning as to why we experience these emotional reactions in the presence of certain people. This greater understanding allows us to better manage our emotions and create facilitative or positive emotional boundaries, which we will discuss later in this chapter.

Emotional Contagion

Emotions are like yawns: they are contagious. When we see someone yawn, it creates the urge to yawn ourselves—and emotions work in the same way. This “emotional yawn” is called **emotional contagion**. Emotional contagion occurs when we are exposed to other individuals' emotions during social interactions. Our instincts tend to impact these social interactions and create an alignment with the emotional states we are perceiving in others (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021).



Figure 8.2.1: Baby's Grey Knit Hat by Minnie Zhou

on [Unsplash](#)

Emotional contagion can be both a conscious and unconscious reaction. When we are in social settings with people whom we feel close to and would identify as significant individuals in our lives, we might be able to pick up and be impacted by their emotion states more quickly and without reason, as if it is an “automatic” connection we have with the person, whereas other interactions may require us to appraise, or assess the emotional state of the other person to establish our own reaction (The Libarynth. n.d.). Both reactions are part of our emotional awareness in balancing our communication to being effective and appropriate.

Emotions can be transferred from one individual to another through a wide array of communicative expressions: physical features, such as the urge to smile at someone when they smile at you; vocal expressions, as when someone starts to become tearful while they are talking, we might find ourselves holding back tears as well; posture or kinesics, when we see someone slump down into a chair we might feel their exhaustion; as well as through our nervous system, where our brain and nerve cells transmit information, we are able to not just perceive the emotions of others but literally feel them within ourselves.

Empathy versus Sympathy

Emotional contagion relates to the concepts of empathy and sympathy. **Sympathy** is the ability to understand your own experiences and emotional reactions to the environment around you and use that as a way to compare to other individuals who may be having similar emotional experiences. Sympathy is the projection of our emotions on other people, where we might feel bad for the person but we don't see ourselves as agents in the emotional state. **Empathy**, in contrast, is sharing the emotional experiences with the other person. By showcasing emotional awareness to experience the emotional state of the other person. Empathy is directly connected to the concept of emotional contagion" in order to feel empathy, one must be able to rely on our instincts in order to align to the communicative expressions that the other person is conveying. Empathy is expressed in phrases such as “I understand how hard this is.”

Empathy is a learned skill that not everyone has or will enact the same way as others. Some individuals may not experience empathy at all, may have heightened levels of empathy, or may be at the same level as others. However we experience empathy, it does not mean we cannot communicate in an effective manner—but it may mean these aspects of emotional expression do not come as easily or in the same manner as others. For example, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized as having more difficulty enacting communication and social functioning as those who are neurotypical. Individuals who have ASD may express emotions and empathy in various ways that may look different, such as displaying an overabundance of emotional expression and empathy, or displaying very little. This impacts the amount of emotional contagion that is being experienced on the individual level.

Cultural Understanding

Another example of ways in which empathy and emotional contagion may be showcased in different behaviors is through **cultural understanding**. All cultures have different display rules regarding emotional expression, as we've learned, and that will translate to affecting others around them in various ways. Research has shown that within many cultures, negative emotional reactions and the subsequent impact of emotional contagion creates different display rules as well, therefore there are different measures of emotional contagion in order to understand these concepts within context (Kuang, et al., 2019). One example of different ways

various cultures will showcase empathy include expressions of love. While some cultures showcase love outwardly through public displays of affection such as hand holding, kissing, or hugging, other cultures do not welcome these overt demonstrations of love in public ways.



Figure 8.2.2 [Man hugging woman near trees](#) by [Gus Moretta](#) on

[Unsplash](#)

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8.3: Managing Emotions

Context for Managing Emotions

Managing emotions can be difficult given a lot of different factors, including aspects of our internal and external selves that may be impacting or impacted by the emotions we are experiencing. For example, our self-concept and self-esteem have a large impact on our emotions and our ability to be effective communicators when these emotions are running high. Managing our emotions does not mean that we are trying to suppress or make our emotions disappear, but instead it explains how we are reacting to the emotions we are feeling. There is an unlimited amount of ways we can react, just like there are unlimited amounts of emotions or combinations of emotions we can feel at any given time. Managing our emotions means that we are feeling our emotions and we are in control of how we are reacting to them given our surroundings (Course Hero, n.d.b). When people are able to manage their emotions, they understand that emotions are an important part of the self and that expressing emotions is a natural, healthy, and necessary part of life—but are also self-aware enough to realize that there are productive and nonproductive ways to react.

Facilitative and Debilitative Emotions

Choosing how we react to our emotions instead of allowing our emotions to overcome us is an important aspect of being a competent communicator. Being able to know what emotions are **facilitative**, or helpful, versus what emotions are **debilitative**, or harmful, allows us to be able to understand that our emotional reactions do not just affect ourselves and our internal dialogue but also the way in which we interact and engage with others around us.

When we explore the wide range of possible emotions one could feel, we can generally classify most of those emotions into one of two categories—and the difference between these two categories really relies on the intensity of the emotion itself. **Facilitative emotions** tend to be emotions that do not negatively impact us from the daily tasks or functions of our lives; they allow us to progress forward in a positive way. **Debilitative emotions**, on the other hand, tend to be emotions that stop or slow us down from tasks or functioning effectively. Debilitative emotions typically result in destructive behavior (Lumen, n.d.b). For example, if we are at work and a co-worker makes us annoyed because of a certain action or behavior, we can generally move past that emotion quickly and continue working without letting that emotion or the individual causing the emotion to impact our work. However if instead of annoyance, we were feeling anger, or even rage, that might make it more difficult for us to continue working in the environment. The emotion might take over us in that moment and it would become harder to make sure our actions and communication were effective and appropriate.

Ask yourself: “Have I ever felt a sense of rage?” How would you describe that feeling? Many people might say that they “saw red” in a moment of rage, and they were unsure of what happened next because their emotions were so all-consuming.

Another important factor that makes up debilitative emotions is the longevity of the emotion. There is a difference in feeling something for a moment in time and then allowing an emotion to pass, and for that emotion to be part of a person’s mindset and way of thinking. Debilitative emotions can take a person longer to recover from and tend to linger or get thrust into more intense or dramatic emotions more easily. For example, let’s say that you work in a store: If you are having a bad day, it is much easier for that bad day to be made worse by the smallest things than it is for you to turn that bad day into a good one. If your co-worker has already annoyed you when you came to work, it might be easier for you to feel annoyed by customers whom you interact with throughout the day as well. This might make it harder for you to smile or act friendly when new customers enter the store, which then creates a negative emotional spiral in all of your interactions for the day. Table 8.3.1 details descriptions of both facilitative and debilitative emotions in comparison to one another.

Facilitative and Debilitative Emotions

Emotional State	Description
Facilitative emotions	• Can result in constructive behavior (positive outcomes). • Emotional states feel supportive and benefit personal growth. • Include neutral emotions, such as contentment. • Intense positive emotions may not last long, but create positive moods. • Focus on aspects that bring the individual joy and happiness.

Emotional State	Description
Debilitative emotions	• Can result in destructive behavior (negative outcomes). • Emotions tend to take control and become overwhelming. • Take a long time to recover from or “snap out” of the negative emotion, creating negative moods. • Fostered by irrational thinking. • Focused on negative self-talk.

Table 8.3.1: Facilitative and Debilitative Emotions by Elizabeth Encarnacion is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#)

Minimizing Debilitative Emotions

Debilitative emotions are fostered by irrational thinking. **Irrational thinking** is when our mind wanders down a path of thought that links things together that are unrelated, or makes us only consider our options in a scenario as “black and white” when there are many possible outcomes that may occur. Irrational thinking can lead to overgeneralizing about the emotions that we are feeling or about the interactions that caused the emotions. In order to overcome debilitating emotions, there are four steps to help minimize them, in order to reduce how much impact they are having over us, so that we can instead manage them effectively both in the moment and in the long term.

Step 1: Monitor Emotional Reactions

What is happening internally at the moment? We should try to name the emotion we are feeling. It is important to be able to gauge the intensity and severity of the emotion we are feeling. By naming the emotion, we are better able to gain self-awareness of what that emotion is doing to us both physically and emotionally. Does the emotion change over time or does it stay the same? Does it get more intense or does it seem to fade? Are there certain people, places, things, phrases, etc. that bring the emotion back or make the emotion worse? Looking at the example that we provided earlier, if you are aware that you are working with a coworker whom you typically don’t get along with, it will be important for you to be aware that you get more easily agitated with them. Maybe you will shorten conversations with them or try to stay busy in areas where they aren’t so that you can avoid communication that might make you internalize that annoyance. This allows you to focus on communicating with customers and actively putting a smile on your face in order to hopefully help change your mood internally as well.

Step 2: Note the Activating Event

What caused this emotion to develop inside of me? Does it relate to the setting I am in? The types of people I am communicating with or interacting with specific people? Or maybe its specific topics of conversation that tend to make this debilitative emotion “rise to the surface.” One of the authors shares a personal example:

I have a difficult relationship with my mother that extends back the majority of my life. There are many times when I can remember getting extremely angry in conversations with her, where I have left crying or close to crying because of what was said. When I try to look back at all the times those types of incidents have happened, I might be able to identify what the activating event is that creates these extreme and long-lasting emotions. Once I can make the connection that the topic of conversation around weight or physical features tends to push me into debilitating emotions very quickly, I can then be aware of when those interactions might come up with my mother in order to have a greater sense of control on how I handle them, or if I need to avoid them all together.

Step 3: Record Self-Talk

Recording our self-talk is an important part of being able to change the internal dialogue and take back control of the way in which we allow that emotion to take up space internally. Going back to the workplace example: If you allow yourself to get aggravated with your co-worker, you might start to hate your job as a whole. While you don’t work with this co-worker all the time, you are letting the interactions that you have with them impact your overall experience of the workplace. This might begin to impact your self-concept of your work ethic and your interactions with customers overall. Repeating the internal dialogue of “I hate this place” might perpetuate conflict with customers or co-workers that you don’t want to occur. For the author’s example, she may feel that she wouldn’t get into these arguments with my mother if she lost weight, or if her body looked different in some way, or if she exercised more. She may believe that it is her fault these arguments occur because of the way that she looks.



Figure 8.3.1 Day 3 - Callen-Lorde-4196 by

Zackary Drucker from The Gender Spectrum Collection.

Step 4: Dispute Irrational Beliefs

This leads us to the final step in minimizing debilitating emotions, which is to dispute irrational beliefs. You are not a “bad person” because you don’t get along with all of your co-workers, nor is our author’s physical size or shape responsible for the relationship with her mother. When we start to monitor and take specific note of the self-talk that the debilitating emotions are making us feel, we can start to see how irrational those debilitating emotions truly are. Being able to see the logic—or the lack of logic—in our own thought patterns allows us to see that the emotion is taking over control of what we know is true and real. Even being able to read the self-talk that we used as examples earlier showcases the disconnect the thoughts have in response to the interaction that is causing these emotions. That does not mean those emotions are not valid—all emotions are valid—however, in those moments, our emotions are controlling us instead of us controlling our emotions.

Being able to get to a point where we can identify our own irrational beliefs is not always as easy as it sounds, and it is much easier when written into four steps than it is to practice in real-life examples—especially attempting to do it in the moment when the emotions are controlling us. But the idea is to challenge our internal dialogue by asking questions, and as with most things in life, practicing this technique makes us better able to see, recognize, and take back control of these emotions over time.

The four steps in minimizing debilitating emotions are challenging to complete, and require a lot of time, practice, and patience to work through. It is important to remember that becoming a more competent communicator takes time, and “perfection” does not exist. Once we feel we are at a place where we are continuously remembering to monitor our emotional reactions and to note the events that tend to activate certain debilitating emotions, where we are more aware of our self-talk and how to pinpoint the thoughts and beliefs that are interfering with our lives, we can begin to work on changing our self-talk.

There are many ways we can approach changing our self-talk, but some of the most common advice stems from treating ourselves like we would treat a friend, based on the cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) through self-compassion. Self-compassion essentially means that we are being kind to ourselves—understanding that we are all learning and growing, and with growth comes making mistakes. It is also important to remember that we are all critical of ourselves from time to time, and sometimes our mind does trick us into believing things that are not true about ourselves. Trying to catch negative self-talk in the moment, and either stopping it completely or challenging it, is an important way to stop debilitating emotions from spiraling and allow more facilitative emotions to come forward.

Maximizing Facilitative Emotions

Now that we have looked at ways we can work through overcoming debilitating emotions, it is equally important to learn how we can maximize facilitative emotions. It is important to understand that all emotions live in tandem with one another; while one moment we feel a high level of a positive emotion, in the next moment we could be met with a neutral or negative emotion. When working towards maximizing our **facilitative**, or **positive emotions**, it is important to keep at the forefront three important

thoughts: emotions are complex, neutrality in emotions is facilitative, and how culture impacts how facilitative emotions are constructed.

Emotions Are Complex

Emotions are complex aspects of our identities. In the same way we view the intersection of our identities as being the overlapping and interdependent social systems that contribute to our understanding of ethnic and cultural identity, we can view emotions as having the same intersection and interdependence. Emotions do not live in a vacuum, and they are often difficult to distinguish because there are multiple emotional reactions being felt at the same time. Because of these complexities within emotions, it is important to understand that modeling facilitative emotions is going to look different for each person. Research has consistently shown that maximizing facilitative emotions depends strongly on “fit” or the ways in which the strategies to promote facilitative emotions positively connect to a person’s interests, values, strengths, motivation, or needs (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). In order to sustain facilitative emotions, it is important to make sure the strategies being used are ones that connect to the needs and goals of the individual. Choosing activities, exercises, or strategies to promote facilitative emotions that are uniquely satisfying to the individual will help create habitual commitment and increase the likelihood of the facilitative emotion being increased and sustained (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

Neutrality in Emotions Is Facilitative

This also leads to the understanding of what neutrality in emotions are. Neutrality is defined as

feeling indifferent, nothing in particular, and a lack of preference one way or the other. Note, when we use the term *indifferent*, we do not use it to indicate disliking something because that would imply a negative rather than a neutral reaction. (Gasper, et al., 2019)

This neutral emotion can also occur at the same time as other positive or negative emotions as well, relating back to the complexity that emotions can have within us. Neutral emotions are important to understand and acknowledge within the rollercoaster of emotions so they are not ignored. Oftentimes neutrality can be seen as a lack of emotion, where emotion is defined as the reaction to experiences, and in order to have a reaction, it must be charged as either positive or negative. However, neutrality is often the existence of a more subtle understanding that we do not feel one way or another about our environment, such as the feeling of contentment, or just feeling “OK” versus feeling “good” or “great.” Neutrality could have a “range of potential consequences, including helping people cope” with the given environment. As such, neutral emotions are not negative; they are stable in long-term understanding of our mood and personality traits. This harkens back to our definition of facilitative emotions being ones that allow us to progress forward in a positive way (Gasper, et al., 2019). When looking at facilitative emotions and ideas for how we can better foster facilitative emotions, it is important to be mindful and realistic in what facilitative emotions we can achieve. Not every facilitative emotion is going to be high on the “positivity scale” ; being able to acknowledge when we are able to reach a level of neutrality in our facilitative emotion building is an important skill.

Culture Impacts how Facilitative Emotions Are Constructed

Research demonstrates that emotions are social interactions that are created within our interpersonal interactions and our social environments. As you have learned in this book, culture has an important impact on our interpersonal interactions because our social environments are culturally constructed. Emotions also impact and are impacted by our culture as well (Cho et. al, 2019). Geert Hofstede’s foundational research in cultural dimensions showcases six prominent ways in which a culture’s values, needs, and social behaviors can be analyzed. The six value dimensions include collectivistic and individualistic cultures, where values of individual versus group needs are heightened. Research on emotions has traditionally emphasized intrapersonal and individualized aspects, such as personal self-esteem and our internal dialogue as separate from our interpersonal, communal, communication (Cho et. al, 2019). These ideas showcase the individualistic understanding of emotion as a cultural value, but do not showcase collectivistic understanding. Within collectivistic cultures—such as East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian cultures—emotional values gravitate towards prioritizing group needs as well as emotional well-being (Tsai, 2021). There are many ways in which emotions are similar across cultures (including our physiological responses to emotions) but there are also important ways in which emotional behaviors differentiate, and these differentiations are important to understand in making sure we are creating effective and appropriate interpretations on our emotional response within communication interactions.



Figure 8.3.2 [Friendship](#) by [Chona Kasinger](#) on [Disabled and Here](#)

Facilitative emotions are imperative to our mental well-being as individuals as well as our well-being within relationships (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Creating and fostering positive emotions takes time and effort, and while there is no “one size fits all” method to maximizing facilitative emotions, research does show there to be some strategies that are likely to work given commitment and longevity of practice (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006):

- Spend time socializing or doing activities that bring joy.
- Become present-oriented to help enjoy and savor positive emotional experiences.
- Regard challenging situations as opportunities for growth.
- Express gratitude in order to savor positive experiences with others.
- Commit to acts of kindness.
- Identify and use your unique strengths.
- Visualizing ones’ best possible self in all aspects.
- Working on personal goals.
- Choose compassion for others, understanding that we all have different experiences that make up who we are, instead of contempt in viewing others as below or beneath us.

Consider This: *Encanto* Connections

Encanto (2021) is a film showcasing the Madrigal family, who live in Columbia. They have been gifted with an enchanted candle and *casita* (house), which they have used to support an enchanted village community. The lineage of Madrigal family members each have a special gift, except Mirabel. Throughout the story, viewers can see facilitative and debilitating emotions at work. To illustrate how we could maximize our facilitative emotions and minimize our debilitating emotions, we will use these characters as an example.

There are many facilitative emotions where the emotions the characters experience are positive and connect to our identities and interests. For instance, the sister relationship between Mirabel and Luisa is one of support and love. The interaction where Mirabel is scared and is asking Luisa about what could be causing the enchanted house to crack, we see that Mirabel’s attitude goes from worrying about the house, to focusing on supporting her sister. Through this change in emotions, Maribel is showcasing how to support her sister’s development of facilitative emotions through her active listening. By the end of this scene, Luisa relaxes into Maribel and cries, allowing her to break down the emotional walls she had built up.

We see a few instances of debilitating emotions and how they hurt the characters as well. Let’s talk about Bruno. Why is Bruno a taboo topic? The Bruno character is vilified because his gift of premonition is seen as creating negative outcomes, although the future is not dictated or guided by Bruno in any way. Bruno is able to experience very big and powerful emotions and

experiences a high amount of emotional contagion from the other family members. While many of the family members perceive Bruno's gift as negative, we know that debilitating emotions are fostered through irrational thinking. Had the family members been aware of the blaming language they used, they could have changed this language and reframed their perceptions of his gift to promote their relationship with Bruno as well as to understand the true meaning of his power. Conversely, Bruno could have stood up for himself and explained how their language and actions were negatively affecting him so that he did not feel that leaving the family was necessary.

The Madrigal family, like many Colombian families, is collectivistic and works together to achieve their goals. Their collectivism and unity is the family's true gift and strength, but without proper communication channels and facilitating emotional growth of each member, this strength can also become their downfall, creating cracks in the foundation of their identity. Through promoting positive communication tools and skills, the family members learn how to overcome these cracks and rebuild a stronger foundation. Luisa should work on communicating the feelings of being burdened by her daily responsibilities and Bruno should find ways to soften harsh realities that will occur. The family could then reframe their beliefs about his powers and it could change the consequences. Both of these two characters could record their self-talk. Luisa and Bruno perpetuated debilitating emotions through the language they used when describing themselves. Finally, they could dispute irrational beliefs. Strength is not always physical, and Luisa's character was strong even when she was physically weak. Bruno was helping the family even when hiding in the house's walls. Bruno was simply using the gift he was given, and this was not a reflection of his identity. By identifying and using their unique strengths, they made the family stronger. We can follow these steps to help us minimize the debilitating and maximize the facilitative emotions we experience.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some constructive ways you can work towards maximizing facilitative emotions in your own life? Think of three to five specific strategies that you can draw from when debilitating emotions start to form. Spend a week being mindful of your emotions, both facilitative and debilitating, and take notes on what helped you the most during these emotionally charged events.
2. We know that emotions are contagious (emotional contagion). Is there an example you have that shows when you have experienced a positive or negative emotional contagion? Are there ways for us to promote positive emotional contagion? How does this relate to facilitative versus debilitating emotions?

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8.4: Guidelines for Communicating Emotions Effectively

The ABC Model

We've spent a majority of this chapter looking at the various ways in which we are effected and affected by our emotions. Emotions are powerful parts of our identities; there are many ways in which our emotions positively and negatively impact our life experiences. Being able to distinguish our emotions from one another, anticipating when debilitating emotions may arise, and recognizing the power we hold in order to change our emotional reaction based on our perceptions is the next step in important skills we can add to our toolbox of competent communication.

Psychologists have largely studied the ways in which emotional responses occur within the mind and body. The appraisal theory of emotions demonstrates that emotions arise from how our internal communication responds to an event. An **appraisal** is our internal communication creating an opinion, interpreting, judging, and responding to an event (Course Hero, n.d.a). When we appraise an event, we are creating an emotion in response based on our beliefs and perceptions. Stress can be a great example of how appraisal works. When we experience stress, there are often times that we can pinpoint what is causing the stress, called the **stressor**. Our perception of the stressor is that it is overwhelming or that it is causing an extraordinary amount of pressure. These judgments of the stressor are creating our emotional reaction to the event itself (Spielman, et al., n.d.a). The event we are experiencing does not cause the emotion: our judgments about the event do. But these judgments are rarely done with complete conscious awareness on our part. The appraisal process is automatic, which is why we can often find ourselves in an emotional state that we can't explain and do not prefer. But we do have the ability to reappraise our emotion-based judgments. **Reappraisal** is the process of consciously reevaluating the interpretations and responses to events. Our appraisal process is constantly learning and adapting to the environment and can be guided. When we are equipped with skills to actively reappraise situations and contexts that block our ability to feel productive emotions, we can work to reframe the internal communication and change the thoughts and beliefs into rational ones.

Rational-emotive behavioral therapy is a type of therapy that helps individuals gain communicative skills in the reappraisal process. The framework behind the rational-emotive approach involves trying to gain a deeper understanding of the causes behind emotional reactions. This type of therapy has three guiding principles, which fall under the ABC model. The **ABC model** aims to identify the activating event (A) that causes the irrational belief (B), then to understand and adjust the emotional response, or consequence (C) to better process the information and adjust the emotional outcomes (Turner, 2016). Next, we will walk through the ABC model with examples of how it might play out in our everyday life.

Recognize the Activating Event (A)

We start the ABC model with recognizing the activating event. Sometimes when we are in the middle of experiencing an emotion, we do not stop to isolate what happened beforehand. We can start to recognize this activating event to help us understand where we are emotionally. You may ask yourself:

- What happened right before I noticed the change in my emotional state?
- Who was around me or involved in the event? How did they react or what did they do in the event?
- What was my role in this event?

Then it is important to be able to name the emotion we are experiencing. It is important to be able to build up self-awareness and to be able to name and identify our emotions. Pay attention to the way your body reacts to emotions: What are you feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally? Are you sad, frustrated, or angry? Sometimes our physical reactions to these very different emotions can feel the same. Being self-aware and tapping into our emotional intelligence will allow us to fine-tune what we're truly feeling and how we choose to name it.

For example, in the workplace we tend to mask a lot. Reappraisal is an effective tool to avoid the emotional labor of constant masking. Consider if you have a boss that tends to be insensitive frequently. Once we have made a generalization of someone's actions, it is easy to continue this trend. Once someone acts on our beliefs of what that person's personality traits are we tend to see their actions as fitting into those characteristics, which we call **confirmation bias**.

One of our authors shares her personal example:

I had a boss once who was very terse in the morning before drinking coffee, yet made comments to me about my morning attitude. I tried to understand why he made these attributions of my behavior and found that I was using confirmation bias, but should have used reappraisal to avoid this trend. I looked first at the activating event itself. I found that in going straight

to my computer before a morning greeting, I was in fact supporting his confirmation bias that I was unfriendly in the morning. Not starting with a morning greeting was that activating event. In reflecting on the previous questions, it was easier for me to see, I played many roles in this event. First, I had confirmation bias, so it is easy not to accept that I played a role in his perceptions of my behavior. Second, I was able to name my emotions. It was hurtful and resulted in me feeling defensive.

So why was she mad? This leads to the next step, which is challenging our interpretations of the event.

Challenge the Irrational Beliefs (B)

Once we have isolated the activating event and are able to name our emotion(s), we can start to challenge any beliefs that are proliferating negative emotions, which are called **irrational beliefs**. This term may imply that we are illogical, but in this sense it refers to the loss of connection from our experiences to our understanding (of lack thereof) of those experiences. We can start by being blunt, honest, and logical with ourselves in order to push towards changing our thoughts and behaviors. This is a straightforward request of ourselves, but it is difficult to do.

When we challenge our deeply held beliefs, we can start to make changes where we find it beneficial to. We need to own our feelings. This involves using the language of responsibility. Recall that some language assigns blame, which is not necessarily used intentionally. If we remove “you” language and use “I” language or “we” language, we can open the door to understanding. We can avoid “but” statements or anything defensive. In Chapter 4, we discussed defensive language in detail, but here we can add that removing defensive language can open the doors to effective communication. We should strive for accurate and authentic conversations, and avoid speaking in generalities, counterfeit emotional language, and patronizing responses. We should focus on owning feelings, or revisiting “I” language. Then we can identify the underlying thought patterns and beliefs that lead us to conclusions about the intent behind the message, the relational dimensions attached to our emotions, and challenging “absolutes.” These will often be reflected as absolutes, such as “I must,” “I should,” or “I cannot.” Possessing rigid expectations of ourselves and others only leads to disappointment, judgment, regret, and anxiety.

For example, consider this statement: “My roommate makes me so angry! He always eats the food in the refrigerator that I have my name on!” This can be reframed without the absolutes, to give ourselves room for alternative conclusions: “I am really frustrated because the food in the refrigerator I wanted to eat is gone.” By removing the absolutes and blame, we open ourselves to understand this could have been unintentional and gives us room to move through the emotion instead of spiraling the emotion or enhancing the negative consequences of that emotion.

Recognize the Emotional Consequences (C)

Often we see our emotions as our own, but our emotions affect others (like with emotional contagion). We can attempt to recognize the consequences for experiencing our emotions. Perhaps we do not want to be seen as “angry” at work or “defensive” with friends. We can start by changing our listening style when we notice activating events occurring. When we are people-oriented listeners, we focus on the relational dimension instead of the circumstances of the moment. Then we can respond sensitively when others communicate their emotions. If our emotions are contagious and we influence each other in multiple dimensions, it is important to ascribe to the policy “treat others the way you want to be treated.” We want validation. When we share our emotional experiences with others, it can allow us to feel vulnerable. We can validate emotional responses of others while respecting boundaries to ensure our relational partners know they are respected. When we reframe or reappraise the situation, we give ourselves room to change our perspectives and our underlying emotions.

There are steps we may take proactively to avoid needing to constantly reappraise. We start by using the language of responsibility from Chapter 4. When we use language that automatically places blame on others, we may become defensive. If we follow the steps of the language of responsibility, we are taking responsibility for our actions and beliefs without blaming others. We can also look at past encounters and figure out if there are patterns that we can avoid. There are times we have irrational thoughts (such as assigning intentionality) we can avoid. When we are faced with similar situations in the future, the emotionally healthy response recognizes failure is a part of life, and that all emotions are necessary (to some extent) but need to be channeled appropriately. By recognizing patterns, we can change our thinking in an attempt to change our negative emotions and channel them in a way that protects ourselves and our relationships.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Dynamics of Interpersonal Relationships

The English Poet, John Donne, once stated “No man is an island (Donne, 1964),” which is an apt statement when applied to communication, as interacting with others is an important (and inevitable) part of our existence. In our lives, we will be a part of thousands of relationships, both in personal and professional contexts, ranging from superficial to intimate. While it takes between 90 seconds and 4 minutes for someone to decide if they like another person (BBC, 2014), developing and maintaining relationships is more complicated and time consuming. In this chapter, we will cover four stages of relationships, from beginning to end, and provide communication theories that address the how, why, and who of relationship formation. We will also provide strategies for repairing relationships, discuss the contextual nuances of self-disclosure, and reflect on ways to manage tensions that arise in our relationships.

Learning Objectives

- What is the nature of the different types and stages of interpersonal relationships, and why are they important?
- How can we work to maintain interpersonal relationships in increase satisfaction?

Successful students will be able to:

- define interpersonal relationship
- identify characteristics of interpersonal relationships
- describe four stages of intimate relationships
- recognize and differentiate between various communication theories that help to explain relational stages
- identify relational dialectic maintenance strategies
- recognize contextual influences on self-disclosure
- recognize the influence of technology use on relational satisfaction

[9.1: Why We Form Relationships](#)

[9.2: Stages of Relationships](#)

[9.3: Managing Relational Dialectics](#)

Contributors and Attributions

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9.1: Why We Form Relationships

Learning Outcomes

- Understand attraction.
- Ascertain reasons for attraction.
- Realize the different types of attraction.

Have you ever wondered why people pick certain relationships over others? We can't pick our family members, although I know some people wish they could. We can, however, select who our friends and significant others are in our lives. Throughout our lives, we pick and select people that we build a connection to and have an attraction towards. We tend to avoid certain people who we don't find attractive.

Understanding Attraction

Researchers have identified three primary types of attraction: physical, social, and task. **Physical attraction** refers to the degree to which you find another person aesthetically pleasing. What is deemed aesthetically pleasing can alter greatly from one culture to the next. We also know that pop culture can greatly define what is considered to be physically appealing from one era to the next. Think of the curvaceous ideal of Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor in the 1950s as compared to the thin Halle Barry or Anne Hathaway. Although discussions of male physical attraction occur less often, they are equally impacted by pop culture. In the 1950s, you had solid men like Robert Mitchum and Marlon Brando as compared to the heavily muscled men of today like Joe Manganiello or Zac Efron.

The second type of attraction is **social attraction**, or the degree to which an individual sees another person as entertaining, intriguing, and fun to be around. We all have finite sources when it comes to the amount of time we have in a given day. We prefer to socialize with people that we think are fun. These people may entertain us or they may just fascinate us. No matter the reason, we find some people more socially desirable than others. Social attraction can also be a factor of power, for example, in situations where there are kids in the "in-group" and those that are not. In this case, those that are considered popular hold more power and are perceived as being more socially desirable to associate with. This relationship becomes problematic when these individuals decide to use this social desirability as a tool or weapon against others.

The final type of attraction is **task attraction**, or people we are attracted to because they possess specific knowledge and/or skills that help us accomplish specific goals. The first part of this definition requires that the target of task attraction possess specific knowledge and/or skills. Maybe you have a friend who is good with computers who will always fix your computer when something goes wrong. Maybe you have a friend who is good in math and can tutor you. Of course, the purpose of these relationships is to help you accomplish your own goals. In the first case, you have the goal of not having a broken down computer. In the second case, you have the goal of passing math. This is not to say that an individual may only be viewed as task attractive, but many relationships we form are because of task attraction in our lives.

Reasons for Attraction

Now that we've looked at the basics of what attraction is, let's switch gears and talk about why we are attracted to each other. There are several reasons researchers have found for our attraction to others, including proximity, physicality, perceived gain, similarities and differences, and disclosure.

Physical Proximity

When you ask some people how they met their significant other, you will often hear proximity is a factor in how they met. Perhaps, they were taking the same class or their families went to the same grocery store. These common places create opportunities for others to meet and mingle. We are more likely to talk to people that we see frequently.

Physical Attractiveness

In day-to-day interactions, you are more likely to pay attention to someone you find more attractive than others. Research shows that males place more emphasis on physical attractiveness than females.⁵ Appearance is very important at the beginning of the relationship.

Perceived Gain

This type of relationship might appear to be like an economic model and can be explained by **exchange theory**.⁶ In other words, we will form relationships with people who can offer us rewards that outweigh the costs. Rewards are the things we want to acquire. They could be tangible (e.g., food, money, clothes) or intangible (support, admiration, status). Costs are undesirable things that we don't want to expend a lot of energy to do. For instance, we don't want to have to constantly nag the other person to call us or spend a lot of time arguing about past items. A good relationship will have fewer costs and more rewards. A bad relationship will have more costs and fewer rewards. Often, when people decide to stay or leave a relationship, they will consider the costs and rewards in the relationship.

Costs and rewards are not the only factors in a relationship. Partners also consider alternatives in the relationship. For instance, Becky and Alan have been together for a few years. Becky adores Alan and wants to marry him, but she feels that there are some problems in the relationship. Alan has a horrible temper; he is pessimistic; and he is critical of her. Becky has gained some weight, and Alan has said some hurtful things to her. Becky knows that every relationship will have issues. She doesn't know whether to continue this relationship and take it further or if she should end it.

Her first alternative is called the **comparison level (CL)**, which is the minimum standard that she is willing to tolerate. If Becky believes that it is ok for a person to say hurtful things to her or get angry, then Alan is meeting or exceeding her CL. However, if past romantic partners have never said anything hurtful towards her, then she would have a lower CL.

Becky will also consider another alternative, which is the **comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt})**, or the comparison between current relationship rewards and what she might get in another relationship. If she doesn't want to be single, then she might have a lower CL of alternatives. If she has another potential mate who would probably treat her better, then she would have a higher level of alternatives. We use this calculation all the time in relationships. Often when people are considering the possibility to end a relationship, they will consider all alternatives rather than just focusing on costs and rewards.

Similarities and Differences

It feels comforting when someone who appears to like the same things you like also has other similarities to you. Thus, you don't have to explain yourself or give reasons for doing things a certain way. People with similar cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds are typically drawn to each other for this reason. It is also known as **similarity thesis**. The similarity thesis basically states that we are attracted to and tend to form relationships with others who are similar to us.⁷ There are three reasons why similarity thesis works: validation, predictability, and affiliation. First, it is validating to know that someone likes the same things that we do. It confirms and endorses what we believe. In turn, it increases support and affection. Second, when we are similar to another person, we can make predictions about what they will like and not like. We can make better estimations and expectations about what the person will do and how they will behave. The third reason is due to the fact that we like others that are similar to us and thus they should like us because we are the same. Hence, it creates affiliation or connection with that other person.

However, there are some people who are attracted to someone completely opposite from who they are. This is where differences come into play. Differences can make a relationship stronger, especially when you have a relationship that is **complementary**. In complementary relationships, each person in the relationship can help satisfy the other person's needs. For instance, one person likes to talk, and the other person likes to listen. They get along great because they can be comfortable in their communication behaviors and roles. In addition, they don't have to argue over who will need to talk. Another example might be that one person likes to cook, and the other person likes to eat. This is a great relationship because both people are getting what they like, and it complements each other's talents. Usually, friction will occur when there are differences of opinion or control issues. For example, if you have someone who loves to spend money and the other person who loves to save money, it might be very hard to decide how to handle financial issues.

Disclosure

Sometimes we form relationships with others after we have disclosed something about ourselves to others. Disclosure increases liking because it creates support and trust between you and this other person. We typically don't disclose our most intimate thoughts to a stranger. We do this behavior with people we are close to because it creates a bond with the other person.

Disclosure is not the only factor that can lead to forming relationships. Disclosure needs to be appropriate and reciprocal⁸. In other words, if you provide information, it must be mutual. If you reveal too much or too little, it might be regarded as inappropriate and can create tension. Also, if you disclose information too soon or too quickly in the relationship, it can create some negative outcomes.

Key Takeaways

- We can be attracted to another person via various ways. It might be due to physical proximity, physical appearance, perceived gain, similarity/differences, and disclosure.
- The deepening of relationships can occur through disclosure and mutual trust.
- Relationships end through some form of separation or dissolution.

Exercises

- Take a poll of the couples that you know and how they met. Which category does it fall into? Is there a difference among your couples and how they met?
- What are some ways that you could form a relationship with others? Discuss your findings with the class. How is it different/similar to what we talked about in this chapter?
- Discuss how and why a certain relationship that you know dissolved. What were the reasons or factors that caused the separation?

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9.2: Stages of Relationships

Learning Outcomes

- Describe the coming together stages.
- Discern the coming apart stages.
- Realize relationship maintenance strategies.

Every relationship goes through various stages. Mark Knapp first introduced a series of stages through which relationships can progress.⁹ This model was later modified by himself and coauthor Anita Vangelisti to create a model of relationships.¹⁰ They believe that we come together and we can come apart in stages. Relationships can get stronger or weaker. Most relationships go through some or all of these stages.

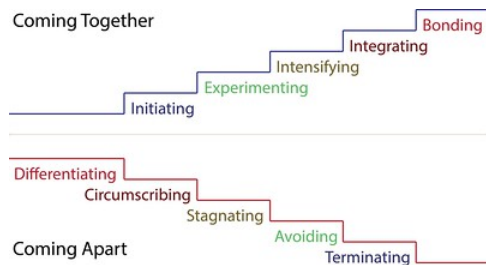


Figure 1: Knapp and Vangelisti Model of Relationships

Coming Together

Do you remember when you first met that special someone in your life? How did your relationship start? How did you two become closer? Every relationship has to start somewhere. It begins and grows. In this section, we will learn about the coming together stages, which include: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and then bonding.

Initiating

At the beginning of every relationship, we have to figure out if we want to put in the energy and effort to talk to the other person. If we are interested in pursuing the relationship, we have to let the other person know that we are interested in initiating a conversation.

There are different types of initiation. Sustaining is trying to continue the conversation. Networking is where you contact others for a relationship. An offering is where you present your interest in some manner. Approaching is where you directly make contact with the other person. We can begin a relationship in a variety of different ways.

Communication at this initiating stage is very brief. We might say hello and introduce yourself to the other person. You might smile or wink to let the other person know you are interested in making conversation with him or her. The conversation is very superficial and not very personal at all. At this stage, we are primarily interested in making contact.

Experimenting

After we have initiated communication with the other person, we go to the next stage, which is experimenting. At this stage, you are trying to figure out if you want to continue the relationship further. We are trying to learn more about the other person.

At this stage, interactions are very casual. You are looking for common ground or similarities that you share. You might talk about your favorite things, such as colors, sports, teachers, etc. Just like the name of the stage, we are experimenting and trying to figure out if we should move towards the next stage or not.

Intensifying

After we talk with the other person and decide that this is someone we want to have a relationship with, we enter the intensifying stage. We share more intimate and/or personal information about ourselves with that person. Conversations become more serious, and our interactions are more meaningful. At this stage, you might stop saying “I” and say “we.” So, in the past, you might have said to your partner, “I am having a night out with my friends.” It changes to “we are going out with my friends tonight.” We are becoming more serious about the relationship.

Integrating

The integrating stage is where two people truly become a couple. Before they might have been dating or enjoying each other's company, but in this stage, they are letting people know that they are exclusively dating each other. The expectations in the relationship are higher than they were before. Your knowledge of your partner has increased. The amount of time that you spend with each other is greater.

Bonding

The next stage is the bonding stage, where you reveal to the world that your relationship to each other now exists. It might be as simple as a Facebook post. For others, the bonding stage is where they get engaged and have an engagement announcement. For those that are very committed to the relationship, they might decide to have a wedding and get married. In every case, they are making their relationship a public announcement. They want others to know that their relationship is real.

Coming Apart

Some couples can stay in committed and wonderful relationships. However, there are some couples for whom, after bonding, things seem to fall apart. No matter how hard they try to stay together, there is tension and disagreement. These couples go through a coming apart process that involves: differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating.

Differentiating

The differentiating stage is where both people are trying to figure out their own identities. Thus, instead of trying to say "we," the partners will question "how am I different?" In this stage, differences are emphasized and similarities are overlooked.

As the partners differentiate themselves from each other, they tend to engage in more disagreements. The couples will tend to change their pronoun use from "our kitchen" becomes "my kitchen" or "our child" becomes "my child," depending on what they want to emphasize.

Initially, in the relationship, we tend to focus on what we have in common with each other. After we have bonded, we are trying to deal with balancing our independence from the other person. If this cannot be resolved, then tensions will emerge, and it usually signals that your relationship is coming apart.

Circumscribing

The **circumscribing** stage is where the partners tend to limit their interactions with each other. Communication will lessen in quality and quantity. Partners try to figure out what they can and can't talk about with each other so that they will not argue.

Partners might not spend as much time with each other at this stage. There are fewer physical displays of affection, as well. Intimacy decreases between the partners. The partners no longer desire to be with each other and only communicate when they have to.

Stagnating

The next stage is **stagnating**, which means the relationship is not improving or growing. The relationship is motionless or stagnating. Partners do not try to communicate with each other. When communication does occur, it is usually restrained and often awkward. The partners live with each other physically but not emotionally. They tend to distance themselves from the other person. Their enthusiasm for the relationship is gone. What used to be fun and exciting for the couple is now a chore.

Avoiding

The **avoiding** stage is where both people avoid each other altogether. They would rather stay away from each other than communicate. At this stage, the partners do not want to see each other or speak to each other. Sometimes, the partners will think that they don't want to be in the relationship any longer.

Terminating

The **terminating** stage is where the parties decide to end or terminate the relationship. It is never easy to end a relationship. A variety of factors can determine whether to cease or continue the relationship. Time is a factor. Couples have to decide to end it gradually or quickly. Couples also have to determine what happens after the termination of the relationship. Besides, partners have to choose how they want to end the relationship. For instance, some people end the relationship via electronic means (e.g., text message, email, Facebook posting) or via face-to-face.

Final Thoughts on Coming Together

Not every relationship will go through each of the ten stages. Several relationships do not go past the experimenting stage. Some remain happy at the intensifying or bonding stage. When both people agree that their relationship is satisfying and each person has their needs met, then stabilization occurs. Some relationships go out of order as well. For instance, in some arranged marriages, the bonding occurs first, and then the couple goes through various phases. Some people jump from one stage into another. When partners disagree about what is optimal stabilization, then disagreements and tensions will occur.

In today's world, romantic relationships can take on a variety of different meanings and expectations. For instance, "hooking up" or having "friends with benefits" are terms that people might use to describe the status of their relationship. Many people might engage in a variety of relationships but not necessarily get married. We know that relationships vary from couple to couple. No matter what the relationship type, couples decided to come together or come apart.

Relationship Maintenance

You may have heard that relationships are hard work. Relationships need maintenance and care. Just like your body needs food and your car needs gasoline to run, your relationships need attention as well. When people are in a relationship with each other, what makes a difference to keep people together is how they feel when they are with each other. Maintenance can make a relationship more satisfying and successful.

Daniel Canary and Laura Stafford stated that "most people desire long-term, stable, and satisfying relationships."¹¹ To keep a satisfying relationship, individuals must utilize relationship maintenance behaviors. They believed that if individuals do not maintain their relationships, the relationships will weaken and/or end. "It is naïve to assume that relationships simply stay together until they fall apart or that they happen to stay together."¹²

Joe Ayres studied how individuals maintain their interpersonal relationships.¹³ Through factor analysis, he identified three types of strategies. First, *avoidance strategies* are used to evade communication that might threaten the relationship. Second, *balance strategies* are used to maintain equality in the relationship so that partners do not feel underbenefited or overbenefited from being in the relationship. Third, *direct strategies* are used to evaluate and remind the partner of relationship objectives. It is worth noting that Joe Ayers found that relationship intent had a major influence on the perceptions of the relationship partners. If partners wanted to stay together, they would make more of an effort to employ maintenance strategies than deterioration strategies.

Laura Stafford and Daniel Canary (1991) found five key relationship maintenance behaviors (Figure 1). First, positivity is a relational maintenance factor used by communicating with their partners in a happy and supportive manner. Second, openness occurs when partners focus their communication on the relationship. Third, assurances are words that emphasize the partners' commitment to the duration of the relationship. Fourth, networking is communicating with family and friends. Lastly, sharing tasks is doing work or household tasks. Later, Canary and his colleagues found two more relationship maintenance behaviors: conflict management and advice.¹⁴

Additionally, Canary and Stafford also posited four propositions that serve as a conceptual framework for relationship maintenance research.¹⁵ The first proposition is that relationships will worsen if they are not maintained. The second proposition is that both partners must feel that there are equal benefits and sacrifices in the relationship for it to sustain. The third proposition states that maintenance behaviors depend on the type of relationship. The fourth proposition is that relationship maintenance behaviors can be used alone or as a mixture to affect perceptions of the relationship. Overall, these propositions illustrate the importance and effect that relationship maintenance behaviors can have on relationships.

Relationship maintenance is the stabilization point between relationship initiation and potential relationship destruction.¹⁶ There are two elements to relationship maintenance. First, strategic plans are intentional behaviors and actions used to maintain the relationship. Second, everyday interactions help to sustain the relationship. Talk is the most important element in relationship maintenance.¹⁷

Mindfulness Activity

Learning how to use mindfulness in our interpersonal relationships is one way to ensure healthy relationships. Lauren Korshak recommends using the RAIN method when interacting with one's relational partners:

- Recognize: Nonjudgmentally recognize and name emotions you feel in the present moment.
- Allow: Acknowledge, accept, and allow your emotions to be as they are without trying to change them. Allowing does not mean you like what is happening, but that you allow it, dislike and all.

- Investigate with kindness: Ask yourself, “What am I experiencing inside my body? What is calling my attention? What does this feeling need from me?”
- Non-identification/nurture with self-compassion: Observe thoughts, feelings, and sensations without attaching to them. If you notice painful feelings, nurture them by placing a hand over your heart or speaking words of kindness, reassurance, and compassion, such as “I see you’re suffering,” or “I’m sorry,” or “I love you, I’m listening.”¹⁸

For this activity, we want you to use the RAIN method in a conversation with your romantic partner. As an alternative variant, both of you can engage in the RAIN method and discuss a recent conflict you had. The goal is not to establish fault or a win-lose attitude, but rather to learn to empathize with your partner and their perspective.

Key Takeaways

- The coming together stages include: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding
- The coming apart stages include: differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating.
- Relationship maintenance strategies include positivity, openness, assurances, sharing tasks, conflict management, social networks, and advice.

Exercises

- Find video clips online that illustrate each of the coming together/coming apart stages. Show them to your class. Do you agree/disagree?
- Do a self-analysis of a relationship that you have been involved with or have witnessed. How did the two people come together and come apart? Did they go through all the stages? Why/why not?
- Write down an example of each of the relationship maintenance strategies. Then, rank order in terms of importance to you. Why did you rank them the way that you did? Find a peer and compare your answers.

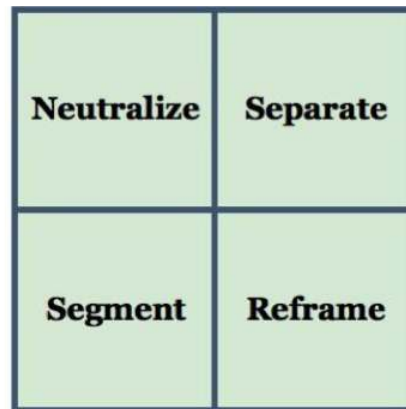
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9.3: Managing Relational Dialectics

In this section, we will cover techniques for managing relational dialectics, address contextual nuances surrounding self-disclosure, and discuss the importance of reflecting on how technology impacts others and our relationships

Effective Communication: Managing Relational Dialectics



4 Ways to Handle Dialectical Tension

(Image: [Spaynton](#), CC BY-SA 4.0)

In section 8.2.3.1, we discussed the three dialectics that influence relationship dynamics: autonomy-connection, novelty-predictability, and openness-closedness. Understanding that these three dialectical tensions are at play in all relationships is a first step in understanding how our relationships work. Since the way we communicate our needs (or don't communicate them) and respond to the needs of others can have both a short and long-term impact on our relationships, we need to learn how to manage dialectics to enhance relationship satisfaction. Depending on the relational context (the nature of the relationship between two people), couples, friends, or family members may have different strategies for managing these tensions in an attempt to meet the needs of each person. Baxter (1988) identifies four ways we can handle dialectical tensions.

- **Neutralize:**

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.

- **Separation:**

The second option is separation. 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 long-distance 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.

- **Segmentation:**

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.

- **Reframing:**

The final option for dealing with these tensions is a creative technique called reframing. This strategy requires creativity not only in managing the tensions, but also 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 may be viewed less as a compromise and more as an opportunity to develop themselves and their own interests so that they are better able to share themselves with their partner and enhance their connection.

Relational dialectics are a natural part of our relationships, and 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, 1988). Therefore it is important to reflect on both our dialectics needs and that of the other and to remember 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 manage dialectical tensions contributes greatly to the communication climate in relationships.

Contextual Communication: Self-Disclosure and Context



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It's important to pay attention to contextual nuances when disclosing information to others. For example, the physical context- where an interaction takes place- can either facilitate or hinder disclosure.

While the mutual disclosure of information can bring people together and strengthen a relationship, inappropriately disclosing information—either to the wrong person, at the wrong place, or at the wrong time—can have negative effects. Below we discuss some contextual nuances to keep in mind when disclosing (or not disclosing) to others.

- **Physical Context:**

The physical context in which an interaction takes places can influence the types of disclosure. A quiet coffee shop or the privacy of a home may facilitate disclosure while crowded, public places may not. Disclosing sensitive information in the wrong place can have negative results. For example, disclosing to your long-time romantic partner in a public place (such as a dinner party) that you cheated on them may not go over so well. However, other times you may elect to disclosure in a public place, such as when you fear a violent reaction. Physical context can also encompass virtual spaces, such as social networking sites. Some sites, such as Facebook or Twitter encourage the disclosing of private and personal information. However, if using a social networking site like LinkedIn, you should keep your disclosures professional. When disclosing in online platforms, also keep in mind that what you disclose can never be reversed and may be shared with others.

- **Relational Context:**

The relational context, or the relationship between two people, is important to consider when deciding what we should or should not disclose. Generally speaking, personal and private matters are appropriate to discuss in ongoing intimate personal relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships. However, if you are in a professional relationship, such as those that take place in the workplace, you should typically avoid disclosing overly personal information (unless you are also in an intimate relationship with that individual). When in professional contexts, avoid discussing overly personal information and/or asking others to disclose overly personal information about themselves. When choosing to disclose information to another, consider both the potential positive and negative effects of said disclosure. If you are in an intimate personal relationship, disclosure can enhance the relationship and bring people closer. However, when you disclose information to another, it can

potentially have negative repercussions if that person shares your private information, thoughts, or feelings with others. For example, if you disclose to a coworker that you dislike another coworker, they may tell that person, which could in turn cause unwanted workplace conflict.

- **Individual Context:**

Individual context and internal motivations will also influence self-disclosure. Some people may disclose more information than others or do so more quickly while others may take more time or be more hesitant. Some people may be motivated to get something off their chest or be seeking advice, support, or validation. However, others may feel vulnerable in disclosing information or fear of a negative reaction and/or rejection. Our past experiences may also influence how much we disclose and who we disclose to. For example, if you have had negative experiences in the past with friends sharing your private information with others, you may be more hesitant to disclose in the future.

- **Cultural/Co-Cultural Context:**

Cultural rules and norms exist for disclosure in terms of the privacy and openness surrounding particular topics and what is considered acceptable to disclose (or not), depending on other contextual nuances such as physical location and/or the type of relationship. For example, some cultures value directness and openness while others value privacy. Co-cultural factors also influence disclosures. In particular, gender differences for males and females exist in terms of topics considered okay to talk about and amount of disclosure. Females are typically socialized to disclose more than males, especially when it comes to topics such as feelings and emotions.

Reflective Communication: Technology and Relationships

Technology has vastly reshaped how we form relationships and communicate with others, whether it be strangers, friends, family, or romantic partners. Reflecting on how we use technology is important, as it may affect others and contribute to relationship satisfaction (or dissatisfaction).

- **Others:**

Technology enables anonymity and provides a screen for us to ‘hide’ behind, which can be both good and bad. One advantage is that we may be able to say and communicate things to others that we might not otherwise be able to in face-to-face interactions because of anxiety, fear, and/or vulnerability. However, the disadvantage is that when we can’t see the other person immediately in front of us, we may have less empathy and may say things that we would never say face-to-face. Anonymity can make people less accountable and responsible for their actions. Bullying and flaming (verbally attacking others) are common online and can have adverse effects on others. Taken to the extreme, cyber-bullying has even impacted others to the point where they have attempted suicide or taken their own lives. So, while technology may empower us in some ways, we should keep in mind the famous quote “With great power comes great responsibility.”

- **Relationships:**

Finally, technology can both positively and negatively affect the satisfaction of relationships during the beginning, developing, and maintaining stages. As an advantage, we can use technology to begin, develop, and maintain relationships with those who are not in our geographic location. This is beneficial for families, friendships, and romantic relationships where people are separated by distance. For example, if you are in a romantic relationship with a member of the military who gets stationed for three months overseas, you can stay in contact and still maintain a level of closeness that may have been more difficult to achieve in the past. Even little text messages asking about someone’s day or saying “I love you” can help increase overall relationship satisfaction by letting others know we are thinking of them. However, if used too much in relationships, technology may have a negative impact. It’s common to go out to restaurant or bar and observe couples or groups staring at their phone screens versus interacting with each other. Over time, these types of behaviors may lead to people not feeling as close in a relationship and/or relationship deterioration. In addition, the things we post online may impact a relationship. For example, let’s say you told a friend you were staying in for the night but then ended up going to a party. While at the party another friend takes and posts a photo of you on Facebook. When your other friend sees this, it may result in hurt feelings and/or a fight.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: Close Relationships- Friends, Family, and Romantic Partners

Learning Objectives

- Identify and understand different types of interpersonal relationships, needs, roles, and norms
- Discuss how interpersonal communication changes as we move through various relationship stages
- Explain the influence that context, identity, and culture have on our interpersonal communication interactions and relationships
- Apply interpersonal communication theories and strategies when discussing and analyzing relationships

Interpersonal communication is vital to building, maintaining, and even ending our relationships. In this chapter, we discuss the foundations of relationships, relational stages, and the tools and strategies to achieve the relational outcomes we desire. We talk about healthy and unhealthy communication in relationships, and how to deal with relationship termination.

[10.1: Common Relationship Types](#)

[10.2: Love Languages](#)

[10.3: Communication Relationship Theories](#)

[10.4: Forming Attachments](#)

[10.5: Attachment in Adulthood](#)

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10.1: Common Relationship Types



Figure 10.1.1 [Family](#) by Syuhada Faizal is licensed as [CC BY NC 2.0](#)

Family

How do you define family? There is no right or wrong answer! Families are traditionally defined as the people with whom you are connected by blood, however, that is not a required characteristic. How we define family changes over our lifetimes. For many people, the first understanding of family starts off as the people who raised us or those who were raised among us, which could include biological parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, cousins, foster parents, adoptive parents, extended relatives, close friends, in-laws, and step-family members. As we age, who we identify as a family member continues to evolve as we experience new phases of life. We may move around, grow and mature, live with friends, date, marry, adopt or foster a child, divorce, and remarry. As adults, many people start to look at family membership as less of an involuntary relationship, and more of a voluntary choice.

To begin our discussion, let's frame family as the people who raised you from childhood through adolescence, whether there is a biological connection or not. In either case, the bonds, experiences, and communication patterns you develop with the people who make up this type of relationship lays a foundation for all your relationships thereafter. This is because they model communication for us, and we learn from their example. The communication skills, norms, and expectations we learn from our families of origin become our starting point for interacting with the world. Let's examine some common communication patterns within family relationships.

Think about how often you talk to your family. What do you talk about? Do you feel free to speak your mind? Now consider the table below, which again offers two different categories that intersect along two different spectrums.

In Figure 10.1.2 two different communication orientations are represented. Figure 10.1.2 refers to the degree to which family members interact and communicate about various topics. Conformity orientation refers to the degree to which a family expects uniformity of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Conversation and conformity orientations intersect to create the following family climates: **consensual**, **pluralistic**, **protective**, and **laissez-faire**. In Figure 10.1.2 we see a square, divided into four boxes by two axes. Descriptions of the four types of families follow.

Pluralistic = High Conversation and Low Conformity	Consensual = High Conversation and High Conformity
Laissez-Faire = Low Conversation and Low Conformity	Protective = Low Conversation and High Conformity

Figure 10.1.2 [Family Types Based on Conversation and Conformity Orientations](#) by Koerner, A. F. and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick is licensed as [CC BY -NC-SA 4.0](#)

Pluralistic

Pluralistic families talk a lot (**high conversation**) but do not expect to agree (**low conformity**). Many families might see themselves fitting into this category in general, or on specific topics. For example, topics like the sports or movie genres you each like could be in the pluralistic quadrant, meaning you all share your thoughts on films and games, but disagreement doesn't ruffle anyone's feathers.

Consensual

Consensual families talk a lot (**high conversation**) and expect to agree (**high conformity**). One topic that might fit here is how a family celebrates any fun family holidays that the entire family looks forward to and enjoys. Other topics might be what religion is observed in the home, or children's plans after college— and in this type of family, despite your personal feelings, you are expected to do what your parents say, with little room for negotiation.

Laissez-Faire

Laissez-faire families talk less (**low conversation**) and do not expect to agree (**low conformity**). A common topic here could be what you like to order from your family's favorite take-out spot. It only comes up when it's time to order, and everyone gets what they want.

Protective

In the **protective** quadrant families talk less (**low conversation**) and do expect to agree (**high conformity**). A possible topic here could be going to your younger siblings' dance recital. You are just expected to show up, right?

Friendships

How do you define friendship? There is no right or wrong answer. Friendship, like family, is in the eye of the beholder. In essence, friendship is often thought of as a close relationship with a person with whom you have a common interest or connection. Friendship is often considered a voluntary social relationship, but it can become voluntary personal if there is a large amount of contact and self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is when you purposefully share personal information with another individual. It includes the expression of your observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs.

Chosen Family



Figure 10.1.3 **Just Chillin'** by Michael Poley

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The term **chosen families** (Weston, 1991) originally referred to families that members of the LGBTQIA+ community formed with friends, community members, and others, when their families of origin excluded them, due to their sexuality or gender expression. In modern times, many of us have formed small groups of intimate friends and neighbors who act as our most trusted companions, essentially like family. The term **friendsgiving** has become commonplace, indicating that we are sharing Thanksgiving with non-family members, whom we consider close friends (Fetters, 2018).

Reflection Questions

1. Do you have a group of close friends you consider to be your chosen family?
2. What are the advantages of having non-family members in your intimate group for celebrations, discussions of difficult issues, and support?
3. If you do not have a “chosen family,” who would you include in this group?

Common Friendship Types

As with all relationships, friendships look different over time, and as we get older. For adults, in particular, there are three common types of friendships: **reciprocal**, **associative**, and **receptive**.

Reciprocal Friendships

Reciprocal friendships involve people who are equally invested in the relationship. They share a similar appreciation for each other's company, and a desire to maintain a connection throughout changing circumstances. Perhaps you have a friend whom you have known for a long time, maybe since childhood, to whom you are still connected despite having grown in different ways. This person might even be your "best friend"—someone you feel you can talk to about anything without judgment, and vice versa.

Associative Friendships

Associative friendships are a lighter version of reciprocal friendship. They include people who have the same level of respect and fondness for one another, but they connect less frequently with less depth. In these relationships, the two people involved are more like close acquaintances. They may connect over specific shared interests. For example, maybe you volunteer somewhere and work with the same community of people every week or month. You have likely bonded and grown relatively close within a specific area; however, it is not clear that this relationship extends beyond the boundaries of your specific common interest area.

Receptive Friendships

Receptive friendships tend to have some imbalance of power. Common examples include when you have a friendly relationship with your boss or yoga instructor. These relationships can be very meaningful, however, they can be tricky if the power imbalance gets in the way. When participating in a receptive friendship, it is important to be aware of the possibility that the person who is the supervisor or mentor could take advantage of the power differential in the relationship. This would be an abuse of power.

Reflecting on Friendships

After reading the section on different types of friendships, could you think of examples from your own life that fit within the three categories?

1. Take a moment to name a reciprocal friend. How long have you known this person? What is special about this relationship?
2. Can you discuss an associative friend? Where did you meet? Do you ever hang out or talk outside of the place where you have a common interest?
3. Is there anyone in your life with whom you have a large power differential, but you would still consider this person your friend? Discuss this receptive friendship and whether you have ever been in a situation where someone with power abused their position within your relationship.
4. When you think of these different types of friendships, what norms come to mind? What communication tactics work best to sustain them? Would you call them voluntary, or involuntary? Social, or personal?
5. Are friendships free from structure and rules? If not, what rules or norms have you set with your friends?

No matter the circumstance, friendships are a valuable part of our lives. Friendships are often safe spaces for us to be ourselves, to practice having healthy boundaries and experiment with other parts of our personalities. Another type of relationship that can also feel both fulfilling and challenging is a romantic partnership. Let's examine some nuances and dynamics that may be in place when someone becomes more than a friend.

Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships, like families and friendships, come in different combinations, shapes, and sizes. They may involve two people, or more for **polyamorous** relationships (which involve multiple partners). Romantic partners spend time in various ways, depending on the people involved. Often, romantic partners share deep conversations, affection and sexual intimacy, mutual interests, tenderness, and caring. In romantic relationships, there are many different arrangements.

Two people who engage in an interpersonal (or two-person) romantic relationship may identify as any gender or sexuality. For example, one individual in a romantic relationship may identify as **gender-fluid** (gender identity may change over time and in different situations) and **pansexual** (attraction to people regardless of their gender or sexual identity), while another may identify as **nonbinary** and **queer**. Each of us determines our own gender identity and sexuality. Our sexual identity indicates who we are

romantically and sexually drawn to. Discovering your own sexuality is often considered a journey, and you may experience many different types of romantic relationships along that journey.



Figure 10.1.4 [LGBT Pride Parade San Francisco 2009](#) by [davidyuweb](#) licensed as [CC BY](#)

2.0

Every romantic relationship has its own unique communication style based on the people involved. There is no one size fits all relationship. However, there are some common stages experienced in romantic partnerships. Later in this chapter, you will learn about some of the ways in which communication looks differently as romantic partnerships evolve. You will also learn more about communication red flags that might indicate the relationship is no longer serving a healthy purpose in your life.

Before we discuss those various components, let's unpack one last type of relationship that can have a deep impact on your life: relationships at work. Interestingly, these types of relationships are often underestimated or taken for granted, even though as adults we often spend the majority of our time at work.

Workplace Relationships

Relationships at work are very unique and nuanced. Perhaps you have friends or formed a love interest at the place you are employed or where you serve as a volunteer or intern. All these circumstances impact your interactions differently, but keep in mind that at work we are communicating first and foremost from our professional identity. We will cover more information on relationships at work in Chapter 12.



Figure 10.1.5 [WOCintech Stock-33](#) by [Mike Ngo](#) licensed as [CC BY 2.0](#)

As you can see, between the four main types of relationships (family, friends, romantic partners, and at work) some overlap exists, as well as key differences. But don't forget, in these relationships you are the common denominator. With your new deeper understanding of interpersonal communication, you have the ability to shape these relationships to increase the fulfillment for everyone involved. You may also start to notice positive differences and perhaps some disappointments. Remember to practice clear, authentic, and kind verbal and nonverbal messaging, and effective listening. Perhaps most importantly, aim to be empathetic, in all contexts!

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10.2: Love Languages



Figure 10.2.1: A happy couple (CC0; Polina Tankilevich via [Pexels](#))

Hollywood has produced an endless stream of love stories. Some, such as “Gone with the Wind,” “Cleopatra,” or “Titanic” are love stories wrapped in grand dramas. Others – “Philadelphia Story,” “The Notebook,” or “Love Story” are more intimate.

Dr. Gary Chapman is a psychologist and marriage counselor who developed the concept of love languages. Let’s get started by taking a few moments to listen to Dr. Chapman explain why the five love languages are so important, especially for Gen-Z, and how he came to develop the concept of love languages which he then wrote about in a book that has sold more than 50 million copies.

[Dr. Gary Chapman on The Five Love Languages](#)



When people “fall in love,” they do so with high hopes and expectations of a life of bliss forever, “until death do us part.” But researchers have found that almost 50% of all marriages in the U.S. will end in divorce or separation. Diving a bit deeper, 41% of all first marriages will end in divorce as will 60% of second marriages, and 75% of third marriages. The U.S. has the fourth highest divorce rate in the world, behind Russia, Belarus, and Gibraltar. At least we’re ahead of No. 5 and 6, Moldova and Lithuania (Wilkinson & Finkbeiner, 2022).

Dr. Chapman believes the reason is many people speak different love languages. If you don’t speak the same love language as your partner, you might as well be speaking Mandarin. Not feeling loved is a huge problem, as demonstrated not only by divorce statistics but also by the experience of children of divorce, who often feel unloved by the parent who left them.

The problem is, falling in love is one thing, staying in love is another. Just like anything else, it requires continuous work. If you’re a triathlete now, you won’t remain a triathlete by sitting on your couch every weekend and watching TV. You’ll be out running in all sorts of weather, biking to work, etc.

One study suggested that romantic obsession lasts for about two years. After that, the “rose-colored glasses” come off and reality sets in. Your partner’s quirks become annoying or worse, and life’s routine – paying bills, doing laundry, raising kids, hosting in-laws, etc., wears on the marriage. Resentment and separation can follow. Many couples resign themselves to emotional deprivation or file for divorce.

There is, however, a better way. It starts with family dinners. We’ll get back to love languages in a minute, but family dinners are essential for building and maintaining families. Adolescents who have just one or two family dinners a week with their parents are two to four times more likely to use alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs than youth who have five to seven family dinners a week (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2006). Other research has found the frequency of family dinners is related to lower rates of delinquency and sexual promiscuity.

What makes a family dinner so important? Family dinners provide a relaxed atmosphere that allows for open discussion about daily activities, sensitive issues involving politics, core moral choices (or both), and continued emotional bonding between family members. It’s thought this may be more successful than a formal lecture, and youth learn their family loves them and cares about them. When families fall on hard times – and most families do at some point – family dinners provide the opportunity to discuss the situation openly and to get input from everyone, to build a family team. Schirch (2005).

Aside from family dinners, feeding the fires of a couple’s love takes work. And that’s where the five love languages come in. The first of these is **Words of Affirmation**. You may have said as a child, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” That’s a lie. Words can build up, and words can break down.

Watch the difference as two coaches adopt different approaches to coaching a soccer match. One coach adopts a positive approach, the other a negative approach.

Positive Coach vs Negative Coach | A 5-a-Side Surprise! | England



Most people – not all, but most – respond better when they are affirmed. So it makes sense that we would praise our partner’s good works, and not just the extraordinary things they do, but the everyday things: “Honey, you look great in that dress!” or, “I don’t

know how you do it, but you go from one stellar meal to another.” Some studies indicate that successful couples praise six times for every time they criticize.

One caution: Most of us have pretty good “B.S. meters” and can detect false praise. So mean it when you say it.

Also, remember that in a marriage, spouses are equals and must treat each other as equals. So don’t make demands, but rather requests. Demands are demeaning, requests are empowering.

The second love language is **Quality Time**. We have to spend time with our spouse. When we were dating, we carved out time for a date and on that date gave our spouse 100% of our attention. Once we’re married we still need to carve out time for our spouse and give him/her 100% of our attention.

To be sure, we live busy lives. But what worked when dating will work when married. That’s why many couples have a regularly scheduled “date night.” Maybe they go to a movie and then out for a snack or drinks. Maybe it’s out for a nice dinner, and then a stroll around a lake.

The third love language is **Receiving Gifts**. Everyone likes to receive gifts. We like to get presents on our birthdays and major holidays. But a surprise present is best of all.

This works even in the business setting. A newsletter publisher delights its subscribers by sending subscribers an eBook of Success Quotes for Every Week of the Year each holiday season. Dynamic Catholic sends two or three free books a year to members of its Ambassadors Club who donate \$10 a month. The Wall Street Journal offers subscribers free eBooks and free audiobooks from HarperCollins, a major New York publisher, each month. The Journal also offers complimentary virtual passes to selected WSJ events that cost hundreds of dollars for in-person attendance. (These subscriber benefits are available to student subscribers; student subscriptions are \$4 a month [here](#).)

The fourth love language is **Acts of Service**. Many men demonstrate love by doing things for girlfriends such as cleaning out gutters; many women demonstrate love by cooking, folding laundry. People of any gender can show love by running errands.

The fifth love language is **Physical Touch**. For a person whose love language is touch, a slap is devastating, but a tender hug is not only reassuring but deeply comforting. In times of grief and crisis, physical touch can communicate more powerfully than words.

How do we know our partner’s love language? If you really like hearing “I love you” again, and again, and again, words of affirmation are probably one of your love languages. That’s also true if you appreciate being recognized, whether it’s because you put on work clothes for your Zoom call or your partner says thank you.

If you like to spend uninterrupted time with your partner, if it’s meaningful when your partner makes time for you, if creating memories and special moments together is important to you, then quality time is one of our love languages.

Acts of service are one of our love languages when your partner helps ease your responsibilities by doing little chores or tasks for you or follows through on something, or you think talk is cheap, action counts.

You know if receiving gifts is one of your love languages when the present is nice but what really matters is the thought behind it.

Touch is one of your love languages if you look forward to hugs, cuddles, and intimacy; if you feel grounded in a relationship when physical affection is accessible and cultivated, if you like public displays of affection.

What’s the most common love language? Chapman analyzed the results of 10,000 people who took his online quiz in 2010 and found words of affirmation was the most popular language (Borensen, 2018). Dating app Hinge analyzed its data and found Quality Time won, hands down (Emery, 2018).

Love is the most fundamental of human emotions and is key to human relationships. Watch Billy Ward, a former Baltimore Raven, talk about love and being loved.

[How to love and be loved | Billy Ward | TEDxFoggyBottom](#)



- Do you agree with Chapman's list of love languages? Is there are you would add? What's your favorite love language? In your favorite romance movie (comedy or serious), what love languages can you identify? Be prepared to discuss in class and write a 500-word essay.
- What is your love language? Take this quiz and find out (be prepared to discuss in class or share in an online class):

The Love Languages Quiz

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10.3: Communication Relationship Theories

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Describe the importance of affectionate communication in relationship interactions.
- Explain how interaction expectations affect interpersonal communication.
- Discuss how individuals manage private information in their everyday interactions.

RELATIONSHIP INTERACTIONS

We engage in social interaction every day with many different people, such as friends, family members, romantic partners, classmates, and even strangers. Each of those interactions and relationships brings with it a host of complexities that influence our communication.

For example, think about how your relationship with someone influences your expectations for the kind of affection you want to share with them. With a family member, sharing affection may not be weird at all and likely welcomed. However, sharing affection with strangers is likely not something we would be as comfortable with in most cases. So what it is about some relationships that make us okay with receiving affection, but in other relationships it is not okay?

Furthermore, consider what information you are willing to share with people. Does that differ based on our relationship with them? If you're like most people, the answer is yes. For example, you would probably be willing to share your name, hometown, and maybe your favorite ice cream flavor with mostly anyone. But what about your religious views, family history, or personal insecurities? That type of information would likely be more closely guarded.

So we come back to the question of *why* and *how*. Why do we engage in affectionate communication with some people and not others? Why might it bother us if someone violates our expectations for who can share affection with us? How do we determine what information we are okay sharing with people (e.g., name, hometown) and what information we are *not* okay sharing with people (e.g., religious views, personal insecurities)?

To help address these questions, this module will introduce three theories that explain important aspects of everyday relationship interactions. The three theories we will discuss are 1) affection exchange theory, 2) expectancy violations theory, and 3) communication privacy management theory.

Affection Exchange Theory

Affection Exchange Theory (AET) focuses on questions about why humans communicate affection to each other, as well as why affectionate communication is important (Floyd, 2001). To answer these questions of “Why?”, AET relies on two different ideas:

Idea #1: From an evolutionary perspective, developing close relationships is a fundamental need for us to achieve two critical evolutionary objectives: survival and procreation.

Idea #2: Affectionate communication helps facilitate relationship development and thus, improves chances of survival and procreation (Floyd, 2006).

But what does “affectionate communication” look like? As you might imagine, affection can be communicated in various ways. However, Floyd and Morman (1998) identified three distinct categories of affectionate communication.

Type	Example
Nonverbal	• Hold hands • Kiss on lips or cheek • Sit close together • Hug each other
Verbal	• Say “You’re my best friend.” • Say “You’re a good friend.” • Say “I love you” • Say “I like you”

Support	• Help each other with problems • Give each other compliments • Praise each other's accomplishments • Acknowledge each other's birthday
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Table 10.3.1: Categories of Affection Communication

Take a moment and consider these examples. Can you think of a time when someone said or did something like this for you or with you? How did it make you feel? If you're like most people, receiving these types of affectionate communication usually makes us feel really good!

Actually, beyond just "good feelings", research shows that both giving *and* receiving affectionate communication yields significant benefits. But it is also important to note that receiving less affectionate communication than you desire can also be detrimental.

<i>When People...</i>	<i>They Tend to Experience...</i>	<i>Research Citation</i>
Receive affection often...	• Better mental health • Greater self-esteem • Being less depressed • Being less stressed	Aloia & Brecht, 2017
Give affection often...	• Greater happiness • Greater self-esteem • Being less depressed • Being less stressed	Floyd, 2002
Don't receive as much affection as they desire...	• More feelings of loneliness • More routine physical pain • Being more stressed • Lower quality sleep	Floyd, 2014; 2016

Table 10.3.2 Benefits of Giving and Receiving Affection

In summary, AET provides a compelling explanation for why affectionate communication is so important to us as humans. Specifically, we have learned that affectionate communication is not only important to developing and maintaining close relationships, but it also yields significant physical, mental, and emotional benefits as well.

So does that mean we should start hugging everybody? No, not necessarily. All of us have different "limits" for how much affection we desire. For example, you might have a very high limit of desired affection with a romantic partner (i.e., we prefer more affection from people we are close to). But with a stranger, you probably have a very low limit of desired affection (i.e., we prefer less affection from people we don't know).

Therefore, the type of relationship we have with other people (e.g., friends, co-workers, romantic partners, etc.) will likely influence how much affectionate communication we desire from them, as well as what our expectations are for how they communicate affection to us. In turn, to experience the benefits of affectionate communication, we need to make sure it fits within the expectations of our relationships and the affection limits of the people in those relationships.

But what if someone gives us more affectionate communication than we expect or want? In other words, what happens when those expectations or limits are broken? Would that bother you? If your romantic partner gives you more affectionate communication than you expect, that would probably be viewed positively. However, if this happens with a classmate, you might not appreciate that very much, especially if its nonverbal in nature.

To dig into this deeper, we might question *why* it is okay when some people break these types of expectations, but not okay when others do it. How do we make those determinations? These types of questions about when people break communication expectations are quite common, yet difficult to answer at times. To help find some potential answers, we turn to our attention to the second theory in this module: expectancy violations theory.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Think about the last time you flew on an airplane. What were your expectations for how that would go? What would the flight be like? Specifically, what would the flight attendants do or say?

We generally have expectations for what flight attendants should do before taking off, such as making sure everyone finds their seat, reminding all passengers to fasten their seat belts, and performing the safety instructions. Some of us could probably even predict what they will say if we've traveled quite a bit.

However, imagine if your flight attendant did not make any announcement about seat belts or communicate any safety instructions. What if they performed no safety checks? What if all they did was say, "Welcome!" and then make a few jokes about crash landings. How would you feel? What would you do? If you're like most people, you might be pretty concerned and even scared! Why? This would most likely be due to the flight attendants drastically violating your expectations of what they should be doing.

Expectancy violations theory (EVT; Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon & Jones, 1976; Burgoon & Hale, 1988) initially explained the consequences of when people violate social norms and expectations about individuals' nonverbal behaviors, specifically those about personal space. For example, think of the time when a coworker stands awkwardly close to you. EVT would say that the way they handle personal space certainly violates your expectations.

EVT was later applied to both verbal *and* nonverbal encounters in a variety of communication contexts, such as emotional communication (Burgoon, 1993) and computer-mediated communication (e.g., Ramirez & Wang, 2008). The primary assumption of EVT is that individuals hold **expectations/expectancies** for interpersonal encounters and use them as frameworks to make sense of the world around them.

These expectations are influenced by individual, relational, and contextual factors. When individuals' expectations are violated (i.e., **expectancy violations**), their attention is deviated from the event to the violation; they experience heightened emotional and physiological reactions, and they try to assess and explain the violation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). In essence, EVT explains both how people respond to unexpected communication incidents and why they do so.

Let's go back to the example presented at the beginning. The unusual behaviors of the flight attendant will certainly violate your expectations, and you probably will stop what you are doing (deviate your attention to the violation), start to feel knots in your stomach (heightened emotional and physiological reactions), and try to figure out what is going on about the flight attendant (assess and explain the violation). Hopefully no one would ever experience something like this!

According to Burgoon (1993), **communicator reward valence**, or the extent to which a communicator is positively or negatively perceived, encompasses an array of characteristics, such as physical attractiveness, competence, and intelligence. People often make a quick calculation of all the available characteristics of a communicator and then assess the potential benefits interaction with the communicator might offer.

But why does this matter? Communicator reward valence affects how people interpret and evaluate expectancy violations (i.e., whether the violation is important or unimportant and if it is desirable or undesirable). The result of the interpretation and evaluation process is what is called **violation valence**, which refers to how positive or negative we view a violation to be. It entails both the direction (i.e., positive or negative) and the magnitude (e.g., how much a violation deviates from an individual's expectation) of the valence.

Let's think about an example here to illustrate the process. You unexpectedly find out that your friend, Bob, who you have perceived as kind and trustworthy (communication reward valence), is cheating on his girlfriend. You've tried your best to figure out why Bob is doing this (interpretation and evaluation). Maybe he is unhappy with his relationship? Maybe his girlfriend is also cheating on him? Regardless of the reasons for his infidelity, you believe that Bob's behavior is quite unacceptable and wrongful (violation valence), and you decide to talk with him and give him a wake-up call.

It is important to note that early literature on relationship violations generally views violations as negative, but EVT explains that not all violations are negative and some are even favorable (Burgoon, 2015). Think about that time when an attractive stranger pays for your Starbucks order. That would be quite an unexpected, but delightful, surprise, right? So keep in mind that "expectancy violations" can be both positive and negative.

In summary, EVT provides a helpful perspective in understanding situations in which our expectations about social interactions are violated in some way. To help tie together a lot of what you have learned here, check out this [video](#) that provides a summary of the concepts and principles of EVT.

As you have likely experienced, our expectations are often violated by many different people, such as our friends, family members, romantic partners, and even strangers. One way that our expectations are often violated is in how people manage or share our

private information. For example, if your friend were to share one of your biggest secrets with someone else, that might violate your expectation for how your friend was supposed to behave and specifically how they were supposed to protect your information.

In order to reduce the chance of this type of expectancy violation, you may engage in conversations with your friend to set up rules to about how they should protect your private information. But how would we come up with these types of rules? Why would we feel those rules even necessary?

To help answer some of these questions about how we manage our private information, we turn to our third theory in this module: communication privacy management theory.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

Put yourself into this scenario: Your best friend, Anna, came up to you. She took a deep breath and said, “Okay, I am gonna tell you something, but you must promise that you won’t tell anyone else. Jake and I just broke up.” How would you feel? What would you say to her?

Communication privacy management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2002) addresses the process of disclosing private information to others. Grounded in the assumption that individuals experience consistent tensions between revealing and concealing private information, CPM presents **a rule-based system** in which individuals make decisions to disclose or conceal private information and coordinate privacy management with others (Petronio, 2002).

CPM uses a boundary metaphor to explain the mechanisms through which individuals and collectives manage private information and coordinate privacy management. Unlike other theories on disclosure and privacy, it particularly highlights the role confidants play in the privacy management process.

Petronio (2004) has articulated five core principles of CPM explaining how a rule-based privacy management system functions. The first two principles lay out the foundational assumption of CPM by presuming individuals’ perceptions about private information. Principle one states that people believe they have the **ownership** of their private information.

Due to the perception of possessing private information, people believe they have the right to control and regulate the dissemination of their private information, as principle two claims. For instance, when you are back home during winter break, your uncle may welcome you with all kinds of questions about your study, your social life at college, and your romantic relationship. You may feel a bit irritated as you believe that you own your private information and you have the right to choose whom you want to disclose the information to.

The third principle centers around privacy rule development. It proposes that people develop certain rules regarding whether to make the privacy boundary open or to keep it closed. Petronio (2002) identifies five criteria (i.e., culture, gender, motivation, risk and benefit ratio, specific contexts) people use to set up privacy management rules.

The culture we belong to, our gender and that of the confidant influence whether we choose to disclose or not. For example, there might be specific reasons why Anna decides to tell you about her breakup (e.g., to seek support). Additionally, she probably has considered the risks and benefits associated with disclosing and the context in which the disclosure should happen.

The fourth principle explains what happens when people disclose private information to others. According to CPM, individuals who reveal private information to others make others the **co-owners** of the private information. New privacy rules are thus needed to be negotiated so that all stakeholders are clear about their roles in managing the private information. According to CPM, there are three types of rules that are often discussed and negotiated: boundary linkage, boundary ownership, and boundary permeability (Petronio, 2010).

Boundary linkage refers to the considerations about whether co-owners of private information are allowed to grant access to others into the privacy boundary, and if so, the criteria for selecting new confidants privy to the information. Boundary ownership represents how much control co-owners independently have with regard to the management of private information. Boundary permeability involves concerns about how much private information can flow out of the boundary.

Going back to the example we talked about at the beginning of this module. Your best friend Anna told you that she broke up with her boyfriend Jake but did not want you to tell anyone else. This is an effort to establish privacy rules. Maybe a few days later, you said to Anna: “Kelly has been worrying about you since she hasn’t seen you at the sorority gatherings. Do you think I can tell her that you broke up with Jake? Or at least you are having some issues with your relationship?”

Here, you are negotiating existing privacy rules with Anna, particularly about whether you have the control to distribute the information (boundary ownership), whether you can grant Kelly the access to the private information (boundary linkage), and if so,

how much you can share (boundary permeability).

The fifth principle considers the consequences of ineffective and unsuccessful boundary coordination. CPM predicts that **boundary turbulence** (e.g., unwanted intrusion, misunderstanding, interpersonal conflicts) will occur when expectations for privacy management are unmet; when privacy rules are violated by one or more of the co-owners, or when the privacy rules are unclear (e.g., fuzzy boundaries).

CPM has been a helpful perspective for researchers studying the management of private information in various contexts. For example, Brannon and Rauscher's (2019) study indicated that that boundary permeability was associated with how individuals responded to discussions about sexually transmitted infections (e.g., caring more for the partner or protecting oneself). Ledbetter's (2019) research suggested that family communication patterns were associated with the degree of parental privacy invasions and children's privacy defense during the first year of college.

At this point, you have been able to learn quite a bit about CPM, as well as the way this theory explains the processes and rules for how we manage our private information. To help tie this all together, let's take a look at the following video, which summarizes the main ideas discussed in this [video](#).

With all of this in mind, the next time your friend tells you some private information and expect you to keep it to yourself, hopefully you can remember CPM. You can realize that you are included as the co-owner of your friend's private information and that it's better to clearly communicate about privacy rules for that information so that you don't get into trouble later!

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Identifying Factors of Expectancy Violations

1. Review the video clip from the movie "Love Actually:" <https://youtu.be/2y-8vxObugM>
2. Gather student perceptions of the context and what is happening.
 - In short, Karen accidentally finds out a fancy gold necklace in her husband, Harry's coat pocket, and assumes that it is his Christmas gift for her. However, she ends up unwrapping a Joni Mitchell CD from Harry. Clearly, the gold necklace is not meant for her but for someone else. Although Karen is not fully aware of what is going on, we as audience know that Harry has an extramarital relationship with his secretary Mia.
3. Ask students to apply expectancy violations theory to this situation using the following prompt:
 - Based on what we know about EVT, what factors might influence Karen's interpretation and evaluation of the fact that her husband gives a fancy necklace to someone other than her?

Activity 2: Comparing Affection Exchange Theory & the Pop Culture "5 Love Languages"

1. Introduce the concept of the "5 Love Languages" to student. The concept may be verbally introduced or students can individually have review the "5 Love Languages" website: <https://www.5lovelanguages.com/>
2. Review how each love language is defined.
3. Ask students to compare the categories of affectionate communication described by AET and the five love languages.
 - What similarities do you see?
 - How do they match up?
4. An additional step to this exercise might be to have students complete...
 - The "Love Languages Quiz: <https://www.5lovelanguages.com/quizzes/>

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GLOSSARY

Affection: Feelings of liking, fondness.

Boundary turbulence: The relational outcomes that occur when expectations for privacy management are unfulfilled.

Communicator reward valence: The extent to which a communicator is positively or negatively perceived.

Expectancy violations: Specific communication behaviors that are recognizably discrepant from one's expectations and cause heightened emotional and psychological reactions.

Expectations/expectancies: The collection of one's judgments on and perceptions about what communication behaviors are feasible, appropriate, and typical in a particular setting.

Violation valence: The degree to which an unexpected behavior is perceived as positive or negative.

Co-owners: Individuals who have access to others' private information; also called confidants.

Ownership: The right and entitlement one perceives to have regarding the possession and dissemination of their private information.

Rule-based system: Refers to the systematic process of private information management as explained by CPM theory.

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10.4: Forming Attachments

Attachment is the close bond with a caregiver from which the infant derives a sense of security. The formation of attachments in infancy has been the subject of considerable research as attachments have been viewed as foundations for future relationships. Additionally, attachments form the basis for confidence and curiosity as toddlers, and as important influences on self- concept.



Figure 3.25: Mutually enjoyable interactions promote infant bonding. Credit: Peter Shanks.

Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory: According to Freud (1938) infants are oral creatures who obtain pleasure from sucking and mouthing objects. Freud believed the infant will become attached to a person or object that provides this pleasure. Consequently, infants were believed to become attached to their mother because she was the one who satisfied their oral needs and provided pleasure. Freud further believed that the infants will become attached to their mothers “if the mother is relaxed and generous in her feeding practices, thereby allowing the child a lot of oral pleasure,” (Shaffer, 1985, p. 435). Was Freud correct in his explanation for why infants became attached?

Harlow's Research: In one classic study showing if nursing was the most important factor to attachment, Wisconsin University psychologists Harry and Margaret Harlow investigated the responses of young monkeys. The infants were separated from their biological mothers, and two surrogate mothers were introduced to their cages. One, the wire mother, consisted of a round wooden head, a mesh of cold metal wires, and a bottle of milk from which the baby monkey could drink. The second mother was a foam-rubber form wrapped in a heated terry-cloth blanket. The infant monkeys went to the wire mother for food, but they overwhelmingly preferred and spent significantly more time with the warm terry-cloth mother. The warm terry-cloth mother provided no food but did provide comfort (Harlow, 1958). *The infant's need for physical closeness and touching is referred to as contact comfort.* Contact comfort is believed to be the foundation for attachment. The Harlows' studies confirmed that babies have social as well as physical needs. Both monkeys and human babies need a secure base that allows them to feel safe. From this base, they can gain the confidence they need to venture out and explore their worlds.

Bowlby's Theory: Building on the work of Harlow and others, John Bowlby developed the concept of attachment theory. He defined attachment as the affectional bond or tie that an infant forms with the mother (Bowlby, 1969). An infant must form this bond with a primary caregiver in order to have normal social and emotional development. In addition, Bowlby proposed that this attachment bond is very powerful and continues throughout life. He used the concept of secure base to define a healthy attachment between parent and child (Bowlby, 1982). A **secure base** is a parental presence that gives the child a sense of safety as the child explores the surroundings.

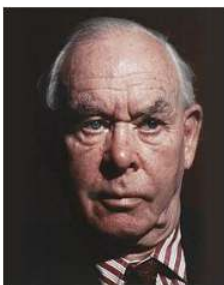


Figure 3.26: John Bowlby. Source.

Bowlby said that two things are needed for a healthy attachment: The caregiver must be responsive to the child's physical, social, and emotional needs; and the caregiver and child must engage in mutually enjoyable interactions (Bowlby, 1969). Additionally, Bowlby observed that infants would go to extraordinary lengths to prevent separation from their parents, such as crying, refusing to be comforted, and waiting for the caregiver to return. He observed that these same expressions were common to many other mammals, and consequently argued that these negative responses to separation serve an evolutionary function. Because mammalian infants cannot feed or protect themselves, they are dependent upon the care and protection of adults for survival. Thus, those infants who were able to maintain proximity to an attachment figure were more likely to survive and reproduce.

Erikson: Trust vs. Mistrust

As previously discussed in chapter 1, Erikson formulated an eight stage theory of psychosocial development. Erikson was in agreement on the importance of a secure base, arguing that the most important goal of infancy was the development of a basic sense of trust in one's caregivers. Consequently, the first stage, trust vs. mistrust, highlights the importance of attachment. Erikson maintained that the first year to year and a half of life involves the establishment of a sense of trust (Erikson, 1982). Infants are dependent and must rely on others to meet their basic physical needs as well as their needs for stimulation and comfort. A caregiver who consistently meets these needs instills a sense of trust or the belief that the world is a trustworthy place. The caregiver should not worry about overly indulging a child's need for comfort, contact or stimulation.

Problems establishing trust: Erikson (1982) believed that mistrust could contaminate all aspects of one's life and deprive the individual of love and fellowship with others. Consider the implications for establishing trust if a caregiver is unavailable or is upset and ill-prepared to care for a child. Or if a child is born prematurely, is unwanted, or has physical problems that make him or her less desirable to a parent. Under these circumstances, we cannot assume that the parent is going to provide the child with a feeling of trust.

Mary Ainsworth and the Strange Situation Technique

Developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth, a student of John Bowlby, continued studying the development of attachment in infants. Ainsworth and her colleagues created a laboratory test that measured an infant's attachment to his or her parent. The test is called **The Strange Situation Technique** because it is *conducted in a context that is unfamiliar to the child and therefore likely to heighten the child's need for his or her parent* (Ainsworth, 1979).

During the procedure, that lasts about 20 minutes, the parent and the infant are first left alone, while the infant explores the room full of toys. Then a strange adult enters the room and talks for a minute to the parent, after which the parent leaves the room. The stranger stays with the infant for a few minutes, and then the parent again enters and the stranger leaves the room. During the entire session, a video camera records the child's behaviors, which are later coded by trained coders. The investigators were especially interested in how the child responded to the caregiver leaving and returning to the room, referred to as the "reunion." On the basis of their behaviors, the children are categorized into one of four groups where each group reflects a different kind of attachment relationship with the caregiver. One style is secure and the other three styles are referred to as insecure.

- A child with a **secure attachment style** usually explores freely while the caregiver is present and may engage with the stranger. The child will typically play with the toys and bring one to the caregiver to show and describe from time to time. The child may be upset when the caregiver departs, but is also happy to see the caregiver return.
- A child with an **ambivalent** (sometimes called resistant) **attachment style** is wary about the situation in general, particularly the stranger, and stays close or even clings to the caregiver rather than exploring the toys. When the caregiver leaves, the child is extremely distressed and is ambivalent when the caregiver returns. The child may rush to the caregiver, but then fails to be comforted when picked up. The child may still be angry and even resist attempts to be soothed.
- A child with an **avoidant attachment style** will avoid or ignore the mother, showing little emotion when the mother departs or returns. The child may run away from the mother when she approaches. The child will not explore very much, regardless of who is there, and the stranger will not be treated much differently from the mother.
- A child with a **disorganized/disoriented attachment style** seems to have an inconsistent way of coping with the stress of the strange situation. The child may cry during the separation, but avoid the mother when she returns, or the child may approach the mother but then freeze or fall to the floor.

How common are the attachment styles among children in the United States? It is estimated that about 65 percent of children in the United States are securely attached. Twenty percent exhibit avoidant styles and 10 to 15 percent are ambivalent. Another 5 to 10 percent may be characterized as disorganized.



Figure 3.27. Source.

Some cultural differences in attachment styles have been found (Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2010). For example, German parents value independence and Japanese mothers are typically by their children's sides. As a result, the rate of insecure-avoidant attachments is higher in Germany and insecure-resistant attachments are higher in Japan. These differences reflect cultural variation rather than true insecurity, however (van Ijzendoorn and Sagi, 1999).

Keep in mind that methods for measuring attachment styles have been based on a model that reflects middle-class, U. S. values and interpretation. Newer methods for assessment attachment styles involve using a **Q-sort technique** in which a large number of behaviors are recorded on cards and the observer sorts the cards in a way that reflects the type of behavior that occurs within the situation (Waters, 1987). There are 90 items in the third version of the Q-sort technique, and examples of the behaviors assessed include:

- When child returns to mother after playing, the child is sometimes fussy for no clear reason.
- When the child is upset or injured, the child will accept comforting from adults other than mother.
- Child often hugs or cuddles against mother, without her asking or inviting the child to do so
- When the child is upset by mother's leaving, the child continues to cry or even gets angry after she is gone.

At least two researchers observe the child and parent in the home for 1.5-2 hours per visit. Usually two visits are sufficient to gather adequate information. The parent is asked if the behaviors observed are typical for the child. This information is used to test the validity of the Strange Situation classifications across age, cultures, and with clinical populations.

Caregiver Interactions and the Formation of Attachment: Most developmental psychologists argue that a child becomes **securely attached** when there is consistent contact from one or more caregivers who meet the physical and emotional needs of the child in a responsive and appropriate manner. However, even in cultures where mothers do not talk, cuddle, and play with their infants, secure attachments can develop (LeVine et. al., 1994).

The **insecure ambivalent style** occurs when the parent is insensitive and responds inconsistently to the child's needs. Consequently, the infant is never sure that the world is a trustworthy place or that he or she can rely on others without some anxiety. A caregiver who is unavailable, perhaps because of marital tension, substance abuse, or preoccupation with work, may send a message to the infant he or she cannot rely on having needs met. An infant who receives only sporadic attention when experiencing discomfort may not learn how to calm down. The child may cry if separated from the caregiver and also cry upon their return. They seek constant reassurance that never seems to satisfy their doubt. Keep in mind that clingy behavior can also just be part of a child's natural disposition or temperament and does not necessarily reflect some kind of parental neglect. Additionally, a caregiver that attends to a child's frustration can help teach them to be calm and to relax.

The **insecure avoidant style** is marked by insecurity, but this style is also characterized by a tendency to avoid contact with the caregiver and with others. This child may have learned that needs typically go unmet and learns that the caregiver does not provide care and cannot be relied upon for comfort, even sporadically. An insecure avoidant child learns to be more independent and disengaged.

The **insecure disorganized/disoriented style** represents the most insecure style of attachment and occurs when the child is given mixed, confused, and inappropriate responses from the caregiver. For example, a mother who suffers from schizophrenia may laugh when a child is hurting or cry when a child exhibits joy. The child does not learn how to interpret emotions or to connect with the unpredictable caregiver. This type of attachment is also often seen in children who have been abused. Research has shown that abuse disrupts a child's ability to regulate their emotions (Main & Solomon, 1990).



Figure 3.28. Source.

Caregiver Consistency: Having a consistent caregiver may be jeopardized if the infant is cared for in a day care setting with a high turn-over of staff or if institutionalized and given little more than basic physical care. Infants who, perhaps because of being in orphanages with inadequate care, have not had the opportunity to attach in infancy may still form initial secure attachments several years later. However, they may have more emotional problems of depression, anger, or be overly friendly as they interact with others (O'Connor et. al., 2003).

Social Deprivation: Severe deprivation of parental attachment can lead to serious problems. According to studies of children who have not been given warm, nurturing care, they may show developmental delays, failure to thrive, and attachment disorders (Bowlby, 1982). **Non-organic failure to thrive** is the *diagnosis for an infant who does not grow, develop, or gain weight on schedule*. In addition, postpartum depression can cause even a well-intentioned mother to neglect her infant.

Reactive Attachment Disorder: Children who experience social neglect or deprivation, repeatedly change primary caregivers that limit opportunities to form stable attachments, or are reared in unusual settings (such as institutions) that limit opportunities to form stable attachments can certainly have difficulty forming attachments. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical

Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), *those children experiencing neglectful situations and also displaying markedly disturbed and developmentally inappropriate attachment behavior, such as being inhibited and withdrawn, minimal social and emotional responsiveness to others, and limited positive affect, may be diagnosed with Reactive Attachment Disorder*. This disorder often occurs with developmental delays, especially in cognitive and language areas. Fortunately, the majority of severely neglected children do not develop Reactive Attachment Disorder, which occurs in less than 10% of such children. The quality of the caregiving environment after serious neglect affects the development of this disorder.

Resiliency: *Being able to overcome challenges and successfully adapt* is **Resiliency**. Even young children can exhibit strong resiliency to harsh circumstances. Resiliency can be attributed to certain personality factors, such as an easy-going temperament. Some children are warm, friendly, and responsive, whereas others tend to be more irritable, less manageable, and difficult to console, and these differences play a role in attachment (Gillath, Shaver, Baek, & Chun, 2008; Seifer, Schiller, Sameroff, Resnick, & Riordan, 1996). It seems safe to say that attachment, like most other developmental processes, is affected by an interplay of genetic and socialization influences.

Receiving support from others also leads to resiliency. A positive and strong support group can help a parent and child build a strong foundation by offering assistance and positive attitudes toward the newborn and parent. In a direct test of this idea, Dutch researcher van den Boom (1994) randomly assigned some babies' mothers to a training session in which they learned to better respond to their children's needs. The research found that these mothers' babies were more likely to show a secure attachment style in comparison to the mothers in a control group that did not receive training.

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10.5: Attachment in Adulthood

Hazan and Shaver (1987) described the attachment styles of adults, using the same three general categories proposed by Ainsworth's research on young children; secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent. Hazan and Shaver developed three brief paragraphs describing the three adult attachment styles. Adults were then asked to think about romantic relationships they were in and select the paragraph that best described the way they felt, thought, and behaved in these relationships (Table 7.4).

Table 7.4: Which of the following best describes you in your romantic relationships?

Secure	I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.
Avoidant	I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others. I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.
Nervous/Ambivalent	I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or won't stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this sometimes scares people away.

Bartholomew (1990) challenged the categorical view of attachment in adults and suggested that adult attachment was best described as varying along two dimensions; attachment-related-anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. **Attachment-related anxiety** refers to the extent to which an adult worries about whether their partner really loves them. Those who score high on this dimension fear that their partner will reject or abandon them (Fraley, Hudson, Heffernan, & Segal, 2015). **Attachment-related avoidance** refers to whether an adult can open up to others, and whether they trust and feel they can depend on others. Those who score high on attachment-related avoidance are uncomfortable with opening up and may fear that such dependency may limit their sense of autonomy (Fraley et al., 2015). According to Bartholomew (1990) this would yield four possible attachment styles in adults; secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful-avoidant (see Figure 7.19).

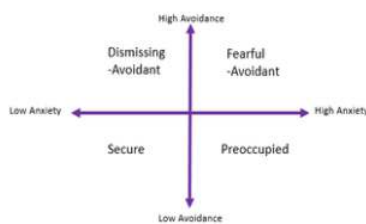


Figure 7.19: Four-Category Model with the Two- Dimensions of Attachment. Source:

Adapted from Fraley, et al., 2015. p. 355

Securely attached adults score lower on both dimensions. They are comfortable trusting their partners and do not worry excessively about their partner's love for them. Adults with a dismissing style score low on attachment-related anxiety, but higher on attachment-related avoidance. Such adults dismiss the importance of relationships. They trust themselves, but do not trust others, thus do not share their dreams, goals, and fears with others. They do not depend on other people, and feel uncomfortable when they have to do so.

Those with a preoccupied attachment are low in attachment-related avoidance, but high in attachment-related anxiety. Such adults are often prone to jealousy and worry that their partner does not love them as much as they need to be loved. Adults whose attachment style is fearful- avoidant score high on both attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety. These adults want close relationships, but do not feel comfortable getting emotionally close to others. They have trust issues with others and often do not trust their own social skills in maintaining relationships.

Research on attachment in adulthood has found that:

- Adults with insecure attachments report lower satisfaction in their relationships (Butzer, & Campbell, 2008; Holland, Fraley, & Roisman, 2012).
- Those high in attachment-related anxiety report more daily conflict in their relationships (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005).
- Those with avoidant attachment exhibit less support to their partners (Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002).
- Young adults show greater attachment-related anxiety than do middle-aged or older adults (Chopik, Edelstein, & Fraley, 2013).
- Some studies report that young adults show more attachment-related avoidance (Schindler, Fagundes, & Murdock, 2010), while other studies find that middle-aged adults show higher avoidance than younger or older adults (Chopik et al., 2013).
- Young adults with more secure and positive relationships with their parents make the transition to adulthood more easily than do those with more insecure attachments (Fraley, 2013).

Do people with certain attachment styles attract those with similar styles? When people are asked what kinds of psychological or behavioral qualities they are seeking in a romantic partner, a large majority of people indicate that they are seeking someone who is kind, caring, trustworthy, and understanding, that is the kinds of attributes that characterize a “secure” caregiver (Chappell & Davis, 1998). However, we know that people do not always end up with others who meet their ideals. Are secure people more likely to end up with secure partners, and, vice versa, are insecure people more likely to end up with insecure partners? The majority of the research that has been conducted to date suggests that the answer is “yes.” Frazier, Byer, Fischer, Wright, and DeBord (1996) studied the attachment patterns of more than 83 heterosexual couples and found that, if the man was relatively secure, the woman was also likely to be secure.

One important question is whether these findings exist because (a) secure people are more likely to be attracted to other secure people, (b) secure people are likely to create security in their partners over time, or (c) some combination of these possibilities. Existing empirical research strongly supports the first alternative. For example, when people have the opportunity to interact with individuals who vary in security in a speed-dating context, they express a greater interest in those who are higher in security than those who are more insecure (McClure, Lydon, Baccus, & Baldwin, 2010). However, there is also some evidence that people’s attachment styles mutually shape one another in close relationships. For example, in a longitudinal study, Hudson, Fraley, Vicary, and Brumbaugh (2012) found that, if one person in a relationship experienced a change in security, his or her partner was likely to experience a change in the same direction.



Figure 7.20: Sharing food, celebrations and traditions are some of the ways we establish secure attachments with our loved ones from an early age. [Image: skeeze]

Do early experiences as children shape adult attachment? The majority of research on this issue is retrospective; that is, it relies on adults’ reports of what they recall about their childhood experiences. This kind of work suggests that secure adults are more likely to describe their early childhood experiences with their parents as being supportive, loving, and kind (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). A number of longitudinal studies are emerging that demonstrate prospective associations between early attachment experiences and adult attachment styles and/or interpersonal functioning in adulthood. For example, Fraley, Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Owen, and Holland (2013) found in a sample of more than 700 individuals studied from infancy to adulthood that maternal sensitivity across development prospectively predicted security at age 18. Simpson, Collins, Tran, and Haydon (2007) found that attachment security, assessed in infancy in the strange situation, predicted peer competence in grades one to three, which, in turn, predicted the quality of friendship relationships at age 16, which, in turn, predicted the expression of positive and negative emotions in their adult romantic relationships at ages 20 to 23.

It is easy to come away from such findings with the mistaken assumption that early experiences “determine” later outcomes. To be clear: Attachment theorists assume that the relationship between early experiences and subsequent outcomes is probabilistic, not deterministic. Having supportive and responsive experiences with caregivers early in life is assumed to set the stage for positive social development. But that does not mean that attachment patterns are set in stone. In short, even if an individual has far from

optimal experiences in early life, attachment theory suggests that it is possible for that individual to develop well-functioning adult relationships through a number of corrective experiences, including relationships with siblings, other family members, teachers, and close friends. Security is best viewed as a culmination of a person's attachment history rather than a reflection of his or her early experiences alone. Those early experiences are considered important, not because they determine a person's fate, but because they provide the foundation for subsequent experiences.

Relationships with Parents and Siblings

In early adulthood the parent-child relationship has to transition toward a relationship between two adults. This involves a reappraisal of the relationship by both parents and young adults. One of the biggest challenges for parents, especially during emerging adulthood, is coming to terms with the adult status of their children. Aquilino (2006) suggests that parents who are reluctant or unable to do so may hinder young adults' identity development. This problem becomes more pronounced when young adults still reside with their parents. Arnett (2004) reported that leaving home often helped promote psychological growth and independence in early adulthood.

Sibling relationships are one of the longest-lasting bonds in people's lives. Yet, there is little research on the nature of sibling relationships in adulthood (Aquilino, 2006). What is known is that the nature of these relationships change, as adults have a choice as to whether they will maintain a close bond and continue to be a part of the life of a sibling. Siblings must make the same reappraisal of each other as adults, as parents have to with their adult children. Research has shown a decline in the frequency of interactions between siblings during early adulthood, as presumably peers, romantic relationships, and children become more central to the lives of young adults. Aquilino (2006) suggests that the task in early adulthood may be to maintain enough of a bond so that there will be a foundation for this relationship in later life. Those who are successful can often move away from the "older-younger" sibling conflicts of childhood, toward a more equal relationship between two adults. Siblings that were close to each other in childhood are typically close in adulthood (Dunn, 1984, 2007), and in fact, it is unusual for siblings to develop closeness for the first time in adulthood. Overall, the majority of adult sibling relationships are close (Cicirelli, 2009).

Erikson: Intimacy vs. Isolation

Erikson's (1950, 1968) sixth stage focuses on establishing intimate relationships or risking social isolation. Intimate relationships are more difficult if one is still struggling with identity. Achieving a sense of identity is a life-long process, as there are periods of identity crisis and stability. However, once identity is established intimate relationships can be pursued. These intimate relationships include acquaintanceships and friendships, but also the more important close relationships, which are the long-term romantic relationships that we develop with another person, for instance, in a marriage (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000).

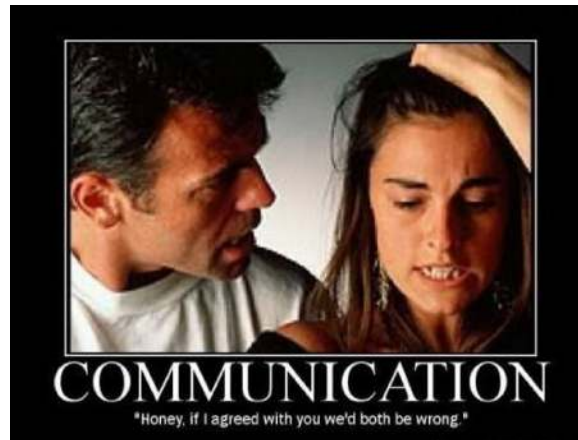
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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

11: Interpersonal Conflict

Which of your relationships contain the most conflict right now? Your answer to this question probably depends on the various contexts in your life. If you live with family, you may have daily conflicts as you try to balance your autonomy with the practicalities of living under your family's roof. Or if you live with friends, you may be negotiating roommate conflicts. You probably also have experiences managing conflict in romantic relationships and in the workplace. Think back and ask yourself, "How well do I handle conflict?" As with all areas of communication, we can improve if we have the background knowledge to identify relevant communication phenomena and the motivation to reflect on and enhance our communication skills. In this chapter, we will define interpersonal conflict, describe common conflict approaches, and explain how to be more competent when it comes to more effectively managing conflict in our lives.



Learning Objectives

- What is conflict, and what are some of the different ways we behave in conflict situations?
- How can we approach conflict effectively, and why is it important?

Successful students will be able to:

- define conflict
- explain the importance of effective conflict management
- identify five conflict styles
- demonstrate effective strategies for approaching and responding to conflict
- demonstrate effective apologies
- recognize how culture affects perceptions of conflict approaches
- identify four conflict triggers

[11.1: Introduction to Interpersonal Conflict](#)

[11.2: Interpersonal Conflict Defined](#)

[11.3: Conflict Management Styles](#)

[11.4: Unproductive Conflict](#)

[11.5: Conflict Resolution](#)

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11.1: Introduction to Interpersonal Conflict

Introduction

In 2021, news stories were dominated by the “Free Britney” movement and the battles between Britney Spears and her family. In November 2021, a judge terminated the conservatorship that had controlled the last 15 years of her life. She publicly blamed her family, saying “they hurt me deeper than you will ever know,” and severed her ties with her parents and sister. This case, which held the attention of fans around the world, is an example of both interpersonal and family conflict, centering on issues of power and control. Most of us, hopefully, will never experience conflict that is so severe and so public. But the underlying themes of conflict in this family dilemma are more common than one might expect.

When was the last time you had a disagreement, argument, or conflict with someone you cared about? Whether a conflict is minor, such as whether the dishwasher has been loaded properly, or major, such as dealing with issues of money, child-rearing, and relationship expectations, chances are you recently experienced interpersonal conflict. Communication and conflict are interwoven and affect most interpersonal relationships at some time, including, but not limited to, romantic partnerships, family, friends, and co-workers. Communication is a key component of interpersonal conflict in that communication behaviors can create conflict, reflect conflict, and serve as the instrument that delivers productive and unproductive conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). This chapter will call on you to reflect on your conflict patterns and to develop communication skills to help you navigate conflict more effectively in the future.

Benefits of Studying Interpersonal Conflict

The pervasiveness of conflict in everyday life provides a strong justification for studying interpersonal conflict. There are several personal benefits you may receive from studying interpersonal conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018).

- Conflict management skills are not inborn, rather they are learned. By studying interpersonal conflict, you can learn helpful relational skills for peaceful conflict resolution.
- Mental health may be improved as constructive approaches to conflict are practiced.
- Family relationships and overall well-being are linked to constructive conflict management.
- Long-term marital satisfaction may depend on effective conflict management.
- Romantic partners who practice positive conflict management are more likely to have happy relationships (Cramer, 2000).
- Workplace relationships are characterized by conflict by almost 85% of employees surveyed (1995). Learning effective conflict negotiation skills can help improve the quality of your work life.
- Victims of abuse benefit from examining alternative constructive models of conflict.

The next section of this chapter addresses various aspects of conflict including interpersonal matters, cultural differences, gender differences, and the digital divide.

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11.2: Interpersonal Conflict Defined

Key Concepts in Interpersonal Conflict

Chris and Michelle are a married couple with young children. Chris would like to move from California to Texas to raise their children, for job opportunities, and to afford a home. Michelle does not want to leave Southern California, her family and close friends, and her rewarding job. To add to the stress, Michelle's parents are pressuring her to stay in California. Chris and Michelle are experiencing what is known as interpersonal conflict. **Interpersonal conflict** occurs when two or more interdependent parties perceive and experience a struggle over incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Here is a breakdown of some of the key concepts in the definition.

- **Interdependence:** Interpersonal conflict occurs in part because individuals are connected and depend on one another. In the example, as a married couple with children, Chris and Michelle are very invested in their relationship, with very integrated lives.
- **Incompatible goals:** Each of us has goals for our relationships, our identity, and ourselves. Sometimes our goals do not match up with the goals of others, and this can create a conflict. In the example, Chris's goal was to move to Texas, whereas Michelle's goal was to stay in California.
- **Scarce resources:** Resources are commodities such as money, time, relationships, and affection. If we believe there are not enough resources available (such as money), this can create conflict. In the case of Michelle and Chris, there are a variety of resources at stake, such as relationships with families and friends, future employment, and housing.
- **Interference from others:** Interference from others can come from any outsider who gets in the way of your relationship. Marriage and family therapists have long noted that in-laws are among the top sources of conflict and divorce for couples. Whether it is a mother-in-law interfering with your decision-making, or a brother-in-law who is constantly borrowing money, it can create stress and frustration for a relationship. In the example, Michelle's parents are pressuring her to stay in California.

Now that we have identified some common causes of conflict, can you recognize some of the conflicts you have experienced with friends, family, and romantic partners? In addition to causes of conflict, factors such as culture, gender, and even social media add a layer to how we experience and negotiate conflict.

Conflict and Culture

Laura, who is Japanese Hawaiian, and Steve, who is Italian, have been married for more than 40 years. They often reflect on how bringing their diverse cultures together has enriched their lives, but not without a few bumps in the road along the way. Over the years, they have observed that their cultural differences shape how they negotiate issues ranging from food (Italian vs. Japanese Hawaiian), child-rearing, religion, and family expectations. They are not alone. According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2019, roughly 1 in 5 marriages in the United States were interracial (Parker & Barroso, 2021). With the increasing diversity in our society, you will likely have friends, neighbors, co-workers, romantic partners, and family members from culturally different groups. While increasing interaction between diverse individuals enhances our lives in many ways, it can add an important layer to conflict exchanges, and that is how our culture shapes the way we negotiate conflict. In this section, we will look at how culture plays a part in our conflict experiences, by examining face negotiation theory, cultural background, and situational factors.

Have you ever heard someone say, "I need to save face?" In the United States, face-saving generally refers to an individual recovering from embarrassment, a put-down, or a public disappointment. However, the concept of face takes on a different meaning when we examine it from a lens of conflict and culture. **Face** refers to the favorable social impression we would like to present during social interactions (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). For example, you might want the people in your life to see you as a caring family member, a trusting friend, a good student, and as funny and adventurous. The concept of face is at the heart of **face-negotiation theory**, which provides a useful way to understand the relationships between culture and conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1988). The theory suggests that we use communication to maintain and negotiate our face and that culture influences the way we handle conflict because of our face concerns, cultural background, and situational factors. These three factors interact to shape how we communicate about conflict.

Take a moment to pause and reflect: How do you want other people to see you? The impression you would like to make on others is known as our face concerns. **Face concerns** are the social impression you would like to make on others and are tied into your identity. Take for example when you meet a romantic partner's family for the first time. It is likely that you would like to make a positive impression on the family and hope that they will like you for who you are. We have two face concerns: self-face and other-

face. Self-face is when we focus on maintaining the image we project to others, and other-face is when we focus on protecting the image and feelings of others. Your face concerns are in turn shaped by your cultural background.

Your cultural background is shaped by your family's cultural heritage, ethnic identity, and cultural values, such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, and high- and low-context communication styles (Hofstede, 2001). In individualistic, low-context cultures like that of the United States, where people tend to prefer individuality, autonomy, and care for themselves and their immediate family, people are more likely to feel comfortable disagreeing openly and communicating directly about conflict. In collectivistic, high-context cultures like those in China and Mexico, where people tend to put group needs before individual needs in exchange for loyalty, and expect their in-groups will take care of them, people may be more likely to use indirect messages, avoidance, and accommodation. Low- and high-context communication, which is covered in detail in Chapter 8, Section 8.3, refers to the degree to which cultures prefer direct, explicit messages or indirect, implicit messages (Hall, 1976). For example, research across different cultures, including those in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Mexico, and the United States, found that participants' levels of individualism/collectivism directly impacted their conflict styles, with collectivists preferring integrating and compromising approaches and individualists relying on more competing and dominating styles (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Situational factors include the roles you play (daughter/son, boyfriend/girlfriend, employee/boss), your status, your communication preferences, and cultural norms and rules that guide your behavior. To illustrate, cultures have different beliefs about how power should be shared amongst the people in the culture, known as **power distance** (Hofstede, 2001). In low-power-distance cultures, such as the United States, power is supposed to be distributed equally, meaning that the culture tries to diminish the differences between low- and high-status individuals. In high-power-distance cultures, it is accepted that power is distributed unequally, thus people in high-status positions are afforded special treatment and privilege. For example, in the United States, it is considered appropriate for college students to question and at times challenge their professors. In high-power-distance cultures, such as in China, it is considered inappropriate and disrespectful for a student to question a professor, even if the professor has made an error. Differences in perceptions of status and power will influence how, why, and with whom we choose to initiate conflict.

Saving Face in Conflict

It is important to understand that conflict is viewed differently across cultures. Consider what you recall from Chapter 8 on how low- and high-context cultures and communication shape our interpersonal relationships. See for example this YouTube video on "The Importance of Face in China," which explores the idea that winning a conflict isn't seen as positive in all cultures. In the video, Rupert Munton talks about a situation that involved two British engineers who were based in Beijing and their interaction with a local engineer. In this video, you will come to find out that sometimes winning an argument or being "right" will cost you.

Creative Commons Video: [The Importance of 'Face' in China - Rupert Munton - ClarkMorgan Insights - YouTube](#) – accessible with closed-captioning and transcript included.

Discussion Questions

1. Reflecting on your culture, how do you view conflict? Is conflict good? Is it bad?
2. When you are in conflict, what is your main goal?
3. What does "saving face" mean to you?
4. Do you try to save face during the conflict, or save the group's face?
5. Do you adjust your conflict management style when working cross-culturally?
6. What is one main takeaway from the video that you can apply in school, at work, or in your social life?

Gender Communication and Conflict

In 1992, psychologist John Gray published the book *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. This runaway bestseller was based on the idea that not only are people different genders, but we are from completely different planets in terms of our problem-solving communication. The truth of the matter is a little more nuanced, with research showing that while there may be some differences, there are likely more similarities in how people handle conflict (Cupach et al., 2010). In fact, most of the research on gender differences and conflict management has shown weak or inconsistent results.

Researchers have long tried to establish a link between biological sex, gender roles, and approaches to managing conflict. One large study of more than 6,000 men and women in the workplace, spanning 40 years, demonstrated that women were more likely to

use other-face conflict management strategies in order to maintain relationships, and men were more likely to use self-face strategies that are competitive in nature (Rahim & Katz, 2019). Other researchers have argued that gender identity roles (the degree to which one identifies as stereotypically feminine or masculine) are a better predictor than biological sex of conflict approaches. One study of gender role identity and conflict found that individuals who identified as masculine showed a preference for a dominating approach, whereas individuals who identified as feminine were highest on avoiding, and individuals who identified as androgynous preferred an integrating style (Brewer et al., 2002). What is clear is that more research is needed to examine some of the subtle variations in conflict style that are related to gender roles and identity.

Most observations regarding interpersonal conflict and gender differences are likely due to our cultural beliefs and stereotypes, not differences based on gender or sex. Although early research on gender differences in conflict tried to draw conclusions based on biological sex, recent research shows that how you communicate during conflict is more likely a result of factors such as your family upbringing, societal expectations, and cultural background. To illustrate, in Nila's family, she and her sister are constantly told to be nice and play fair when they have arguments, but their brothers are told to take their problems outside and that "boys will be boys." If you grew up in a family with other children, you may have witnessed firsthand that your family expected different behavior from your siblings based on their gender. Yet, in other families, children may have been raised without strict gender norms. These expectations set us up to communicate with people based on our stereotypes of their sex or gender, which can influence how we handle conflict. Contrary to sex-role stereotypes about conflict within interpersonal relationships, women have been shown to be more assertive and openly address conflict, whereas men have been shown to be more likely to withdraw. However, as our knowledge about gender and sex-role identities continues to evolve, it is clear that it is difficult to draw conclusions about conflict behavior based solely on gender.

As we can see, the research findings on conflict and gender are mixed, and likely other factors shape how you handle conflicts, such as your age, unique family dynamics, cultural background, stereotypes, and the topic of conflict. It is important to be aware of sex-role stereotypes and how they shape our responses to other people. We need to take the time to get to know people so that we can adjust our communication to the individual, and not just the stereotypes we hold regarding their gender, culture, age, and other traits. Take some time to reflect on how gender stereotypes regarding conflict play out in your life. Have you ever been in a situation where you made judgments about someone's ability to manage conflict based on their biological sex or gender identity? Have you ever been in a situation where you felt someone else stereotyped you due to culturally based gender role expectations?

Digital Communication and Conflict

With the invention of the internet, cell phones, and social media, the world experienced a revolution through the creation of new computer-mediated communication channels. These technological innovations have had a profound impact on communication, changing how we date (Match.com, Plenty of Fish, Bumble), how we communicate with our friends (Snapchat), how we share hobbies (i.e. Twitch for gaming), and how we communicate at work (Zoom). It was inevitable that these innovations would also impact how we experience and negotiate interpersonal conflict. Digital forms of communication, whether e-mail, texting, or using an app like Snapchat, have become sources of conflict, changed how we handle conflict, and contributed to problematic conflict behaviors.

Digital mediated communication has become a source of conflict for people. To illustrate, the Pew Research Center (Lenhart et al., 2020) found that among coupled adults in the United States (married, cohabiting, or in a committed relationship), approximately half (51%) say that cell phones can be a cause of conflict because their partners are distracted by their cell phone while they are trying to have a conversation with them. Not only can the amount of time spent on cell phones be a source of conflict, but also can social media. "Teens, technology, and friendships" (ibid.) reports that 31% of social media users have fought with a friend over something that occurred online or through a text message. Social media has been shown to promote conflict in romantic relationships by increasing jealousy, suspicion, negative social comparisons, and online opportunities for infidelity (Clayton et al., 2013). Part of the challenge is that the use of computer-mediated communication, whether texting, emailing, or tweeting, is accompanied by a loss of important communication cues, such as tone of voice and micro-facial expressions. "Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can inhibit what people are willing to express" (Suler, 2004, p. 322). When negotiating conflict online, whether through email or social media, there is often a loss of immediate feedback. In addition, media platforms promote negative social comparisons and can serve as a distraction in face-to-face interactions.

Have you ever tried to settle an argument on social media? Or have you ever tried to negotiate a conflict through a text message? If so, you are not alone. Changes in social media and technology dependence have provided people with new options for responding to conflicts. For example, we have witnessed the birth of "call-out culture." Call-out culture refers to using social media to confront

someone publicly. One call-out technique is flaming, a hostile and aggressive online interaction that involves directing insulting messages at another person. Online communication has a **disinhibition effect**, which means that people feel safe saying things online and through digital media that they would rarely say to someone if they were in a face-to-face interaction. For example, in 2013 rapper Meek Mill publicly shamed a lifelong friend for asking for money by posting the entire exchange on Instagram. Airing grievances and making personal attacks such as this in public online settings may make the attacker feel as though there is a veil of protection but, in reality, public shaming can heighten the hurt of the conflict. If you have a conflict that does not go well, you have other options that are not available in face-to-face conversations, such as blocking the other person, leaving their messages unread, or copying and sharing messages for feedback from others. Research has shown that 60% of all teens report taking an action like unfriending, blocking, or deleting photos of a former friend (Lenhart et al., 2020).

Addressing interpersonal conflicts through digital communication media may provide some protection for freely sharing your feelings on difficult issues without facing immediate criticism, nonetheless, as with face-to-face communication, we should make every effort to practice mindful communication skills when negotiating conflict in a digital world.

Before calling someone out through social media, consider these tips:

1. If you are going to send a harshly worded email, text, or post, consider having a trusted friend review the message first.
2. Take some time to pause and cool down before sending critical or combative messages.
3. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were on the receiving end of the message.
4. Regarding personal relationships with friends, family members, or romantic partners, although digital forms of communication provide some protection when delivering critical messages, make every effort to try and resolve relational conflict in a setting that allows for real-time feedback, such as face-to-face, via video calls, or through a phone call.

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11.3: Conflict Management Styles

Would you describe yourself as someone who prefers to avoid conflict? Do you like to get your way? Are you good at working with someone to reach a solution that is mutually beneficial? Odds are that you have been in situations where you could answer yes to each of these questions. You may also find that one of the above approaches is preferable for most situations you face, making it your primary or “go-to” conflict style. Conflict management styles are the communication strategies we use that attempt to avoid, address, or resolve a conflict. In this section, we will describe five approaches for managing conflict: competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating.

Each of these conflict styles emphasize a dynamic between concern for self and others. In order to better understand the elements of the five styles of conflict management, we will apply each to the following scenario. Amal and Vaughn have been married for seventeen years. Amal is growing frustrated because Vaughn continues to give money to their teenager, Sasha, even though they both decided to keep Sasha on a fixed allowance. While conflicts regarding money and child rearing are very common, we will see the numerous ways that Amal and Vaughn could approach this problem as we address each of the five styles. We rarely are conscious of our approach. Rather, unless we’ve been trained, we tend to handle conflict habitually, in the default ways we’ve been conditioned through observing others (e.g., family, culture).

Competing



(Image: [CC0](#))

Coercive Competitive strategies can include verbal and/or nonverbal aggressive acts such as threats, yelling, or violence.

The competing style indicates a high concern for self and a low concern for other. When we compete, we are striving to “win” the conflict, potentially at the expense or “loss” of the other person. One way we may gauge our win is by being granted or taking concessions from the other person. For example, if Vaughn gives Sasha extra money behind Amal’s back, then Vaughn is taking an indirect competitive route. The competing style also involves the use of power, which can be noncoercive or coercive (Sillars, 1980). Noncoercive strategies include requesting and persuading. Amal could try to persuade Vaughn to stop giving Sasha extra allowance money by bringing up their fixed budget or by reminding Vaughn that they are saving for a summer vacation. Coercive strategies may include aggressive communication directed at rousing your partner’s emotions through insults, profanity, and yelling, or through threats of punishment if you do not get your way. If Amal is the primary income earner in the family, they could use that power to threaten to take Vaughn’s ATM card away if Vaughn continues to give Sasha money. In all these scenarios, the “win” that could result is only short term and can lead to conflict escalation, even in the seemingly innocuous noncoercive situation, because the core of the conflict was not resolved. Each parent’s goals for Sasha may still be incompatible.

Interpersonal conflict is rarely isolated, meaning ripple effects can occur that connect the current conflict to previous and future conflicts. Vaughn’s behind-the-scenes money giving or Amal’s confiscation of the ATM card could lead to built-up negative emotions that could further test the relationship.

Avoiding



(Image: [CC0](#))

When people engage in an Avoiding style, they physical, mentally, and/or emotionally withdraw from the conflict and do not communicate about the issue(s).

The avoiding style of conflict management often indicates a low concern for self and a low concern for other, and no overt or direct communication about the conflict takes place. However, in some cultures that emphasize group harmony over individual interests, and even in some situations in the United States, avoiding a conflict can indicate a high level of concern for the other. In general, avoiding doesn't mean that there is no communication about the conflict. Remember, you cannot not communicate. Even when we try to avoid conflict, we may intentionally or unintentionally give away our feelings through our verbal and nonverbal communication. Amal's sarcastic tone when telling Vaughn "You are soooo good with money!" and subsequent eye roll both bring the conflict to the surface without specifically addressing it. The avoiding style is either passive or indirect, which may make this style less effective than others.

We may decide to avoid conflict for many different reasons, some of which are better than others. If you view the conflict as having little importance to you, it may be better to ignore it. If the person with whom you're in conflict with will only be working in your office for a week, you may perceive a conflict to be temporary and choose to avoid it, hoping it will solve itself. If you are not emotionally invested in the conflict, you may be able to reframe your perspective and see the situation in a different way, therefore resolving the issue. In all these cases, avoiding doesn't really require an investment of time, emotion, or communication skill, so there is not much at stake to lose. However, while it may be easy to tolerate a problem when you're not personally invested in it or view it as temporary, when faced with a situation like Amal and Vaughn's, avoidance may just make the problem worse. For example, avoidance could first manifest as changing the subject, and then progress from avoiding the issue to avoiding the person altogether, to even ending the relationship.

Indirect strategies of hinting and joking also fall under the avoiding style. When we hint, we drop clues that we hope our partner will find and piece together to see the problem and hopefully change, thereby solving the problem without any direct communication. However, often the person dropping the hints overestimates their partner's detective abilities. For example, when Amal leaves the bank statement on the kitchen table in hopes that Vaughn will realize how much extra money is being given to Sasha, Vaughn may simply ignore it. We also overestimate our partner's ability to decode the jokes we make about a conflict situation. It is more likely the receiver of the jokes will think you're genuinely trying to be funny or feel provoked or insulted than realize the conflict situation that you are referencing. More frustration may develop when the hints and jokes are not accurately decoded, which often leads to a more extreme form of hinting/joking: passive-aggressive behavior.

Passive-aggressive behavior is a way of dealing with conflict in which one person indirectly communicates negative thoughts or feelings through nonverbal behaviors, such as not completing a task. For example, Amal may wait a few days to deposit money into the bank so Vaughn can't withdraw it to give to Sasha. Although passive-aggressive behavior can feel rewarding in the moment, it is one of the most unproductive ways to deal with conflict. However, as noted above, avoidance can be appropriate in some situations—for example, when the conflict is temporary, when the stakes are low or there is little personal investment, or when there is the potential for violence or retaliation.

Accommodating

The accommodating conflict management style indicates a low concern for self and a high concern for other, and is often viewed as passive or submissive, in that someone complies with or obliges another. Basically, accommodating entails doing what the other wants, whereas avoiding is doing nothing in a situation. It should be noted that sometimes avoiding often leads to accommodating

indirectly as not addressing a problem or voicing our opinion can lead others to perceive that we are okay with doing things their way.

The context for and motivation behind accommodating play an important role in whether or not it is an appropriate approach. Generally, we accommodate because we are being generous, we are obeying, we are yielding (Bobot, 2010). If we are being generous, we accommodate because we genuinely want to. If we are obeying, we don't have a choice but to accommodate (perhaps due to the potential for negative consequences or punishment). If we yield, we may have our own views or goals but give up on them due to fatigue, time constraints, or because a better solution has been offered.

Accommodating can be appropriate when there is little chance that our own goals can be achieved, when we don't have much to lose by accommodating, when we feel we are wrong, or when advocating for our own needs could negatively affect the relationship (Isenhardt & Spangle, 2000). The occasional accommodation can be useful in maintaining a relationship. For example, Amal may say, "It's OK that you gave Sasha some extra money. Sasha did have to spend more on gas this week since the prices went up." However, being a team player can slip into being a pushover, which people generally do not appreciate. If Amal keeps telling Vaughn, "It's OK this time," the family may find themselves short on spending money at the end of the month.

Compromising

The compromising style shows a moderate concern for self and other. Even though we often hear that the best way to handle a conflict is to compromise, the compromising style isn't a win/win solution; it is a partial win/lose. In essence, when we compromise, we give up some or most of what we want. It's true that the conflict gets resolved temporarily, but lingering thoughts of what you gave up could lead to a future conflict. Compromising may be a good strategy when there are time limitations or when prolonging a conflict may lead to relationship deterioration. Compromise may also be good when both parties have equal power or when other resolution strategies have not worked (Macintosh & Stevens, 2008). Compromising may help conflicting parties come to a resolution, but neither may be completely satisfied if they each had to give something up.

Compromising versus Accommodating

People often get accommodating and compromising confused. Accommodating means sacrificing your needs/wants/desires for what the other wants, without them giving anything in return. When you compromise, both parties give something and gain something.

A negative of compromising is that it may be used as an easy way out of a conflict. The compromising style is most effective when both parties find the solution reasonably agreeable. If Amal values using allowance to teach responsibility and Vaughn wants to give Sasha an extra twenty dollars a week to make Sasha's life easier, they may decide to compromise by giving Sasha ten more dollars a week.

Collaborating

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

Problem-Solving

When trying to collaborate on solving a conflict, it is useful to use the following five-step problem-solving sequence:

1. Identify the problem(s).
2. Analyze the problem(s), the causes, and symptoms. In other words, how did the problem come about and why are you having this conflict?
3. Identify the goals/needs of each person in the conflict. In other words, what does each person want?

4. Identify solutions that might solve the problem and meet the goals/needs of the conflict participants. Be creative and think outside the box if necessary.
5. Evaluate the solutions that were identified. When evaluating the solutions, you should consider the following: Will it solve the problem? Will it satisfy the goals/needs of the conflict participants? What are some potential issues that might arise when the choice is implemented?

Here are some tips for collaborating and achieving a win/win outcome (Hargie, 2011):

- Avoid viewing the conflict as a contest you are trying to win.
- Remain flexible and realize there are solutions yet to be discovered.
- Separate between the person and the problem (don't make it personal).
- Determine the underlying needs driving the other person's demands.
- Identify areas of common ground or shared interests that you can work from to develop solutions.
- Ask questions to allow them to clarify and to help you understand their perspective.

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11.4: Unproductive Conflict

Learned Communication Responses to Conflict

Have you ever walked away from a conflict feeling bad about your behavior? You are not alone, as conflict can be a frustrating emotional experience that can bring out the worst in us. Unproductive conflict behaviors consist of learned communication responses to conflict that can damage relationships, escalate a conflict, stifle conflict resolution, and contribute to dysfunction in relationships. Unproductive conflict behaviors are often used to set up attacks in conflict. They may lead to short-term wins, but they sacrifice the health of the relationship and the self-concept of the other people in the conflict. In this section, you will first learn about the Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse, which are broad patterns of responses to conflict that harm relationships. Second, you will be introduced to unproductive communication behaviors that are ineffective for conflict resolution.

Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse

Imagine that you are about to get married, and a family member comes to you and tells you that they can predict whether or not you will be divorced in five years. Would you like to know their prediction? While much of interpersonal research has focused on what we can do with our communication to have happy relationships, researcher John Gottman has made a career of studying communication behaviors that sabotage our closest relationships and what we can do to change these negative patterns. He has identified four communication styles that can predict the end of a relationship due to their unproductive and dysfunctional nature (Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman, 2014). He calls them the Four Horsemen of the Relational Apocalypse: criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness. These four forms of communication can sabotage your successful management of conflict.



Figure 11.4.1: [The Four Horsemen](#) are used by permission from The Gottman Institute. Image by Julie Schwartz Gottman, John Gottman, and The Gottman Institute. Source: [The Four Horsemen: The Antidotes](#).

Criticism

This occurs when we publicly or privately call out someone's faults in a negative manner. In Figure 9.5.1, criticism is described as verbally attacking someone's character or personality. In relationships, it can be necessary to offer feedback, share complaints, or offer a critique. However, criticism is different in that in addition to the issues being discussed, it relies on making a personal attack on the other person's self-concept. Criticism can be private, such as between two people, or public, such as when someone criticizes their partner in front of other people. Public criticism can feel more damaging because it is shared in front of other people, causing the recipient to lose face or experience shame. Ongoing criticism can lead to conflict.

Complaint: "I feel frustrated because you keep buying candy for the kids. I thought we agreed that we are going to try to limit how much candy they eat."

Criticism: "You are a horrible partner and parent. Not only do you not honor our agreement, but you are also encouraging unhealthy eating habits in our kids by loading them up with sugar."

Contempt

This refers to the extreme dislike of another person and may include negative verbal and nonverbal expressions towards another person. Figure 9.5.1 captures that contempt leads to attacks, insults, and abuse. Specific communication messages that fall under contempt include insults, mockery, sarcasm, disapproval, judgment, name-calling, and negative labels (Gottman, 1994). Nonverbal indicators of contempt include eye-rolling, facial expressions indicating disgust and anger (such as the nose wrinkle), and aggressive hand gestures. Contempt is considered to be one of the most corrosive behaviors for relationships.

Consider this exchange between David and Stephanie, where Stephanie's response indicates she is feeling contempt for David.

David: "I would like us to take another look at our family budget. I am worried that our family is making too many materialistic purchases that are not in our family's best interest."

Stephanie: "Hah! Are you suggesting I'm materialistic? Give me a break (rolling eyes)! If you learned to manage your money better and figure out a simple budget, I wouldn't have to break my back trying to support this family. I should have listened to my family when they told me you were going to bleed me dry financially."

Defensiveness

This is a common response to feedback and criticism. Figure 9.5.1 identifies that when people are defensive, they assume the role of the victim and try to reverse the blame. Rather than listening and considering the feedback, the recipient tries to protect themselves by making excuses, denying responsibility, blaming and or accusing the other person, justifying their behavior, or offering a counter-criticism. The problem is that deflecting criticism with defensiveness leaves conflict issues unresolved. Gottman found that there are specific communication behaviors that trigger defensiveness, including negative mind-reading and the speaker's tone of voice. Negative mind-reading occurs when someone makes negative attributions about our thoughts, motives, and behavior, such as "You always put yourself first and you never think about how I feel." Negative mind-reading is further exacerbated by a negative tone of voice, which can receive a different response than if the message was delivered with a neutral or positive tone of voice.

Stonewalling

This occurs when the receiver emotionally or physically withdraws from the interaction, closing themselves off from the other person because they feel overwhelmed. Stonewalling is a form of avoidance that is often a response to criticism and contempt. As Figure 9.5.1 indicates, stonewalling is used to create distance, indicate disapproval, and create separation. According to Gottman, it is common for people to become physiologically flooded during conflict exchanges (in other words, overcome with negative emotions), which leaves them needing a break from the interaction. When we use stonewalling as a response, we tend to stop listening, try to change or avoid the subject, and physically turn away from the other person. Nonverbal indicators of stonewalling include a lack of eye contact, minimal facial expressions, head movement, and vocalizations.

For example, consider the situation of Rebecca and Javier, the happy new parents of a baby boy. Javier's mother lives just five minutes away from the new parents and has taken to dropping in daily to visit her grandson. Rebecca is frustrated by the unannounced visits and would like Javier to intervene with his mother. Javier believes his mom just wants to help and feels trapped between his wife and mother. The next time that Rebecca brings up the issue, Javier is overwhelmed with feelings of guilt. Rather than dealing with the problem, he tells Rebecca that he does not have time to discuss the issue and he leaves for a walk. Continued unresolved conflict may lead to defensiveness.



Figure 11.4.2 [Four horsemen of the apocalypse](#) by [Humber Museums](#)

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Communication Barriers to Conflict Management

Now that you understand the Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse and the negative communication patterns that can harm relationships, let's examine some specific unproductive responses to conflict. Increasing your awareness of unproductive conflict can help you recognize how these behaviors can create negative conflict spirals, identify these behaviors in your interactions with others, and promote awareness of alternative, more collaborative and peaceful, responses.

Gunnysacking

A gunnysack is a large burlap sack. In the world of conflict, gunnysacking refers to storing up one's grievances and unloading them all at once at a later date on the other party. For example, consider the couple Erin and Gavin who have been dating for two years. Erin would like to discuss the future of their relationship, but Gavin, in a defensive response, uses gunnysacking and starts to unload all sorts of grievances, such as Erin's money and time management, and lack of cooking skills, as reasons he is not ready to discuss the future of their relationship. Erin is caught off guard and is curious why she hasn't been made aware of these issues before this time. Another conflict behavior that is closely related to gunnysacking is known as kitchen sinking.

Kitchen Sinking

Whereas with gunnysacking people store up their grievances to unload them at a later date, kitchen sinking refers to bringing up past conflicts, even those resolved, to gain leverage in the conflict. The challenge created by kitchen sinking is that it can distract from the conflict at hand by bringing up the past.

Blame

Some conflicts have a clearly identifiable source, but often there are multiple causes for the conflicts we experience. Blame, or trying to place responsibility for the conflict on another person, is primarily only effective in making the other party feel defensive. In the landmark book *Getting to yes* the authors recommend separating people from the issues. In other words, rather than blaming the other person, recognize that we all play a part in the conflict process and that we must isolate the conflict as the source of the problem, not the other party (Fisher et al., 2011).

Beltlining

This refers to a boxing move that means to hit below the belt. In terms of conflict, this metaphor refers to using intimate information against each other to cause hurt and anger. For example, Annabelle and Ariana are having a conflict over their friendship and Ariana beltlines Annabelle with this comment: "You have often wondered why you don't have more friends. Based on how you are acting right now, I don't need to wonder anymore."

Force

In January of 2021, Kanye West made headlines when he dropped a new song with the lyrics "God saved me from that crash / just so I can beat Pete Davidson's a**." We live in a society where images of force are often glorified not only in song lyrics, but also in movies, gaming, and professional fighting. Unfortunately, the use of force to control conflict is too common in interpersonal relationships. Force refers to using physical pressure to exert control in conflict exchanges and can include both exertions directed at inanimate objects, such as throwing and breaking a vase, or physical assault against another person. Of all the unproductive

conflict behaviors listed here, this one is the most harmful and dangerous. According to the [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#) Statistics (2015), 21% of college students report dating violence by a current partner, and 32% of college students have experienced dating violence from a previous romantic partner.

Manipulation

This unproductive conflict strategy includes one party being extremely charming and even generous to help sway the conflict outcome in their direction. For example, Ian wants to buy a new surfboard. To soften up his wife, Lily, for the big purchase, he makes favorite dinner and brings home a bouquet of roses, thinking that she won't say no after he was so "considerate." However, if Lily finds out that Ian was merely being nice to gain an advantage, this may harm the trust in their relationship over the long run.

Personal Rejection

This occurs when one party in the conflict withholds love, affection, and attention from the other party. The strategy is designed to reject the other person in hopes that they will give in to the other person and come back to reconcile. For example, after a family conflict with his parents, Darren refuses to accept holiday gifts from his parents for his kids and sends them back, unopened.

Counterpunch

This is a defensive response to conflict whereby rather than responding to the initial topic of conflict, the other person reacts by sharing their own, often unrelated criticism. For example, Sara asks Ethan to make a better effort cleaning up after himself in the kitchen. Rather than responding to Sara's request, Ethan responds with, "If you were a better cook, it might motivate me to clean up my dishes."

Labeling

This occurs when you assign negative terms to the other person's behavior. We can do this internally by just thinking about it in our heads, or externally by sharing our labels with others, or by labeling the other person during our interaction. Not only can labels be extremely hurtful, but when we use labels to assign meaning to the behavior of other people, we begin to view those people through the labels. For example, Mason works up the courage to tell their father that they do not want to go into the family business, but instead would like to go to college. His father, who is extremely disappointed, responds by telling Mason that they are "ungrateful," "selfish," and a "bad son."

Silencers

These behaviors can stifle and silence the conflict, such as crying, yelling, and heavy breathing. When conflict escalates quickly, parties may use silencers to deflect attention away from the conflict issue and instead make the conflict about the silencers. For example, let's say that friends Jasmine and Sam are having a conflict over money. Jasmine assertively tells Sam that she expects to be repaid for the money she lent them. Rather than responding to Jasmine's request, Sam begins crying and suggests that Jasmine is a bully for bringing up the topic. The conflict now becomes about Jasmine's approach and Sam's crying; the money problem is left without being addressed.

As we can see, there are a variety of ways we can worsen conflict, hurt the other person, and hurt our relationships. It is now time to turn our attention to positive communication behaviors that you can use to resolve your differences.

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11.5: Conflict Resolution

Using Conflict as an Opportunity



Figure 11.5.1: This fortune says, “The purpose of argument

should not be victory, but progress.”

[The Purpose of Argument is Progress](#) by [Jon Collier](#) from [Flickr](#) [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

As we have learned so far, interpersonal conflict can be a complicated, emotional, and frustrating experience. It is equally important to recognize that conflict is normal and can be an opportunity to bring people together. Thankfully, there are several helpful communication strategies available to you for conflict resolution. In this section, you will review communication skills that help promote peaceful conflict resolution, learn a model of conflict resolution, and learn about alternative options for conflict management.

Communication Skills for Effective Conflict Resolution

As previously noted, communication and conflict are closely woven together. Thus, communication behaviors can both serve as a source of conflict and as the key to resolving interpersonal conflict. Throughout this text, you have learned a variety of interpersonal communication skills that will come in handy when trying to resolve conflict. This section will provide an overview of key communication skills for effective conflict resolution and provide additional tips to help in the process.

Mindfulness

Approach conflict with mindfulness. Mindfulness refers to being present in the moment, with increased awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and communication behaviors. To approach conflict mindfully, consider your conflict opening, including your tone of voice and tone of the message. For example, Liana is aware that she is an assertive communicator who at times can be very passionate about her views. When addressing conflicts with her friends or family she makes a conscious effort to use a considerate tone and to find the right words to start the discussion. A gentle start to the conflict can help make the other person more willing to listen.

Perception Checking

When negotiating conflict, it is important to understand the source of the conflict and the perspective of the other parties. Take the time to check your perceptions about the cause of the conflict and how the other person is feeling.

Being Unconditionally Constructive

Regardless of the approach used by the other party in the conflict, commit to being unconditionally constructive, which means adhering to the principles of ethical communication by honoring yourself, the other person, and the relationship, and not engaging in communication behaviors that will harm the other party or the relationship. We cannot change how others will respond to us, but we can choose to control our own communication behaviors (Fisher et al., 2011).

The 5 to 1 Rule

People in satisfying and stable relationships share more positive than negative messages about their relationships and each other. Even during an argument, it is worthwhile to take the time to appreciate the other person. This phenomenon, which is called the 5

to 1 Rule, is particularly important when trying to resolve conflicts (Gottman, 1994). To practice the 5 to 1 Rule, include positive communication behaviors such as empathy, making respectful jokes, expressing appreciation for the other person (even for trivial things like taking out the trash), apologizing, trying to find areas of agreement, expressing both physical and verbal affection, and demonstrating that you are interested in the other person.

Bracketing

This refers to breaking down the conflict into smaller and more manageable parts. Sometimes during a conflict, individuals will bring a large variety of topics to the table, including old issues. It can be helpful to say “What is the most pressing issue for you (or us) right now? We can deal with the other issues, but let’s try to focus on one right now.” Separating conflict issues into smaller parts increases the chances of successfully resolving problems.

Active Listening

Family therapists stress that active listening is one of the most important communication skills to use to promote harmonious relationships and to help manage conflicts. When you find yourself in a conflict situation, whenever possible, be the first to listen by encouraging the other party to speak and then take time to paraphrase their messages. This helps to slow the pace of conflicts and encourages mutual understanding. Now, in some situations, you may find yourself initiating a discussion of the conflict. If that is the case, you will likely speak first, and then request feedback from the other party.

Assertiveness

In terms of conflict management, being assertive with our communication helps us stand up for ourselves while at the same time respecting the needs of the other person. If you decide to address a conflict with another party, review tips for assertive communication, such as relying on communication that is respectful, honest, and maintains a focus on the needs of both parties.

Empathy

To take a collaborative approach to conflict, actively try to put yourself in the other party's position to understand the conflict from their point of view. How would you feel if you were in their shoes? Empathy is essential to achieving a collaborative outcome to the conflict. Taking the time to verbally express that you empathize with the other person can encourage them to also empathize with you, building a connection that may help lead to resolution.

Emotional Intelligence

This is a key component of successful conflict negotiation. When preparing to engage in conflict, check in with your emotional intelligence. How are you and the other party feeling emotionally and physically? Is it the right time to discuss a conflict? Are you able to empathize with the other party? Are you in control of your communication behavior? Practicing emotional intelligence while engaging in conflict resolution will contribute to maintaining and strengthening the relationship rather than solely focusing on winning the argument.

You have now reviewed several communication tools that can help you improve your conflict negotiation experiences. In the next section, let’s examine a step-by-step model for creating a collaborative and peaceful conflict negotiation.

Conflict Letter

Now that you have familiarized yourself with conflict management styles, unproductive conflict, and communication strategies for conflict resolution, it is time to reflect on what you have learned.

Think about an important relationship you have with a friend, family member, romantic partner, or co-worker, and how you would like to improve problem-solving in the relationship. Take a few minutes to write this person a letter or email that reflects on what you have learned about your approach to conflict. Your letter should be about addressing *your* conflict style, not the other person's.

- In the letter, identify your preferred conflict management style and explain what it means. Briefly discuss how your conflict style may impact the other person. You can begin with: “I hope this letter finds you doing well. I am currently taking an interpersonal communication class and have been learning about my communication style when trying to solve problems. I find that I approach conflict as an avoider/obliger/compromiser/etc.” Take the time to mention a strength and a drawback of your approach.

- Review the list of unproductive conflict management strategies, and identify at least one unproductive strategy you use that you would like to try to minimize.
- Review tips throughout the book and explain how you will try to improve how you manage conflicts in your relationship. You can share at least two new communication tools you plan to try to use the next time you encounter a conflict with this person.
- Talk about your role and what you plan to do, not focusing on what the other person should be doing. You can make one request, but the focus should be on improving your own conflict communication.
- You can share this letter with the person you wrote it to, or keep it for yourself as motivation to work towards peaceful conflict resolution.

Integrative Conflict Resolution Model

Conflict negotiation refers to a formal or informal process that individuals use to find a mutually agreeable solution to a problem. When sorting through the complexity of conflict, it can help to have a model to guide the process. Before you choose to try and solve a problem, it can be helpful to ask yourself a few guiding questions first:

- Will this subject bother me tomorrow, next week, next month, etc.? If the answer is yes, give yourself some time to cool off and plan to address the issue. If the answer is no, you may choose not to deal with the situation.
- Is this the right time to address the problem? Do you and the other person have the time and emotional bandwidth to tackle the conflict? If not now, schedule a time to talk later.
- Are you addressing the conflict with the correct person? All too often, we complain to friends and family members about a problem we have experienced with someone else. This allows us to release a little emotional frustration, but if the problem continues you will need to address it with the involved parties.

The integrative conflict resolution model presented below is appropriate to use for issues that are important to you and/or the other person, ongoing conflicts, or conflicts that may significantly impact you.

1. **Define the conflict:** To successfully negotiate conflict, all parties in the conflict must identify the issues. You can begin by describing the central concerns and identifying different conflict goals (content, relational, identity, process). There may be multiple issues at play, and this is a good time to practice bracketing, or breaking the conflict into smaller parts, to determine what issues you would like to focus on.
2. **Use “I” statements:** Use “I” statements instead of “you” language to avoid triggering defensiveness and to demonstrate that you are taking responsibility for your own feelings.
3. **Empathize with the other person:** When possible and appropriate, take the time to acknowledge how the other person is feeling and their perspective on the conflict.
4. **Brainstorm solutions:** Once both parties have identified the conflict and shared their personal perspectives, jointly brainstorm solutions to the problem. Brainstorm multiple solutions together. Refrain from judging solutions during this step.
5. **Test a solution:** Jointly select a solution to the conflict that you are willing to put into practice. Agree to a timeline to test the solution, whether it be in days, weeks, or months.
6. **Adopt or reject the solution:** After the agreed-upon time has passed, meet up to discuss the solution to the conflict. Did the solution solve the problem? Did it make it worse? You may need to revisit the conflict and test a new solution.

Using the integrative conflict resolution model can take time and practice. When you first use the model, it can feel a bit stiff and artificial, as though you are following a script for a play. However, over time, using an approach like this can help you slow down and think through the best options for conflict resolution. If you are facing a significant area of conflict with a friend, family member, or co-worker, it may help to sit down and think through in advance what you would like to say and accomplish.

Some conflicts can be too big for individuals to resolve on their own. In these cases, it can help to seek out a third party. There are many options available. Conflict mediation is where individuals seek help resolving a conflict with the aid of a trained mediator. Many cities offer free or low-cost conflict mediation services for families, couples, and communities. In other situations, particularly when conflict is creating a painful emotional experience, or is multi-layered, therapy or counseling may be a beneficial option. Therapy or counseling can provide individuals and families with training, problem-solving, and coping strategies for managing conflict. Colleges frequently offer free therapy sessions and/or referrals for low-cost options within the community. If you experience conflict at work, you may want to turn to your Human Resources department for help in resolving the issue. It is worthwhile to develop skills in peaceful conflict resolution, but it is also helpful to recognize times when you may need professional assistance to aid you in solving your conflict.

Building Bridges Through Apology and Forgiveness



Figure 11.5.1 Forgiveness by [scem.info](https://www.scem.info/) from [Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/sceminfo/) CC-BY-SA-2.0.

As we have learned throughout this book, our personal relationships with family, friends and romantic partners are essential for our physical and psychological well-being. However, despite our best intentions, conflict can arise in these relationships, creating emotionally charged situations and often resulting in hurt feelings and misunderstandings.

Offering an **apology** to another is a signal that you recognize the impact of your actions and that you would like to make amends. Granting **forgiveness** is the process of fostering personal healing by offering grace to the party who has hurt us. To forgive does not mean to excuse or forget that you have been harmed. Rather, the aim of forgiveness is to bring peace that allows both parties to move forward.

Learning to apologize effectively may be one of the most powerful communication tools we can use to respond when things go wrong in our relationships. In the book *A good apology: Four steps to make things right* (2020), psychologist Molly Howes outlines four steps for a meaningful apology:

1. First, you must come to understand the other person's injury, including the effects of your actions. This usually involves asking questions and listening.
2. Second, you must articulate a sincere statement of regret. You must acknowledge what you did and how it affected the other person. This is no small feat for most of us, especially when we didn't intend to hurt someone.
3. Third, you must make reparations. This can include material restitution, although in relationships that's less likely to occur.
4. Fourth, you must make a convincing plan to prevent the problem from happening again (Howes, 2020, p. 73).

As with the other communication skills you have learned throughout this book, apology and forgiveness take practice and patience.

When should you forgive? One of my favorite sayings is from 18th-century poet Alexander Pope, who wrote, "To err is human, to forgive is divine." This line reminds us that it is human nature to make mistakes, and it is a gracious act to grant forgiveness. Granting forgiveness does not mean releasing the other person from responsibility, but can allow us to move forward with our lives by releasing us from pain and from any control that a situation or other person may have over us.

Consider This: To Apologize and Forgive, That Is the Question

Jake and Dana have been friends since elementary school. After high school, Jake became heavily involved in the drug scene. Unfortunately, Jake developed a drug addiction. As a result of the addiction, Jake alienated friends and family, stole money from Dana, and as a breaking point, endangered Dana's life. As a result, Dana cut off all contact with Jake. After hitting rock bottom, Jake completed two rounds of rehab. Upon completion of the last round of treatment, Jake reached out to Dana through text, and apologized for their previous behavior, acknowledging the theft and the danger caused as a result of the addiction.

1. Based on Howes' (2020) four steps for a meaningful apology (understand, articulate, repair, and prevention, how would you apologize to Dana if you were in Jake's position?
2. If you were in Dana's position, would you be able to forgive Jake? Why or why not? Explain how you might respond to a sincere apology from Jake.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

12: Communication Climate

Do you feel organized or chaotic in a small workspace? Are you more productive when the sun is shining than when it's gray and cloudy outside? Just as factors like physical space and the weather impact us, communication climate can influence our interpersonal interactions. In this chapter, we will define and explore the basic principles of communication climate. Then, we will lay out some strategies for identifying, achieving and responding to communication climate. Lastly, we will explore how context influences perceptions of climate, and address reasons communication climate is important in interpersonal relationships and in society.

Learning Objectives

- How does communication shape the relational and emotional tone of a relationship or interaction?
- How do we communicate in ways that effectively achieve a desired climate?
- How can we effectively respond to climate behaviors that are undesirable?

Successful students will be able to:

- define communication climate.
- identify five principles of communication climate.
- recognize examples of messages that contribute to warm and cold climates.
- demonstrate three skills that help improve climate effectiveness
- recognize how three types of contextual nuances influence our needs
- explain how mindfulness plays a role in helping us achieve a desired climate

[12.1: Defining Communication Climate](#)

[12.2: Principles of Communication Climate](#)

[12.3: Frameworks for Identifying Types of Climate Messages](#)

[12.4: How to Create Positive Communication Climates](#)

[12.5: Skills to Support Confirming Communication Climates](#)

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12.1: Defining Communication Climate

In this section, we will define what communication climate is.



Communication Climate

Communication climate is the “overall feeling or emotional mood between people” (Wood, 2018). For example, you may prefer hanging out with one of your friends because they make you laugh and dread hanging out with another because they constantly criticize you. The first friend may create a positive, or warm climate, whereas the other friend may create a negative, or cold climate. The communication climate is created because of other people and the type of communication that takes place during an interaction. You probably have relationships or interpersonal interactions that feel cloudy, stormy, calm, sunny, warm, or cold. Throughout this chapter, we will focus on the latter two as an overarching analogy for understanding communication climate and look at how the emotional “temperature” of relationships or interactions is affected by behaviors that are often perceived (and felt) as “warm” and “cold.” For example, messages that convey respect and acceptance tend to feel warm and those that convey hostility and judgment tend to feel cold. Warm behaviors tend to meet human social needs, and cold behaviors do not. The knowledge we gain in this chapter will help us better understand why some relationships and interactions feel warmer than others. Understanding climate also helps us communicate more purposefully in order to better meet our interpersonal goals.

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12.2: Principles of Communication Climate

In this section we will discuss the five principles of communication climate: messages contain relational subtexts that can be felt; climate is conveyed through words, action, and non-action; climate is perceived; climate is determined by social and relational needs; and relational messages are multi-leveled.

Messages contain relational subtexts that can be felt

In addition to generating and perceiving meaning in communicative interactions, we also subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) convey and perceive the way we feel about each other. As we discussed in Chapter 1: Introduction to Communication, almost all messages operate on two levels: content and relational. As a reminder, the content is the substance of what's being communicated (the what of the message). The relational dimension isn't the actual thing being discussed and instead can reveal something about the relational dynamic existing between you and the other person (the who of the message). We can think of it as a kind of subtext, an underlying (or hidden) message that says something about how the parties feel toward one another. For example, when deciding on a TV program, your partner might politely suggest, "I'd like to watch this show, how about you?" The content of the message is about what they want to watch. The relational subtext is subtle but suggests your partner values your input and wants to share decision-making control. The climate of this interaction is likely to be neutral or warm. However, consider how the relational subtext changes if your partner insists (with a raised voice and a glare): "We are WATCHING THIS SHOW tonight!" The content is still about what they want to watch. But what is the subtext now? In addition to what your partner wants to watch, they seem to be sending a relational message of dominance, control and potential disrespect for your needs and wants. You might be hearing an additional message of "I don't care about you," which is likely to feel cold, eliciting a negative emotional reaction such as defensiveness or sadness.

Climate is conveyed through words, action, and non-action

Relational subtexts can be conveyed through direct words and actions. A student making a complaint to an instructor can be worded with respect, as in "Would you have a few minutes after class to discuss my grade?" or without, as in "I can't believe you gave me such a crappy grade, and we need to talk about it right after class!" We can often find more of the relational meaning in the accompanying and more indirect nonverbals—in the way something is said or done. For example, two of your coworkers might use the exact same words to make a request of you, but the tone, emphasis, and facial expression will change the relational meaning, which influences the way you feel. The words "can you get this done by Friday" will convey different levels of respect and control depending upon the nonverbal emphasis, tone, and facial expressions paired with the verbal message. For example, the request can be made in a questioning tone versus a frustrated or condescending one. Additionally, a relational subtext might also be perceived by what is NOT said or done. For example, one coworker adds a "thanks" or a "please" and the other doesn't. Or, one coworker shows up to your birthday coffee meetup and the other doesn't. What do these non-actions suggest to you about the other person's feelings or attitude towards you? Consider for a moment some past messages (and non-messages) that felt warm or cold to you.

Climate is perceived

Relational meanings are not inherent in the messages themselves. They are not literal, and they are not facts. The subtext of any communicative message is in the eye of the beholder. The relational meaning can be received in ways that were unintentional. Additionally, like content messages, relational messages can be influenced by what we attend to and by our expectations (as discussed in Chapter 3: The Perception Process and Perception of Others). They also stand out more if they contrast with what you normally expect or prefer.

You might interpret your partner's insistence on watching a certain show to mean they are bossy. However, your partner might have perceived you to be the bossy one and is attempting to regain loss of decision control. Control could be exerted because doing so is the accepted relational dynamic between you, or it could be a frustrated reaction to a frequent loss of decision control, which they want to regain. Here, it needs to be noted that the relational message someone hears at any given time is a perception and doesn't necessarily mean the message received was the message intended. Meanings will depend on who is delivering it and in what context. Cultural and co-cultural context will also impact the way a message is interpreted, which we will discuss later in the Communication Competence section of this chapter. In addition, later in this chapter we will discuss metacommunication, a way to address climate and relational subtexts in interactions in order to clarify intent and increase shared meaning.

Climate is determined by social and relational needs

While relational messages can potentially show up in dozens of different communicative forms, they generally fall into categories that align with specific types of human social needs that vary from person to person and situation to situation. In addition to physical needs, such as food and water, human beings have social and relational needs that can have negative consequences if ignored. Negative consequences can range from frustrating work days to actual death (in cases of infants not getting human touch and attention and the elderly who suffer in isolation). Scholars categorize social needs in many different ways. Recall the discussion of Interpersonal Needs Theory from Chapter 8: Interpersonal Relationships, which explained that we are more likely to develop relationships with people who meet one or more of three basic interpersonal needs: affection, control, and belonging. We want to be liked or loved. We want to be able to influence others and our own environments (at least somewhat). We want to feel included. Each need exists on a continuum from low to high, with some people needing only a little of one and more of another. The level of need also varies by context, with some situations calling for more affection (e.g., romantic relationships) and others calling for less (e.g., workplace).

Another framework for categorizing needs comes from a nonviolent communication approach used by mediators, negotiators, therapists, and businesses across the world. This approach focuses on compassion and collaboration and categorizes human needs with more detail and scope. For example, categories include freedom, connection, community, play, integrity, honesty, peace, and the needs to matter and be understood. When people from all cultures and all walks of life all over the world are asked “Do you need these to thrive?” the answer—with small nuances—is always “yes” (Sofer, 2018).

During interactions, we detect on some level whether the person with whom we are communicating is meeting a particular need, such as the need for respect. We may not really be aware, on a conscious level, of why we feel cold toward a coworker. But, it is likely that the coworker’s jokes, eyerolls, and criticisms toward you feel like a relational message of inferiority or disrespect. In this case, your unmet need for dignity, competence, respect or belonging may be contributing to your cold reaction toward this person. When other people’s messages don’t meet our needs in whole or in part, we tend to have an emotionally cold reaction. When messages do meet our needs, we tend to feel warm.

Consider how needs may be met (or not met) in when you are in a disagreement of opinion with someone else. For example, needs may be met if we feel heard by the other and not met if we feel disrespected when we present our opinion. In a different example, consider all the different ways you could request that someone turn the music down. You could do both of these things with undertones (relational subtexts) of superiority, anger, dominance, ridicule, coldness, distance, etc. Or you could do them with warmth, equality, playfulness, shared control, respect, trust, etc.

Relational messages are multi-leveled

On one level, we want to feel that our social needs are met and we hope that others in our lives will meet them through their communication, at least in part. On another level, though, we are concerned with how we are perceived; the self-image we convey to others is important to us. We want it to be apparent to others that we belong, matter, are respected, understood, competent, and in control of ourselves. Some messages carry relational subtexts that harm or threaten our self-image, while others confirm and validate it.

To help better understand this second level of relational subtexts, let’s discuss the concept of “face needs.” Face refers to our self-image when communicating with others (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Lim and Bowers, 1991). It does not refer to our physical face, but more of an unsaid portrayal of the image that we want to project to others, and sometimes even to ourselves. Most of us are probably unaware of the fact that we are frequently negotiating this face as we interact with others. However, on some level, whether we are aware of it or not, many of our social needs relate to the way we want to be perceived by others. Specifically, we not only want to feel included in particular groups, we also want to be seen as someone who belongs. We want to feel capable and competent, but we also want others to think we are capable and competent. We want to experience a certain level of autonomy, but we also want to be seen as free from the imposition of others. Communication subtexts such as disrespect tend to threaten our face needs, while other behaviors such as the right amount of recognition support them. Once again, we can apply the temperature analogy here. When we perceive our “face” to be threatened, we may feel cold. When our face needs are honored, we may feel warm. Effective communication sometimes requires a delicate dance that involves addressing, maintaining, and restoring our own face and that of others simultaneously.

Because both our own needs and the needs of others play an important role in communication climate, throughout the rest of this chapter we will utilize the following three general categories when we refer to social needs that can be addressed through communication:

- Need for Connection: belonging, inclusion, acceptance, warmth, kindness
- Need for Freedom: autonomy, control, freedom from imposition by others, space, privacy
- Need for Meaning: competence, capability, dignity, worthiness, respect, to matter, to be understood

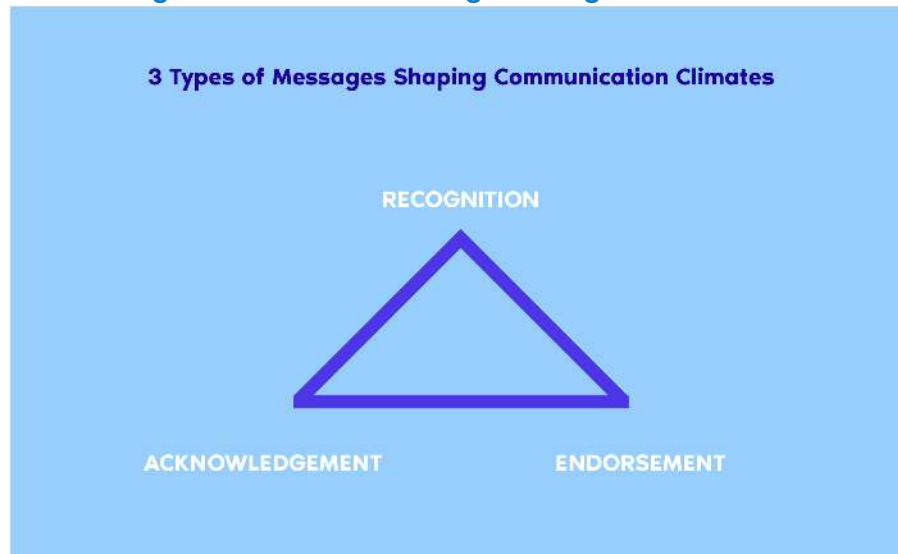
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12.3: Frameworks for Identifying Types of Climate Messages

In this section, we will examine two frameworks for understanding and identifying relational messages that contribute to communication climate: confirming versus disconfirming messages and supportive versus defensive messages. Many of the common behaviors that can lead to a cold climate are performed in an automatic state of mind, without forethought or strategy. Exploring these types of messages in pairs helps us be better able to mindfully recognize warm climate alternatives that might be better received.

Confirming versus Disconfirming Messages



Confirming messages convey another person's value and worthwhile disconfirming messages may suggest someone is devalued and unimportant. Obviously, most of us like to receive warm confirming messages because they foster emotional safety as well as personal and relational growth. However, it is likely that many of the messages you receive and give are somewhere between the two extremes. Let's look at three specific types of confirming and disconfirming messages. Consider how each may meet or not meet our social needs.

- **Recognition Messages:** Recognition messages either confirm or deny another person's existence. For example, if a friend enters your home and you smile, hug them, and say, "I'm so glad to see you" you are confirming their existence. If you say "good morning" to a colleague and they ignore you by walking out of the room without saying anything, then they are creating a disconfirming climate by not recognizing you.
- **Acknowledgement Messages:** Acknowledgement 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 acknowledgement messages. When a friend tells you they had 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 their 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 their experience and presenting yours as more important.
- **Endorsement Messages:** Endorsement 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 partner. 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" you would be sending messages that deny their right to feel frustrated in that moment. 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.

Supportive versus Defensive Messages

Another useful framework for understanding communication climate can be found in the six defensive and supportive behavior pairs proposed by psychologist Jack Gibb in 1965, adapted here with some pairs re-named for clarity. These six behaviors are, on the one hand, likely to generate an emotional climate of defensiveness (cold) and are, on the other, likely generate a supportive climate (warm).

In the box below, we define and give examples of each of the six pairs: evaluation/description, manipulation/straightforwardness, control/collaboration, indifference/empathy, superiority/equality, certainty/flexibility. In addition, we propose some possibilities for how climate might be perceived by the recipients of such behavior and why it might be perceived that way.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Evaluation Vague, abstract, blaming, inflammatory and judgmental language that indicates lack of regard for other. "You" statements.	Description Neutral, factual, concrete, precise descriptions of what something looks or sounds like, and of your own reactions to it. Ownership of thoughts, feelings and observations. "I" language. No judgment(s).
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
"You're such a slob! Sheesh! [eye roll]"	"I get frustrated when I see your socks on the floor."
Recipient's Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel attacked, judged, disrespected, and/or defensive, in addition to possible confusion over what the complaint is specifically addressing.	Recipient has more clarity about what's specifically bothering the other and why. They may not like something negative being pointed out, but they may not feel as judged, attacked, or put down as with the opposing example.
DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Control Speaker forces solutions with little regard for receiver's needs or interests. Message seems to suggest that speaker knows better than listener, and/or that listener is not capable of finding solution.	Collaboration Focus is on finding a win-win solution that meets the needs of all parties involved. Conveys respect for the other person. Makes decisions "with" rather than "for." Asks rather than tells.
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
"No! You do it this way!"	"Since you actually work the floor, what are your thoughts about the best way to set this up?"
Recipient's Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel controlled, disrespected, or that their expertise/effort isn't acknowledged or respected. They may feel hostile towards the speaker and competitive rather than collaborative.	Recipient feels needs and wants are seen, respected, and honored. They will likely want to work collaboratively with the other person.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Manipulation Dishonesty, manipulation, hidden agendas, passive-aggressiveness, guilt-making, score-keeping, tit-for-tat	Straightforwardness Honesty, respect, directness, openness
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
“&\$#@! Can’t you EVER do what you promised?! I’ve been watching you do this all week, and I’m fed up! [after observing from a silent pedestal and keeping score all week]”	“Honey, please wake up and let the dogs out.”
Recipient’s Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel attacked, judged, and controlled. They may feel distrustful or confused as to why the message was held back so long and not addressed.	Recipient may feel annoyed but appreciative that no judgment, extraneous complaints, or appeals to guilt were thrown in with the main point.
DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Indifference Indifference to a person’s plight, impersonal response, lack of concern and care, indicating the person or person’s issue has little value	Empathy Attempting to put yourself in the other’s shoes, see what is seen, feel what is felt, acceptance, support and care of person, feelings and issues
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
“Um. Yeah. It doesn’t really matter what the reason is. The policy is the policy. No late papers.”	“I’m so sorry for what you’re going through. That’s a tough situation. Let’s talk about specific ways you might be able to keep up.”
Recipient’s Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel unworthy and inferior, that their needs aren’t important or are being ignored. They may feel a lack of connection and belonging.	Recipient may feel acknowledged, respected, and/or worthy of compassion.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Superiority Condescending and superior attitude, ridicule, eye-rolls, huffs and puffs, patronizing, one-up approach, conveys perceived “greater-than- you” status	Equality Sees equal worth in all human beings, recognizes that all people have strengths and weaknesses, respectful, honors and values people as capable beings
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
“Move over! I’LL fix this! Sheesh!” [eye rolls]	“Hey, no worries. I struggled with this too when I first learned. I’ll show you some strategies and you’ll get it soon.”
Recipient’s Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel defensive, angry, or hurt.	Recipient may feel respected and thought of as capable.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Certainty It’s “my way or the highway,” already certain of being right, needs no additional input, one-track mind, lack or regard and respect for others’ ideas	Flexibility Acknowledges others’ views, willingness to hear input, open-door policy, no corner on truth, open-mindedness, willing to change stance if reasonable
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
“I don’t want to hear it It’s NOT going to work!”	“I’m not familiar with that idea. Can you tell me more about it?”
Recipient’s Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel devalued, defensive, or hostile. May feel unworthy or unaccepted.	Recipient may feel valued, recognized, capable, or worthy.

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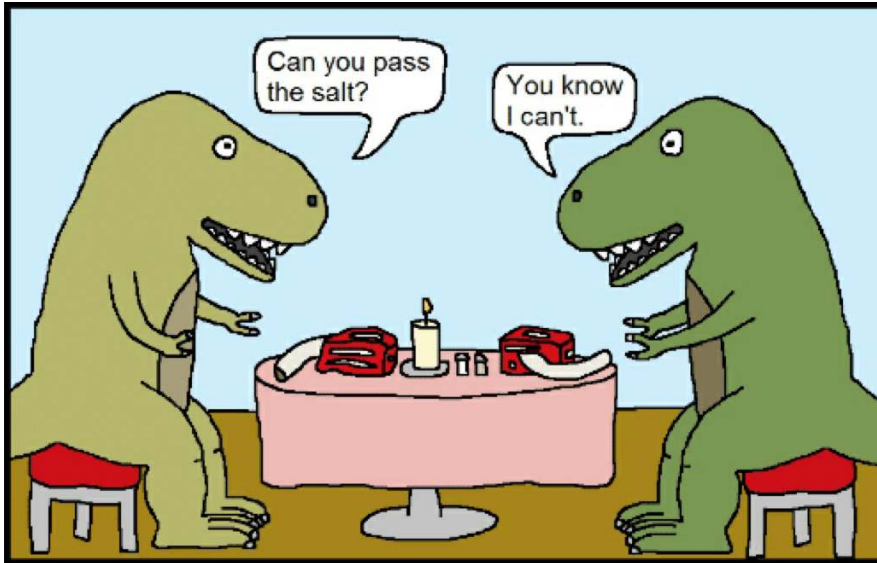
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12.4: How to Create Positive Communication Climates

In this section, we will cover cognitive and behavioral skills to help us more effectively create the communication climate we want to experience, contextual nuances in interpersonal needs, and discuss the importance mindfulness and awareness.

Effective Communication: Cognitive and Behavioral Skills

Cognitive skills involve thinking about others and behavioral skills involve actionable things we can actually say and do. Specifically, we will cover three skills for more effective climate messages: empathy, quadruple thinking, and metacommunication.



Empathy

You may have heard empathy defined as the ability to (metaphorically) “put yourself in someone else’s shoes,” to feel what another may be feeling. This description is technically accurate on one level, but empathy is actually more complex. Our human capacity for empathy has three levels: cognitive, affective, and compassionate.

The first is cognitive and involves more thinking than feeling. A more appropriate metaphor for this level is “putting on someone else’s perception glasses,” to attempt to view a situation in the way someone else might view it. It requires thinking about someone else’s thinking, considering factors that make up someone’s unique perceptual schema, and trying to view a situation through that lens. For example, employees don’t always view things the way managers do. A good manager can see through employee glasses and anticipate how workplace actions, decisions, and/or messages may be interpreted.

The second level is affective, or emotional, and involves attempting to feel the emotions of others. The “shoes” metaphor fits best for this level. Attempting to truly feel what other humans feel requires envisioning exactly what they might be going through in their lives. Doing so effectively might even require “taking off your own shoes.” For example, to empathize with a complaining customer, we can temporarily put our own needs aside, and really picture what it would feel like to be the customer experiencing the problem situation. Your own need might be to take care of the complaint quickly so you can go to lunch. Yet, if it were you in the problem situation, you would likely want someone to be warm, attentive, and supportive, and take the time needed to solve the problem.

This level of empathy is often confused with sympathy, something with which you are probably already very familiar. The two are related but are not the same. Feeling sympathy means feeling bad for or sorry about something another person might be going through, but understanding and feeling it from your own perspective, through your own perception glasses, and in your own shoes. We all recognize that losing a pet is likely to be devastating for someone. We therefore feel sympathy for our friend because their dog died. However, feeling empathy requires making an effort to see the situation through their glasses and shoes. What this means is that we consider how they may see and feel the situation differently from us. For instance, we may have experienced many pet losses and even human losses in your life, so yet another pet loss may not feel that significant to us. But, if this is your friend’s first significant loss, they may likely feel more devastation than we would. We can respond more appropriately and with more warmth by letting go of our own perspective and attempting to see and feel the situation as they might. Another way to distinguish between

sympathy and empathy is by seeing sympathy as “feeling for...” (as in feeling sorry for or feeling compassion for another person) and empathy as “feeling with...” as in actually feeling the emotions of another person.

The third level of empathy is the compassionate concern for the well-being of our fellow humans (Goleman, 2006). Feeling empathy at this level motivates us to act compassionately in the interest of others. Examples may include dropping off a casserole for a grieving friend, taking some of your coworker’s calls when they are especially busy or stressed, or organizing a neighborhood clean-up. With this level of empathy, we sense what people need and feel compelled to help. Most of us are usually able to empathize at this level with people who are important to us.

Strategies for building empathy: While empathy comes more naturally for some people than others, it is a skill that can be developed (Goleman, 2006) with a greater awareness of and attention to the perception process. Remember that perception is unique to each person. We all interpret and judge the world through our own set of perception glasses that are framed by factors such as upbringing, family background, ethnicity, age, attitude, knowledge of person and situation, past experiences, amount of exposure to others, social roles, etc.

Below addresses specific ways to build our empathy muscles. The strategies fall into two categories: adding information to the rims of our perception glasses and bringing attention to the perception process itself.

Add more information to our perception glasses. In order to add more information to our perception glasses, we need to find out what we can about a situation or person with whom we are seeking to understanding and empathize. We can do this by:

- Taking in information: When we observe, listen, question, perception check, paraphrase, pay attention to nonverbals and feelings, we take information in rather than putting information out (e.g., listening more and talking less).
- Broaden or narrow our perspective: Sometimes we feel stuck, allowing one interaction with one person to become all-consuming. If we remember how big the world is and how many people are dealing with similar situations right now, we gain perspective that helps us see the situation in a different way. On the other hand, sometimes we generalize too broadly, seeing an entire group of people in one way, or assuming all things are bad at our workplace. Focusing on one person or one situation a time is another way to helpfully shift perspectives.
- Imagine or seek stories and info (through books, films, articles, technology): We can learn and imagine what people’s lives are really like by reading, watching, or listening to the stories of others.
- Seek out actual experiences to help us understand what it’s like to be in others’ shoes: We can do something experiential like a ride-along with a police officer or spend a day on the streets to really try to feel what it’s like to be in a situation in which we are not familiar.

Bring attention to the perception process. Pull down our own perception glasses and try on a pair of someone else’s. Thinking about our thinking is a process called metacognition. By turning our attention toward the way we perceive information and how that perception makes us feel. What factors make up the rims of our glasses and how do these factors shape our perspectives, thoughts, feelings, and actions? Consider what makes another person unique, and what rim factors may influence the person’s perspectives and feelings. We should try to see the situation through those glasses, inferring how unique perceptual schemas might shape the others person’s emotions and actions too. Remember, though, we can never be certain how or why people do what they do. Only they know for sure. But communication can be more effective if we at least give some type of speculative forethought before we act or react. And when in doubt, we can always ask.

Climate-Centered Message Planning

Our second mindful competence skill is called Climate-Centered Message Planning (CCMP), which is a term coined by Gerber and Murphy (2019). CCMP refers to the conscious encoding (planning and forethought) involved in meeting communication goals. CCMP requires two steps and takes the basics of empathy a bit further into message construction. The steps include: 1. Think about what we want to say or do. What is our goal? What outcome(s) do we hope to achieve? What message or behaviors are we considering? What needs do we hope to fulfill? What emotional temperature do we hope to create? Which behaviors or message strategies will help us achieve it? 2. Think about how the other person (or persons) might hear (or perceive) what we say. Here, we should put on their perception glasses and consider as many factors as possible that affect how the person might see and feel our message. We should think about whether the message is likely to be perceived and received as intended. If not, rethink what we want to say so that they will be more likely hear what you want them to hear (so a person is more likely to interpret your messages as you intend it to be interpreted). Remember once again, we can never completely ensure that someone “hears what we want them to hear” (interprets what we intended). However, with some awareness and forethought, we can ensure there’s a better chance of it. CCMP also helps us with better awareness of how what we say and how we say it may impact another person’s relational or face

needs. Our consideration of what human beings “need” will help us infer how they might react to messages emotionally, intellectually, or relationally. Doing so helps us communicate more effectively and appropriately whatever our goal may be.

Metacommunication

Our third skill is an action skill: the skill of metacommunication. It, too, requires mindfully elevating awareness beyond the content level of communication, but also requires us to actually discuss things such as needs and relational messages aloud. Metacommunication literally means communicating about communication, and occurs when we talk to each other about any part of the communication process, including what is said or done, how it is interpreted, how we feel, what we wish had been said or done, etc. For example, metacommunication occurs anytime you say “It’s frustrating when you interrupt me,” or “I wish you’d have asked me before you made that decision.” Other forms of metacommunication bring relational messages and social needs right to the surface level for discussion. For example, if you said “when you brought that up in front of my friends, I felt embarrassed and undignified,” or “when I don’t hear from you, I feel less connected to you.” Metacommunication can involve any of the skills we’ve learned so far (“I” messages, perception checking, etc.) and can be used deliberately to address our own wants, needs, or to clarify our intentions when something we’ve expressed may have been ill-received. Scholar and speaker Brene Brown recommends using phrases such as “the story I’m making up about this is...” to explain the way we perceived something and “help me better understand” as a form of listening to understand how another person may have perceived something. Metacommunication can help us in the middle of interactions to clarify and prevent misunderstandings as we both send and receive messages. For example, if you notice someone reacting in a way you didn’t intend, you can ask about it (“how are you feeling right now? What are you hearing me say?”) or you can clarify your intent and adjust (“My intent was not for you to feel disrespected. How can I say this differently so that you hear my respect for you?”). We can also respond to the cold relational messages of others with “When you say it that way, I hear not only what you’re saying but an extra message that you don’t think I’m capable” or “not giving me options leaves me feeling boxed in and I really want to feel more freedom in this relationship.”

Contextual Communication: Context and Needs

Context influences all of our communication, but it also has important implications when it comes to the interpersonal needs we have discussed throughout this chapter. Below we discuss how three types of contextual nuances that influence our needs: relational, individual, and co-cultural.

- **Relational Context:**

Based on the relational context, the relationship we have with others (friend, colleague, etc.), different people will meet different needs. We may expect a specific type of relationship to meet one need (but not the other) or place more or less importance on that relationship meeting a particular need. For example, in workplace relationships with colleagues, managers, or people we manage we may expect these people, and place higher value on these people meeting needs pertaining to competence, capability, control, etc. We may not expect these relationships to, or place lesser importance on them, meeting needs such as warmth and kindness. Conversely, we may expect intimate relationships with friends and romantic partners to satisfy needs related to connection, and not expect them to, or place less importance, on them meeting needs like control.

- **Individual Context:**

Individuals tend to vary in the level of desire for certain needs to be met. We may have low needs in one area and medium or high needs in another. For example, we may have a high need for connection and a low need for freedom. Conversely, another individual may have a low need for connection and high need for freedom. We also see a difference between how much needs are wanted (we want our needs met from others) and expressed (how much we want and do work toward meeting these needs in others). For example, we may have a need to feel respected but do little to show respect to another to meet their respect need.

- **Co-Cultural Context:**

Group membership and identity based on factors like gender, generation, social class, etc. can influence the value placed on a particular need. For example, men are often taught (through socialization) to strongly value the needs of autonomy, control, freedom from imposition by others, space, and privacy. Conversely, women are often taught to place higher value on needs of belonging, inclusion, warmth, and kindness. Because of this, it is important to recognize what we genuinely want in terms of needs- not just what we think we should want or were told we should value.

Reflective Communication: Mindfulness

The word mindfulness refers to “paying attention on purpose,” and has many uses in personal and work life. For interpersonal communication purposes, mindfulness relates to becoming more conscious of how we encode and decode messages. We can better meet our communication goals with increased awareness of how communication carries relational subtexts, how those subtexts

may be perceived to meet (or not meet) social needs, and how those perceptions might result in a warm or cold emotional temperature. As with all communication competence skills, awareness helps us shift from a habitual or automatic state of being and thinking to a mindful and thoughtful state where we put more effort, attention and forethought into what we hope to accomplish and why.

Becoming mindful of climate means increasing awareness of the needs of self and others before, during, and after interactions. It requires reflecting on our own desires, thought processes and emotional reactions, and with applied forethought, thinking about and speculating about those of others. Learning about relational messages and social needs gives us access to a greater variety of perceptual frameworks through which to view communication (e.g., how might this message be received by others?). It also requires that during interactions we observe, reflect on, and attend to others' emotional reactions and shift gears midstream if necessary. For example, if mid-interaction we observe a person's outward response that seems to indicate embarrassment, shame, agitation or defensiveness, we can adjust our behavior or discuss and clarify our intent. We may even take notice of an interaction after it occurred, reviewing it and considering how well it went or how we might do better next time. Through awareness, reflection, mindfulness we can build a cognitively complex repertoire of skill, knowledge, and motivation that helps us engage in a skillful dance of communication that attempts to honor social needs.

Practice

Consider what you might say and do to convey the given relational subtext.

1. How might you decline a friend's invitation to coffee with respect and affection?
2. How could you address an employee's need for autonomy when telling her she is needed to work this weekend? The need for dignity?
3. How might you disagree with a classmate's politics by recognizing their need for inclusion? Respect? The need to matter?
4. How might you address the autonomy or affection needs of your significant other when you request that they come home on time tonight?

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12.5: Skills to Support Confirming Communication Climates



Figure 12.5.1 [Raised Fists](#) by [Chona Kasinger](#) from [Disabled and Here](#)

Receiving and Giving Feedback

How we respond to negative feedback, criticism, and corrections can reveal a lot about who we are. Do we respond defensively, or do we receive criticism and feedback graciously and with an open mind? Responding negatively to feedback communicates that we are closed-minded and unwilling to learn and change. On the other hand, thoughtfully receiving feedback shows a willingness to adapt, change, and grow.

In this section, we're going to learn how to respond non-defensively to feedback and criticism, how to manage frustration while remaining professional, and how to provide positive feedback as well.

Responding Non-defensively to Feedback and Criticism

We need to reflect on how we react to criticism from others and develop our skills in responding in a constructive way. That requires us to take the time and make the effort to process the feedback that others give us in different situations. According to an article titled "The Right Way to Respond to Negative Feedback" (Eurich, 2018):

We can't act on feedback until we truly understand it. Especially when we hear something new, it's usually a good idea to ask a few trustworthy sources whether they've noticed the same behavior. Not only does this give us more detail about what we are doing to create a certain impression, it helps us avoid overcorrecting based on one person's opinion. After all, as Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius stated, "Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact."

First off, set your defenses aside and engage your active listening and empathy skills. For empathy, keep in mind that it may be just as difficult for the person giving the feedback as it is for you to receive it. Active listening is important to prevent you from jumping to conclusions and becoming defensive. Additionally, putting defensiveness aside, you may learn something helpful and constructive. Upon receiving feedback, whether in person or in writing, here are some helpful strategies to help you react and acknowledge the feedback.

Use the Feedback WALLET

Consider turning those potentially negative initial reactions to feedback into an opportunity for reflection, planning, and future action. Keep the acronym WALLET in mind, and pull out these helpful suggestions from your "feedback WALLET" to use: **Wait**, **Avoid attacking back**, **Listen**, **Learn**, **Engage** in planning, and **Take control**:

1. **Wait.** Take a moment to digest the information before making any response or decision. Give yourself some time to hear, review, and contemplate the information that is being shared with you. Giving yourself some time to think about and reflect on the feedback can help you avoid jumping to conclusions. This is possibly one of the most important tips to take out of your "feedback WALLET" to use.
2. **Avoid attacking back.** It's human nature to become defensive when engaged with something unpleasant, like receiving feedback. Listen with an open mind and resist the urge to rebut every point of "criticism" from your communicating partner.
3. **Listen.** Focus your attention and energy on actively listening to the feedback. Identify the key points being made. Ask for clarification and/or examples to help you better understand the messages being shared with you.
4. **Learn.** Reframe the feedback and criticism as an opportunity to learn and grow. Even if you don't agree with the feedback, there is always something to be learned from how others perceive you.

5. **Engage in planning.** Don't make excuses. Make a plan instead! Start making a plan of action to correct the issue or work towards a solution. This shows your initiative for problem-solving.
6. **Take control.** "Responsibility" is not the same as "fault." It's easy for us to place blame on others or external circumstances. Taking responsibility means taking control of your behavior and responses. Ask yourself, "What can I do differently to get the desired response/results?" By doing this, your perception changes to one of action and looking for opportunities, rather than self-pity and playing the blame game.

Stay Clear of Negative Responses

1. **Don't take it personally.** Reframe the feedback and criticism as an opportunity to learn and grow. Even if you don't agree with the feedback, there is always something to be learned from how others perceive you. For example, portray yourself as a gracious recipient of feedback by responding with, "Thank you for taking the time to notice my work and share your thoughts with me."
2. **Don't react right away.** It's human nature to become defensive when engaged with something unpleasant, like receiving feedback. Listen with an open mind and resist the urge to rebut every point of "criticism" from your communicating partner. Ask for time to process and digest the feedback when necessary.
3. **Don't argue back.** Take this opportunity to listen and learn. Sometimes receiving feedback that seems to conflict with our self-image can make us feel threatened. In this case, rather than respond with something like, "You're out of your mind! I don't do that!" It's quite ok for you to use an "I-message": "I feel surprised that you see my work rushed and sloppy. What can you suggest to help me improve on this?"
4. **Don't point fingers and blame others.** Remember "responsibility" is not the same as "fault." It's easy for us to place blame on others or external circumstances. Taking responsibility means taking control of our behavior and responses. Ask yourself, "What can I do differently to get the desired response/results?" By doing this, your perception changes to one of action and looking for opportunities, rather than self-pity and playing the blame game.
5. **Don't make excuses.** Start making a plan of action to correct the issue or work towards a solution. This shows your initiative for problem-solving.

Practice Positive Responses

1. **Be grateful.** Simply thank your communication partner for taking the time to offer their feedback. By thanking your partner, you are not only acknowledging their comments, but you are also showing your open-mindedness.
2. **Ask questions.** It's OK to ask for clarification if you don't understand what's going on or why/how the negative feedback came about.
3. **Paraphrase** and restate what you understood to have heard to ensure that you interpreted the feedback correctly.
4. **Ask for help.** Ask for one or two simple steps that can nudge you towards improvement.
5. **Aim for mutual satisfaction.** Are the proposed corrections mutually agreed upon? As we know from experience, if one side is not happy with something, that side will not follow through.
6. **Follow-up to follow-through.** Hold yourself accountable and schedule a follow-up. That shows your communicating partner your willingness to learn and improve. But don't wait too long to schedule that follow-up or you'll lose your momentum.

Managing Frustration while Remaining Professional



Figure 12.5.2 youtuber-blogger by Lukas Bieri from Pixabay

No one likes to deal with a Negative Nellie (or Neil). So how do we remain professional when we're feeling frustrated? The definition of **professionalism** varies, but it generally boils down to being good at what you know and do, maintaining a positive attitude, treating the people you work with respectfully, maintaining a professional appearance, and meeting your professional obligations promptly. However, all of us, at one time or another, have had our professionalism tested by a co-worker, a superior, a client/customer, or an unanticipated situation. How we handle ourselves in these situations directly impacts the communication climate, either positively or negatively. Here are some suggestions:

- **Take a deep breath.** Pause and give yourself some time to think about how you want to respond. We often end up regretting those “in the heat of the moment” responses. Research indicates that different emotions are linked to different types of breathing (Philippot et al., 2002). For example, when we are feeling stressed or anxious, our breathing tends to be short, shallow, fast, and irregular. On the other hand, deep, slow, and regular breaths are associated with feelings of joy. This study suggests that when we take the time to mindfully breathe deeply and slowly we will begin to associate the corresponding emotions of calm and joy.
- **Look for the positives.** There is always something to be learned from every situation. According to the Mayo Clinic (2022), positive thinking leads to positive health benefits. While researchers are still not certain why positive thoughts lead to better health, one theory believes that having a positive outlook allows us to handle stressful situations better, thus reducing the harmful effects stress can have on our bodies. Accordingly, focusing on our strengths and not weaknesses will not only help to energize us but will help build on a positive outlook.
- **Reframe how you look at the feedback and use it as motivation.** Stacey Finkelstein and Ayelet Fishbach (2012) point out that our experience level dictates the kinds of feedback that motivates us. Novices look for encouragement and positive feedback. Experts prefer more critical feedback that could help develop weaker skills. Therefore, put the negative energy and frustration to work for you to find ways you can turn the obstacle into an opportunity. Set new goals and focus your energy on achieving your new goals.
- **Remember that you are in control.** Don't forget that you are in charge of your life and what you need to do to be happy and successful. Choose to use the feedback that you decide is useful and lose the feedback that is not helpful or relevant. It is important to “remember that you don't have to use every bit of feedback that comes to you. You have the power” (Furlan & Schneider, 2021).

Giving Constructive Feedback

Providing constructive feedback is a key factor to support a positive and productive environment. **Constructive feedback** involves providing individuals with timely and meaningful information regarding strengths and weaknesses in their interpersonal interactions as well as concrete steps for improving any areas of weakness thus fostering personal and professional growth. You may think that simply giving feedback is helping the recipient improve. But giving good, positive, and constructive feedback is not an easy task. Here are some things to consider:

- Are you in a position to comment or provide feedback?
- Is the recipient ready to receive your feedback? If not, you're walking into a negative communication climate that's not going to get any better. Timing is important.
- Does the other person want your feedback? If the response is no, you'll have to come up with another way to deal with the problem at hand.

If all the stars align and the recipient is open and ready to engage in a feedback discussion, be sure to keep these three things in mind as you craft your feedback:

- **Be positive.** Especially when you know the feedback will include criticism, start and end with positives. Sandwiching the criticisms and corrections between the good points and what they are doing right will help your message be received more positively. See Figure 12.5.3 for a diagram of the "Feedback Sandwich" (an accessible text version is linked in the figure caption).
- **Avoid using absolutes or negative words.** Absolutes include words like *always*, *never*, or *don't*. Avoiding using absolutes communicates you are open to different interpretations, solutions, and entertaining the “gray” areas. Psychology research has shown that as humans, we tend to focus more on the negatives to try and make sense of our world. Knowing that, try to replace negative words and phrases with positive ones.
- **Avoid comparison.** According to social comparison theory, it's natural that we want to compare ourselves to others. But these comparisons also tend to result in resentment and frustration when the comparisons portray us as less than. Stop comparing people and situations.

- **Be specific.** Avoid using evaluative adjectives and remember to try and use *descriptive* words that are precise and straightforward. Address specific issues, behavior, or attitudes that can be improved upon and/or changed. If you are suggesting improvements/changes, specify what you expect and how to achieve it.

All in all, for feedback to be positive, it needs to:

- be given and received at the right time and right place;
- be given with positive points and a specific plan of action;
- be based on facts and information directed at working towards a solution.

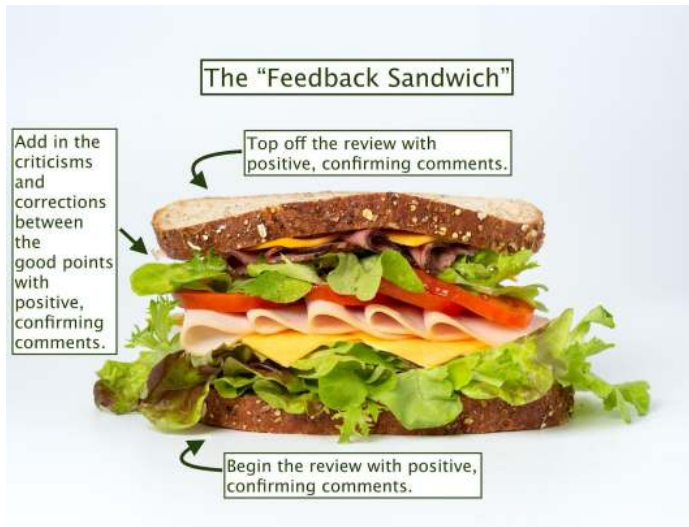


Figure 12.5.3 A sandwich by Mae Mu on Unsplash, modified

into “The Feedback Sandwich” by Armada C. Reitzel CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

An accessible text version is provided here: [The Feedback Sandwich](#)

Getting Critical

Jackson Bird presents “constructive feedback” to his audience about interacting with people who identify as transgender. Through his TED Talk on transgender experiences, he discusses topics such as pronouns, bathroom usage, and more, all while bringing humor, empathy, and transparency to the conversation in an effort to bring awareness and acceptance. Watch the [TED Talk](#) or read the [transcript](#) and then complete the reflection questions.

Reflection Questions

1. How does aspects of your identity (race, religion, nation, age, sex, and so forth) shape your understanding of gender?
2. After receiving this “feedback” from Jackson, reflect on your own reactions when first meeting someone who identifies as transgender. For example, can you relate to what Jackson talks about in terms of people’s curiosity regarding transgender bathroom use and their sex lives? How do you keep that curiosity in check so as not to offend your communication partner?
3. What tips do you find most useful from the TED Talk?
4. Based on the information in this chapter on confirming and disconfirming messages, how can you apply the information to improving the way you talk and listen to transgender people?

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