Interpersonal Communication: Critical Connections

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De Anza College

Social Sciences

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DeAnza College





Interpersonal Communication: Critical Connections

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Program Page



De Anza College sits in the heart of Silicon Valley, where innovation and opportunity are part of daily life, and also has one of the highest costs of living in the country. For our students, that makes every dollar count, and the price of a textbook can be the difference between staying enrolled or dropping a class. Our Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) program closes that gap by giving students full access to high-quality, faculty-created course materials at no cost from the first day of class.

De Anza is proud of its diverse student community, and we hold our ZTC materials to the same standard of excellence that defines the college. Faculty across departments write, adapt, and review these resources themselves, keeping them accurate, current, and grounded in the perspectives of the students who use them, with accessibility and inclusive design built in from the start.

This program reflects the time and care our faculty invest in their students. If you have questions, feedback, or come across any issues with a ZTC resource, contact De Anza College's ZTC Grants Coordinator, Shagun Kaur.

Learn more about De Anza ZTC Program [www.deanza.edu/academic-services/oer/]

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Accessibility Statement

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We selected LibreTexts as our preferred platform because of its commitment to accessibility. In addition to the platform's inherent accessibility, we collaborated with the LibreTexts team to fix any accessibility issues we found.

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1. **Template check.** The project coordinator and instructional designers checked the first chapter for accessibility as a model to ensure later chapters meet accessibility standards.
2. **Progress checks.** The manuscript was checked at approximately 40%, 60%, and 80% completion to catch and correct accessibility issues in production.
3. **Specialist review.** Once the manuscript was complete, an accessibility expert conducted an accessibility check.
4. **Remediation.** The author and the project manager who conducted the earlier progress checks worked together to remediate the issues identified by the accessibility expert.
5. **Final check.** The resource underwent another full check by the accessibility expert before the book was deemed ready for publication.

This process combines ongoing checks during writing with a final specialist review, so issues are caught early and confirmed fixed before publication.

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- The location of the problem (a web address or page/chapter description)
- A description of the problem you encountered
- The device, browser, and any assistive technology you were using (e.g., Windows 11, Google Chrome, JAWS screen reader)

Contact us: De Anza ZTC team

This statement was last updated August 2026

This resource was project-managed by **Shagun Kaur**, overseeing scope, budget, and schedule; stakeholder coordination via monthly meetings; training and platform support (LibreTexts, troubleshooting, technical support); QA/accessibility check scheduling; and licensing and copyright governance.

A Note on Known Limitations

No accessibility check is perfect. We've made a genuine, sustained effort to catch and fix issues throughout the writing and review process described above, but some barriers may remain, especially in complex or interactive content. We'd rather be upfront about that than claim a standard of perfection we can't guarantee.

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AI Use

Generative AI

The authors of this textbook believe that use of generative AI tools is a detriment to the goals of effective human communication, and as such we used AI as sparingly as was feasible for the scope of this project. In an effort of ethical transparency and full disclosure, you should know we used AI to create the sub-chapter previews on each landing page, the review of the chapter in the summary sections, to alphabetize and sort long lists such as the reference pages, and for initial drafts of captions, glossary definitions, and alt-text image descriptions. The human authors checked and reviewed every use of AI for consistency and accuracy.

The course authors extensively reviewed, revised, verified, and edited all AI-generated material. Faculty members evaluated content for accuracy, clarity, inclusivity, accessibility, relevance, and alignment with course learning outcomes. In many cases, AI-generated text served only as a starting point and was substantially modified, expanded, reorganized, or rewritten during development.

We also recognized that AI systems can reflect biases, inaccuracies, omissions, or outdated information. For this reason, we accepted no content without human review and independent verification. We evaluated all factual claims, educational recommendations, examples, and references against current evidence, professional standards, and the authors' subject matter expertise. The human authors ultimately remain responsible for the content, not the technology used during development.

Our use of AI mirrors how many professionals increasingly use emerging technologies in education and the workplace: as tools that can enhance efficiency, creativity, and productivity while still requiring critical thinking, ethical judgment, and expert oversight. By incorporating AI transparently and responsibly, we sought not only to improve the development process but also to model thoughtful technology use for students navigating an increasingly digital and AI-assisted world.

Copyright & Fair Use Considerations

We aligned with evolving IP policy frameworks, especially insights from the U.S. Copyright Office:

- The Office's Part 3 report on AI model training highlights the importance of fair use analysis and restricts reliance on generative AI when it could replicate copyrighted works—our use was limited to non-protected, openly licensed materials.
- This cautious approach is consistent with guidance that encourages transformative use, transparency, and limiting output that could inadvertently mirror protected content.

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About the Book

About the Book

Lately, we've been thinking about how every community college course could or should have the words "Intro To" at the beginning of its title. And as a community college instructor, we needed an "Intro To" Interpersonal Communication text book. **Interpersonal Communication: Critical Connections** was born of a desire to meet three goals. The first was to be an interpersonal communication textbook that was available and accessible to community college students. For us, this meant that it had to be written in a style that was engaging to read and navigate, had to be completely free of cost, and to every extent we could be available for students with a diversity of abilities and neurotypes. For the second goal, we had California Community Colleges in mind, and therefore tried to ensure that the book's content met the criteria of common course and general education standards, without being superfluous. In other words, we wanted to balance the need to meet state standards while also allowing introductory students from an 11-week quarter to an 18-week semester still find it useful and engaging. Finally, it was important for us that the book had social justice and critical perspectives in both the explicit content and the implicit writing. Implicitly, we made every effort to use gender neutral names and pronouns in all examples and ensured that any advice or guidance offered was prioritizing the safety and wellbeing of those systematically most vulnerable and marginalized. Explicitly, we ensured that an entire chapter covered the concepts of power and privilege in order to give context to Interpersonal Communication from a critical lens. Taken with the second goal of prioritizing a community college audience, our move to this third goal of a critical perspective is meant to be an introduction; its the start of our students' journeys, not the end.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks go from the authors to the teachers that inspired a passion for communication studies and a dedication to community college education. This book is a collaborative effort stemming from that initial spark. Special thanks to Shagun Kaur for being the catalyst for the OER endeavor that will make a lasting impact for our students and our schools.

Open Education Resource Authors

As with all academic endeavors, this book is an extension of tremendous intellectual and creative work that came before us. Among many others, we would like to extend tremendous gratitude in particular to authors of the following books for being the foundation on which this book was built:

- Interpersonal Communication - A Mindful Approach to Relationships (Wrench et al.) by Jason S. Wrench, Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter & Katherine S. Thweatt is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
- Interpersonal Communication: Context and Connection-OERI by ASCCC Open Educational Resources Initiative (OERI) is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0
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- Organizational Communication - Theory, Research, and Practice by Anonymous is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 3.0
- COMM 325: Intercultural Communication (Williams) by Anonymous is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

A Note to Instructors

Thank you for choosing **Interpersonal Communication: Critical Connections** for your interpersonal communication course! As stated in the "about the book" section, we wrote this book to be an introduction to interpersonal communication that is both intellectually stimulating but also accessible for a community college student population. Just as we hope the content of this book stimulates interesting and engaging conversation in your classrooms, we hope it also stimulates interesting and engaging conversation among us. Not just for our students, but for all us, this book is meant to be the beginning of a journey, not the end.

A Note to Students

It is an interesting endeavor to study a topic that you have such personal experience in, and thus it will be crucial to be mindful throughout. There may be new and provocative insight in these pages; we encourage you to marinade on those and find their applications to your life. There may be times where guidance and theory in this book may create intellectual or emotional dissonance; a feeling that you've been doing something "wrong." But remember this dissonance is what college is all about: you are supposed to be different on the other side. However, we must also balance this discomfort with learning new things and growth in our endeavors and extend it to us, the authors: we are not perfect either. So please be curious and ask questions of us and your instructors. This book and this course is meant to be a collaborative effort towards growth and progress for all of us. Thank you for coming on this journey. Onward!

Overview

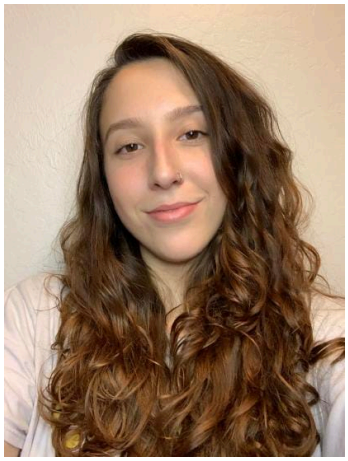
This book is designed to take a largely theoretical and "broad stroke" approach to the study of interpersonal communication. It will start with wide open foundations and gradually funnel closer and closer to something concrete and specific as the chapters move on. Its generally organized in four units:

- **Chapters 1-4: Theoretical foundations -** these sections will help us understand the nature of communication and its theoretical foundations. It will explain "why" everything that comes later works the way it does and has the impact that it does.
- **Chapters 5-7: Communication practices -** these sections are about the mechanics of communication: verbal, nonverbal, and listening. With these mechanics of practice, we start to build the vocabulary of everyday application.
- **Chapters 8-10: Communication effects -** these sections discuss how interpersonal communication is inherently intertwined with our lived experience in the world. We will always have emotions and conflict, and these are both created by and resolved by communication.
- **Chapter 11: Interpersonal Relationships -** the most specific and concrete chapter, this chapter discussed how we can use the tools developed in chapters 1-10 to understand and improve professional, friendly, family, and romantic relationships.

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About the Authors

Author Biographies

Author Images	Author Bios
 Nick Chivers, M.A.	**Nick Chivers** earned his Master's Degree in Communication Studies from San Francisco State University in 2013. During his MA program he focused on Critical Theory and Gender & Sexual Identities. After graduating, he was an adjunct instructor at several bay area universities and community colleges, including De Anza College in Cupertino, CA, where Nick earned tenure in Spring of 2021. Since joining De Anza, Nick has focused on critical perspectives to pedagogy, presenting on the topic regularly at conferences and conventions, and delivered a TEDx Talk in 2019 titled "Grades Aint It: A Case for Redefining Success in College." Nick lives in Sonoma County, is a husband and father of two, and a lover of distance running, escape rooms, and ska music.
 Nicole Stibbard, M.A.	**Nicole Stibbard** is a Part-Time Faculty Instructor at De Anza College. She has her BA from Cal Poly Humboldt and her MA from San Francisco State University, both in Communication Studies. Throughout her academic journey, her focus has been to utilize a feminist lens to dissect heteropatriarchy, patriarchal binarism, and sexual infantilization of women and girls. Her hobbies include art, collecting, and gaming.

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1: COMMUNICATION FOUNDATIONS

Chapter Overview

Communication is a fundamental part of human life that shapes relationships, identities, and social realities. It is a complex process that is difficult to fully capture, but understanding its patterns allows us to navigate interactions more effectively. Communication is not just about sending and receiving messages; it involves meaning-making, adaptation, and social influence. Models of communication help simplify this complexity by providing frameworks to visualize how messages flow, how participants respond, and how context shapes understanding. Interpersonal communication is a specialized form that focuses on interactions between people whose lives mutually influence one another and highlights the strategic, functional, and cultural dimensions of relationships. Developing communication competence and understanding ethical considerations are also critical for personal, professional, and societal success.



Figure 1.1: Students engage in a group discussion, illustrating how communication functions as a dynamic process of meaning-making, adaptation, and social influence. (CC BY-SA 4.0; VMasrour via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Define communication and describe why it is complex and continuous.
- Identify various models of communication, specifically exploring the transaction model of communication.
- Analyze interpersonal communication, including functional and cultural aspects.
- Identify the elements of communication competence and strategies for its development.
- Apply principles of ethical communication in personal, professional, and societal contexts.

1.1: Communication Defined and Communication Function

1.2: Transactional Model and Components

1.3: Interpersonal Communication Definitions and Principles

1.4: Communication Competence and Communication Ethics

1.5: Chapter Review

1.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

1.7: Discussions and Exercises
1.8: Alternative Descriptions for Chapter 1
1.9: References

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1.1: Communication Defined and Communication Function

Overview

Communication is a fundamental process through which people create meaning, build relationships, shape identity, and participate in society. It is more than simply talking; it is a dynamic, continuous, and learned process that involves verbal and nonverbal symbols shaped by culture, context, and ethics. Communication operates across academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts, making it an essential life skill rather than a standalone subject. It also meets human needs, follows rules and norms, and carries ethical implications that shape how interactions unfold.

Learning Objectives

- Define communication as a process of meaning-making involving verbal and nonverbal symbols influenced by multiple contexts.
- Explain how communication functions across academic, professional, personal, and civic spheres of life.
- Identify the primary functions of communication and how communication meets physical, instrumental, relational, and identity needs.
- Describe key principles of communication, including its processual, irreversible, unrepeatable, learned, and culturally guided nature.
- Recognize how rules, norms, and ethics shape communication choices and outcomes.

Defining Communication

The word communication originates from the Latin "communico," meaning “to join or unite,” “to connect,” “to participate in,” or “to share with all.” This root word also gave rise to the words communicate, common, commune, communion, and community. Therefore, we can broadly understand communication as a process through which we share ideas or information with others. Communication is often associated with talking, but it extends beyond speech. We also communicate through eye contact, facial expressions, hand gestures, body posture, and movement. With this foundation, we can examine key principles that shape how we communicate with one another.

It is important that we have a shared understanding of what we mean by the word communication. For the purposes of this text, we will define **communication** as the transactional process by which people generate meaning through the exchange of verbal and nonverbal symbolic messages with multiple cultural contexts. This definition builds on other definitions of communication that have been rephrased and refined over many years. In fact, since the systematic study of communication began in colleges and universities a little over one hundred years ago, there have been more than 126 published definitions of communication (Dance & Larson, 1976).

Definition: Communication

Communication is the transactional process by which people generate meaning through the exchange of verbal and nonverbal symbolic messages with multiple cultural contexts.

Communication Integrated

Communication is integrated into all aspects of life. This text aims to show communication’s value beyond theory or passing tests, as it is deeply woven into our daily lives. To explore this, we'll divide our lives into four spheres: academic, professional, personal, and civic. These areas clearly overlap, as in our lived experiences we move from one sphere to the next and these spheres may coexist in the same place. This is an important framework as we move through this course: we will discuss things in isolation, but we experience them much more dynamically.

Academic

As students in a communication class, you likely see its academic relevance, starting with earning a good grade. But beyond that, this text and your course will challenge you to link communication skills across your courses. Furthermore, information is exchanged between students and teachers through communication, through readings, lectures, and asking questions. Building this foundation now will enhance your competence and benefit your overall academic success.

Example 1.1.1 Effective Team Collaboration

Scenario: You're in a business course working on a marketing presentation. One teammate misses meetings, another is unclear about expectations, and tension starts to build. Drawing on communication skills such as clear goal-setting, respectful feedback, and asking clarifying questions, you help the group realign on deadlines, roles, and shared expectations.

Impact: Misunderstandings decrease, accountability improves, and the group completes the project on time. Your instructor notes the professionalism of your presentation, and the team earns a strong grade while maintaining positive working relationships.

Professional

Strong communication skills are among the top qualities employers seek in college graduates. Similarly, strong interpersonal skills rank consistently among top employer demands. Workplaces may be able to teach you the skills necessary to execute your job, but will likely not want to or be able to train you to be an effective team member. Poor communication, such as weak listening or unclear feedback, can hinder workplace success. Introductory communication courses teach essentials like listening, writing, speaking, researching, organizing, and decision-making. Despite this, some students hesitate to take communication classes, perhaps believing they already communicate well. However, formal training can provide a competitive edge in the job market.

Example 1.1.2 Standing Out at Work

Scenario: You're working part-time at a nonprofit and asked to update your supervisor on a recent outreach project. Using communication skills such as organizing your message clearly, adapting your tone to your audience, and using confident nonverbal cues, you deliver a concise and professional update and address questions calmly.

Impact: Your supervisor recognizes your professionalism and reliability, assigns you greater responsibility, and asks you to contribute to future planning discussions. You gain hands-on experience, strengthen your communication confidence, and enhance your career prospects.

Personal

Most students recognize communication's role in relationships but may underestimate its extent. In this interpersonal communication course, you will see how theory and vocabulary give you tools to understand, improve, and reflect on your interactions. Having the language to identify communication patterns empowers you to consciously adjust behaviors, avoid misunderstandings, and learn from mistakes. Listening, emotional intelligence, conflict management, among many others, will all shape the overall quality of our personal relationships.

Example 1.1.3 Resolving Interpersonal Conflict

Scenario: You and a close friend are experiencing tension because plans are frequently changed at the last minute. Rather than reacting with frustration, you use calm tone, active listening, and clear "I" statements to explain how the situation affects you, such as saying, "I feel undervalued when plans change without notice."

Impact: Your friend better understands your perspective, and together you set clearer expectations. Trust improves, conflict decreases, and the relationship becomes more respectful and balanced.

Civic

Civic engagement involves working to improve community life or participate in political and social processes, and is sometimes less tangible to students. It ranges from local involvement to contacting legislators and is vital for a healthy democracy (Ehrlich, 2000). Aristotle, who laid foundational communication theories, emphasized communication as essential to civic participation and virtuous citizenship. The more we learn about the world, the more we realize we must be invested in its processes and outcomes; we are all implicated in all of it. Colleges offer resources to support civic engagement, and you're encouraged to explore how to connect this course's lessons to your role as an active citizen.

Example 1.1.4 Civic Engagement in Action

Scenario: You participate in a community forum discussing the development of a new public park. Using communication skills from class, you organize your thoughts ahead of time, speak respectfully, and clearly explain how the project would benefit local families and students during the open discussion.

Impact: Community members respond positively to your input, and a neighborhood organizer invites you to help with future planning meetings. You become more engaged in local decision-making and gain confidence as an active community participant.

Communication Functions

Communication serves several essential functions in human interaction, helping individuals meet personal, relational, and social needs. At a basic level, communication allows people to share information, express thoughts and emotions, and make sense of their experiences. Beyond exchanging information, communication helps us establish and maintain relationships by building trust, showing support, and negotiating roles. It also plays a key role in shaping identity, as people use communication to present themselves, gain feedback from others, and understand who they are in relation to the world around them. On a broader level, communication enables coordination and problem-solving in groups, supports social order through shared rules and norms, and allows societies to pass down cultural values, beliefs, and traditions. Through these varied functions, communication becomes central to both individual development and collective life.

Communication Meets our Needs

Communication is more than just exchanging information. While messages help meet physical and practical needs, communication also shapes our identities and relationships in profound ways.

Physical

Physical needs are essential for our functioning and survival, and communication plays a critical role in meeting them. While often associated with cognitive processes, communication also affects physical well-being. At a basic level, it allows individuals to express unmet needs, such as when a baby cries from hunger or someone asks for shelter after eviction. Communication is also tied to psychological and physical health; humans are inherently social, and isolation can cause severe harm (Williams & Zadro, 2001). Effective interpersonal communication reduces stress, depression, and anxiety (Hargie, 2011), and can be therapeutic. For example, individuals who did not talk with friends after a traumatic loss experienced more physical health issues than those who did (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). Thus, while satisfying physical needs is vital, meeting instrumental, relational, and identity needs is also crucial for social functioning and well-being.

Instrumental

Instrumental needs refer to communication that helps us accomplish everyday tasks and achieve short- and long-term goals. Much of daily communication is focused on fulfilling these needs, such as influencing others, acquiring information, or seeking support (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). In essence, communication also helps us get things done. A lot of everyday interaction is practical: asking for information, coordinating plans, requesting help, or influencing others to take action. Whether it's organizing schedules, solving problems, or working toward longer-term goals, communication is often the tool we use to move tasks forward.

Due to this, people sometimes communicate strategically, thus choosing how to phrase requests or present ideas based on what they want to achieve. This can be as simple as asking a classmate for notes, coordinating responsibilities in a group project, or negotiating shared decisions. In this sense, communication isn't just about expressing thoughts; it's also how we get cooperation, make progress, and handle the practical demands of daily life.

Relational

Relational needs involve the communication necessary to initiate, maintain, and sometimes end interpersonal relationships. While instrumental communication supports daily functioning, relational communication fulfills our innate need for social connection. Communication enables relationship development through nonverbal cues, conversation, and self-disclosure. Once relationships are formed, they require ongoing communication for maintenance, such as expressing affection or showing support. Communication also plays a key role in relational decline and dissolution, whether through avoidance, criticism, or explicit endings. These interactions, whether digital or face-to-face, form the foundation of relational bonds. However, not all relational communication is positive; some patterns, like manipulation or passive aggression, can be harmful.



Figure 1.1.1: Friends connect and maintain their relationships through both conversation and digital communication, highlighting how relational communication, whether face-to-face or via mobile devices, supports social bonds, affection, and ongoing interaction. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Garry Knight via Wikimedia Commons)

Identity

Identity needs involve the desire to present ourselves to others in specific, often favorable, ways. Our sense of identity is shaped not only by internal self-perception but also through communication with others. As identity evolves over time, communication remains the central means by which it is expressed and negotiated. Like public figures who may craft various images or versions of themselves, individuals present different "faces" depending on context. Erving Goffman (1959) described **self-presentation** as a performance, with people enacting different roles in different situations. Competent communicators manage these roles effectively, adapting their behavior to fit social expectations. For example, individuals may shift from supportive to authoritative roles depending on context, or modify behavior as professional roles change. These performances influence how others perceive us and help fulfill our identity needs.

Communication is a Process

Communication is a process that involves an interchange of verbal and nonverbal messages within a continuous and dynamic sequence of events (Hargie, 2011). Since it is continuous and dynamic, it is often hard to pinpoint exactly when communication starts or stops. Studying communication means taking snapshots of this flow, like isolating feedback or eye contact, but this interrupts the natural process. Still, these snapshots are useful for scholarly interrogation of the communication process, and they can also help us evaluate our own communication practices, troubleshoot a problematic encounter we had, or slow things down to account for various contexts before we engage in communication (Dance & Larson, 1976).

This fluid nature of communication leads to some key principles: communication messages differ in how consciously they are crafted, communication cannot be undone, and every communication event is unique and unrepeatable.

Some scholars define communication strictly as messages intended for others. This narrow definition only includes messages that are tailored or at least targeted to a particular person or group and excludes any communication that is involuntary (Dance & Larson, 1976). But consider this: if you frown and sigh on a bus without meaning to, and someone notices, is that communication? Yes, because meaning was created, even if unintentionally. Communication includes both intended and unintended messages.

Communication varies by how much conscious thought it involves. Reactionary messages, like screaming when scared or saying “ouch” when in pain, are mostly involuntary. Routine messages, such as polite greetings, involve some thought but are still automatic. Constructed communication requires more conscious effort and often serves relational and identity needs. However, more intention does not guarantee effectiveness, understanding, or ethical outcomes. Ethical communicators remain responsible for their messages’ impacts, even if unintended. Communication has short- and long-term effects, which illustrates the next principle we will discuss: communication is irreversible.

Once a message is sent, it cannot be taken back. Characters in sitcoms and romantic comedies often use the line “Can we just start over?” Or perhaps after you have said something you realize is hurtful, you say "oh no! I take it back!" As favorable as it would be to “redo” a failed or embarrassing communication encounter, it is impossible. Real communication can’t be erased. If a joke offends someone, saying “I didn’t mean it” does not undo the effect. Communication always leaves an impact, whether positive or negative. Conversely, when communication goes well, we often wish we could recreate it. However, in addition to communication being irreversible, it is also unrepeatable. Communication is always impacting the context; it is perpetually creating the current setting. Even if you are standing in front of another person and say the exact same thing two times in a row, the second time you said it, it will be perceived differently by virtue of it being the second time you said. Trying to recreate a past interaction exactly, will not yield the same results. Even if the words are the same, changing physical, psychological, social, relational, and cultural contexts alter the experience. Ever noticed how retelling a funny story often falls flat? That’s communication’s unrepeatable nature in action.

Communication is Guided by Culture and Context

Context is a constantly changing part of the communication process. Both culture and context shape how we understand and define communication. Western cultures often focus more on the sender of a message than the receiver, and on the actual content rather than the surrounding context. These cultural priorities influence how communication is defined and modeled. Cultures also differ in their orientation toward individualism or collectivism. For example, the United States is typically seen as an individualistic culture that values personal expression and achievement, while Japan is considered a collectivistic culture that emphasizes group harmony and cohesion. These deep cultural values shape how people learn to communicate. In many collectivistic cultures, silence and nonverbal cues play a more important role. Regardless of the country, whether the U.S., Japan, or elsewhere, people grow up learning culturally specific ways of communicating that vary depending on the context. Next, we’ll explore how communication is learned, the rules and norms that guide it, and the ethical considerations involved.

Communication is Learned

Everyone is born with the capacity to communicate, but everyone communicates in their own way. This is because communication is something we learn rather than something that is innate. Communication patterns depend on the culture and context where they happen, and many cultures have their own distinct languages made up of symbols.

A key principle of communication is that it is symbolic. The words in language do not directly represent reality; instead, they stand for or symbolize things. The fact that communication varies so much among people, contexts, and cultures shows that meaning is not built into the words themselves. For example, if you visit France and see the word poisson on a menu, unless you know French, you might not realize it means “fish.” The French word looks nothing like the English word “fish,” but both represent the same thing. If you judged only by how it looks, you might confuse it with the English word “poison” and avoid ordering it. A picture of a fish on the menu could also help tourists interpret the meaning, since it uses a visual symbol rather than written language to represent the item.

All symbolic communication is learned, negotiated, and dynamic. We know that the letters b-o-o-k refer to a bound object with pages, and t-r-u-c-k refers to a vehicle with a bed for hauling things. But if those meanings were swapped, if t-r-u-c-k meant a book and b-o-o-k meant a vehicle, it would still make sense because letters themselves don’t carry inherent meaning; the meaning depends on what we agree they represent. Later chapters will explain more about how language works, but communication is definitely more than just words.

We are socialized into different languages, but we also "speak" differently depending on the situation. This is partly because we learn not only the meanings of symbols, but also the rules for how and when to use them, i.e. **constitutive rules**. These rules guide whether we speak directly, use euphemism, stay silent, or choose another form of expression based on context and expectations. For instance, in some cultures it is not appropriate to discuss family or health matters in public, while in small-town America, you might overhear people chatting about their kids or upcoming surgery in a grocery store. Some communication patterns are widely shared, while others are specific to certain relationships, like best friends who develop inside jokes and expressions that others don't understand. These examples show that communication is learned and shaped not only by vocabulary, but also by the social rules that tell us how to use it.

Whether it is verbal or nonverbal, mediated or face-to-face, our communication follows certain rules and norms. Phatic communion is an instructive example of how we communicate under the influence of rules and norms (Senft, 2009). **Phatic communion** involves routine, scripted verbal exchanges that aim to establish social bonds rather than to actually share meaningful information.

Example 1.1.5 Bumping into your Professor

When passing your professor in the hall, the exchange may go as follows:

Student: "Hey, how are you?"

Professor: "Good, how are you?"

Student: "Good."

What's the real purpose of this exchange? It's probably not to genuinely check on each other's well-being. We have similar interactions when we comment on the weather or mention that it's Monday. People often joke about phatic communion because it seems pointless on the surface.

In fact, the student and professor might as well just say:

Student: "Generic greeting question."

Professor: "Generic greeting response and question."

Student: "Generic response."

This shows that phatic communion involves messages that do not require much conscious thought, do not carry significant content, and do not generate deep meaning. So, if it seems so "pointless," why do we engage in phatic communion?

The term phatic communion comes from the Greek word phatos, meaning "spoken," and communion, meaning "connection or bond." Communication helps us meet our relational needs. Just as people find communion through food or religion, they also find it through words. But the extent to which, and the situations in which, we engage in phatic communion are shaped by social rules and norms. For example, in the U.S., silence in social settings is often seen as awkward, so we fill that silence with seemingly meaningless words to meet social expectations. It is also a norm to greet people when you see them, especially if you know them. We all understand that when someone asks, "How are you?" they are not expecting us to unload all our problems or share our to-do list when someone says, "What's up?" Instead, we stick to the social script with this routine type of exchange.

Phatic communion, like many other aspects of communication, is culturally relative. Most cultures use phatic communion, but the topics and occasions vary. In the U.S., greeting scripts are common, while in other cultures, parting scripts might be more typical. Asking about someone's well-being might be normal phatic communion in one culture, while in another, asking about the health of a person's family could be the usual practice.

Communication has Ethical Implications

Another principle of communication that varies depending on culture and situation is that communication has ethical implications. **Communication ethics** involves the ongoing process of negotiating and reflecting on our actions and communication in terms of what we believe to be right or wrong. Aristotle once said, "In the arena of human life the honors

and rewards fall to those who show their good qualities in action" (Pearson et al., 2006). His focus on actions highlights a key aspect of communication ethics. While ethics has been studied in philosophy since Aristotle's time, its application to communication is more recent. In communication ethics, the main concern is the choices people make about right and wrong, rather than the philosophies, systems, or religions behind those choices. Often, ethics are a gray area. Though we often think about decisions as simply right or wrong, reality is rarely that clear-cut. Aristotle also said that we should act "to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way." The word "right" in this context can be a bit ambiguous. Communication competence involves communicating effectively. Communication ethics involves communicating morally and justly. Communication has consequences, and communication cannot be undone, so we must be constantly considering the moral and ethical consequences–both short and longer term–of our communication actions.

When it comes to communication ethics, it is difficult to label something as completely ethical or unethical. Every day we make choices that are more or less ethical, and sometimes we realize later that our decision wasn't the most ethical one. These situations test our ethics and goodwill, since many times multiple options may seem appropriate, but we can only pick one. If after reflecting on a choice, we see that a more ethical option was possible, does that make us bad people? While some actions are easier to classify, take murder for example, communication is often less clear. Hurtful speech, or even speech some label as hate speech, can be protected under free speech laws. This highlights the complex relationship between protected speech, ethical speech, and the law. In some situations, people believe it is their ethical duty to share information they see as serving the public interest. For example, WikiLeaks has released thousands of classified documents on wars, intelligence, and diplomacy. WikiLeaks argues that this transparency holds leaders accountable and keeps the public informed, while government officials call the leaks criminal acts. Both sides view their own actions as ethical and the other side's as unethical. So, who is right?

Since many ethical decisions depend on context, situation, and personal judgment, various professions have developed codes of ethics to guide members through gray areas. For instance, doctors take oaths to do no harm, and journalists follow guidelines promoting objectivity and protecting sources. While businesses have faced high-profile ethical scandals, business ethics has become an important subject in many schools, and more companies are adopting ethical guidelines for their employees.

Why Study Communication?

Studying communication offers endless possibilities. For instance, you might explore YouTube's history (Soukup, 2014), deception in texting (Wise & Rodriguez, 2013), or college students' media habits (Panek, 2014). You could also look at how family members communicate disappointment (Miller et al., 2013), how parental communication patterns influence romantic relationships (Young & Schrodt, 2016), or how parents construct narratives about health decisions like HPV vaccination (Garcia et al., 2024). In terms of gender, researchers have examined communication differences in spatial proximity and social behavior (Yang et al., 2016) and the ways motherhood is represented in lesbian-headed households (Koenig et al., 2012). Media and technology remain central to communication studies, with work examining how adolescents and parents interact in digital spaces (Rudi, Walkner, & Dworkin, 2015). Environmental communication is another dynamic area, addressing emotional responses to climate change (Wong-Parodi & Feygina, 2021), media framing of climate solutions (Günay et al., 2021), public messaging strategies (Ballew et al., 2024; O'Callaghan et al., 2025), and the role of culture in climate engagement (Munshi et al., 2020). Additionally, organizational research highlights shifts in workplace communication, such as the modularity of networks during remote work transitions (Zuzul et al., 2021). These examples showcase the diversity of research topics in the field, illustrating its dynamic and interdisciplinary nature.

We need to study communication for a variety of reasons. First, it gives us a new perspective on something we take for granted every day. Many may think they are excellent communicators. However, most people never ask another person if they are great communicators. Besides being in a public speaking class or listening to your friends' opinions, you probably do not get a lot of feedback on the quality of your communication. You will not be able to see the impact of your communication behaviors, if you do not focus on certain communication aspects. The second reason we study communication is based on the quantity of our time that is devoted to that activity. Since we spend so much of our time communicating with others, we should make that time worthwhile. We need to learn how to communicate and communicate better because a large amount of our time is allotted to communicating with others. The last reason why we study communication is to increase our effectiveness. Marriages and relationships often fail for several reasons. The most popular reason is that people do not know how to communicate with each other, which leads to irreconcilable differences. People often do not know how to work through problems, and it creates anger, hostility, and possibly violence. In these cases, communication needs to be effective for the relationship to work and be satisfying. Think about all the relationships that you have with friends, family, coworkers, and significant others. This text, and the course you are enrolled in, could make you more successful in those relationships.

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1.2: Transactional Model and Components

Overview

Communication can feel seamless in everyday life, yet it is a complex and dynamic process that is difficult to define or isolate. Communication models help simplify this complexity by visually representing key elements of communication encounters, making it easier to understand how messages are created, exchanged, and interpreted. The three primary models (transmission, interaction, and transaction) each reflect different assumptions about how communication functions. The transaction model in particular emphasizes communication as a simultaneous, context-driven process in which meaning and social reality are co-created. Understanding these models provides tools for analyzing communication more thoughtfully and becoming a more intentional and effective communicator.

Learning Objectives

- Explain the purpose of communication models and how they simplify complex communication processes.
- Identify the key elements common to communication models, including participants, messages, encoding, decoding, and channels.
- Compare and contrast the transmission, interaction, and transaction models of communication.
- Describe the transaction model of communication and its emphasis on simultaneous meaning-making.
- Analyze how social, relational, and cultural contexts influence communication encounters.

Core Components

Communication is a complex process, and it is difficult to determine where or with whom a communication encounter starts and ends. Models of communication simplify the process by providing a visual representation of the various aspects of a communication encounter. Some models explain communication in more detail than others, but even the most complex model still does not and cannot recreate what we experience, in even a moment, of a communication encounter. Models still serve a valuable purpose for students and scholars of communication because they allow us to see specific concepts and steps within the process of communication, define communication, and apply communication concepts.

When you become aware of how communication functions, you can think more deliberately through your communication encounters, which can help you better prepare for future communication and learn from your previous communication. There are three standard models of communication: the transmission, interaction, and transaction models. This section will overview each of these models, but discuss the transaction model in depth.

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

The internal cognitive process that allows participants to send, receive, and understand messages is the encoding and decoding process. **Encoding** is the process of turning thoughts into symbolic communication. **Decoding** is the process of turning symbolic communication into thoughts. For example, you may realize you’re hungry and encode the following message to send to your roommate: “I’m hungry. Do you want to get pizza tonight?” As your roommate receives the message, they decode your communication and turns it back into thoughts in order to make meaning out of it. Encoded messages are sent through a **channel**, or a sensory route on which a message travels, to the receiver for decoding. While communication can be sent and received using any sensory route (sight, smell, touch, taste, or sound), most communication occurs through visual (sight) and/or auditory (sound) channels. If your roommate has headphones on and is engrossed in a video game, you may need to get his attention by waving your hands before you can ask him about dinner.

Summarizing Communication Models

The **transmission model of communication** describes communication as a linear, one-way process in which a sender intentionally transmits a message to a receiver (Ellis & McClintock, 1990). This model focuses on the sender and message within a communication encounter. Although the receiver is included in the model, this role is viewed as more of a target or end point rather than part of an ongoing process. We are left to presume that the receiver either successfully receives and understands the message or does not.

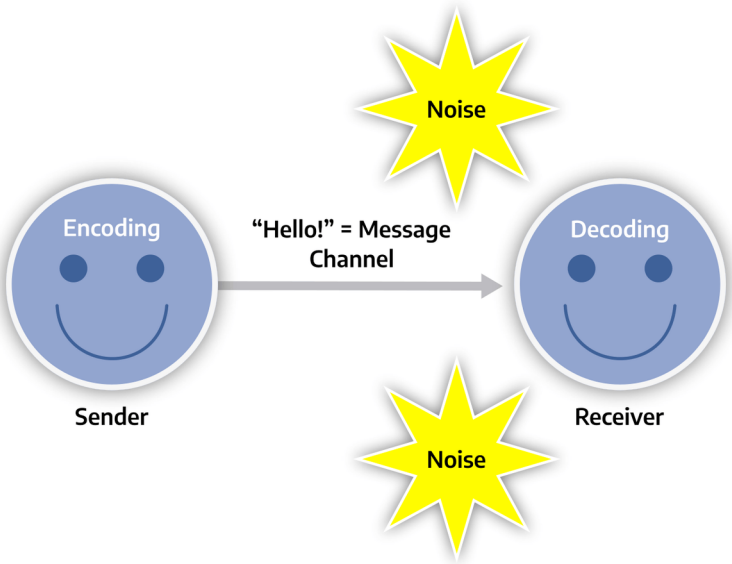


Figure 1.2.1: The Transmission Model of Communication: The diagram depicts a one-directional flow of communication, in which a sender encodes and transmits a message to a receiver who decodes it, with the process subject to possible interference from noise. Alternative description of image. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Andy Schmitz via Wikimedia Commons)

The **interaction model of communication** describes communication as a process in which participants alternate positions as sender and receiver and generate meaning by sending messages and receiving feedback within physical and psychological contexts (Schramm, 1997). Rather than illustrating communication as a linear, one-way process, the interaction model incorporates feedback, which makes communication a more interactive, two-way process. **Feedback** includes messages sent in response to other messages.

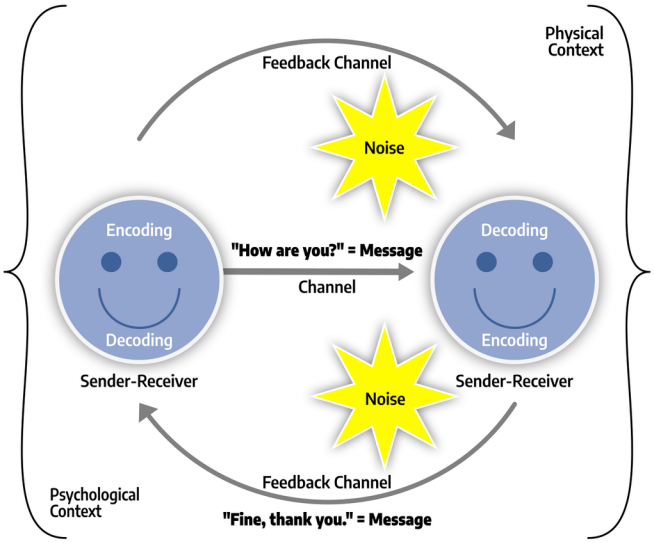


Figure 1.2.1: The Interaction Model of Communication: The diagram illustrates that communication is two-directional, includes feedback, and occurs within overlapping contexts that can be affected by noise. Alternative description of image. (CC BY-SA 4.0; University of Minnesota via Wikimedia Commons)

As the study of communication progressed, models expanded to account for more of the communication process. Many scholars view communication as more than a process that is used to carry on conversations and convey meaning. We do not send messages like computers, and we do not neatly alternate between the roles of sender and receiver as an interaction unfolds. We also cannot consciously decide to stop communicating, because communication is more than sending and receiving messages. The transaction model differs from the transmission and interaction models in significant ways, including the conceptualization of communication, the role of sender and receiver, and the role of context (Barnlund, 1970).

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

The Transaction Model of Communication

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

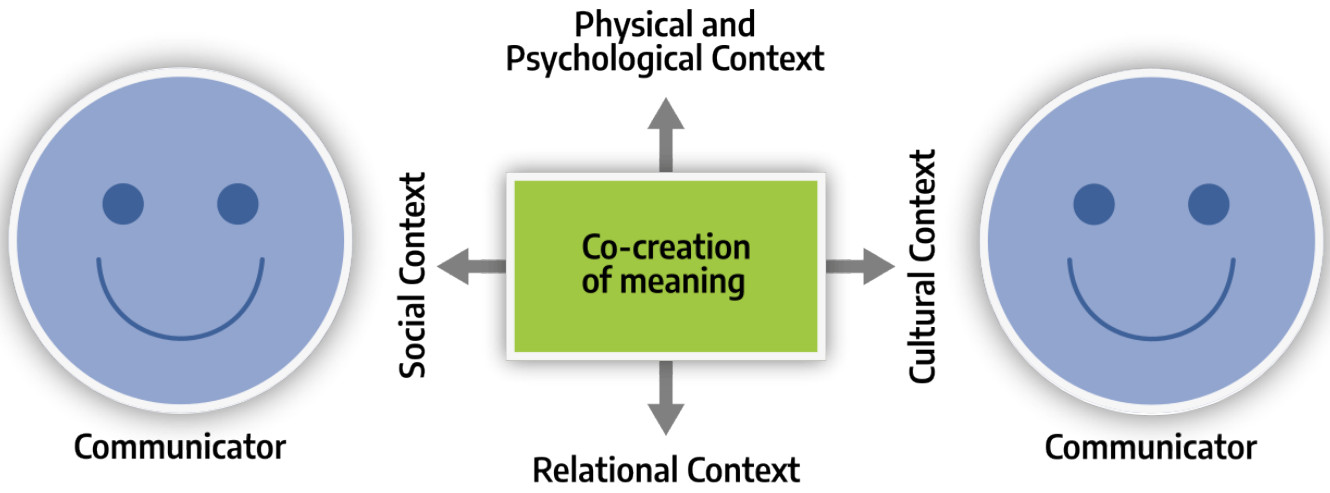


Figure 1.2.1: The Transaction Model of Communication: The diagram depicts communication as a simultaneous, collaborative process in which meaning is co-created by communicators, shaped by social, cultural, physical, psychological, and relational contexts. Alternative description of image. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Andy Schmitz via Wikimedia Commons)

The roles of sender and receiver in the transaction model of communication differ significantly from the other models. Instead of labeling participants as senders and receivers, the people in a communication encounter are referred to as communicators. Unlike the interaction model, which suggests that participants alternate positions as sender and receiver, the transaction model suggests that we are simultaneously senders and receivers. For example, on a first date, as you send verbal messages about your interests and background, your date reacts nonverbally. You do not wait until you are done sending your verbal message to start receiving and decoding the nonverbal messages of your date. Instead, you are simultaneously sending your verbal message and receiving your date's nonverbal messages. This is an important addition to the model because it allows us to understand how we are able to adapt our communication in the middle of sending it based on the communication we are simultaneously receiving from our communication partner.

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

Social context refers to the set of expectations, both explicit and implicit, that guide communication in a given situation. These expectations are shaped through socialization and can vary across communities, relationships, and settings. Rather than being fixed rules, they are often flexible norms that help people interpret what kinds of communication are appropriate in a particular moment. For example, people may generally expect honesty, turn-taking in conversation, basic politeness like greeting others, or showing appreciation when complimented. Parents and teachers may explicitly teach some of these expectations, while others are learned more informally through observation and experience. However, these expectations are not universal or constant; they can shift depending on context, culture, and the relationship between communicators, and they may be followed more strictly in some situations than in others. Related to the social context, time is an important contextual element that influences communication. First, the historical social/political time in which communication is taking place influences the subject matter we may communicate about, the language we would use to communicate about it, and the channels used to transmit those messages. Second, the amount of time that participants have to communicate influences the manner in which we communicate. When the social context dictates that participants are running out of time and need to end the communication to be somewhere else, our manner of communication changes. These are several of the ways in which the social context influences communication.

Relational context includes the previous interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person. We communicate differently with someone we just met versus someone we have known for a long time. Initial interactions with people tend to be more highly scripted and governed by established norms and rules, but when we have an established relational context, we may be able to bend or break social norms and rules more easily. For example, you would likely follow social norms of politeness and attentiveness and might spend the whole day cleaning the house for the first time you invite your new neighbors to visit. Once the neighbors are in your house, you may also make them the center of your attention during their visit. If you end up becoming

friends with your neighbors and establishing a relational context, you might not think as much about having everything cleaned and prepared or even giving them your whole attention during later visits. Also important is the relationship of power between the two participants, something we will discuss in depth in later chapter, but you may already have a sense this is significant. For example, there are certain communication rules and norms that apply to a supervisor-supervisee relationship that do not apply to a brother-sister relationship and vice versa. These differences often involve power, which can shape who sets expectations, how direct communication can be, and what kinds of behaviors are considered appropriate. Just as relational history and power influence communication, so does culture.

Cultural context includes various aspects of identities such as race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and ability. Identity and various specific identity categories will be further discussed in later chapters. For now, it is important for us to understand that whether we are aware of it or not, we all have multiple cultural identities that influence our communication. Our cultural backgrounds teach us (among other things) what is seen as good, worthy, or valuable in the world, and these values are often embedded in the ways we communicate. Some people, especially those with identities that have been historically marginalized, are regularly aware of how their cultural identities influence their communication and influence how others communicate with them. Conversely, people with identities that are dominant or in the majority may rarely, if ever, think about the role their cultural identities play in their communication.

When cultural context comes to the forefront of a communication encounter, it can be difficult to manage. Since intercultural communication creates uncertainty, it can deter people from communicating across cultures or lead people to view intercultural communication as negative. However, if you avoid communicating across cultural identities, you will likely not get more comfortable or competent as a communicator. Difference, as will also be discussed in Chapter 2, is not a bad thing. In fact, intercultural communication has the potential to enrich various aspects of our lives. In order to communicate well within various cultural contexts, it is important to keep an open mind and avoid making assumptions about others' cultural identities. While you may be able to identify some aspects of the cultural context within a communication encounter, there may also be cultural influences that you cannot see. A competent communicator should not assume to know all the cultural contexts a person brings to an encounter, since not all cultural identities are visible. As with the other contexts, it requires skill to adapt to shifting contexts, and the best way to develop these skills is through practice and reflection.

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1.3: Interpersonal Communication Definitions and Principles

Overview

Interpersonal communication is central to human relationships, well-being, and social life. It is a mutually influential process shaped by social and cultural contexts, and understanding it is essential for personal health, relationship satisfaction, and professional success. It serves instrumental, relational, and self-presentation goals, helping people accomplish tasks, build connections, and manage impressions. Relationships also develop their own cultures through storytelling, routines, rituals, rules, and norms that guide interaction and meaning.

Interpersonal communication skills such as listening, emotional intelligence, and appropriate skill selection support effective interaction across diverse relational contexts. These skills help individuals adapt their communication to different people and situations while maintaining relational health. Strong interpersonal communication enhances understanding, reduces conflict, and improves both personal and professional relationships.

Learning Objectives

- Define interpersonal communication and explain how it differs from other forms of communication.
- Describe why interpersonal communication is essential to human health, relationships, and professional success.
- Identify instrumental, relational, and self-presentation goals in interpersonal communication.
- Explain how relationship cultures are created through storytelling, idioms, routines, rituals, and norms.
- Apply core interpersonal communication skills to communicate more effectively and appropriately in varied contexts.

Defining Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication shapes nearly every meaningful connection we have, from friendships and family relationships to workplace interactions and romantic partnerships. Unlike casual or impersonal exchanges, interpersonal communication involves mutual influence, emotional investment, and ongoing interaction. Understanding how these relationships function, and how communication both strengthens and strains them, allows us to become more intentional, competent, and ethical communicators. The following sections explore what makes interpersonal communication unique, why it matters, and how it operates in everyday life.

In order to understand interpersonal communication, we must understand how interpersonal communication functions to meet our needs and goals and how our interpersonal communication connects to larger social and cultural systems. **Interpersonal communication** is the process of exchanging messages between people whose lives mutually influence one another in unique ways in relation to social and cultural norms. This definition highlights the fact that interpersonal communication involves two or more people who are interdependent to some degree and who build a unique bond based on the larger social and cultural contexts to which they belong. For instance, a brief exchange with a grocery store clerk who you do not know would not be considered interpersonal communication, because you and the clerk are not influencing each other in significant ways. On the other hand, if the clerk were a friend, family member, coworker, or romantic partner, the communication would fall into the interpersonal category. In this section, we discuss the importance of studying interpersonal communication and explore its functional and cultural aspects.

Definition: Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is the process of exchanging messages between people whose lives mutually influence one another in unique ways in relation to social and cultural norms.

Why Study Interpersonal Communication?

Interpersonal communication has many implications for us in the real world. In fact, interpersonal communication played an important role in human evolution. Early humans who lived in groups, rather than alone, were more likely to survive, which meant that those with the capability to develop interpersonal bonds were more likely to pass these traits on to the next generation (Leary, 2001). Additionally, interpersonal skills have a measurable impact on psychological and physical health. People with higher levels of interpersonal communication skills are better able to adapt to stress, have greater satisfaction in relationships and more friends, and have less depression and anxiety (Hargie, 2011). In contrast, prolonged isolation has been shown to severely damage a human (Williams & Zadro, 2001). Take the various myths of the child who was raised by wolves for example. There have been documented cases of abandoned or neglected children, sometimes referred to as feral children, who survived using their animalistic instincts but suffered psychological and physical trauma as a result of their isolation (Candland, 1995). There are also examples of solitary confinement, which has become an ethical issue in many countries. In "supermax" prisons, which now operate in at least forty-four states, prisoners spend 22.5 to 24 hours a day in their cells and have no contact with the outside world or other prisoners (Shalev, 2011). Aside from making your relationships and health better, interpersonal communication skills are highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2010). Each of these examples illustrates how interpersonal communication meets our basic needs as humans for security in our social bonds, health, and careers. However, we are not born with all the interpersonal communication skills we will need in life. In order to make the most out of our interpersonal relationships, we must learn some basic principles.

Think about a time when a short communication exchange affected a relationship almost immediately, whether we did or did not intend for it to occur. Many times we engage in interpersonal communication to fulfill certain goals we may have, but sometimes we are more successful than others. This is because interpersonal communication is strategic, meaning we intentionally create messages to achieve certain goals that help us function in society and our relationships. Goals vary based on the situation and the communicators, but ask yourself if you are generally successful at achieving the goals with which you enter a conversation or not. If so, you may already possess a high degree of interpersonal **communication competence**, or the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in personal relationships.

This section will emphasize some key processes that can make us more effective and appropriate communicators. For example, using listening skills to better understand others, applying people skills to navigate social situations, and drawing on emotional intelligence to recognize and respond to emotions in yourself and others. It is important to note that effectiveness and appropriateness are not the same thing, and communication outcomes are often shaped by many shifting factors that we cannot fully control. Consider a manager at a marketing agency working under tight deadlines. As pressure increases, they may step in, divide tasks, and provide highly detailed instructions to ensure the project is completed on time. In the short term, this approach might work and the deadline is met. However, communication is experienced in ongoing relationships, not isolated moments. Over time, some employees may feel excluded or micromanaged, and the manager later learns that team members have expressed frustration and even begun looking for other opportunities. What seemed effective in one moment may have unintended relational consequences in another, depending on expectations, personalities, and workplace culture. A different approach, such as inviting input, clarifying expectations collaboratively, and checking in with the team, might still accomplish the task, but in a way that better supports trust and engagement. In this sense, communication is not simply about applying the "right" technique, but about adapting to complex and changing relational dynamics.

Functional Aspects of Interpersonal Communication

We have different needs that are met through our various relationships. Whether we are aware of it or not, we often ask ourselves, "What can this relationship do for me?" In order to understand how relationships achieve specific functions, the following section will examine instrumental goals, relationship-maintenance goals, and self-presentation goals.

What motivates you to communicate with someone? We frequently engage in communication designed to achieve **instrumental goals** such as [coordinating efforts], getting information we need, or asking for support (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). In short, instrumental talk helps us "get things done" in our relationships. Our instrumental goals can be long term or day to day.

Example 1.3.1 Communicating for Instrumental Goals

- You ask your friend to help you move this weekend (coordinating efforts).
- You ask your coworker to remind you how to balance your cash register till at the end of your shift (requesting or presenting information).

- You console your roommate after he loses his job (asking for or giving support).

When we communicate to achieve **relational goals**, we are striving to maintain a positive relationship. Engaging in relationship-maintenance communication is like taking your car to be serviced at the repair shop. To have a good relationship, just as to have a long-lasting car, we should engage in routine maintenance. For example, maybe you wanted to stay in and order a pizza and watch a movie, but your friend suggests that you go to a local restaurant and then to the theater. Perhaps you do not feel like being around a lot of people or spending money (or changing out of your pajamas), but you decide to go along with their suggestion. In that moment, you are putting your relational partner's needs above your own, which will likely make them feel valued. It is likely that your friend has made or will also make similar concessions to put your needs first, which indicates that there is a satisfactory and complimentary relationship. However, if one partner always insists on having their way or always concedes, becoming the martyr, the individuals are not exhibiting interpersonal-communication competence. Other routine relational tasks include celebrating special occasions or honoring accomplishments, spending time together, and checking in regularly by phone, e-mail, text, social media, or face-to-face communication.

Example 1.3.2 Communicating for Relational Goals

- You organize an office party for a coworker who has just become a U.S. citizen (celebrating/honoring accomplishments).
- You make breakfast with your mom while you are home visiting (spending time together).
- You post a message on your long-distance friend's social media page saying you miss them (checking in).

We also pursue **self-presentation goals** by adapting our communication in order to be perceived in particular ways. Just as many companies, celebrities, and politicians create a public image, we desire to present different faces in different contexts. The well-known scholar Erving Goffman compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts (Goffman, 1959). Indeed, competent communicators can successfully manage how others perceive them by adapting to situations and contexts. A parent may perform the role of stern head of household, supportive shoulder to cry on, or hip and culturally aware friend to their child. A newly hired employee may initially perform the role of serious and agreeable coworker. Sometimes people engage in communication that does not necessarily present them in a positive way.

Example 1.3.3 Communicating for Self-Presentation Goals

- As your boss complains about struggling to format the company newsletter, you tell them about your experience with Microsoft Word and editing and offer to look over the newsletter once they're done to fix the formatting (presenting yourself as competent).
- You and your new college roommate stand in your dorm room full of boxes. You let them choose which side of the room they wants and then invite them to eat lunch with you (presenting yourself as friendly).
- You say, "I don't know," in response to a professor's question even though you have an idea of the answer (presenting yourself as aloof, or "too cool for school").

As if managing instrumental, relational, and self-presentation goals is not difficult enough when we consider them individually, we must also realize that the three goal types are always working together. In some situations we may privilege instrumental goals over relational or self-presentation goals. For example, if your partner is offered a great job in another state and you decided to go with them, which will move you away from your job and social circle, you would be focusing on relational goals over instrumental or self-presentation goals. When you are facing a stressful situation and need your best friend's help and call saying, "Hurry and bring me a gallon of gas or I'm going to be late to work!" you are privileging instrumental goals over relational goals. However, if the person really is your best friend, you can try to smooth things over or make up for your shortness later. Although, you probably would not call your boss and bark a request to bring you a gallon of gas so you can get to work, since you likely want your boss to see you as dependable and likable, meaning you have focused on self-presentation goals.

The functional perspective of interpersonal communication indicates that we communicate to achieve certain goals in our relationships. We get things done in our relationships by communicating for instrumental goals. We maintain positive relationships through relational goals. We also strategically present ourselves in order to be perceived in particular ways. As our goals are met and our relationships build, they become little worlds we inhabit with our relational partners, complete with their own relationship cultures.

Cultural Aspects of Interpersonal Communication

Aside from functional aspects of interpersonal communication, communicating in relationships also helps establish relationship cultures. Just as large groups of people create cultures through shared symbols (language), values, and rituals, people in relationships also create cultures at a smaller level. **Relationship schema** are the climates established through interpersonal communication that are unique to the relational partners but based on larger cultural and social norms. We also enter into new relationships with expectations based on the schema we have developed in previous relationships and learned from our larger society and culture. Think of relationship schema as blueprints or plans that show the inner workings of a relationship. Just like a schematic or diagram for assembling a new computer desk helps you put it together, relationship schemata guide us in how we believe our interpersonal relationships should work and how to create them. Therefore, from our life experiences in our larger cultures, we bring building blocks, or expectations, into our relationships, which fundamentally connect our relationships to the outside world (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). Even though we experience our relationships as unique, they are at least partially built on preexisting cultural norms.

Storytelling

Some additional communicative acts that create our relational cultures include relational storytelling, personal idioms, routines and rituals, and rules and norms. Storytelling is an important part of how we create culture in larger contexts and how we create a uniting and meaningful storyline for our relationships. In fact, an anthropologist coined the term "homo narrans" to describe the unique storytelling capability of modern humans (Fisher, 1985). We often rely on relationship storytelling to create a sense of stability in the face of change, test the compatibility of potential new relational partners, or create or maintain solidarity in established relationships. Think of how you use storytelling among your friends, family, coworkers, and other relational partners. If you recently moved to a new place for college, you probably experienced some big changes. One of the first things you started to do was reestablish a social network; remember, human beings are fundamentally social creatures. As you began to encounter new people in your classes, at your new job, or in your new housing, you most likely told some stories of your life before (about your friends, job, or teachers back home). One of the functions of this type of storytelling, early in forming interpersonal bonds, is a test to see if the people you are meeting have similar stories or can relate to your previous relationship cultures. In short, you are testing the compatibility of your schemata with the new people you encounter. Although storytelling will continue to play a part in your relational development with these new people, you may be surprised at how quickly you start telling stories with your new friends about things that have happened since you met. You may recount stories about your first trip to the dance club together, the weird geology professor you had together, or the time you all got sick from eating the cafeteria food. In essence, your old stories will start to give way to new stories that you have co-created. Storytelling within relationships helps create solidarity, or a sense of belonging and closeness. This type of storytelling can be especially meaningful for relationships that do not fall into the dominant culture. For example, research on a gay male friendship circle found that the gay men retold certain dramatic stories frequently to create a sense of belonging and to also bring in new members to the group (Jones Jr., 2007).



Figure 1.3.1: Friends gather and share stories, using relational storytelling to create a sense of belonging, strengthen bonds, and establish a shared culture within their group. Exchanging experiences tests compatibility, co-constructs new memories, and maintains solidarity, highlighting how storytelling serves as a cornerstone of human connection and relationship development. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Dave C via Wikimedia Commons)

Idioms

We also create personal idioms in our relationships (Bell & Healey, 1992). If you have ever studied foreign languages, you know that idiomatic expressions like "I'm under the weather today" are essentially nonsense when translated. For example, the equivalent of this expression in French translates to "I'm not in my plate today." When you think about it, it does not make sense to use either expression to communicate that you are sick, but the meaning would not be lost on English or French speakers, because they can decode their respective idiom. This is also true of idioms we create in our interpersonal relationships. Just as idioms are unique to individual cultures and languages, personal idioms are unique to certain relationships, and they create a sense of belonging due to the inside meaning shared by the relational partners. For example, in romantic relationships it is common for individuals to create nicknames for each other that may not directly translate for someone who overhears them. You and your partner may find that calling each other "booger" is sweet, while others may think it is gross and bizarre. Researchers have found that personal idioms are commonly used in the following categories: activities, labels for others, requests, and sexual references (Bell & Healey, 1992). Idioms help create cohesiveness, or solidarity in relationships, because they are shared cues between cultural insiders. They also communicate the uniqueness of the relationship and create boundaries, since meaning is only shared within the relationship.

Routines and Rituals

Routines and rituals help form relational cultures through their natural development in repeated or habitual interaction (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). While "routine" may connote boring in some situations, **relationship routines** are communicative acts that create a sense of predictability in a relationship that is comforting. Some communicative routines may develop around occasions or conversational topics. For example, it is common for long-distance friends or relatives to schedule a recurring phone conversation or for couples to review the day's events over dinner. Other routines develop around entire conversational episodes. For example, two best friends recounting their favorite spring-break story may seamlessly switch from one speaker to the other, finish each other's sentences, speak in unison, or gesture simultaneously because they have told the story so many times. **Relationship rituals** take on more symbolic meaning than do relationship routines and may be variations on widely recognized events (such as birthdays, anniversaries, Passover, Christmas, or Thanksgiving) or highly individualized and original. Relational partners may personalize their traditions by eating mussels and playing Yahtzee on Christmas Eve or going hiking on their anniversary. Other rituals may be more unique to the relationship, such as celebrating a dog's birthday or going to opening day at the amusement park.

The following highly idiosyncratic ritual was reported by a participant in a research study:

> I would check my husband's belly button for fuzz on a daily basis at bedtime. It originated when I noticed some blanket

> fuzz in his belly button one day and thought it was funny...We both found it funny and teased often about the fuzz. If there wasn't any fuzz for a few days my husband would put some in his belly button for me to find. It's been happening for about 10 years now (Bruess & Pearson, 1997).

Whether the routines and rituals involve phone calls, eating certain foods, or digging for belly button fuzz, they all serve important roles in building relational cultures. However, as with storytelling, rituals and routines can be negative. For example, verbal and nonverbal patterns to berate or belittle your relational partner will not have healthy effects on a relational culture. Additionally, visiting your in-laws during the holidays loses its symbolic value when you dislike them and comply with the ritual because you feel like you have to. In this case, the ritual does not enrich the relational culture, but it may reinforce norms or rules that have been created in the relationship.

Rules and Norms

Relationship rules and norms help with the daily function of the relationship. They help create structure and provide boundaries for interacting in the relationship and for interacting with larger social networks (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). **Relationship rules** are explicitly communicated guidelines for what should and should not be done in certain contexts. A couple could create a rule to always confer with each other before letting their child spend the night somewhere else. If a mother lets her son sleep over at a friend's house without consulting her partner, a more serious conflict could result. **Relationship norms** are similar to routines and rituals in that they develop naturally in a relationship and generally conform to or are adapted from what is expected and acceptable in the larger culture or society. For example, it may be a norm that you and your coworkers do not "talk shop" at your Friday happy-hour gathering. So when someone brings up work at the gathering, his coworkers may remind him that there is no shop talk, and the consequences may not be that serious. In regard to topic of conversation, norms often guide expectations of what subjects are appropriate within various relationships. Do you talk to your boss about your personal finances? Do you talk to your father about your sexual activity? Do you tell your classmates about your medical history? In general, there are no rules that say you cannot discuss any of these topics with anyone you choose, but relational norms usually lead people to answer "no" to the questions above. Violating relationship norms and rules can negatively affect a relationship, however in general, rule violations can lead to more direct conflict, while norm violations can lead to awkward social interactions. Developing your interpersonal communication competence will help you assess your communication in relation to the many rules and norms you will encounter.

Interpersonal Communication Skills

While understanding the theory behind interpersonal communication is important, competence ultimately depends on skillful practice. Interpersonal communication skills help us listen more effectively, respond with empathy, manage emotions, and adapt our communication to different situations and relationships. These skills are not fixed traits; they are learned behaviors that improve with awareness, reflection, and experience. We'll discuss each of these in much greater depth in later chapters, but we'll introduce core interpersonal communication skills that support effective and appropriate interaction across personal, academic, and professional contexts.

Listening Skills

The most important part of communication is not the actual talking, but the listening. If you are not a good listener, then you will not be a good communicator. One must engage in mindful listening. **Mindful listening** is when you give careful and thoughtful attention to the messages that you receive. People will often listen mindfully to important messages or to people that matter most. Think about how happy you get when you are talking to someone you really love or maybe how you pay more attention to what a professor says if they tell you it will be on the exam. In each of these scenarios, you are giving the speaker your undivided attention. Most of our listening is not mindful, but there will be times where it will be important to listen to what others are telling us so that we can fulfill our personal and/or professional goals.

Example 1.3.4 Using our Listening Skills

Scenario: A coworker is venting about feeling overwhelmed by a heavy workload. Instead of interrupting or offering quick advice, you maintain eye contact, nod, ask clarifying questions, and reflect back what you hear: "It sounds like you're frustrated because you don't feel supported."

Impact: Your coworker feels heard and validated, the conversation becomes calmer and more productive, and trust between you strengthens.

People Skills

People skills are a set of characteristics that will help you interact well with others (Thompson, 2015). These skills are most important in group situations and where cooperation is needed. These skills can also relate to how you handle social situations. They can make a positive impact on career advancement but also in relationship development (Hopkins, 2005). One of the most essential people skills to have is the ability to understand people. Being able to feel empathy or sympathy to another person's situation can go a long way. By putting yourself in other people's shoes and understanding their hardships or differences, you can put things into perspective. It can help you build a stronger and better interpersonal relationship.

Example 1.3.5 Using our People Skills

Scenario: You are working on a group assignment with classmates from different backgrounds and communication styles. One member seems withdrawn and hesitant to share ideas. You make an effort to include them by asking for their input and acknowledging their contributions.

Impact: The group becomes more collaborative, the quieter member participates more actively, and the overall quality of the project improves.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to recognize your own emotions and the emotions of others (Colman, 2008). Emotionally intelligent people can label their feelings appropriately and use this information to guide their behavior. EQ is highly associated with the ability to empathize with others. Furthermore, EQ can help people connect interpersonally.

Example 1.3.6 Using our EQ

Scenario: After receiving critical feedback from a supervisor, you notice yourself feeling defensive and frustrated. Instead of reacting emotionally, you pause, recognize your feelings, and ask follow-up questions to better understand the feedback.

Impact: You respond professionally, learn from the feedback, and demonstrate maturity and self-awareness, which strengthens your working relationship with your supervisor.

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1.4: Communication Competence and Communication Ethics

Overview

We often think of being a “good communicator” as knowing what to say, but communication competence is more than that. It involves what we know, how we use it in real situations, and how we adjust when contexts change. We build these skills over time through experience and reflection. We might, for example, focus on efficiency in a group project by giving direct instructions to keep things moving. That may work in the moment, but later we might realize others felt left out or less engaged. In another situation, involving the group more could still get the task done while improving the experience for everyone. Competence is less about getting communication perfect and more about staying aware, flexible, and reflective as we interact with others.

Learning Objectives

- Define communication competence and explain its cognitive, behavioral, and contextual components.
- Identify individual, social, and cultural factors that influence perceptions of communication competence.
- Describe the stages of competence development and how communicators progress through them.
- Explain the role of mindfulness in developing and maintaining communication competence.
- Analyze ethical responsibilities in communication from the perspectives of sources, receivers, and society.

Defining Communication Competence

Communication competence refers to the knowledge of effective and appropriate communication patterns and the ability to use and adapt that knowledge in various contexts (Cooley & Roach, 1984). To better understand this definition, the following paragraphs will dissect its components.

The first part of the definition deals with knowledge of effective and appropriate communication patterns. As discussed in previous sections of this chapter, the purpose of communication is to utilize symbolic message to generate a shared meaning between participants. When we discuss knowledge of effective patterns in the context of communication competence, we are referring to the understanding that we can use a multitude of symbols - words, sounds, gestures, etc. - to share our meaning with others, and we must develop the understanding of which of these symbols will be the most effective in agreeing upon the shared meaning. We must know which symbols will be best to convey the meaning I intend with the person(s) I am communicating with. The cognitive elements of competence include knowing how to do something and understanding why things are done the way they are (Hargie, 2011). People can develop cognitive competence by observing and evaluating the actions of others. Cognitive competence can also be developed through instruction.

The second part of the definition of communication competence involves the ability to use. Individual factors affect our ability to do anything. Not everyone has the same athletic, musical, or intellectual ability. At the individual level, a person’s physiological and psychological characteristics affect competence. In terms of physiology, age, maturity, and ability to communicate affect competence. In terms of psychology, a person’s mood, stress level, personality, and level of communication apprehension (level of anxiety regarding communication) affect competence (Cooley & Roach, 1984). All these factors will either help or hinder you when you try to apply the knowledge you have learned to actual communication behaviors. For example, you might know strategies for being an effective speaker, but public speaking anxiety that kicks in when you get in front of the audience may prevent you from fully putting that knowledge into practice.

The third part of the definition revolves around an ability to adapt to various contexts. Recall that our transactional model of communication discusses setting and context to include time, physical setting, relational dynamics, and cultural context. Being a competent communicator necessitates what is known as **rhetorical sensitivity.** Rhetorical sensitivity is having the ability to quickly and effectively gauge the impact of the contextual variables and to adapt our communication symbols and channels effectively to match that context, without sacrificing our intended meaning. Lets say for example you are a barista at a popular coffee shop chain and you are irritating with a particular practice at your workplace. Your irritation is real and valid and should necessarily be negated, however the manner in which you discuss that irritation will change depending on if you are talking to your fellow barista outside of work or you are talking to your supervisor during working hours. What is competent or not varies

based on social and cultural context, which makes it impossible to have only one standard for what counts as communication competence (Cooley & Roach, 1984). Social variables such as status and power affect competence.

Despite the fact that no guidelines for or definitions of competence will be applicable in all situations, the National Communication Association (NCA) has identified many aspects of competence related to communication. The primary focus has been on competencies related to speaking and listening, and the NCA notes that developing communication competence in these areas will help people in academic, professional, and civic contexts (Morreale, Rubin, & Jones, 1998).

Speaking and Listening Competencies

To help colleges and universities develop curriculum and instruction strategies to prepare students, the NCA has defined what students should be able to do in terms of speaking and listening competencies by the time they graduate from college:

1. State ideas clearly.
2. Communicate ethically.
3. Recognize when it is appropriate to communicate.
4. Identify their communication goals.
5. Select the most appropriate and effective medium for communicating.
6. Demonstrate credibility.
7. Identify and manage misunderstandings.
8. Manage conflict.
9. Be open-minded about another's point of view.
10. Listen attentively.

These are just some of the competencies the NCA identified as important for college graduates. While these are skill focused rather than interpersonally or culturally focused, they provide a concrete way to assess your own speaking competencies and to prepare yourself for professional speaking and listening, which is often skill driven. Since we communicate in many different contexts, such as interpersonal, group, intercultural, and mediated, we will discuss more specific definitions of competence in later sections of the book.

Developing Communication Competence

Understanding the dimensions of competence is an important first step toward developing competence. You likely have some experience with and knowledge about communication, since you have spent many years explicitly and implicitly learning to communicate. For example, we are explicitly taught the verbal codes we use to communicate. On the other hand, although there are numerous rules and norms associated with nonverbal communication, we rarely receive explicit instruction on how to do it. Instead, we learn by observing others and through trial and error with our own nonverbal communication. Competence obviously involves verbal and nonverbal elements, but it also applies to many situations and contexts. Communication competence is needed in order to understand communication ethics, to develop cultural awareness, and to think critically. Competence involves knowledge, motivation, and skills. It is not enough to know what good communication consists of; you must also have the motivation to reflect on and better your communication and the skills needed to do so.

In regard to competence, we all have areas where we are skilled and areas where we have deficiencies. In most cases, we can consciously decide to work on our deficiencies, which may take considerable effort. There are multiple stages of competence: unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, and unconscious competence (Hargie, 2011). Before you have built up a rich cognitive knowledge base of communication concepts and practiced and reflected on skills in a particular area, you may exhibit unconscious incompetence, which means you are not even aware that you are communicating in an incompetent manner. Once you learn more about communication and have a vocabulary to identify concepts, you may find yourself exhibiting conscious incompetence, which is where you know what you should be doing, and you realize that you're not doing it as well as you could. However, as your skills increase you may advance to conscious competence, meaning that you know you are communicating well in the moment, which will add to your bank of experiences to draw from in future interactions. When you reach the stage of unconscious competence, you just communicate successfully without straining to be competent. Just because you reach the stage of unconscious competence in one area or with one person does not mean you will always stay there. We are faced with new communication encounters regularly, and although we may be able to draw on the communication skills we have learned about and developed, it may take a few instances of conscious incompetence before you can advance to later stages.

One way to progress toward communication competence is to become a more mindful communicator. Mindfulness is an important concept when growing in our communication skills, since up to this point most of us have communicated our entire lives without being fully critically aware of our communication choices and their impacts; we just sort of do it. **Mindfulness** is a state of heightened and focused awareness of the present moment's experiences, thoughts, and feelings. A mindful communicator actively and fluidly processes information, is sensitive to communication contexts and multiple perspectives, and is able to adapt to novel communication situations (Burgoon, Berger, & Waldron, 2000). Becoming a more mindful communicator has many benefits, including achieving communication goals, detecting deception, avoiding stereotypes, and reducing conflict. Whether or not we achieve our day-to-day communication goals depends on our communication competence. Various communication behaviors can signal that we are communicating mindfully. For example, asking an employee to paraphrase their understanding of the instructions you just gave them shows that you are aware that verbal messages are not always clear, that people do not always listen actively, and that people often do not speak up when they are unsure of instructions for fear of appearing incompetent or embarrassing themselves. Some communication behaviors indicate that we are not communicating mindfully, such as withdrawing from a romantic partner or engaging in passive-aggressive behavior during a period of interpersonal conflict. Most of us know that such behaviors lead to predictable and avoidable conflict cycles, yet we are all guilty of them. Our tendency to assume that people are telling us the truth can also lead to negative results. Therefore, a certain amount of tentativeness and mindful monitoring of a person's nonverbal and verbal communication can help us detect deception. However, this is not the same thing as chronic suspicion, which would not indicate communication competence.



Figure 1.4.1: A man listens attentively, demonstrating mindful communication by actively processing information, remaining aware of context and nonverbal cues, and showing openness to clarification. Such behaviors reflect communication competence and help reduce misunderstandings, build trust, and support more effective and ethical interactions. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Blmurch via Wikimedia Commons)

As communicators become more competent through increased awareness, practice, and mindfulness, another critical dimension of competence comes into focus: ethics. Effective and appropriate communication is not solely about achieving personal goals or adapting to contexts; it also involves considering the moral implications of our communicative choices. Mindful communicators recognize that messages can influence others in powerful ways and that with communicative ability comes responsibility. Understanding communication ethics allows individuals to evaluate not only how well they communicate, but also whether their communication respects others, promotes fairness, and contributes positively to relationships and society.

Communication Ethics

Ethical issues may arise in human communication when three factors exist: 1) when the communicative behavior "could have a significant impact on other persons;" 2) when the communicative behavior "involves conscious choice of means and ends;" and 3) when the communicative behavior "can be judged by standards of right and wrong" (Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008). Additionally, human communication ethics is multi-faceted and an endless debate about means and ends is not sufficient for a "viable systems for evaluating the ethics of human communication" (McCroskey, 2006).

Furthermore, "ethics is a dimension in all the communication process" and "[ethics] is a dimension that is relevant to all the actors in the communication process—the source or the originator, the person that initiates communication; the person who

receives, interprets, hears, reads the communication; and the people who, in effect, are further agents of transmission" (Andersen, 2007). In essence, Andersen sees communication ethics as something that needs to be examined from all points of view, including understanding ethics from a societal viewpoint is important.

The source's ethical choices involve their basic intent toward their receiver(s). The key individual who wrote about the ethical nature of communication from a source's perspective was Aristotle. Aristotle realized that depending on the originator of the message, a message could be either virtuous or used for mischief. McCroskey summarized Aristotle's writings on source ethics and said that, "The effect of a message cannot be used as the primary means of evaluating the ethical quality of an act of communication. Furthermore, the means of persuasion themselves are ethically neutral," and instead, "ethical judgments in rhetorical communication should be based exclusively on the intent of the source toward the audience" (McCroskey, 2006). In other words, when determining whether a specific communicative interaction was ethical from a source's perspective, the goodness of the source's intent is what should be examined instead of examining the message itself.

The receiver's ethical choices involve how the individual decides to process the message being sent by the source. The idea of a receiver ethic starts with the notion that being a receiver of a message should be an active process and not a passive process. Andersen (2007) noted that, "you [the receiver] have a 100% responsibility to listen, to be critical, to evaluate, to reject, to demand more information, to reject, whatever the case may be." However, there is another aspect to receiver ethics that must also be considered. As stated by McCroskey, Wrench, and Richmond (2003), receivers must attend to a message objectively. Quite often receivers attend to messages depending on either their initial perception of the message or their initial perception of the sender. When these initial perceptions interfere with our ability as a receiver to listen, be critical, evaluate, or reject a message, we are not ethically attending to a message.

Third-party individuals are not directly involved in the communicative exchange, but nonetheless are ethically attending to messages being sent by a source to a receiver. Whether eavesdropping on a conversation at a table next to you in a restaurant or inadvertently hearing the neighbors fighting at 3:00 A.M., third-party receivers of messages also have ethical considerations. In both of these cases, the overarching ethical dilemma is what should one do with the information they are receiving. If you overhear gossip at the table next to you, is it ethical to pass on that information to others? If you hear one partner physically abusing another partner, do you have an ethical obligation to call the police? Andersen (2007) realizes that these situations call for different responses and "Now those responsibilities in every case will be unique to the situation, unique to one's ability to fulfill the role of intermediary."

To extend this even further, we must incorporate a social and cultural constructionist perspective and consider the ways in which our cultural values are built upon individual interactions. What do you think of when you consider something that is worthy, desirable, or valuable? What is beauty? What is a good person? Whatever ideas that come to mind for you have been built within you through layers of communication. When considering the ethics of our communication, we can extend beyond the impacts of the sender, the receiver, and third-party individuals, but we can also consider the long-term consequences of our society and culture at large.

Overall, Andersen (2007) summarizes his position by stating, "So, one begins to say that in all the activity of communication, in whatever role we may happen to be in at the moment, there is an ethical dimension." While clearly each of the roles described by Andersen has different ethical responsibilities, an individual's perception of her or his ethical responsibilities created differently. Arnett, Harden Fritz, and Bell (2009) believe that an individual's ethical schema is derived by a combination of commonsense, theories, and learning.

Commonsense vs. Learning

The term "commonsense" is used quite readily in modern society. Whether the issues are commonsense to drive on the right side of the road or commonsense to not lie to a police officer, individuals rely quite heavily on their perceptions of commonsense. Arnett et al. (2009) defines commonsense, "The commonly understood, taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the world works and expected communicative behaviors one will meet in navigating that world in daily life" as "the commonly understood, taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the world works and expected communicative behaviors one will meet in navigating that world in daily life." Unfortunately, commonsense can be historically and culturally based assumptions. Commonsense communicative behaviors of the 1300s are not the same behaviors that are perceived as commonsense today. Furthermore, what is considered commonsense can vary greatly from culture to culture. Ultimately, the "loss of agreed-upon commonsense expectations is neither good nor bad, but simply a defining reality of our time" (Arnett, 2009).

Arnett et al. (2009) argues that learning is the first principle of communication ethics because "we cannot trust the old 'commonsense' notions" of ethics. "If we fail to connect the loss of agreed-upon commonsense with learning, we fall prey to

discounting or making fun of those different from ourselves, those with dissimilar backgrounds, experiences, and practices" (Arnett, 2009). In essence, ethical communicators must avoid perceiving their commonsense perceptions of ethics as being universal perceptions of ethics adhered to by all people. Therefore, individuals need to seek out and analyze how varying cultures perceive and understand communicative ethics. Ethical communicators need to see that "learning and understanding different standpoints is a pragmatic communication ethics act" (Arnett, 2009).

Example 1.4.2 Applying a Learning Mindset

Scenario: During a cross-cultural project meeting, a team member from another country proposes an idea that initially seems inefficient to you based on your prior experiences. Rather than dismissing it, you consciously apply a learning mindset, seeking to understand their cultural reasoning and communication norms. You ask questions, listen actively, and research best practices from their perspective.

Impact: By approaching the situation as an opportunity to learn, you discover a more efficient method that combines both cultural perspectives. Your adaptability enhances team collaboration, strengthens trust among team members, and improves the quality of the project outcome. You also expand your own competence in working with diverse communication styles.

Clearly, the study of communication ethics is simply not a black-and-white endeavor. Often there are clear-cut, easy answers to determining ethical communicative behavior. For example, while some may think lying is always unethical, is it always unethical to lie? Would it be ethical to lie to someone to save their life? As Arnett et al. (2009) discussed, the best way to learn how to be an ethical communicator in today's world is to explore and learn. To help with this learning process, NCA approved a Credo for Ethical Communication in 1999, reaffirmed in 2024.

NCA Credo for Ethical Communication

Questions of right and wrong arise whenever people communicate. Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision-making, and relationship building, and community development within, and across, contexts, cultures, channels, and media. Moreover, ethical communication enhances human worth, human life, and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others. We believe that unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and, consequently, the wellbeing of individuals and the society in which we live. Therefore we, the members of the National Communication Association (NCA), endorse and are committed to practicing the following principles of ethical communication:

- We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.
- We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and acknowledgement of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision-making fundamental to civil society.
- We strive to understand and respect other communicators' intent before evaluating and responding to their messages.
- We promote access to communication resources and opportunities necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of individuals, families, communities, and societies.
- We promote a supportive climate of communication that entails caring, mutual understanding and respect for individual communicators' needs and characteristics.
- We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.
- We commit to supporting the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.
- We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant decisions, while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.
- We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences of our own communication and expect the same from others.

By adhering to these principles, communicators are reminded that ethical communication is not just about following rules, but about cultivating awareness, responsibility, and respect in every interaction. Ethical communication requires ongoing reflection, mindfulness, and a commitment to understanding diverse perspectives. Applying the Credo encourages individuals to consider both the short- and long-term effects of their messages, to weigh the intent and potential impact of their communication, and to act in ways that promote fairness, dignity, and mutual understanding. Ultimately, practicing ethical communication strengthens relationships, enhances professional credibility, and contributes to healthier, more just communities.

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1.5: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Communication is a continuous and multifaceted process that shapes our social worlds, relationships, and personal identities. At its core, communication allows humans to exchange messages, make meaning, build relationships, and influence one another. Major models of communication are introduced to illustrate this complexity. The transmission model views communication as a one-way process focused on the sender and message, while the interaction model adds feedback and emphasizes reciprocal exchanges within physical and psychological contexts. The transaction model extends this further by framing communication as a simultaneous, collaborative process in which meaning is co-created within social, relational, and cultural contexts.

Interpersonal communication occurs when people whose lives influence each other engage in strategic, goal-driven exchanges. These interactions are shaped by functional goals, including instrumental (achieving tasks), relational (maintaining connections), and self-presentation (managing impressions), as well as cultural influences such as social norms, relational history, and personal schemata. Relational culture develops through storytelling, personal idioms, routines, rituals, rules, and norms, all of which create shared meanings and a sense of belonging between partners.

Communication competence is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately. It includes knowledge of communication patterns, skillful performance in real situations, and adaptability across diverse social and cultural contexts. Competence develops through reflection, practice, and mindful communication, emphasizing its importance for navigating new and challenging interactions. Ethical communication is also a central concern, involving evaluation of intent, responsibility, and societal consequences, while recognizing that judgments of right and wrong are shaped by context, culture, and learning. The National Communication Association's Credo for Ethical Communication highlights principles of truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, respect, and accountability.

Overall, communication is both a human necessity and a learned skill. Understanding communication processes, interpersonal dynamics, competence, and ethical dimensions highlights that individuals can foster meaningful relationships, adapt across diverse contexts, and participate responsibly in society. Competent and ethical communicators are not only able to exchange information effectively but also help create, maintain, and enrich the social realities in which they live.

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1.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Channel
- Communication
- Communication Competence
- Communication Ethics
- Constitutive Rules
- Cultural Context
- Decoding
- Emotional Intelligence
- Encoding
- Feedback
- Identity Needs
- Instrumental Goals
- Instrumental Needs
- Interpersonal Communication
- Listening
- Message
- Mindfulness
- Participants
- People Skills
- Phatic Communication
- Physical Needs
- Relational Context
- Relational Goals
- Relational Needs
- Relationship Norms
- Relationship Rituals
- Relationship Routines
- Relationship Rules
- Relationship Schema
- Rhetorical Sensitivity
- Self-Presentation Goals
- Social Context

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1.7: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. The chapter defines communication as a “transactional process of meaning-making.” How does this definition expand or challenge your previous understanding of what communication is?
2. Communication is described as irreversible and unrepeatable. How does this principle show up in your own experiences (e.g., conversations, texts, misunderstandings, or conflicts)?
3. The text divides communication into academic, professional, personal, and civic spheres. Where do you see the most overlap in your own life, and how do communication skills transfer across those contexts?
4. The transaction model suggests that communication is co-created rather than simply exchanged. How does this idea change how we think about responsibility in misunderstandings or conflict?
5. Ethical communication involves intent, impact, and context. Can you think of a situation where someone’s “good intent” still led to a harmful outcome? What does that suggest about communication ethics?

Chapter Exercises

1. Communication Snapshot Analysis
    1. Choose a recent conversation (text, in-person, or online). Break it down using the communication model elements: participants, message, encoding/decoding, channel, and context. Identify at least two ways context shaped meaning.
2. Sphere Mapping Activity
    1. Draw four circles labeled academic, professional, personal, and civic. Place 5 communication behaviors or skills (e.g., listening, persuasion, conflict management) into each circle where they apply. Then identify overlaps between at least two spheres.
3. Process vs. Transaction Comparison
    1. Write two short descriptions of the same interaction (e.g., asking a roommate to clean up):
        1. one using the transmission model
        2. one using the transaction model
    2. Reflect on how meaning and responsibility shift between the two.
4. Ethics Reflection Journal
    1. Write about a time when communication went “wrong” (misunderstanding, argument, awkward moment). Analyze it using:
        1. intent
        2. impact
        3. context
    2. Then evaluate what an ethical response might have looked like.
5. Mindful Communication Practice
    1. For one day, practice mindful communication:
        1. pause before responding
        2. observe nonverbal cues
        3. paraphrase what others say in at least one conversation
    2. Afterward, write a short reflection on what changed in your communication behavior or awareness.

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1.8: Alternative Descriptions for Chapter 1

Figure 1.2.1: The Transmission Model of Communication

A smiley face labeled "Sender" on the left contains the word "Encoding." A straight, horizontal arrow labeled "'Hello!' = Message Channel" points right toward another smiley face labeled "Receiver," which contains the word "Decoding." Two yellow stars labeled "Noise" are positioned above and below the message channel, indicating potential interference.

Figure 1.2.2: The Interaction Model of Communication

Two smiley faces, each labeled "Sender–Receiver," appear on the left and right sides of the diagram. Both smiley faces contain the words "Encoding" at the top and "Decoding" at the bottom, indicating the dual roles of both participants. A straight horizontal arrow labeled "'How are you?' = Message" points from left to right, representing the initial message sent through a communication channel. A curved arrow labeled "Feedback Channel" loops back from right to left with the message "'Fine, thank you.' = Message," representing the receiver's response. Two yellow stars labeled "Noise" appear near both the message and feedback channels. A large bracket on the left is labeled "Psychological Context," and a corresponding bracket on the right is labeled "Physical Context," signifying the influence of internal and external factors.

Figure 1.2.3: The Transaction Model of Communication

Two smiley faces labeled "Communicator" appear on the left and right sides of the diagram, representing equal participants in the communication process. Between them is a green rectangle labeled "Co-creation of meaning," symbolizing the collaborative development of shared understanding. Four gray arrows point outward from the rectangle. The left arrow is labeled "Social Context," the right arrow "Cultural Context," the upward arrow "Physical and Psychological Context," and the downward arrow "Relational Context." These arrows indicate the multiple, overlapping contexts that shape how meaning is co-created between communicators.

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2: SYMBOLS, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION, AND IDENTITY

Chapter Overview

Communication is central to how humans create meaning and construct identity through ongoing social interaction. It highlights the symbolic nature of communication, showing that language, gestures, and artifacts are socially and culturally shaped tools that influence how reality is understood. Identity is not innate but develops over time through interaction within cultural, historical, and social contexts. Personal, social, and cultural identities are shaped by systems of power, privilege, and discrimination, which influence how individuals experience themselves and others. Identity categories such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability are socially constructed rather than biologically determined, and are continuously reinforced or challenged through communication and social practices.

Meaning and identity are not fixed or natural but are produced, negotiated, and maintained through communication. Identity categories like race, gender, sexuality, and ability are shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces, and are deeply connected to systems of power and inequality. Understanding communication as symbolic and identity as socially constructed allows for a more critical view of how social realities are formed. This perspective supports more thoughtful, ethical, and competent engagement with diversity and difference in everyday life.



Figure 2.1: Two individuals share a moment of understanding using hand gestures, illustrating how meaning and identity are created through symbolic interaction. Their exchange reflects how communication, shaped by cultural and social contexts, plays a central role in negotiating understanding, building relationships, and constructing identities within broader systems of power and difference. (CC BY-SA 3.0 DE; S. Krupp via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Define the symbolic, social, and cultural nature of communication and how it shapes reality.
- Explain how personal, social, and cultural identities emerge, develop, and change across contexts.
- Compare dominant and nondominant identity development models and their implications for privilege, discrimination, and social awareness.
- Describe how identity categories such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been socially constructed.
- Analyze how communication practices both reinforce and challenge socially constructed identities, supporting more ethical and inclusive engagement.

2.1: Symbols and Social Construction

2.2: Identity as a Social Construct
2.3: Identity Categories as Social Constructs
2.4: Chapter Review
2.5: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools
2.6: Discussions and Exercises
2.7: Alternative Descriptions for Chapter 2
2.8: References

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2.1: Symbols and Social Construction

Overview

Communication is a symbolic, social, and culturally constructed process through which humans share ideas, negotiate meaning, and shape reality. Symbols, including language, gestures, and artifacts, represent ideas rather than directly corresponding to them, and their meanings are shaped by context, culture, and individual experience. The study of communication highlights how shared meanings underlie social structures, norms, and institutions. Concepts such as the triangle of meaning, denotation and connotation, and the rules of language show how language mediates understanding. Theories of social construction, symbolic interactionism, roles, status, and presentation of self illustrate how communication shapes personal identity, social interaction, and the organization of society.

Learning Objectives

- Define the symbolic, social, and cultural nature of communication.
- Describe how symbols, language, and definitions create, convey, and negotiate meaning.
- Explain the triangle of meaning and the distinction between denotative and connotative meanings.
- Analyze how social construction, roles, status, and presentation of self influence communication and identity.
- Apply concepts from symbolic interactionism to understand everyday social interactions and impression management.

Communication is Symbolic

Communication is a fundamental human process through which we create, share, and interpret meaning with others. It is not limited to words or speech but encompasses a wide range of symbolic behaviors, including gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, and other nonverbal cues. Through these symbols, we convey thoughts, emotions, intentions, and cultural values, shaping how we understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. Recognizing communication as symbolic allows us to explore how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and sometimes misunderstood, laying the foundation for examining the principles and structures that guide human interaction.

Our language system is primarily composed of symbols. A **symbol** is something that stands in for or represents something else. Symbols may be communicated orally (voiced), verbally (in language), or nonverbally (without language). In all cases, symbols represent objects or ideas rather than directly corresponding to them. Unlike ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, which often had a literal relationship between symbol and referent, symbols in modern languages do not physically resemble the objects or ideas they represent.

Symbolic language is abstract, ambiguous, and arbitrary. Language is abstract because symbols can represent ideas, concepts, emotions, or objects that are not physically present or concrete. For example, words such as freedom, justice, or love refer to complex ideas that cannot be directly touched or observed in a single form. Language is ambiguous because symbols can have multiple meanings depending on context, culture, tone, or interpretation. A single word, phrase, or gesture may be understood differently by different people, which creates the possibility for misunderstanding. For example, the word bank could refer to a financial institution or the side of a river. Furthermore, a single idea or concept can have multiple symbols. For example, your school likely has colors, a logo, a mascot, and a name, each of which may be slightly different but all symbolize your school. Language is also arbitrary because there is usually no inherent or natural connection between a symbol and what it represents. There is nothing about the word tree that naturally connects it to the object itself; speakers of other languages use entirely different symbols for the same concept. The meanings of symbols are therefore based on shared cultural agreement rather than any fixed or natural relationship to reality.

The symbolic nature of communication is unique to humans. Since words do not need to directly correspond to objects in reality, we can communicate abstract ideas. This characteristic of language is called **displacement**, which refers to the ability to discuss events removed in time or space from the speaker and situation (Crystal, 2005). Although animals communicate, their communication is limited, reactive to stimuli, and lacks the productive quality of human language.

Early human verbal communication was minimally symbolic and abstract, likely imitating sounds from animals and nature.

This simple form of communication persisted for thousands of years. As humans adopted settled agriculture and populations increased, communication required greater specificity. Additional terms, or symbols, were needed to represent new tools and emerging ideas such as crop rotation, which developed through farming and animal domestication. During this period, written symbols did not yet exist, but objects were used to represent other objects. For example, a farmer might have kept a pebble for each chicken owned. As societies became more complex and this method became impractical, more abstract symbols and eventually written language developed to represent objects and ideas. Although these changes occurred thousands of years ago, many modern words can still be traced to their more concrete origins.

For example, the word calculate comes from the Latin calculus, meaning “pebble.” Pebbles were once used to count and keep records before verbal or written numbering systems existed (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). A farmer could use one pebble to represent each chicken, creating a direct relationship between the symbol and the object it represented. This system allowed for simple verification of livestock. Over time, more abstract symbols replaced physical objects, such as written numbers or words like five or numerals such as 15, which could represent multiple pebbles. This shift illustrates how symbols evolved from direct representations to more abstract forms. While this evolution increased efficiency, it also introduced greater potential for misunderstanding, as the relationship between symbols and their referents became less direct. Although calculate originally meant “pebble,” the term now has multiple commonly accepted definitions.

Another more modern example is the save icon commonly represented by the image of a floppy disk. Originally, the floppy disk was a physical object used to store computer data. Early software designers used the image of the disk as a direct symbol for saving files because it reflected the actual storage technology people used at the time. Today, however, most people save files to cloud storage or solid-state drives and may never have used or even seen a floppy disk in real life. Despite this, the symbol continues to function and is widely understood as meaning “save.” This example illustrates how symbols can persist even after their original physical referent has largely disappeared, demonstrating the abstract and culturally agreed-upon nature of language and symbols.

The Triangle of Meaning

The **triangle of meaning** is a communication model that illustrates the relationship among a thought, a symbol, and a referent, emphasizing the indirect connection between symbols and referents (Richards & Ogden, 1923). The **thought** is the concept or idea being referenced, the **symbol** is the word used to represent that thought, and the **referent** is the object or idea to which the symbol refers. This model is useful because recognizing the indirect relationship between symbols and referents helps explain how misunderstandings occur.

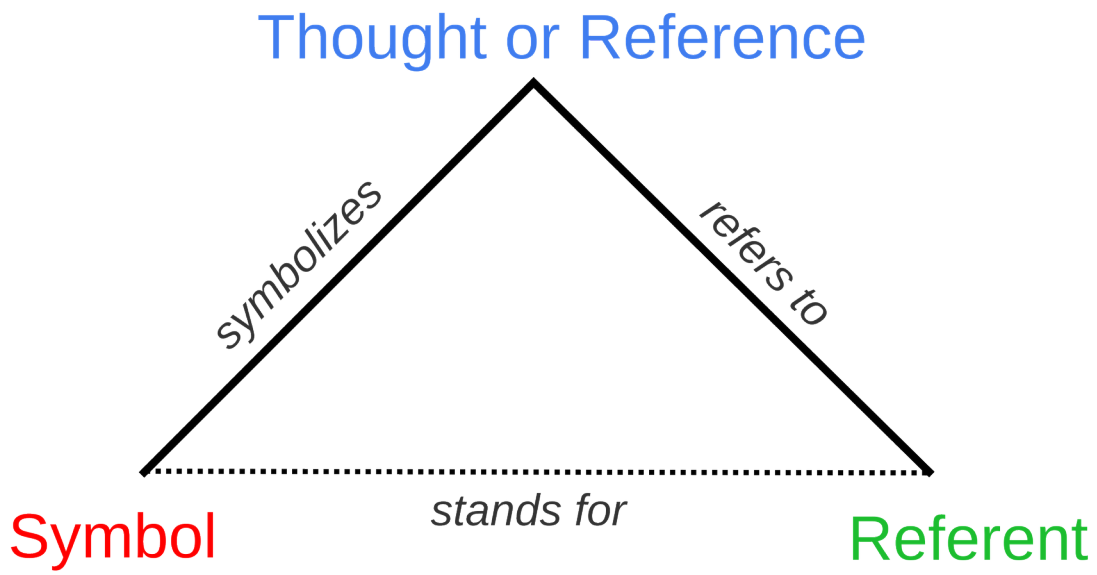


Figure 2.1.1: A diagram of the semiotic triangle showing the relationships among symbol, thought (reference), and referent. Alternative caption of image. (CC0 1.0; Phlsph7 via Wikimedia Commons)

For example, Mateo and Maria are considering getting a new dog and share a similar thought. Both use the same symbol, the word "dog," to communicate that thought. However, their referents differ. Mateo envisions a small dog such as a dachshund, while Maria imagines an Australian shepherd. Since the word dog does not refer to a single specific object in reality, they can use the

same symbol while holding different referents, which may lead to misunderstanding when their expectations do not align.

By recognizing the indirect relationship between symbols and referents, we can attempt to compensate through clarification. For example, Maria might ask Mateo, “What kind of dog do you have in mind?” This allows Mateo to describe his referent and promotes shared understanding. If Mateo responds that he prefers short-haired dogs suitable for apartment living, multiple referents may still apply. Maria could then seek further clarification by asking, “It sounds like a smaller dog might be better. Is that correct?” Even when symbols are defined and referents are described, achieving shared understanding can remain challenging as any one symbol can have many referents.

Definitions

Definitions help narrow the meaning of symbols, which in turn limits a symbol’s possible referents. However, they also introduce additional symbols that require referents. When both a concept and its defining words are abstract, definitions may be unhelpful, as seen when looking up an unfamiliar word only to encounter more unfamiliar terms. Despite this challenge, definitions serve an important purpose.

Words have denotative and connotative meanings. **Denotation** refers to a word’s dictionary or socially accepted definition. For example, the denotation of “cowboy” can be a man who takes care of cattle or a reckless, independent person. Abstract words, like “change,” are more difficult to understand due to multiple denotations. Words with multiple meanings are **polysemic**, while **monosemic** words have only one use, making their denotation straightforward. Specialized academic or scientific terms, such as monosemic, are often monosemic, but everyday monosemic words, like handkerchief, are rare. Overall, polysemic words far outnumber monosemic words.

Connotation refers to the emotion or experience-based associations people attach to a word. For instance, change can have positive or negative connotations depending on personal experience, such as the end of a long-term relationship. Even monosemic words like handkerchief can carry multiple connotations, from dainty Southern imagery to unpleasant associations with snot. Polysemic words, such as cowboy, have numerous connotations, and philosophers of language have explored how connotations extend beyond one or two experiential or emotional meanings of a word to constitute cultural myths (Barthes, 1972). Cowboy evokes the American frontier and western history, shaping national narratives. Popular culture, like western films or the Marlboro Man advertising icon, influences connotations, while individuals with personal experience in ranching may hold more specific associations.

The Rules of Language

Any language system requires rules to be learnable and usable. Grammar refers to the rules governing how words combine to form phrases and sentences. For example, “Where’s the remote control?” is understandable, while “The control remote where’s?” is likely confusing (Crystal, 2005). Understanding grammar helps ensure clarity in writing and speech, but it alone does not make someone an effective communicator. Creativity and play also contribute to effective verbal communication. Although education often emphasizes “right” and “wrong” language use, there is not anything inherently right or wrong about the individual choices we make in our language use. Rather, it is our collective agreement that gives power to the rules that govern language.

Linguists differ in their views of language rules. Some linguists have viewed the rules of language as fairly rigid and limiting in terms of the possible meanings that we can derive from words and sentences created from within that system (de Saussure, 1974). Others have viewed these rules as more open and flexible, allowing a person to make choices to determine meaning (Eco, 1976). Nonetheless, others have claimed that there is no real meaning and that possibilities for meaning are limitless (Derrida, 1978). Our lived experience demonstrates that both are true: there are rules that govern our language usage, but we evoke unique and creative individual choice to break those rules at appropriate times.

Individuals play a role in how meaning and language are related, since we each bring our own emotional and experiential associations with a word that are often more meaningful than a dictionary definition. For instance, secret codes between friends demonstrate how a word’s meaning can be altered and mutually understood without outsiders comprehending it. Similarly, slang often emerges as a covert way to discuss humorous, private, or inappropriate topics. These examples illustrate that meaning resides in people rather than in words alone.

Example 2.1.1: Slang in Action

Example Term: Lit

- Among teenagers, the word “lit” can mean exciting, fun, or amazing, even though a dictionary might only define it as “illuminated.” Friends instantly understand the intended meaning in conversation, while adults or outsiders may misinterpret it.

Example Term: Tea

- In some social media and LGBTQIA+ communities, “tea” is slang for gossip or personal stories. Saying “spill the tea” conveys sharing intimate or juicy information, a meaning not obvious from the word itself.

Example Term: Ghost (or Ghosting)

- Among friends, “ghosting” can mean suddenly ignoring someone’s texts, but it also carries emotional weight (betrayal, hurt, or humor) depending on the context. The word’s meaning is shaped by experience, not a dictionary.

All of the concepts thus far, symbols, meaning, definitions, and the rules of language, illustrate that communication is not a neutral transfer of information but an active process of creating and negotiating reality. The symbols we use, the words we define, and the grammatical rules we follow shape how we understand the world and each other, just as the triangle of meaning shows that symbols do not have a fixed connection to their referents. In turn, these symbolic processes underlie the social construction of reality, emphasizing how our shared meanings and repeated interactions form institutions, norms, and expectations that structure society. In this way, the study of communication connects the abstract, symbolic processes of language to the concrete, socially constructed patterns of everyday life.

So, how exactly do we make order of the chaotic and abstract infinite possibilities of symbols, referents, and rules of language? We socially construct meaning.

Social Construction

Social construction refers to the fact that meaning is created, challenged, and maintained by our everyday interactions. In 1966, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argued in *The Social Construction of Reality* that society is created through human interaction, a process they called habitualization. **Habitualization** occurs when repeated actions form patterns that can be performed efficiently in the future (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). We not only construct society but also accept it because others established it before us. Essentially, society becomes “habit.” For example, a school exists as a school not simply as a building but through collective agreement. This process, called **institutionalization**, embeds norms and conventions into society, making socially constructed institutions real in effect.

There can be a push-back in the form of a slippery slope when people start to consider social constructionism, as people may begin to feel their world is built on shifting sand with no perminant foundation. One might wonder that if everything that has meaning and value is simply created through interaction, then does that mean nothing is truly "real?" The Thomas theorem states, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). People act based on their subjective perception of reality, which can shape behavior. For example, money is a social construct. Its value only exists because we collectively as a society give it value. This is especially true in a modern era in which cash is becoming less and less frequently used; what even is money anymore? However, try telling your landlord "money is just a social construct" when the rent is due. As the Thomas theorem suggests, social constructions are very real because they real in their consequences.

Definition: Social Construction

Social construction refers to the fact that meaning is created, challenged, and maintained by our everyday interactions.

Symbolic interactionism examines how people use symbols, such as language, gestures, and artifacts, to interact and construct reality. Reactions to symbols depend on interpretation. For example, seeing a person with a gun may provoke fear unless the individual is identified as a police officer. Language and gestures reflect values and culture, as meanings vary across contexts. A thumbs-up gesture signifies “great” in the U.S., “one” in Germany, and “five” in Japan, illustrating how symbolic interactions shape our construction of reality.

Taken together, social construction serves as an overarching concept that helps explain how many sociological processes, such as habitualization, institutionalization, the Thomas theorem and symbolic interactionism, work in practice and in concert, all of

which show how shared meanings and repeated interactions actively create and sustain what we experience as reality.

Overall, social construction highlights that much of what we experience as "real" in society is continuously produced and reinforced through shared human interaction and collective meaning-making. However, it is not just words, images, and objects that are socially constructed, but also abstract ideas about people.

Roles and Status

This process of socially constructing meaning does not stop at objects or institutions, but extends to how we define ourselves and others in society through the roles we occupy and the statuses we are assigned.

People perform various **roles** in daily life, which are patterns of behavior linked to social status. As students, we occupy one role, while roles like "daughter," "neighbor," or "employee" carry different responsibilities and expectations. Certain roles carry an amount of status, or privileges and duties associated with a role. Some statuses are ascribed, such as son or elderly person, while others are achieved, like nurse (Merton, 1957). If a single role demands a lot, or too much, of us, we may experience **role strain**. Consider the duties of a parent: care-taking, cooking, cleaning, driving, problem-solving, acting as a source of moral guidance, etc. Similarly, a person can experience **role conflict** when one or more roles are contradictory or contain competing demands. For example, balancing a full-time career and childcare. Conflicts between roles, such as student and employee, affect decisions and shape individual development.

Presentation of Self

Behavior, or **role performance**, is how roles are expressed. Erving Goffman's theory of dramaturgy likens individuals to actors on a stage, using **impression management** to influence how others perceive them. Each situation is a new scene, and individuals perform different roles depending on who is present (Goffman, 1959). Behavior varies by audience; one may act differently around coworkers, grandparents, or a romantic partner. Even when not consciously trying to alter your personality, your grandparents, coworkers, and partner most likely see different sides of you.

Example 2.1.2 Who, What, When, and Where

Workplace vs. Home:
Example: Two Sides of Sam

- At work, Sam speaks formally, dresses in business attire, and focuses on deadlines. At home, Sam relaxes, jokes with family, and wears casual clothes. Sam performs different roles depending on the audience, just like an actor adjusting to a new scene.

Social Media vs. In-Person:
Example: Curated Self Online

- Jordan posts carefully edited photos and captions on social media to appear adventurous and witty. In person, Jordan might be shy or reserved. The behavior changes depending on the "audience," illustrating Goffman's idea of role performance.

Family vs. Friends:
Example: Grandpa vs. Friend

- Alex laughs and teases with friends, telling jokes and stories. Around grandparents, Alex is polite, reserved, and attentive. The same person expresses different behaviors depending on the social context.

Classroom vs. Coffee Shop:
Example: Different Scenes, Different Roles

- In class, Mia raises her hand, takes notes, and focuses on learning. At a coffee shop with friends, she talks loudly, gestures broadly, and shares personal stories. Each context calls for a different performance of her roles.

Impression management is a critical component of symbolic interactionism. For example, impression management is evident in formal contexts, such as a courtroom, where a judge's robe, gavel, and demeanor convey authority, and attire of witnesses or defendants influences perception. Goffman built on Charles Cooley's concept of the **looking-glass self**, which suggests that our sense of self emerges from imagining how others see us, interpreting their reactions, and adjusting our behavior accordingly (Cooley, 1902). People dress, style themselves, and behave in ways that influence others' perceptions, which in turn shapes personal identity.

Goffman's ideas of role performance, impression management, and the looking-glass self reinforce social construction by demonstrating that the self is not fixed or purely internal, but is continuously shaped, maintained, and adjusted through ongoing social interaction and the meanings we interpret from how others perceive us.

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2.2: Identity as a Social Construct

Overview

Identity is a social construct shaped through culture, communication, and social interaction. Personal, social, and cultural identities develop over time, with their salience shifting across different contexts. Dominant and nondominant group memberships influence experiences of privilege and discrimination, while identities are continually formed and transformed through socialization and historical processes. Models of dominant and nondominant identity development illustrate common patterns in how individuals come to understand themselves in relation to power, difference, and social hierarchies. Difference matters in communication because inequality, changing demographics, and cultural contexts shape interpersonal and societal relationships.

Learning Objectives

- Define culture and explain how it is learned, patterned, and negotiated through communication.
- Distinguish among personal, social, and cultural identities and explain how they develop and change.
- Explain identity salience and how context influences how identities are experienced and expressed.
- Compare dominant and nondominant identity development models and identify key stages in each.
- Analyze why difference matters in communication and how power, privilege, and inequality shape communication experiences.

Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities

In order to fully contextualize identity, the concept of culture must also be addressed. Culture is a complicated word to define, and often has an array of meanings across various languages and peoples. For the purposes of examining culture in the context of communication, **culture** can be defined as the ongoing negotiation of learned and patterned beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. This definition emphasizes that culture is not stable or fixed, but rather is negotiated and dynamic, allowing cultural change to be examined over time. This definition emphasizes that culture is learned through socializing institutions such as family, schools, peers, and media, and it is patterned in that shared similarities exist within cultural groups. At the same time, individuals and subgroups may deviate from or resist these patterns, contributing to cultural change. Culture also shapes beliefs about truth and falsehood, attitudes, values, and behaviors, and these influences play a central role in the formation of identity.

When we ask ourselves the question “Who am I?” we must consider the idea of **self-concept**. Self-concept is our overall understanding of who we are and how we see ourselves, including labels for categories we belong to and characteristics we associate with ourselves. The idea of self-concept emphasizes that identity develops through reflections received from others. Parents, friends, teachers, and media all contribute to shaping our perception of ourselves and thus our identity. Although this process begins at birth, many reach a point in adolescence when increased cognitive ability and social awareness prompt more deliberate self-reflection. It is a lifelong process of considering who we are, who we were, and who we may become (Tatum, 2000). Identity is a central component of self-concept and is commonly categorized into personal, social, and cultural identities.

The development of our self-concept happens in several ways, two of the more prominent are social comparison and direct definition. **Social comparison** involves evaluating ourselves in relation to others, using their abilities, behaviors, and achievements as reference points to better understand where we stand. In contrast, **direct definition** occurs when others explicitly label or describe us, such as being called “smart,” “shy,” or “responsible,” which can shape how we see ourselves over time. Together, these processes show that self-concept is not formed in isolation but is continuously shaped through interaction, feedback, and interpretation of the social world.

Identities should not be understood as fixed or complete. Instead, they emerge through ongoing processes that begin before birth and will continue after we are gone. Therefore, our identities are not something we achieve or complete. Two related but distinct components of our identities are our personal and social identities (Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2009). **Personal identities** consist of intrapersonal characteristics shaped by individual experiences, such as interests or preferences. **Social identities**, in contrast, are derived from participation in and commitment to social groups, reflecting how identity is shaped through interaction

and group membership.

For example, aspects of social identity may be derived from family membership or participation in particular communities such as sports fans. Social identities differ from personal identities in that they are externally organized through group membership. This membership may be voluntary, such as joining a club, or involuntary, such as family membership, and it may be explicit, such as paying dues to a labor union, or implicit, such as regularly purchasing and listening to hip-hop music. There are numerous possibilities for both personal and social identities. While personal identities express individual characteristics, social identities align us with particular groups and communicate both who we are and who we are not.

Personal identities often change as people gain new experiences and interests, such as shifting from online video games to graphic design. Social identities tend to change less frequently because they require interpersonal investment over time. For instance, an interest in online gaming may develop into membership in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) community, transforming a personal identity into a more stable interpersonal, social identity. **Cultural identities** are based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for social behavior or ways of acting (Yep, 2002). Since people are often members of various cultural groups from birth, cultural identities are generally the least changeable. The ways of being and the social expectations for behavior within cultural identities do change over time, but what separates them from most social identities is their historical roots (Collier, 1996). Cultural identities are expressed through communication, and acceptance within a cultural group requires acculturation, or learning and using recognizable codes. This process occurs through both direct instruction and indirect exposure, such as messages conveyed through popular culture.

Example 2.2.1 Identity Evolution

- Esteban used to spend hours playing online video games (personal identity). Over time, this interest grew into a role as a moderator in an online gaming community (social identity) and eventually inspired a career in graphic design, connecting personal interests with broader social and cultural contexts.
- Lina loved playing the piano at home (personal identity) and joined her school orchestra (social identity). Her involvement in a traditional music ensemble also connected her to a cultural heritage, highlighting how cultural identities provide long-standing social expectations and ways of being.
- Priya enjoyed running in the park (personal identity) and eventually joined a local running club (social identity). Later participation in a regional marathon tied them to broader cultural traditions around sportsmanship and competition.
- James grew up speaking English at home (personal identity) but joined a Spanish-language club at school (social identity). Over time, learning cultural norms, gestures, and idioms helped Sam integrate into the broader Spanish-speaking community.

Identity can also be understood through the distinction between ascribed and avowed identities. **Ascribed identities** are those assigned to us by others based on social categories such as race, nationality, age, or gender, while **avowed identities** are those we claim or define for ourselves. These two dimensions of identity often interact, and they may align or conflict depending on the social context. For example, someone may avow a strong cultural or national identity while simultaneously being ascribed a different identity by others in a new environment, highlighting how identity is both self-defined and socially constructed through interaction and perception.

Although some identities remain relatively stable, their **salience**, or the degree of awareness and importance attached to them, changes depending on context. An identity may become more salient when it is emphasized by social roles or environments, such as leadership in a cultural organization or participation in international study. Identities may also be ascribed differently across contexts, highlighting how identity is relational and situational. For example, an African American may not have difficulty deciding which box to check on a demographic section of a survey. But if an African American becomes president of her college's Black Student Union, she may more intensely avow her African American identity, which has now become more salient. If she studies abroad in Africa her junior year, she may be ascribed an identity of American by her new African friends rather than African American. For the Africans friends in this context, their visitor's identity as American is likely more salient than her identity as someone of African descent. For individuals who are biracial or multiracial, identity salience may shift during periods of exploration and self-definition. One intercultural communication scholar writes of his experiences as an "Asianlatinoamerican" (Yep, 2002). He notes repressing his Chinese identity as an adolescent living in Peru and then later embracing his Chinese identity and learning about his family history while in college in the United States, showing how even national identity fluctuates. These examples illustrate that identity is not static but continually shaped through social interaction.

Throughout modern history, cultural and social influences have established dominant and nondominant groups (Allen, 2011). **Dominant groups** tend to hold greater access to resources and power, while **nondominant groups** face systemic disadvantages.

These patterns operate at the societal level, even though individual exceptions exist, like people in groups considered nondominant obtaining more resources and power than a person in a dominant group. As a result of institutionalized differences, members of dominant groups often experience privilege, while nondominant groups may encounter discrimination, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. Privilege and disadvantage exist along a continuum, as no individual is entirely privileged or entirely disadvantaged, and social identities intersect in complex ways.

Identity Development

There are multiple models for examining identity development. Given a focus on how difference matters, this section examines similarities and differences in dominant and nondominant identity formation. Although the stages in this model help explain common identity experiences, identity development is complex and may vary across individuals. People also hold multiple identities that intersect with one another, shaping how identity is experienced. As these models are considered, it is important to reflect on how identity development may differ for individuals with multiple dominant and/or nondominant identities.

Nondominant Identity Development

There are four stages of nondominant identity development (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). The first stage, **unexamined identity**, is marked by limited awareness of or interest in one's identity. If limited awareness or lack of interest in one's identity is replaced by an investment in a dominant group identity, individuals may move into the conformity stage.

In the **conformity** stage, individuals internalize, or adopt, the values and norms of the dominant group to avoid being perceived as different. This often involves attempts to assimilate by altering appearance, speech, mannerisms, or names. For instance, Moises, a Chicano man interviewed in a research project about identities, narrated how he changed his "Mexican sounding" name to Moses, which was easier for his middle-school classmates and teachers to say (Jones Jr., 2009). He also identified as white instead of Mexican American or Chicano because he saw how his teachers treated the other kids with "brown skin." Similarly, some gay or lesbian individuals in this stage may attempt to "act straight." When individuals realize that assimilation does not result in full acceptance, they may progress to the resistance and separation stage.

The **separation** stage involves rejecting dominant group norms and actively challenging dominant identities. Individuals may also seek separation by primarily interacting with others who share their nondominant identity. For example, there has been a Deaf culture movement in the U.S. for decades. This movement includes people who are hearing impaired and believe that their use of a specific language, American Sign Language (ASL), and other cultural practices constitutes a unique culture, which they symbolize by capitalizing the D in Deaf (Allen, 2011). Although this is not a separatist movement, individuals who are hearing impaired may find refuge and support within such groups after experiencing discrimination from hearing people.

The **integration** stage represents a point at which individuals with a nondominant identity balance embracing their own identity while simultaneously valuing other dominant and nondominant identities. While residual anger related to discrimination and prejudice may remain, this energy is often redirected toward constructive efforts, such as working to reduce discrimination affecting their own or other groups. For example, Moises, the Chicano man discussed earlier, now advocates for the Chicano community in his city and actively supports gay rights and women's rights.

Dominant Identity Development

Dominant identity development consists of five stages (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). The **unexamined** stage of dominant identity formation is similar to nondominant in that individuals in this stage do not think about their or others' identities. Although differences such as race or gender may be noticed, the existence or impact of social hierarchies is often unrecognized or viewed as irrelevant. For example, a man may take notice that a woman was elected to a prominent office. However, he may not recognize the underlying reason this stands out, namely that the overwhelming majority of political leaders have historically been men. Since people with dominant identities are less likely to experience discrimination, they may remain in this stage for extended periods.

In the **acceptance** stage, individuals acknowledge that inequality exists but do not take action to address it, internally or externally. Passive acceptance often reflects the internalization of norms learned through socializing institutions such as family, media, religion, and education, which often make oppression seem normal and natural. Individuals may believe in equality in principle while overlooking privilege and institutionalized oppression, sometimes interpreting inequities as exaggerated or the result of a lack of individual effort. Some may move into active acceptance, openly endorsing the perceived superiority of the dominant group. Progress beyond this stage often occurs through sustained interactions or experiences that challenge existing beliefs, such as befriending someone from a nondominant group or taking a course related to culture.

The **resistance** stage represents a significant shift, as individuals recognize unearned privilege and may experience guilt or shame. This awareness can lead to distancing from others within the dominant group, though retreat alone does not address inequality. While this stage reflects increased awareness, remaining in resistance can limit productive engagement because people are often retreating rather than trying to address injustice. Sharing knowledge and engaging others may lead individuals toward the next stage, redefinition.

In the **redefinition** stage, individuals reject negative assumptions about their dominant identity and seek to use their social power to support equity and social justice. They realize that they can claim their dominant identity as heterosexual, able-bodied, male, white, etc., and perform their identity in ways that counter norms. For example, in a research project on identity a male participant said, "I don't want to assert my maleness the same way that maleness is asserted all around us all the time. I don't want to contribute to sexism. So I have to be conscious of that. There's that guilt. But then, I try to utilize my maleness in positive ways, like when I'm talking to other men about male privilege," (Jones Jr., 2009).

The final stage, **integration**, occurs when individuals fully incorporate their dominant identity into their lives while acting as informed allies to nondominant groups. At this stage, individuals educate others about privilege and engage in advocacy, such as participating in organizations that support marginalized communities. For example, some heterosexual people who find out a friend or family member is gay or lesbian may have to confront their dominant heterosexual identity for the first time, which may lead them through these various stages. As a sign of integration, some may join an organization like PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), where they can be around others who share their dominant identity as heterosexuals but also empathize with their loved ones.



Figure 2.2.1: Participants hold a PFLAG banner as they march and celebrate during the 2010 Washington, D.C. Pride Parade, part of the annual Capital Pride festival honoring LGBTQIA+ communities and allies. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Tim Evanson via Wikimedia Commons)

Understanding these stages of dominant and nondominant identity development provides a foundation for examining why difference matters in communication and society.

Difference via Interaction

Identity is socially constructed through culture and communication, meaning that who we are is not fixed or purely natural but learned through interaction with others. Across personal, social, and cultural dimensions, identity develops over time, shifts in importance depending on context, and is shaped by how we see ourselves and how others see us. These meanings are reinforced through group membership, power structures, and historical processes that position individuals within dominant and nondominant categories, influencing experiences of privilege and inequality. Ultimately, identity development and difference matter because they emerge through ongoing social interaction within cultural contexts, where meanings about who we are and how we differ are continuously created and revised.

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2.3: Identity Categories as Social Constructs

Overview

Identity categories are social constructs shaped through historical, political, and communicative processes. From a social constructionist perspective, identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability were developed for specific social purposes and continue to evolve over time. Communication plays a central role in creating, maintaining, and challenging these identity categories. In the United States, the development of these identities reveals how power, hierarchy, and inequality are embedded in cultural meanings and everyday interactions. Understanding identity categories as socially constructed provides a foundation for more competent, reflective, and equitable communication across difference.

Learning Objectives

- Explain social constructionism and its relevance to identity and communication.
- Describe how race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been socially constructed in U.S. history.
- Analyze how communication practices reinforce or challenge dominant understandings of identity categories.
- Distinguish between biological explanations and social meanings associated with identity categories.
- Apply concepts of socially constructed identity to contemporary communication contexts and intercultural interactions.

Using Social Constructionism as a Lens to View Identity

Understanding contemporary cultural identities requires examining how they developed over time. Historically, identities often perceived as timeless were actually constructed for specific social and political purposes and have continued to evolve. Communication is central to this process, as identities are relational, communicative, and socially constructed. **Social construction** of identity is a view that argues the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relationship to social, cultural, and political contexts (Allen, 2011). This section examines how race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been constructed in the United States and the role communication plays in shaping these identities. Beyond race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, there are many additional intersecting identities such as religion, age, nationality, and class. While exploring this section, consider how all of these identities may intersect.

Race

Human beings, regardless of racial classification, share 99.9 percent of their DNA, indicating that **race** is a social construct rather than a biological reality (Human Genome Project). The American Anthropological Association agrees, stating that race is the product of “historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances” (Allen, 2011). Race is understood as a socially constructed category based on appearance differences that have been used to create hierarchies privileging some and disadvantaging others.



Figure 2.3.1: A diverse group of students from Rungta College. (CC0 1.0; Basantsatpathy via Wikimedia Commons)

Race became a socially recognized marker during European colonial expansion in the 1500s. Encounters with people who looked different prompted a hierarchy that placed lighter-skinned Europeans above darker-skinned populations. Emerging scientific fields sought to study the natural world, including human populations, often framing native peoples as less evolved. Racial distinctions largely relied on phenotypes such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features. Western "scientists" used these differences as "proof" that native populations were less evolved than the Europeans, which helped justify colonial expansion, enslavement, genocide, and exploitation on massive scales (Allen, 2011). Although race is socially constructed rather than biologically inherent, its consequences are profoundly real. Social constructions can still organize institutions, distribute power, and shape people's lived experiences in material ways. Race does not need a biological basis to exert real influence over opportunity, inequality, and identity.

Given that race is one of the first things we notice about someone, it is important to know how race and communication relate (Allen, 2011). Discussions of race in the U.S. are challenging, partly due to concerns about language and labels. People may be frustrated by their perception that labels change too often or be afraid of using an "improper" term and being viewed as racially insensitive. However, political correctness should not inhibit meaningful dialogue or learning about differences. Understanding the communicative history of race improves competence and opens opportunities for deeper engagement.

Racial classifications in the U.S. have shifted frequently, highlighting their social construction. Today, the U.S. Census commonly uses categories such as White, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latino (as an ethnicity that can be of any race). However, these categories have changed significantly over time and reflect shifting political, social, and historical understandings of race rather than stable or natural divisions. For example, earlier census records included many more and often inconsistent racial classifications, and the meanings of categories like "Black," "White," or "Asian" have been repeatedly revised across decades to reflect changing social definitions of identity rather than fixed biological differences (Tian et al., 2025). Everyday communication about race has also evolved, yet many remain hesitant to discuss it due to concerns or fears about using the wrong vocabulary.

Each major racial category can be further specified by region, country, or culture. Asian Americans, for instance, vary by language, origin, and cultural practices. While broad categories are useful for trends, they risk generalization and stereotyping. You may find that someone identifies as Chinese American or Korean American instead of Asian American. In this case, the label further highlights a person's cultural lineage. We should not assume, however, that someone identifies with their cultural lineage, as many people have more in common with their U.S. American peers than a culture that may be one or more generations removed.

History and personal preference also influence how we communicate about race. Culture and communication scholar Brenda Allen notes that when she was born in 1950, her birth certificate included an N for Negro. Later she referred to herself as colored because that's what people in her community referred to themselves as. During and before this time, the term black had negative connotations and would likely have offended someone. There was a movement in the 1960s to reclaim the word black, and the slogan "black is beautiful" was commonly used. Brenda Allen acknowledges the newer label of African American but notes that she still prefers black. The terms colored and Negro are no longer considered appropriate because they were commonly used during a time when black people were blatantly discriminated against. Even though that history may seem far removed to some,

it is not to others. Currently, the terms African American and black are frequently used, and both are considered acceptable. The phrase people of color is acceptable for many and is used to be inclusive of other racial minorities. If you are unsure what to use, you could always observe how a person refers to themselves, or you could ask for their preference. In any case, a competent communicator defers to and respects the preference of the individual.

The label Latin American generally refers to people who live in Central American countries. Although Spain colonized much of what is now South and Central America and parts of the Caribbean, the inhabitants of these areas are now much more diverse. Depending on the region or country, some people primarily trace their lineage to the indigenous people who lived in these areas before colonization, or to a Spanish and indigenous lineage, or to other combinations that may include European, African, and/or indigenous heritage. Latina and Latino are labels that are preferable to Hispanic for many who live in the U.S. and trace their lineage to South and/or Central America and/or parts of the Caribbean. Scholars who study Latina/o identity often use the label Latina/o in their writing to acknowledge women who avow that identity label (Calafell, 2007). In verbal communication you might say "Latina" when referring to a particular female or "Latino" when referring to a particular male of Latin American heritage. When referring to the group as a whole, you could say "Latinas and Latinos" instead of just "Latinos," which would be more gender inclusive. While Hispanic is used by the U.S. Census, it refers primarily to people of Spanish origin, which does not account for the diversity of background of many Latinos/as. The term Hispanic also highlights the colonizer's influence over the indigenous, which erases a history that is important to many. Additionally, there are people who claim Spanish origins and identify culturally as Hispanic but racially as white. Labels such as Puerto Rican or Mexican American, which further specify region or country of origin, may also be used. Just as with other cultural groups, if you are unsure of how to refer to someone, you can always ask for and honor someone's preference.

U.S. immigration history also shapes racial construction. The metaphor of the melting pot has been used to describe the immigration history of the United States but doesn't capture the experiences of many immigrant groups (Allen, 2011). The metaphor assumes that cultural differences dissolve into a unified national identity, yet in practice assimilation has often required nondominant groups to conform to the norms, values, and expectations of dominant groups. Rather than equally blending cultures, the process has historically privileged dominant identities while marginalizing or pressuring nondominant identities to adapt. Light-skinned, English-speaking immigrants assimilated more easily, while groups now considered white, such as the Irish, faced discrimination. Italian immigrants in the South were once segregated in schools, and Asian immigrants were denied citizenship until 1952. All of this history and context is important, because it continues to influence communication among races today.

A more recent example of how racial categories and their meanings shape social experience can be seen in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM began in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, and it gained national and global attention after the 2020 murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin. The movement emerged as a response to long-standing patterns of racial inequality and police violence against Black Americans. Its goals focus on racial justice, including addressing systemic racism in policing, criminal justice, education, and other social institutions. BLM also highlights how racial identity is not just a personal characteristic but a socially and politically meaningful category that shapes lived experience, access to justice, and collective action.

Interracial Communication

Race and communication are closely connected and in many various ways. Racism shapes how we talk about race and is difficult for many to discuss. Today, racism is often seen as overt acts, such as using derogatory language or discriminating against someone. However, there is a distinction between individual racist acts and institutional racism, which operates through societal patterns and structures and does not require personal intent. Competent communicators must recognize how racism influences communication at both individual and societal levels.

People often make assumptions about others' race based on speech, which are frequently tied to stereotypes. Dominant groups tend to define what is correct or incorrect usage of a language, and since language is so closely tied to identity, labeling a group's use of a language as incorrect or deviant challenges or negates part of their identity (Yancy, 2011). Standard English reflects white, middle-class norms and can marginalize speakers of other dialects. Differences between standard English and what has been called "Black English" have gotten national attention through debates about whether or not instruction in classrooms should accommodate students who do not speak standard English. Debates about accommodating Black English in classrooms illustrate how linguistic standards intersect with race, education, and social class. People who deviate from the standard often face negative judgments, regardless of their own language proficiency.

An additional national controversy has revolved around the inclusion of Spanish in common language use, such as Spanish as an option at ATMs, or other automated services, and Spanish language instruction in school for students who do not speak or are learning to speak English. As noted prior, the Latino/a population in the U.S. is growing fast, which has necessitated the inclusion

of Spanish in many areas of public life. This has also created a backlash, which some scholars argue is tied more to the race of the immigrants than the language they speak and a fear that white America could be engulfed by other languages and cultures (Speicher, 2002). This backlash has led to a revived movement to make English the official language of the U.S.

The U.S. Constitution does not stipulate a national language, and Congress has not designated one either. While nearly thirty states have passed English-language legislation, it has mostly been symbolic, and court rulings have limited any enforceability (Zuckerman, 2010). Interracial communication presents some additional verbal challenges.

Code-switching involves changing from one way of speaking to another between or within interactions. Some people of color may engage in code-switching when communicating with dominant group members because they fear they will be negatively judged. Adopting the language practices of the dominant group may minimize perceived differences. This code-switching creates a linguistic dual consciousness in which people are able to maintain their linguistic identities with their in-group peers but can still acquire tools and gain access needed to function in dominant society (Yancy, 2011). White people may also feel anxious about communicating with people of color out of fear of being perceived as racist. In other situations, people in dominant groups may spotlight nondominant members by asking them to comment on or educate others about their race (Allen, 2011).

This tension around language and legitimacy has also been powerfully captured by James Baldwin, who argued in his essay *"If Black English Ain't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?"* that Black English is a distinct and meaningful linguistic system, not a broken or inferior version of standard English. Baldwin's argument highlights how judgments about language are often tied to broader social hierarchies and assumptions about race and intelligence.

> "People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they *are* submerged.)"

Gender

When a newborn is introduced, we often ask whether it is a boy or a girl, highlighting the role of gender in organizing social life and relationships. Many parents assign gender through clothing, colors, and other cues, demonstrating how societal meanings are attached to seemingly neutral characteristics. Like race, gender is socially constructed. While biological differences exist between who we label males and females, the social significance assigned to these differences shapes daily life and varies across cultures.

Gender differs from sex. **Gender** is an identity based on cultural notions of masculinity and femininity, internalized through socialization and expressed through interaction. **Sex** is based on biological characteristics, including external genitalia, internal sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones (Wood, 2005). While the biological characteristics between males and females are different, it is the meaning that we create and attach to those characteristics that makes them significant. The cultural differences in how that significance is ascribed are proof that "our way of doing things" is arbitrary. For example, cross-cultural research has found that boys and girls in most cultures show both aggressive and nurturing tendencies, but cultures vary in terms of how they encourage these characteristics between genders. In a group in Africa, young boys are responsible for taking care of babies and are encouraged to be nurturing (Wood, 2005).

Over centuries, gender has been deliberately constructed to favor men. Scientific fields historically claimed "natural" differences between men and women, often in ways now recognized as sexist. Craniometry in the late 1800s suggested men's larger brains indicated superior intelligence, while psychology and sociology framed women as less evolved (Allen, 2011). Medical and political authorities cited menstrual cycles to argue women were irrational, restricting their access to education, voting, and leadership. This system, known as **patriarchy**, privileges men and often renders their gender invisible, while masculinities studies have highlighted that men also perform gender.

Gender has been constructed over the past few centuries in political and deliberate ways that have tended to favor men in terms of power. Various academic fields joined in the quest to "prove" there are "natural" differences between men and women. While the "proof" they presented was credible to many at the time, it seems blatantly sexist and inaccurate today. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, scientists who measure skulls, also known as craniometrists, claimed that men were more intelligent than women because they had larger brains. Leaders in the fast-growing fields of sociology and psychology argued that women were less evolved than men and had more in common with "children and savages" than an adult (white) males (Allen, 2011). Doctors and other decision makers like politicians also used women's menstrual cycles as evidence that they were irrational, or hysterical, and therefore could not be trusted to vote, pursue higher education, or be in a leadership position. These are just a few of the many instances of how knowledge was created by seemingly legitimate scientific disciplines that we can now clearly see served to empower men and disempower women. This system is based on the ideology of patriarchy, which is a system of social structures and practices that maintains the values, priorities, and interests of men as a group (Wood, 2005). One of the ways patriarchy is

maintained is by its relative invisibility. While women have been the focus of much research on gender differences, males have been largely unexamined. Men have been treated as the "generic" human being to which others are compared. This ignores that fact that men have a gender, too. Masculinities studies have challenged that notion by examining how masculinities are performed.

There have been challenges to the construction of gender in recent decades. Since the 1960s, scholars and activists have challenged established notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. The women's rights movement in the U.S. dates back to the 1800s, when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 (Wood, 2005). Although most women's rights movements have been led by white, middle-class women, there was overlap between those involved in the abolitionist movement to end slavery and the beginnings of the women's rights movement. Although some of the leaders of the early women's rights movement had class and education privilege, they were still taking a risk by organizing and protesting. Black women were even more at risk, and Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave, faced those risks often and gave a much noted extemporaneous speech at a women's rights gathering in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, which came to be called "Ain't I a Woman?" (Wood, 2005).

Feminism is both an intellectual tradition and a social movement that has evolved over time to address gender inequality and expand understandings of gender, power, and identity. Historically, feminist movements focused on securing legal and political rights for women, including suffrage, access to education, reproductive rights, and workplace equality. These early waves of feminism challenged systems that excluded women from public life and treated male experience as the societal norm. In contemporary contexts, feminism is more diverse and intersectional, meaning it recognizes that gender inequality is shaped by overlapping systems of race, class, sexuality, ability, and other identities. Modern feminist thought also includes a wide range of perspectives rather than a single unified viewpoint, with ongoing debates about issues such as reproductive justice, pay equity, representation in leadership, and gender-based violence.

Today, feminism also engages with broader questions of gender itself, including the rights and visibility of transgender and nonbinary people. **Transgender** is an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth, and experiences within this community vary widely in terms of expression and medical transition. Transgender people may or may not seek medical intervention like surgery or hormone treatments to help match their physiology with their gender identity. As with other groups, it is best to allow someone to self-identify first and then honor their preferred label. If you are unsure of which pronouns to use when addressing someone, you can use gender-neutral language. Contemporary feminist movements increasingly advocate for gender inclusivity and challenge rigid binary definitions of gender, while also addressing how gender norms affect all people, not just women. Although feminism is often misrepresented in popular media as being anti-men or exclusionary, most feminist frameworks focus on achieving equality, challenging systemic inequality, and expanding freedom of identity and expression for everyone. Overall, contemporary feminism as a social movement is largely focused on reducing gender-based barriers and expectations, with the broader goal of creating greater freedom and equality for people of all genders, not just women.

Gender as a cultural identity has implications for many aspects of our lives, including real-world contexts like education and work. Schools are primary grounds for socialization, and the educational experience for males and females is different in many ways from preschool through college. Although not always intentional, schools tend to recreate the hierarchies and inequalities that exist in society. Given that we live in a patriarchal society, there are communicative elements present in school that support this (Allen, 2011). For example, teachers are more likely to call on and pay attention to boys in a classroom, giving them more feedback in the form of criticism, praise, and help. This sends an implicit message that boys are more worthy of attention and valuable than girls. Teachers are also more likely to lead girls to focus on feelings and appearance and boys to focus on competition and achievement. The focus on appearance for girls can lead to anxieties about body image. Gender inequalities are also evident in the administrative structure of schools, which puts males in positions of authority more than females. These inequalities in schools correspond to larger inequalities in the general workforce. While there are more women in the workforce now than ever before, they still face a glass ceiling, which is a barrier for promotion to upper management.

Recent workforce data continue to show significant gender imbalance in STEM fields, particularly in engineering and computer science. For example, women make up only about 15–25% of workers in many engineering and computing occupations, despite earning a growing share of college degrees overall (National Science Board, 2024). This underrepresentation is especially visible in higher-paying technical and leadership roles within these industries. In addition, the gender wage gap persists across nearly all fields: in the United States, women working full-time still earn about 80–85 cents for every dollar earned by men, with even wider gaps for many women of color (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). These disparities reflect not only individual choices but also broader structural and cultural factors, including occupational segregation, unequal access to advancement opportunities, and workplace norms that shape hiring, promotion, and pay.

Sexuality

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

Sexuality relates to culture and identity in important ways that extend beyond sexual orientation, just as race is more than the color of one's skin and gender is more than one's biological and physiological manifestations of masculinity and femininity. Sexuality is not just physical; it is social in that we communicate with others about sexuality (Allen, 2011). Sexuality is also biological in that it connects to physiological functions that carry significant social and political meaning like puberty, menstruation, and pregnancy. Sexuality connects to public health issues like sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and teen pregnancy. Sexuality is at the center of political issues like abortion, sex education, and LGBTQIA+ rights. While all these contribute to sexuality as a cultural identity, the focus in this section is on sexual orientation.

The most obvious way sexuality relates to identity is through sexual orientation. **Sexual orientation** refers to a person's primary physical and emotional sexual attraction and activity. The terms we most often use to categorize sexual orientation are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are sometimes referred to as sexual minorities. While the term sexual preference has been used previously, sexual orientation is more appropriate, since preference implies a simple choice. Although someone's preference for a restaurant or actor may change frequently, sexuality is not as simple. The term homosexual can be appropriate in some instances, but it carries with it a clinical and medicalized tone. The medical community has a recent history of "treating homosexuality" with means that most would view as inhumane today (American Psychological Association, 2009; Drescher, 2015). So many people prefer a term like gay, which was chosen and embraced by gay people, rather than homosexual, which was imposed by a then discriminatory medical system.

The gay and lesbian rights movement became widely recognizable in the U.S. in the 1950s and continues on today, evident by prominent issues regarding sexual orientation in national news and politics. National and international groups like the Human Rights Campaign advocate for rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities. While these communities are often grouped together, they remain different. Gays and lesbians constitute the most visible of the groups and receive the most attention and funding. Bisexuals are rarely visible or included in popular cultural discourses or in social and political movements. Lastly, **queer** is a term used to describe a group that is diverse in terms of identities but usually takes a more activist and at times radical stance that critiques sexual categories. While queer was long considered a derogatory label, and still is by some, the queer activist movement that emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s reclaimed the word and embraced it as a positive. As shown, there is a diversity of identities among sexual minorities, just as there is variation within races and genders.

Ability

There is resistance to classifying ability as a cultural identity because disability has historically been understood through a medical model that treats it as an individual pathology rather than a social and cultural phenomenon. While differences in physical and cognitive ability may involve biological or physiological conditions, the meaning of disability is shaped by social expectations, institutions, and cultural norms. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines an individual with a **disability** as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment" (Allen, 2011). An impairment is defined as "any temporary or permanent loss or abnormality of a body structure or function, whether physiological or psychological" (Allen, 2011). Importantly, this definition demonstrates that disability is not solely a medical condition but also a social construct. Concepts such as "major life activities" depend on socially defined expectations about what bodies and minds should be able to do, while being "perceived by others" as impaired highlights the relational and cultural dimensions of disability. In this sense, disability emerges not only from bodily or cognitive differences themselves, but also from the ways society is organized around norms of able-bodiedness and cognitive ability.

Ascribing an identity of disabled to a person can therefore be both socially and institutionally consequential. Although impairments may be diagnosed by credentialed experts, the label of disabled carries cultural meanings that shape how individuals are treated within schools, workplaces, and other institutions. People are often tracked into educational programs or social categories based on perceived physical or cognitive ability, and there are many cases in which individuals were mistakenly labeled disabled and subsequently treated differently despite contesting the classification. Students who did not speak English as a first language, for example, were, and in some cases still are, placed into special education programs because linguistic difference was interpreted through frameworks of deficiency rather than cultural or linguistic diversity.

Ability, just as the other cultural identities discussed, has institutionalized privileges and disadvantages associated with it. **Ableism** is the system of beliefs and practices that produces a physical and mental standard that is projected as normal for a human being and labels deviations from it abnormal, resulting in unequal treatment and access to resources. Ability privilege refers to the unearned advantages that are provided for people who fit the cognitive and physical norms (Allen, 2011). Unlike other cultural identities that are typically stable over a lifetime, ability fluctuates for most people. Many may, or have, experienced times when we are more or less able. Perhaps you broke your leg and had to use crutches or a wheelchair for a while. Getting sick for a prolonged period of time also lessens our abilities, but we may fully recover from any of these examples and regain our ability privilege. Whether you have experienced a short-term disability or not, the majority of us will become less physically and cognitively able as we get older.

Statistically, people with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the U.S., with an estimated 20 percent of people five years or older living with some form of disability (Allen, 2011). Medical advances have allowed some people with disabilities to live longer and more active lives than before, which has led to an increase in the number of people with disabilities. This number continues to increase as during various periods, veterans returning from wars may return with physical disabilities or psychological impairments such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

As disability has been constructed in U.S. history, it has intersected with other cultural identities. For example, people opposed to "political and social equality for women cited their supposed physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws, deficits, and deviations from the male norm," framed women as emotional, irrational, and unstable, which was used to put them into the "scientific" category of "feeblemindedness," which led them to be institutionalized (Carlson, 2001). Arguments supporting racial inequality and tighter immigration restrictions also drew on notions of disability, framing certain racial groups as prone to cognitive disabilities, mental illness, or uncontrollable emotions and actions.

During the early 1900s, the eugenics movement was the epitome of the move to rehabilitate or reject people with disabilities (Allen, 2005). This was a brand of social engineering that was indicative of a strong public support in the rationality of science to cure society's problems (Allen, 2011). A sterilization law written in 1914 "proposed to authorize sterilization of the socially inadequate," which included the "feebleminded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind, deaf, deformed, and dependent" (Lombardo, n.d.). Although the eugenics movement as it was envisioned and enacted then is unthinkable today, some who have studied the eugenics movement of the early 1900s have issued warnings that a newly packaged version of eugenics could be upon us. As human genome mapping and DNA manipulation become more accessible, advanced genetic testing could enable parents to eliminate undesirable aspects or enhance desirable characteristics of their children before they are born.

Much has changed for people with disabilities in the U.S. in the past fifty years. The independent living movement (ILM) was a part of the disability rights movement that took shape along with other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The ILM calls for more individual and collective action toward social change by people with disabilities. Some of the goals of the ILM include reframing disability as a social and political rather than just a medical issue, a shift toward changing society rather than just rehabilitating people with disabilities, a view of accommodations as civil rights rather than charity, and more involvement by people with disabilities in the formulation and execution of policies relating to them (Longmore, 2003). As society better adapts to people with disabilities, there will be more instances of interability communication taking place.

Interability communication is communication between people with differing ability levels. For example, a hearing person communicating with someone who is hearing impaired or a person who does not use a wheelchair communicating with someone who uses a wheelchair.

Neurodiversity

Australian disability activist Judy Singer coined the term **neurodiversity** in 1977 to categorize nontypical neurological development and related conditions as normal human differences. Singer's model gives us two relative terms: "**neurotypical** refers to brain functions, behaviors, and processing that are considered standard or normal, while **neurodivergent** is the term for folks whose brains function differently than what is considered standard or normal" (Allen, 2023). The latter category can include people with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, Down syndrome, epilepsy, and chronic mental health illnesses such as anxiety or depression, just to name a few. The challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals often stem not from their neurology itself, but from living in a world designed by and for neurotypical people.

There are primarily two ways in which we understand neurodiversity as a socially constructed category. The first is in the core conceptualization of neurodivergence. **Neurodivergence** is defined by being different than what is standard or normal, but this begs the question: what is standard or normal? What is considered to be normal is socially and culturally constructed. We as a culture create normal, and then we describe someone as neurodivergent relative to that socially constructed normal. The second

way in which neurodiversity is culturally constructed is the ways in which a cultural community may validate (or invalidate) or support (or police) neurodivergent people. The neurology of the neurodivergent person may create a proclivity toward a particular pattern of behavior, but then the socially and culturally constructed context may or may not allow for that behavior (Allen, 2023).

Neurodivergence is an ascribed identity that is placed on an individual through a medical authority. With the progression and advocacy to become more aware and educated about neurodiversity within the recent generation, there is a movement that reframes the experience of neurodivergent people to feel empowered to claim their neurotype as an avowed identity. Many people now proudly identify their neurotype as a part of who they are and this identity can often become highly salient as individuals find community with others who share similar experiences and the ways of processing the world. With the help of technology and social media, many of these communities flourish in the online space which allow for individuals to share their unique experiences, while providing opportunities to educate others about their experiences, and perhaps reframe the stigma around neurodivergence.

It's important to note that certain cultures, such as the Western culture and the younger generations, may be moving towards a more progressive and inclusive view of neurodivergent individuals, but that may not be the case for other cultural perspectives. Many cultures still carry a social stigma against those who may have any medical diagnoses that consider them as anything other than neurotypical and able. Since someone's neurotype cannot be determined without a proper diagnosis, we also have to consider the fact that power and privilege play a role in whether or not someone has the means to healthcare. The discussions around mental health and neurodiversity are still fairly new. The more access, and also the willingness, to obtain mental health or psychiatric care can be contributing determinants of a neuroinclusive society.

Understanding Identity as Socially Constructed

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that identities often perceived as natural, fixed, or purely biological are deeply shaped by social and cultural processes. Race, gender, sexuality, ability, and neurodiversity are not simply objective categories that exist outside of society; rather, their meanings are created, reinforced, and challenged through history, institutions, and communication. While biological or physiological differences may exist, the significance attached to those differences is socially constructed and tied to systems of power, privilege, and inequality. Understanding identity in this way helps us recognize that communication does not merely reflect identity categories, but actively participates in shaping how people are understood, treated, and valued within society.

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2.4: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Communication explores how humans create meaning and form identities through communication, emphasizing that both are socially constructed rather than naturally given. Communication is symbolic, relying on language, gestures, and cultural artifacts to represent ideas and facilitate shared understanding. Symbols are interpreted within cultural and social contexts, and meanings are negotiated through interaction. Social reality is not fixed but emerges through repeated human interaction, which institutionalizes habits, roles, and social hierarchies over time. Individuals manage impressions of themselves in daily life, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the social structures they inhabit.

Identity is central to understanding communication and social interaction. Personal, social, and cultural identities develop through lifelong processes of reflection, interaction, and socialization. Personal identities reflect individual characteristics, social identities emerge from group memberships, and cultural identities are deeply rooted in historical and societal contexts. Identity salience shifts depending on context, relational dynamics, and social roles. Dominant and nondominant identity development models illustrate how individuals recognize privilege, oppression, and social hierarchies, progressing through stages that range from unexamined identity to integrated awareness and constructive action. Recognizing and valuing difference is essential for ethical and competent communication.

The discussion further situates identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability as socially constructed categories shaped by historical, political, and communicative processes. Race, although often perceived as biologically fixed, emerged as a social marker during European colonial expansion and continues to influence communication and societal structures. Gender reflects cultural norms and patriarchal power, while sexual orientation and ability are similarly shaped by social meanings, policies, and institutional practices. Communication reinforces, challenges, and transforms these identities through language, labeling, norms, and social interaction. Understanding these constructions illuminates how inequality, privilege, and systemic barriers operate in society.

By examining symbols, social construction, identity development, and the creation of identity categories, a framework emerges for understanding how humans make meaning and navigate social life. It underscores that identity is relational, context-dependent, and intertwined with structures of power, while communication is both the medium and the mechanism through which social realities are produced. Recognizing the socially constructed nature of identity encourages more reflective, ethical, and inclusive engagement across difference, supporting intercultural competence and fostering more equitable social interactions.

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2.5: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Ableism
- Acceptance
- Ascribed identities
- Avowed identities
- Code-switching
- Conformity
- Connotation
- Cultural Identities
- Culture
- Denotation
- Direct Definition
- Disability
- Displacement
- Dominant groups
- Feminism
- Gender
- Habitualization
- Impression Management
- Institutionalization
- Integration
- Looking-Glass Self
- Monosemic
- Neurodivergence
- Neurodivergent
- Neurodiversity
- Neurotypical
- Nondominant groups
- Personal Identities
- Patriarchy
- Polysemic
- Privilege
- Queer
- Race
- Redefining
- Referent (Triangle of Meaning)
- Resistance
- Role Conflict
- Role Performance
- Role Strain
- Roles
- Salience
- Self-concept
- Separation
- Sex
- Sexual orientation
- Sexuality
- Social Comparison
- Social Construction
- Social Identities
- Symbolic Interactionism
- Symbol

- Thought (Triangle of Meaning)
- Transgender
- Triangle of Meaning
- Unexamined identity

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2.6: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. If identities like race, gender, and ability are socially constructed, what does that suggest about the “reality” of social categories people treat as fixed or natural? Can something be socially constructed and still have real consequences?
2. How does identity salience change your behavior in different contexts (e.g., school, home, online spaces)? Can you think of a time when a particular identity became more important in one setting than another?
3. How do dominant and nondominant identity development models help explain differences in how people experience privilege, discrimination, or awareness of inequality?
4. How do communication practices like code-switching, slang, or naming conventions show that language is tied to power and group membership rather than just “correct grammar”?
5. In what ways do communication systems (media, education, law, everyday interaction) reinforce or challenge categories like race, gender, sexuality, and ability?

Chapter Exercises

1. Identity Mapping Reflection
    1. Create a visual map of your identities (personal, social, cultural). Label which identities feel most and least salient in different environments (home, school, online, etc.). Write a short reflection explaining why those shifts occur.
2. Social Construction in Action
    1. Choose one identity category (race, gender, ability, or sexuality). Find a real-world example (news story, policy, or social media post) that shows how it is socially constructed. Explain how communication is shaping its meaning.
3. Code-Switching Analysis
    1. Observe (or reflect on) a situation where language changes depending on audience (formal vs. informal, academic vs. casual, etc.). Describe what changed and what this reveals about identity and power.
4. Triangle of Meaning Practice
    1. Take 3 ambiguous words (e.g., “home,” “success,” “respect”). For each, identify:
        1. possible symbols (words/phrases used)
        2. your thought/interpretation
        3. possible referents (real-world examples)
    2. Reflect on how misunderstandings could arise.
5. Identity Development Scenario
    1. Create a short scenario of a person moving through one stage of either dominant or nondominant identity development (e.g., conformity → resistance or acceptance → redefinition). Explain what communication experiences might trigger the transition.

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2.7: Alternative Descriptions for Chapter 2

2.1: The Triangle of Meaning

The image depicts an equilateral triangle oriented with one vertex at the top and two vertices at the bottom. The top vertex is labeled “Thought or Reference” and represents the mental concept or idea associated with a word. The bottom-left vertex is labeled “Symbol,” representing the word, sign, or symbol used to convey meaning. The bottom-right vertex is labeled “Referent,” representing the actual object, concept, or idea in the world that the symbol refers to. Solid lines connect the top vertex to each bottom vertex, showing that meaning passes from the symbol to thought and from thought to the referent. Alongside the solid line connecting “Thought or Reference” to “Symbol” says “symbolizes,” while the solid line connecting “Thought or Reference” to “Referent” says “refers to.” A dashed line runs along the base of the triangle that says “stands for”, connecting the symbol (bottom-left) directly to the referent (bottom-right), emphasizing that there is no direct link between the word and the object and meaning is always mediated through thought.

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3: POWER

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, we will discuss **power**. This is a crucial chapter, as it shifts our academic paradigm towards a critical lens which we will use throughout the remainder of the text. Power is a phenomenon that we may understand in colloquial and conversational ways through our lives, but we will pinpoint specific philosophical and practical understandings of power to lock in how it influences our identities and our relationships. We will go through this discussion in three parts: first, we'll talk about what power us so we can understand how it is different from privilege and empowerment. Second, we'll discuss various sources of power, both tangible and concrete and intangible and social. Finally, we'll discuss the ways in which power effects our communication interactions and our understanding of ourselves and the world.



Figure 3.1: City protest between groups in a realationship of power. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Ted Eyton via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Define power as a relational communication concept and explain how power differs from empowerment and privilege.
- Identify the major sources of power, including hierarchical authority, access to resources, and cultural capital.
- Analyze how power operates at macroscopic, mezzoscopic, and microscopic levels within social systems and relationships.
- Evaluate how power dynamics influence communication behaviors, perceptions, and interactions between individuals and groups.
- Apply concepts of power, positionality, and standpoint theory to understand how social location shapes experiences and communication practices.

3.1: Power (re)Defined

3.2: Sources of Power

3.3: Manifestations of Power

3.4: Chapter Review

3.5: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

3.6: Discussions and Exercises

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3.1: Power (re)Defined

Overview

In this brief chapter, we will discuss the conceptual framework for understanding power as a relational dynamic. It flows from various levels of social and cultural institutions, and it permeates every interpersonal relationship we have.



Figure 3.1.1: Sign and crowd at the Boston MA 50501 protest February 5 2025, demonstrating a tension between groups of power. (CC0 1.0 Universal: Mmangan333 via Wikimedia Commons)

Learning Objectives

- Define power as a relational communication concept involving the ability to control circumstances and influence the achievement of goals.
- Explain why power exists between people and groups rather than as an individual possession or personal trait.
- Differentiate power from empowerment and privilege by identifying the distinct roles each concept plays in social relationships.
- Identify how social location, cultural context, and access to resources influence power dynamics.
- Recognize how power operates within everyday interpersonal relationships and communication interactions.

Defining & Describing Power

"Power" is a word that is part of a long list of words that have one usage and meaning colloquially and socially, but have a very specific definition and description when used in the social sciences. There are several ways of describing power that all speak to the same phenomena. For our purposes, we can borrow one from Gust Yep (2013):

Definition: Power

Power is the ability to control circumstances (like access to financial, social, and cultural resources), and to get things done (like fulfilling personal goals and dreams and helping others achieve theirs; all individual and social relationships operate within relations of power.

We can break this definition down in other ways to fully grasp the concept and its effects on interpersonal relationships and communication:

- Power is the ability to control circumstances of self and target group.
- Power is the ability to influence the attainment of goals for self and others.
- Power is a productive tension resulting from our different social locations within a cultural context.

All of these articulations point towards power being a substantial leverage or influence over others.

Layers of Power

There are broadly speaking three layers of power:

Macroscopic Power: This is the large overarching systems of power that influence large groups of people, such as entire communities, nations, or cultures. Macroscopic power forces are often intangible cultural values, such as the law, faith in a higher power, intrinsic goodness of knowledge, etc. These power forces will rise above and beyond individuals and groups.

Mezzoscopic Power: These are often related to macroscopic forces of power, but in a more confined and defined institutional framework. Due to a macroscopic power force of the law, a judge has a lot of power in a courtroom. We will never personally see or meet the President of the United States, but the President still has sway and influence over how we live our lives. Even as faculty members at a college, its possible we may never personally meet the president of our college! But that president still has sway and influence over our lives. This is mezzoscopic power.

Microscopic Power: As the name implies, this is the smallest scale of power dimensions: one person to another person, or one person to a small group. Consider perhaps the eldest care-giver in a home, or a shift-supervisor overseeing a staff during a 6 hour window at a coffee shop. This is a very direct and very confined relationship of power. It may be related to a mezzoscopic or macroscopic dimension of power, but it is very tangible and exists on a very small scale.

Foucault Descriptions of Power

French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980) wrote and spoke extensively on the nature of power. Between several of his works, we can summarize power as having four distinct characteristics.

Power is Relational

This is a pretty important place to start our detailed understanding of power. Power is not a characteristic that one person or group just has because they so so. It is not a quality that one possesses in a vacuum. Power, in fact, only exists *between* two people or groups. If you can reflect upon examples of powerful people or powerful groups throughout your life and history, you will always be able to identify another person or group in relationship with those in power: every leader is only a leader because they have followers.

This might be a good moment to differentiate a couple of terms:

Power is not the same as **empowerment.** Power is a dynamic in relationships: it exists between people. Empowerment is an "up from within" personal quality resulting from self-confidence. Often when we think of power we think of personal qualities such as strength, confidence, self-assuredness, etc. But, again, these are significant and perhaps important personal qualities, but these are different than having influence or leverage over someone. I can have all the self-confidence in the world, but that alone doesn't mean I can dictate the decisions of the president of my college. Perhaps people in power also have qualities associated with empowerment, but these two things are not the same.

Power is not the same as **privilege.** Privilege can generally be described as a matrix of unearned advantages resulting from our social location in relationship to social institutions. We will discuss later in this chapter where power comes from, and we'll see that power and privilege may come from similar places. Again, like empowerment, power and privilege are similar but not equivalent. I enjoy many privileges as a white heterosexual US American born man. One of my close colleagues in my department is an accented speaking woman of color. We have the same position in our college, and my pathway to this position was much different and in many ways much easier than hers... but that certainly does not mean I get to tell her what to do. Privilege would be the ability to navigate social institutions with ease, but just because we have fewer obstacles than our peers doesn't mean we

inherently or necessarily have any leverage over those peers.

Power is not the same as privilege or empowerment, because *power is relational; it exists between people.* Power is not only a phenomenon that exists in relationships, though: its a phenomenon that exists in *every* relationship.

Power is Ubiquitous

Power is everywhere. Power is in every relationship. This may make more sense after we read about how power is dynamic, but i think it bares mentioning here. Every relationship has some element of power in it. Power is very dynamic (as we'll discuss in a moment) and the differential of power between two people can be very large (perhaps a teacher in a classroom over their students) or it can be very small (such as two close friends), but it never truly goes away. It's ever present in every relationship, even if it does shift and move.

Power is Dynamic

Power is always present, but its also always moving and moving in multiple directions simultaneously. First, power is relative to the context: if the context shifts, so does the power differential. Second, power can ebb and flow. This is a typical scenario among good friends, romantic partners, family members of equal standing, colleagues, etc. If we feel that the power differential is zero, what is more likely happening is that it shifts back and forth fluidly. Third, we are all situated within multiple dimensions of power. As is often said in a capitalist economy, "everyone has a boss." Power is very dynamic, flowing through our social systems in multiple directions in multiple ways simultaneously, and we are all embedded in very dynamic systems of power. However, the currents of this flow of power sometimes need to be shifted.

Example 3.1.1

Example 1:

- In a college classroom for example, the instructor has quite a lot of purview to make decisions on exactly how the class operates, and the students give the instructor a lot of power to control circumstances on the assumption that they will get a positive learning experience in return. However, that instructor is not *all* powerful. They still have a dean or a vice president that they must answer to. Furthermore, although they do have flexibility in the day-to-day operations of their classroom, they are still obligated to meet expectations of the course that have been decided by powers at a district or state level.

Example 2:

- One day you have just gotten paid and have a little extra money, so you treat your friend to lunch at a restaurant of your choosing (since you're paying, you decide where to go). But a week later, the tables have turned and now your friend is the one with a little extra cash, so now they are going to decide what to do when you hang out. The power differential may be small, but more importantly it shifts back and forth and ebbs and flows in a way that feels very egalitarian.

Power is Productive

When studying communication from a critical perspective in graduate school, my cohort had come accustomed to using the word "crunchy" to describe a concept or a theory that was particularly nuanced and complex in its intellectual and moral framing: this might be something we would have considered "crunchy." Power exists within relationships, which means that in any and every relationship at any given time there is a person or group in a higher power position and a person or group in a lower power position. Both parties understand their position, and to some extent the parties in the lower power position willfully accept their lower power status. The group in the lower power position would accept their lower power status due to some form of social contract. There would be some understanding that this arrangement of power dynamics would come with some guarantees; the lower power party would get something back in return. A person with a part time job will allow their manager to dictate when they come to work and how long they stay and what tasks they will do when they get there, because in return they will be financially compensated and there may also be a promise of raises and promotions in the future. A student will show up to class at the designated time, do the assigned readings, and turn in the expected assignments, because in return they will receive the knowledge they seek and a passing grade which will allow them to continue on their academic journey. The power dynamic usually

comes with some sort of tacit or explicit social contract. But what happens if the terms of this contract are unacceptable? What happens if the lower power party decides that they are not getting what was promised or what they deserve? The short answer is *change*. Either the person or group in the higher power position willfully adjusts what is happening or the lower power party forces the adjustment, but one way or another, Foucault would argue, that change is the result of the tension imbued by power. We'll talk more in depth about exactly how this happens, but its a very basic description of all social movements throughout history. Power is productive in the sense that power is the catalyst for change.

Example 3.1.2

Example 3:

- Think about the example of a shift supervisor at a coffee shop and their staff. During the working shift, the supervisor will delegate tasks and let staff take breaks at certain times (controlling circumstances of self and others), but that supervisor is not all powerful: they are usually carrying out the expectations set forth by a store manager, operating within a dynamic system of power. And once the staff clocks out and leaves, the power of the shift supervisor over the baristas dissipates and shifts. If the staff at this coffee shop - baristas and supervisors alike - are frustrated, exhausted, or hurt by the expectations of the store manager or district supervisors or other corporate decision-makers, members of that coffee shop may elect to unionize. A labor union is an example of individual persons who on their own have little power in their system can coalesce and combine forces to bring more power for themselves and push back against the higher power group.

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3.2: Sources of Power

Overview

In this section, we will discuss the variety of places where power can come from. Power comes from a multitude of sources, and every one of us has some access to some sources of power. None of us are ever powerless, as we can all draw our power from somewhere.



Figure 3.2.1: Water well in Yangdong Village, South Korea - a metaphor for our sources of power. (CC0 1.0; Bernard Gagnon via Wikimedia)

Learning Objectives

- Identify and explain the major sources of power, including hierarchical authority, access to resources, and cultural capital.
- Describe how legitimized hierarchical authority creates power through socially constructed roles, responsibilities, and institutional positions.
- Analyze how access to resources can create power dynamics by understanding how control over needed resources influences relationships and decision-making.
- Define cultural capital and explain how socially valued characteristics, identities, and achievements can function as sources of power.
- Recognize how cultural values and social identities influence who receives power and how power is distributed within society.

Sources of Power

How do certain people and groups end up in positions of power and how do they stay there? Where does their power come from?

Power can come from many places. A metaphor that works in my mind is thinking of wells; like deep wells of water that storybook princesses wish into. Some of these wells are very deep with lots of water, some of these wells may be more shallow with less water. We all have access to certain amounts of wells; the more well water we can tap into, the greater access to power we will have.

Lets talk through some of the primary clusters of these "wells" to see which ones we have access to and how they work.

Hierarchical Authority

The most simple and straightforward group of sources of power is *legitimized hierarchical authority*. When a great number of people are existing together in a social system, it takes a great deal of coordination to ensure that everyone is moving in the same direction and on the same page so that we can all achieve our goals in a fulfilling and meaningful way. Often, this coordination is organized as a **hierarchy**: a sort of family tree where the folks in the upper levels are responsible for the folks at the lower levels. What gives a professor the right to tell you what books you have to read? What gives the assistant manager of the coffee shop you work at the right to tell you when you will work? What gives the state legislature the right to tell you how much taxes you must pay? In all of these cases, the answer is "its literally their job." These hierarchies are of course a social construct, but we have socially constructed certain positions in this stratification to have certain titles, and with that title comes the responsibilities of power.

Access to Resources

Another source of power that may seem fairly straight forward is *access to resources***.** To put it simply: if you have something that I need, it gives you power over me. Examples of this are scattered throughout history. Groups of people have fought wars for centuries struggle over things such as access to trade routes for commerce, oil for fuel, or rare minerals for electronics. For decades there have been political arguments in California between environmental groups and agricultural groups over access to water. The resource that may be held for power could even be life itself; through the threat of immense violence one group is holding the resource of life over the other tho gain leverage and power. On a smaller scale, though, this source of power can ebb and flow fairly dramatically. This category involves what may considered base level needs: access to food, water, shelter, clean air, transportation, internet access, and other similar resources that determine a foundational standard of living. Having access to these resources can be a source of power. But we can also go on from there.

Example 3.2.1

Example 1:

- As a middle-class person who lives in a suburban neighborhood, I find that I have quite a lot of resources that tends to give me leverage in quite a lot of decision-making instances. When my car broke down and had to be towed to a mechanic, I found myself in an extremely low power position. My car stopped running; I could not drive it out of this shop if I wanted to. In that moment, the mechanic had a resource that was very valuable to me (tools, time, & skill to repair my car) and it gave them a lot of leverage in our interaction. Having access to needed resources can be a source of power.

Cultural Capital

This is where things get a little slippery: power can also come from cultural capital. **Cultural capital** describes the intangible assets that a person possesses that allow that person to move and influence the society in which they reside. These are different than necessary resources as they tend to be more abstract and conceptual; socially constructed by each cultural group. As a cultural group, we decide what we think is good or valuable or worthy or desired. And yet, even though they are social construct they are very real and so are their effects: a person who amasses the qualities that our culture determines a valuable becomes a more valuable - and a more powerful - person.

Take a moment to consider what qualities or characteristics you think make a good person. What are they? For some, perhaps its perseverance, loyalty, and dedication? For others it may be wit, humor, and charm? For others still, perhaps intelligence, wisdom, and discernment? Empathy, kindness, and generosity? Strength, athleticism, and courage? Beauty, grace, and dignity? Mindfulness, gratitude, and curiosity? Whatever characteristics you came up with, they are a result of social and cultural teachings: you have learned to admire those qualities in a person. A person who has those qualities then would have **cultural capital:** they would have intangible social resources they can use to hold sway and influence over others. In the same way that a person could use financial capital to influence outcomes in other people, so too can people use cultural capital to do the same (for what it's worth, money is also cultural capital, since it derives its value from how much we as a group value it).

You must intuitively understand the nature of cultural capital since that is why you are here! You are reading this book because you are taking a class because you know that knowledge is a source of power. Ideally, you would be here for the intrinsic value

of the knowledge itself. However in a practical sense, having a college degree is a symbol of intelligence, intellect, perseverance, collaboration, and many other intangible but valuable characteristics. Demonstrating that you have these characteristics is cultural capital: it is a well you can tap into when you need a little more leverage or sway in a social situation (perhaps, say, a job application?).

Example 3.2.2

Example 2:

- My children are 2 grades apart, and when they started attending the same elementary school, I started to get involved in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to stay informed and lend a voice to decision-making at the school regarding budgeting and activities. The PTA was made up of a strong group of parents who had been involved in the school in various capacities for several years. However, after one year of regularly attending PTA meetings, the members of the PTA had asked if I would like to be PTA president. As a college educated white man, I was seen to have leadership qualities and qualifications associated with my cultural status. I was being imbued with power in large part to my perceived cultural capital.

Thus far we have been using secondary identity characteristics (characteristics that are somewhat consistent but relatively fluid) to explore the nature of cultural capital, but Example 3.2.2 brings in race and gender as well. The same system of cultural capital applies to primary identity categories. Primary identity categories are those that remain relatively fixed throughout our lives: if they change, they do not change easily or often. But these relatively fixed identities are also imbued with socially constructed cultural value. A patriarchal society will value masculine traits more than feminine traits, and men will be acculturated to exhibit masculine traits far more than women will, which is why in a patriarchal society you will see far more men in powerful leadership positions than women. Due to centuries of imperialism and colonization from western Europeans, most of the world will view whiteness as valuable, and we can see this not only in instances of outright white supremacy, but also racial profiling and implicit bias, and even colorism (the phenomenon of communities of color valuing lighter pigmentation of skin even within their own racial groups). Similar stratification occurs across every primary identity category. Even though these identities are often immutable and unchangeable, because they are *given* cultural value they can also *be* source of cultural value, and therefore cultural capital, and therefore sources of power.

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3.3: Manifestations of Power

Overview

We have covered what power is and where it comes from…but what does power do? In this section, we will discuss the ways in which power can manifest in our lives. We will discuss manifestations of power that apply to macro, mezzo, and micro contexts. Also we will discuss how power influences our communication practices and our perceptions.



Figure 3.3.1: Alliances can result in stronger resistance to power. (CC BY 2.0; Amaury Laporte via WikiMedia)

Learning Objectives

- Identify how power manifests in communication and relationships across macro, mezzo, and micro contexts.
- Describe characteristics of higher power interactions, including defining others, delegating, communication inhibition, and annexing space.
- Explain how power can be used through dominance, prevention, and empowerment and recognize the different effects of each manifestation.
- Identify communication patterns associated with lower power positions, including excessive politeness, hedging, disclaimers, and nonverbal adaptations.
- Analyze how individuals and groups in lower power positions use strategies such as defiance, resistance, alliances, and self-empowerment to navigate power dynamics.
- Explain standpoint theory and how positionality influences perception, communication, and understanding of social power structures.

High Power Position

Being in a higher power position on an interpersonal level has several effects on the ways in which we interact with others. In general terms, our positions of power create a situation or a context in which we are less concerned with consequences which allows us to be freer or more cavalier in our choices of interaction. This may result in:

Characteristics of Higher Power Interactions

- Defining others: we may use our language to ascribe labels unto others. An **avowed** identity is one that comes from within as self-proclamation, but an **ascribed** identity is one that is given down from above from others. If we are in a position of power, we can ascribe identities to others.
- Delegating and ordering: there may be subtle language shifts based on power dynamics. In a lower-power position, we politely ask for favors. In a higher power position, we simply demand an action.
- **Communication Inhibition**: Whether through virtue of our authority, status, or position of power, or through our communication actions, a person in power may have a chilling effect on those around us inhibiting their comfort or ability to communicate freely.
- Annexing Space: nonverbally, those who are in positions of power often feel entitled to as much space as they want or need, or at the very least inconsiderate or perhaps simply oblivious to the spacial needs of those around them.

Broadly speaking, power can manifest in three different ways:

- **Dominance** is the most overt and explicit presence of power, and the reason that power often gets a bad reputation. Power is often used to deny others rights and freedoms, or to put and keep others down in any way. This is often seen as an abuse of power as it used to harm others in some way.

  This may be an important time to introduce the idea of **hegemony,** which is the process by which the systems of power are normalized in such a way that those who are at the top of these systems of power stay at the top. For example, in a patriarchal society characteristics of masculinity are seen as more desirable and more valuable, and so men who exhibit these characteristics are seen as leaders and put into positions of power, and with their positions of power they maintain and reinforce messages that masculine characteristics are valuable and worthy and so men are put into positions of leadership, and on and on we go through this cycle. Hegemonic systems are a system of dominance, but often one that goes unquestioned as the normal status quo.

- Although dominance is the most obvious and explicit demonstration of power (and why power has such a bad reputation) it is far from the only demonstration of power. Power can also manifest through **prevention,** which is the use of power to fight back against domination. The power that would make one person a bully (dominance) is the same power that would make someone stand up to the bully (prevention). Dominance is a proactive manifestation of power; prevention is a reactive manifestation of power.
- We mentioned earlier that being in a higher power position can result in communication patterns such as defining and delegating, and these descriptions often come with a negative connotation: that we will define others in ways they do not want, or delegate tasks and responsibilities that demean or demoralize others. However, this is not an inevitable or necessary manifestation of power. We could potentially use power to **empower** others. We could define others in supportive and uplifting ways, bestowing titles and descriptions unto them that raise their self-confidence and esteem. We could use our power to encourage others in tasks that would raise their status, like a mentor taking time to train someone in a specialized skill that will advance their role and prospects. It is possible for us to use our power to empower others.

Low Power Position

Being in a lower power position influences our interactions and communication in similar but inverted ways. Communication from a lower power position may result in:

- Excessive politeness: in deference to the power of the other person, in a lower power position we often lean on politeness to a great degree, often adding intensifiers like "I am *so* sorry" and "thank you *very much*."
- Hedging: exemplifying a lack of empowerment and confidence and assertiveness in the face of a more powerful person, we might add language such as "sometimes" or sort of" or "might" or "maybe." This language always leaves the door open for the more powerful person to consider and disagree or correct us.
- Disclaimers and tag questions: Similar to hedging, this language adds a soft uncertainty to either the beginning of our statement or the end. A disclaimer might be starting a sentence with "haven't fully thought this through, no big deal, might be silly, but I was just kind of thinking..." and a tag question ends a sentence with a question such as "don't you think?" Both have the effect of downplaying our assertiveness and certainty.
- Nonverbally, we may make an effort to make our bodies smaller to take up less space, or, depending on the cultural context, avoid prolonged eye contact with the more powerful person.

Although being in a lower power position may influence the ways in which we interact with others, it is important to remember that we never fully powerless. Everyone has access to some sources of power to some extent. Furthermore, power is dynamic so if we are in a lower power position it is entirely possible that the power will shift back in our favor. There are many ways that folks in a lower power position can use the power they have to assert themselves:

There is of course **defiance,** which is to overtly and explicitly defy the mandates of the powerful. This is the simplest and most straightforward to understand, but perhaps the most challenging to execute. Defiance can be extremely risky, and those in the lower power position may be in a very precarious situation and the risk of defiance may be extreme.

If the risk of defiance is too great, folk sin a lower power position can use **resistance,** which is to comply with the mandates of the powerful but in a way that is taxing and subversive. If defiance is to say "no!" with strength and clarity, resistance is to say "yes" but make it as painful and obnoxious a "yes" as possible. Resistance can be seen in places both small and large. Consider a child who doesn't want to go to school, but their parent of course is saying they must. When the parent tells the child to put their shoes on to go to school, the child might say yes, but then spend time looking for their shoes, and then when they find the shoes decide their the wrong ones, and then have a hard time undoing the knot in the laces, and then complaining that their shoes are uncomfortable, etc. On a larger scale, we have seen groups and entities use judiciary to bring lawsuits to more powerful groups. The lawsuits may not directly stop the actions of the more powerful party, but it makes their actions more onerous and taxing to execute, making the lawsuit a reliable form of resistance.

Also, throughout history we have seen countless examples of folks in a lower-power position use **alliances** to protect themselves and assert themselves in the face of a more powerful group. Each individual actor in a lower-power position may be in a precarious position of great risk, but there may be strength in collective action. Labor unions use alliance as a tactic when they strike for their cause: one person may get fired from their job and risk poverty if they speak out, but the institution cannot fire *everybody* because then there is nobody to operate the business. With collective action there is some protection from the lower-power position.

One final manifestation of power from a low-power position is **self-empowerment.** This harkens back to our discussion of cultural capital: if we do not currently have the attributes or characteristics that would result in the cultural capital to rise to a position of power, then why not create those attributes and characteristics ourselves? On the one hand, this falls right in line with dominant U.S. American cultural ideals of "rugged individualism" and the "self-made man": this idea that with enough hard work and perseverance that anyone can be anything. There have been countless popular Hollywood films made about the underdogs overcoming adversity to be champions through sheer grit and determination. This is certainly a possibility for us, however there is a reason we make movies around these stories: it's rare. The reason someone may not have the cultural capital to be in a powerful position is that they do not have the resources to obtain that cultural capital. For example, we currently have an economic system in which having a college degree can create possibilities for economic advancement. However, obtaining that college degree can be expensive. The folks who would need the benefit do not have the resources to obtain the benefit. These cycle can be devastatingly challenging to overcome. Self-empowerment is certainly possible, but to simply go it alone can be daunting and rigorous.

Standpoint

The connection between power and perception is what is known as standpoint, but we have to walk through a couple of elements in order to fully understand it. Recall from our previous chapter on identity the concept of **intersectionality**: we always exist in a unique combination of all our identities simultaneously. This means that we are never completely powerful nor are we completely powerless, but we are always experiencing the world from a unique and complex combination of sources of power and lack of power. Each identity we hold occupies a cultural location, and the unique combination of these cultural locations creates what is known as a **positionality**. **Positionalities** are where we stand in relation to various categories or elements of difference, such as race, economic background, or ability. Our positiionalities describe our relative status of power to one another.

Standpoint theory is a theory that contends that we stand in relation to one another within systems of power, and this positionality influences the ways in which we perceive the world. A great metaphor for standpoint theory is to imagine two people exploring a city: one walking and taking public transit through the streets and the other with an aerial view on a helicopter tour. They are both seeing the same city of course, but understanding it very differently depending on their perspective. However, the person walking and taking public transit would presumably be in a lower power position, as chartering a helicopter would take a tremendous amount of resources. To extend this metaphor even further, **standpoint theory** holds that those in a lower power position are better suited to see and understand more of the power dynamic than those in the higher power position. In the metaphor, the person walking through the street will have a much more nuanced and detailed understanding of the city and the people who live there than the person in the helicopter. Standpoint theory explains why people of color are much more likely to see and understand instances of racism than white people, why queer folks may see homophobia and transphobia more clearly,

why women may see sexism where men don't, etc. Our standpoint is build upon our positions of relative power, and our standpoint influences the way we communicate into the world and understand the messages in it.

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3.4: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Power is a word that has many meanings in many contexts, but it has a very specific definition and usage in communication. Drawing from the work of philosopher Michel Foucault and other critical scholars, we understand power as a force that exists between persons and groups in a relationship. The dynamic of power that exists between these groups has profound and significant impact on the nature of communication and other behaviors in these relationships. This power dynamic is often invisible to those who are in the higher power position, but quite visible to those in the lower power position. This dynamic of power is not fixed or absolute or natural, but rather it is a socially constructed and dynamic force that is related to the cultural context in which it exists.

This power can come from many places. The most obvious place is legitimized hierarchy within an institution, such as an organizational chart. Power can also come from access to needed resources, which can be natural resources like oil or water, or even the resource of life itself which can be taken away through the threat of violence. The most common source of power may also be the most intangible or nebulous, which is cultural capital. Cultural capital is when a cultural group decides what they deem valuable and desirable, and people or groups who have these qualities are then themselves deemed valuable and desirable, such as masculinity within a patriarchal culture.

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3.5: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Alliances
- Communication inhibition
- Cultural capital
- Defiance
- Dominance
- Empowerment
- Hegemony
- Hierarchy
- Intersectionality
- Macroscopic power
- Mezzoscopic power
- Microscopic power
- Positionality
- Power
- Prevention
- Privilege
- Resistance
- Self-empowerment
- Standpoint theory

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3.6: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. Think of a specific organization you are a part of, such as a workplace, a volunteer group, or a university department. Identify one example of power at the microscopic and macroscopic levels within that environment. How do these layers overlap? For instance, how might a **macroscopic** force (like a national law) influence a **microscopic** interaction (like a conversation between a supervisor and an employee)? In your analysis, explain why these power dynamics are **relational** rather than just personal traits held by the individuals involved.
2. The text defines power as **productive** because it serves as a catalyst for change when the "social contract" between parties becomes unacceptable. Describe a hypothetical or real-world scenario where a lower-power group decided to stop accepting their status. In your response, clearly distinguish between the **privilege** the parties might have (unearned institutional advantages) and the actual **power** (leverage or influence) they are exercising.
3. Provide an example of cultural capital you possess, such as your education. How does this intangible asset provide you with leverage or power in a specific social situation
4. Explain the metaphor of the pedestrian versus the helicopter in standpoint theory. How does your own positionality influence what you are able to see or understand within a social system?
5. How does your access to specific wells of power, such as cultural capital or hierarchical authority, shape your standpoint within a social system, and how does this positionality influence your ability to use power productively to initiate change?

Chapter Exercises

1. Describe a relationship you are in where you can identify the dynamic of power.
    1. Name each of Foucault's characteristics of power and provide an example of each characteristic using the described relationship.
2. Consider your experience at your college. Using the pedestrian versus helicopter metaphor of Standpoint Theory, identify your positionality within that system based on your intersectional identities. Provide two details about the environment you see clearly and two things someone in a different power position might understand better than you.

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3.7: References

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4: PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION

Chapter Overview

Perception is a fundamental component of human communication that shapes how we understand ourselves, interpret others, and respond in social contexts. It is influenced by a combination of physiological, cognitive, cultural, and environmental factors, including health, age, sensory abilities, cultural identities, and social experiences. Cognitive structures such as schemas, stereotypes, and implicit biases also filter perception, often leading to distortions or misinterpretations in social interaction. Recognizing these influences is an important step in understanding how perceptions are formed and how they affect communication outcomes.

Improving perception requires ongoing self-awareness, reflection, and intentional communication practices. Self-perception can be strengthened by recognizing negative thinking patterns, challenging rigid schemas, and reducing the influence of harmful socialization and self-fulfilling prophecies. Perceptions of others can be improved through empathetic listening, challenging stereotypes and prejudices, and using perception checking to clarify understanding. Developing these skills helps individuals navigate interactions more effectively while promoting greater understanding, inclusivity, and personal growth.



Figure 4.1: Engaging in lively conversation, these young people illustrate how perception shapes understanding and connection in social interactions. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Ananian via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Explain how humans select, organize, and interpret sensory information to make sense of the world.
- Identify and explain the physiological, cultural, cognitive, and environmental factors that shape self-perception and perception of others.
- Analyze how schemas, scripts, stereotypes, prejudice, and implicit bias influence the way we perceive social situations and individuals.
- Evaluate the effects of socializing forces, self-fulfilling prophecies, and negative thinking patterns on self-concept, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships.
- Apply strategies for improving self-perception, including self-reflection, self-affirmation, and the development of supportive interpersonal relationships.

4.1: The Perception Process

4.2: Perceiving Others and Perceiving Self
4.3: Influences on Perception
4.4: Improving Perception
4.5: Chapter Review
4.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools
4.7: Discussions and Exercises
4.8: Alternative Descriptions for Chapter 4
4.9: References

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4.1: The Perception Process

Overview

Perception is the process through which individuals select, organize, and interpret information to make sense of their social and physical environments. Perceptual filters, such as salience, needs, interests, and expectations, influence the stimuli people attend to, while organizing strategies like proximity, similarity, difference, and punctuation shape understanding of events and interactions. Schemata play a key role in interpreting experiences, guiding behavior, and forming impressions of others. Awareness of these perceptual processes is closely tied to communication competence and can enhance interpersonal understanding while reducing misunderstandings.

Learning Objectives

- Explain the three stages of perception: selecting, organizing, and interpreting information.
- Describe how salience, needs, interests, and expectations influence the information we attend to.
- Identify strategies for organizing information, including proximity, similarity, difference, and punctuation.
- Explain the role of schemata in interpreting experiences and guiding communication behavior.
- Apply perception concepts to real-world communication scenarios to improve understanding and reduce conflict.

Defining Perception

Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This process includes the perception of select stimuli that pass through our perceptual filters, are organized into our existing structures and patterns, and are then interpreted based on previous experiences. Although perception is a largely cognitive and psychological process, how we perceive the people and objects around us affects our communication. We respond differently to an object or person that we perceive favorably than we do to something we find unfavorable. The challenge becomes filtering the massive amounts of incoming information, organizing it, and making meaning from what passes through our perceptual filters and enters our social realities.



Figure 4.1.1: During a team meeting, group members navigate information and perspectives, illustrating how perception shapes understanding and communication. (CC BY-SA 4.0; GCM Communications via Wikimedia Commons)

Selecting Information

We take in information through all five of our senses, but our perceptual field (the world around us) includes so much stimuli that it is impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all. As information comes in through our senses, various factors influence what actually continues on through the perception process (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). **Selecting** is the first part of the perception process, in which we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information. Think about how, out of many other possible stimuli to pay attention to, you may hear a familiar voice in the hallway, see a pair of shoes you want to buy from across the mall, or smell something cooking for dinner when you get home from work. We quickly cut through and push to the background all kinds of sights, smells, sounds, and other stimuli, while deciding what to select and what to leave out.

We tend to pay attention to information that is salient. **Salience** is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. The thing attracting our attention can be abstract, like a concept, or concrete, like an object. For example, a person's identity as an Indigenous person in the United States may become salient when they are protesting at the Columbus Day parade in Denver, Colorado. Or, a bright flashlight shining in your face while camping at night is sure to be salient. The degree of salience depends on three features (Fiske & Tayor, 1991). We tend to notice things that are visually or aurally stimulating, things that meet our needs or interests, and things that align with or violate our expectations.

Visual and Aural Stimulation

It is probably not surprising to learn that visually and/or aurally stimulating things become salient in our perceptual field and get our attention. Creatures ranging from fish to hummingbirds are attracted to things like silver spinners on fishing poles or red and yellow bird feeders. However, having our senses stimulated is not always a positive thing. For example, consider the couple that won't stop talking during a movie or the upstairs neighbor whose subwoofer shakes your ceiling at night. In short, stimuli can be attention-getting in a productive or distracting way. As communicators, we can use this knowledge to our benefit by minimizing distractions when we have something important to say. It is probably best to have a serious conversation with a significant other in a quiet place rather than a crowded food court.

Needs and Interests

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

We also find salient information that interests us. Of course, many times, stimuli that meet our needs are also interesting, but it is worth discussing these two items separately because sometimes we find things interesting that don't necessarily meet our needs. We have all gotten absorbed into a television show, video game, or random project and paid attention to that at the expense of something that actually meets our needs like cleaning or spending time with a significant other.

In many cases we know what interests us and we automatically gravitate toward stimuli that match up with that. For example, as you filter through radio stations, you likely already have an idea of what kind of music interests you and will stop on a station playing something in that genre while skipping right past stations playing something you aren't interested in. Due to this tendency, we often have to end up being forced into or accidentally experiencing something new in order to create or discover new interests. For example, you may not realize you are interested in feminist history until you are required to take such a course and have an engaging professor who sparks that interest in you. Or you may accidentally stumble on a new area of interest when you take a class you wouldn't otherwise because it fits into your schedule.

Expectations

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

There is a middle area where slight deviations from routine experiences may go unnoticed because we are not expecting them. To return to example of expecting a package, if you aren't expecting a package, and you regularly hear vehicle engines and sidewalk foot traffic outside your house, those relatively routine sounds wouldn't be as likely to catch your attention, even if it were slightly more or less traffic than expected. This is because our expectations are often based on previous experience and patterns we have observed and internalized, which allows our brains to sometimes switch to "autopilot" and fill in things that are missing or overlook extra things. Now that we know how we select stimuli, let's turn our attention to how we organize the information we receive.

Organizing Information

Organizing is the second part of the perception process, in which we sort and categorize information that we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns. Three ways we sort things into patterns are by using proximity, similarity, and difference (Coren, 1980). In terms of **proximity**, we tend to think that things that are close together go together. For example, you may have been waiting to be helped in a business when the clerk assumes that you and the person standing beside you are together. The slightly awkward moment usually ends when you and the other person in line look at each other, then back at the clerk, and one of you explains that you are not together. Even though you may have never met that other person in your life, the clerk used a basic perceptual organizing cue to group you together because you were standing in proximity to one another.

We also group things together based on **similarity**. We tend to think similar-looking or similar-acting things belong together. For example, three friends who are all males of roughly the same age, the same race, and who share features such as short hair and glasses may be perceived by others as related when they are out together. Even if many of their other physical features differ, observers may focus on these shared, salient characteristics and assume they are brothers.

We also organize information that we take in based on **difference**. In this case, we assume that the item that looks or acts different from the rest doesn't belong with the group. Perceptual errors involving people and assumptions of difference can be especially awkward, if not offensive. For example, at a workplace meeting, a team of colleagues may all be dressed in business attire, but one person shows up in casual clothing. Despite that individual's role or contributions being identical to the others, observers might immediately assume they don't belong to the group. Such assumptions, based solely on visible differences, can lead to awkward interactions or even unintentional offense.

These innate means for organizing information are so common that they are built into how we teach our children basic skills and how we function in our daily lives. If you think of the literal act of organizing something, like your desk at home or work, we follow these same unconscious strategies. If you have a bunch of papers and mail on the top of your desk, you will likely sort papers into separate piles for separate classes or put bills in a separate place than personal mail. You may have one drawer for pens, pencils, and other supplies and another drawer for files. In this case you are grouping items based on similarities and differences. You may also group things based on proximity, for example, by putting financial items like your checkbook, a calculator, and your pay stubs in one area so you can update your budget efficiently. We simplify information and look for patterns to help us more efficiently communicate and get through life.

Simplification and categorizing based on patterns is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, without this capability we would likely not have the ability to speak, read, or engage in other complex cognitive and behavioral functions. Our brain innately categorizes and files information and experiences away for later retrieval, and different parts of the brain are responsible for different sensory experiences. It is natural for things to group together in some ways. There are differences among people, and looking for patterns helps us in many practical ways. However, the judgments we place on various patterns and categories are not natural; they are

learned and culturally and contextually relative. We will further discuss judgments in the section pertaining to interpretation. Our perceptual patterns do become unproductive and even unethical when the judgments we associate with certain patterns are based on stereotypical or prejudicial thinking.

We also organize interactions and interpersonal experiences based on our firsthand experiences. When two people experience the same encounter differently, misunderstandings and conflict may result. **Punctuation** refers to the structuring of information into a timeline to determine the cause (stimulus) and effect (response) of our communication interactions (Sillars, 1980). In other words, punctuation is about how people decide what happened first, what caused something, and how someone reacted during a conversation. Applying this concept to interpersonal conflict can help us see how the perception process extends beyond the individual to the interpersonal level. This concept also helps illustrate how organization and interpretation can happen together and how interpretation can influence how we organize information and vice versa.

Where does a conflict begin and end? The answer to this question depends on how the people involved in the conflict punctuate, or structure, their conflict experience. Punctuation differences can often escalate conflict, which can lead to a variety of relationship problems (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967).

Example 4.1.1 The Punctuation of Conflict

Scenario: Linda and Joe are on a project team at work and have a deadline approaching. Linda has been working on the project over the weekend in anticipation of her meeting with Joe first thing Monday morning. She has had some questions along the way and has emailed Joe for clarification and input, but he hasn't responded. On Monday morning, Linda walks into the meeting room, sees Joe, and says, "I've been working on this project all weekend and needed your help. I emailed you three times! What were you doing?" Joe responds, "I had no idea you emailed me. I was gone all weekend on a camping trip."

Impact: In this instance, the conflict started for Linda two days ago and has just started for Joe.

Management: So, for the two of them to most effectively manage this conflict, they need to communicate so that their punctuation, or where the conflict started for each one, is clear and matches up. In this example, Linda made an impression about Joe's level of commitment to the project based on an interpretation she made after selecting and organizing incoming information.

As can be seen in the Example 4.1.1, being aware of punctuation is an important part of perception checking. Let's now take a closer look at how interpretation plays into the perception process.

Interpreting Information

Although selecting and organizing incoming stimuli happens very quickly, and sometimes without much conscious thought, interpretation can be a much more deliberate and conscious step in the perception process. **Interpretation** is the third part of the perception process, in which we assign meaning to our experiences using mental structures known as schemata. **Schemata** are mental frameworks or organized patterns of knowledge that help people understand and interpret information and experiences. In other words, schemata are like databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences. For example, a child may already have a schema for "dogs" that includes fur, four legs, barking, and tails. When the child sees a new breed of dog for the first time, they can still recognize it as a dog because it matches the information already stored in their mind. We all have fairly complicated schemata that have developed over time as small units of information combine to make more meaningful complexes of information.

We have an overall schema about education and how to interpret experiences with teachers and classmates. This schema started developing before we even went to preschool based on things that parents, peers, and the media told us about school. For example, you learned that certain symbols and objects like an apple, a ruler, a calculator, and a notebook are associated with being a student or teacher. You learned new concepts like grades and recess, and you engaged in new practices like doing homework, studying, and taking tests. You also formed new relationships with teachers, administrators, and classmates. As you progressed through your education, your schema adapted to the changing environment. How smooth or troubling schema reevaluation and revision is varies from situation to situation and person to person. For example, some students adapt their schema relatively easily as they move from elementary, to middle, to high school, and on to college and are faced with new expectations for behavior and academic engagement. Other students do not adapt as easily, and holding onto their old schema

creates problems as they try to interpret new information through old, incompatible schema. We have all been in a similar situation at some point in our lives, so we know that revising our schemata can be stressful and that such revision takes effort and usually involves some mistakes, disappointments, and frustrations. However, being able to adapt our schemata is a sign of cognitive complexity, which is an important part of communication competence. So, even though the process may be challenging, it can also be a time for learning and growth.

It is important to be aware of schemata because our interpretations affect our behavior. For example, if you are doing a group project for class and you perceive a group member to be shy based on your schema of how shy people communicate, you may avoid giving them presentation responsibilities in your group project because you do not think shy people make good public speakers. Schemata also guide our interactions, providing a script for our behaviors. We know, in general, how to act and communicate in a waiting room, in a classroom, and on a first date.

As we have seen, schemata are used to interpret others' behavior and form impressions about who they are as a person. To help this process along, we often solicit information from people to help us place them into a preexisting schema. In the U.S. and many other Western cultures, people's identities are often closely tied to what they do for a living. When we introduce others, or ourselves, occupation is usually one of the first things we mention. Think about how your communication with someone might differ if they were introduced to you as an artist versus a doctor. We make similar interpretations based on where people are from, their age, their race, and other social and cultural factors. We have schemata about individuals, groups, places, and things, and these schemata filter our perceptions before, during, and after interactions. As schemata are retrieved from memory, they are executed, like computer programs or apps on your smartphone, to help us interpret the world around us. Just like computer programs and apps must be regularly updated to improve their functioning, competent communicators update and adapt their schemata as they have new experiences. In order to evaluate why, when, and how we must adapt our schemata, in section 4.3: Influences on Perception, we will further explore schemata and the connections to stereotyping and stereotype threat, microaggressions, bias, and discrimination.

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4.2: Perceiving Others and Perceiving Self

Overview

Perception is a dynamic process that shapes how individuals interpret and interact with the world, influencing both perceptions of others and of oneself. When perceiving others, people rely on first impressions, attribution processes, and various context cues to shape their judgments. These judgments can often lead to systematic errors in understanding others. Personality, culture, and social context further influence these perceptions, affecting relational interactions and communication outcomes. Self-perception also develops through personal reflection, social comparison, feedback from others, and broader societal influences. Discrepancies between the actual, ideal, and ought selves can create emotional and behavioral consequences. Self-presentation also allows individuals to strategically manage how they are perceived. People may do this either to maintain authenticity or to enhance their self-concept. Understanding these interrelated processes is critical for improving interpersonal communication, self-awareness, and social competence.

Learning Objectives

- Explain how first impressions, attributions, and perceptual biases, such as the fundamental attribution error and self-serving bias, shape our perceptions of others.
- Analyze the influence of physical appearance, environmental cues, culture, and personality on the accuracy and interpretation of social perceptions.
- Describe the components of self-perception, including self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, and how they are shaped by social comparison and feedback.
- Evaluate the effects of discrepancies between actual, ideal, and ought selves on emotions, behavior, and communication.
- Apply strategies of self-presentation and impression management to enhance self-concept, maintain authenticity, and improve interpersonal interactions.

Perceiving Others

Perceiving others is the process of forming impressions and judgments about people based on the information we observe. These perceptions are influenced by factors such as appearance, behavior, communication, culture, and past experiences. Since people rely on assumptions and limited information, perception errors and biases can sometimes lead to inaccurate judgments. As you process this section, keep in mind that these principles apply to how you perceive others and to how others perceive you. Just as others make impressions on us, we make impressions on others.

Attribution and Interpretation

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

Attribution

In most interactions, we are constantly running an **attribution script** in our minds, which essentially tries to come up with explanations for what is happening. Why did my neighbor slam the door when they saw me walking down the hall? Why is my partner being extra nice to me today? Why did my coworker miss our project team meeting this morning? In general, we seek

to attribute the cause of others' behaviors to internal or external factors. **Internal attributions** connect the cause of behaviors to personal aspects such as personality traits. **External attributions** connect the cause of behaviors to situational factors. Attributions are important to consider because our reactions to others' behaviors are strongly influenced by the explanations we reach.

Example 4.2.1 Internal vs. External Attributions: Romantic Relationships

Scenario: Imagine that Morgan and Riley are dating. One day, Riley gets frustrated and raises their voice to Morgan.

Internal Attribution Result: Morgan may find that behavior more offensive and even consider breaking up with them if they attribute the cause of the blow up to Riley's personality, since personality traits are usually fairly stable and difficult to control or change.

External Attribution Result: Conversely, Morgan may be more forgiving if they attribute the cause of Riley's behavior to situational factors beyond Riley's control, since external factors are usually temporary. If Morgan makes an internal attribution, they may think, "Wow, this person is really a loose cannon. Who knows when they will lose it again?" If they make an external attribution, they may think, "Riley has been under a lot of pressure to meet deadlines at work and hasn't been getting much sleep. Once this project is over, I'm sure they'll be more relaxed."

Impact: This process of attribution is ongoing, and, as with many aspects of perception, people are sometimes aware of the attributions they make, and sometimes they are automatic and/or unconscious. Attribution has received much scholarly attention because it is in this part of the perception process that some of the most common perceptual errors or biases occur.

One of the most common perceptual errors is the **fundamental attribution error**, which refers to our tendency to explain others' behaviors using internal rather than external attributions (Sillars, 1980). The emphasis here should be on the "error" part. We have a tendency to want to ascribe motivation to the actions of others in order to explain why they are behaving in the way we can observe them behaving, but we quite often get it wrong.

Example 4.2.2 Fundamental Attribution Error: Parking Tickets

Scenario: An individual receives a parking ticket.

Internal Attribution: "I got a parking ticket! I can't believe those people. Why don't they get a real job and stop ruining my life!"

In this case, someone who is illegally parked attributes the cause of their situation to the malevolence of the parking officer, essentially saying they got a ticket because the officer was a mean and/or bad person, which is an internal attribution.

External Attribution: "It's a bummer I got a parking ticket, but the officer was likely just doing their job."

Here, the individual attributes the outcome to situational factors rather than the officer's character. They recognize that rules exist and that receiving a ticket is a consequence of parking in a restricted area, illustrating an external attribution.

The Example 4.2.2 highlights the fundamental attribution error, where people tend to overemphasize internal characteristics of others (the "mean officer") and underestimate situational factors (the parking rules) when explaining behavior. In contrast, when explaining their own behavior, people are more likely to consider external circumstances, demonstrating a bias in attribution depending on perspective.

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

Example 4.2.3 Fundamental Attribution Error and Self-Serving Bias Working Together

Scenario: A student receives a low grade on an assignment.

Internal Attribution (Fundamental Attribution Error–Judging Others): "The professor gave me a low grade because they are unfair and don't know how to teach!"

In this case, the student attributes the cause of the unsatisfactory grade to the professor's personal characteristics, such as strictness or incompetence. Similarly, a professor might attribute a student's poor performance to the student's laziness or lack of intelligence. Both examples illustrate the fundamental attribution error, where people emphasize internal traits of others while underestimating situational factors.

External Attribution (Self-Serving Bias–Judging Ourselves): "I got a low grade, but it's because I had a hectic schedule and couldn't devote enough time to this assignment."

Here, the student attributes their own failure to situational factors beyond their control, such as time constraints or external responsibilities.

Scenario: A student receives a high grade on an assignment.

Internal Attribution (Self-Serving Bias–Success): "I earned an A on this paper because I am intelligent and worked hard."

When the outcome is positive, the student attributes it to internal personal factors, such as ability and effort, rather than external factors like an easy assignment or lenient grading.

Impact: This example shows how fundamental attribution error and self-serving bias work together; people tend to judge others harshly using internal attributions, while explaining their own successes with internal attributions and their failures with external attributions. As a result, we often perceive ourselves more favorably than others, demonstrating a bias in our social perception.

These psychological processes have implications for our communication because when we attribute causality to another person's personality, we tend to have a stronger emotional reaction and tend to assume that this personality characteristic is stable, which may lead us to avoid communication with the person or to react negatively. Now that you aware of these common errors, you can monitor them more and engage in perception checking to verify your attributions.

Impressions and Interpretation

As we perceive others, we make impressions about their personality, likeability, attractiveness, and other characteristics. Although much of our impressions are personal, what forms them is sometimes based more on circumstances than personal characteristics. All the information we take in isn't treated equally.

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

The **recency effect** leads us to put more weight on the most recent impression we have of a person's communication over earlier impressions. Even a positive first impression can be tarnished by a negative final impression. For example, a professor may have been organized, approachable, and engaging throughout the semester, but if they return the final paper late and your grade is lower than expected, that recent experience can dominate your evaluation. Due to the recency effect, students may focus disproportionately on the professor's last-week actions, overlooking the positive impressions formed earlier in the term.

These early impressions also affect how we interpret and perceive later encounters, which can be further explained through the

halo and horn effects.

The Halo and Horn Effects

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

The **halo effect** occurs when initial positive perceptions lead us to view later interactions as positive. The **horn effect** occurs when initial negative perceptions lead us to view later interactions as negative (Hargie, 2011). Since impressions are especially important when a person is navigating the job market, let's consider how the horn and halo effects could play out for a recent college graduate looking to land their first real job. Nell, a recent communication studies graduate, is seeking a career as a corporate trainer. A professor's positive recommendation to an executive can create a halo effect, causing the executive to form a favorable first impression of Nell and interpret her behaviors more positively. Conversely, if Nell arrives late to an interview without such a recommendation, a negative first impression may trigger a horn effect, leading the executive to overlook her competence and friendliness.

Physical and Environmental Influences on Perception

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

You would likely be able to offer some descriptors of how a person would look and act from the following categories: a goth person, a prep, a jock, a fashionista, a hipster, and so on. The schema associated with these various cliques or styles are formed through personal experience and through exposure to media representations of these groups. Different professions also have schema for appearance and dress. Imagine a doctor, mechanic, congressperson, dancer, or mail carrier. Each group has clothing and personal styles that create and fit into general patterns. However, the mental picture we have of any of the examples above is not going to be representative of the whole group, meaning that stereotypical thinking often exists within our schema.

Just as clothing and personal style help us form impressions of others, so do physical features. The degree to which we perceive people to be attractive influences our attitudes about and communication with them. People perceived as attractive are generally evaluated more positively and seen as more kind and competent than people evaluated as less attractive. Additionally, people rated as attractive receive more eye contact, more smiles, and closer proximity to others. Unlike clothing and personal style, these physical features are more difficult, if not at times impossible, to change.

While these schemas and perceptions are common parts of human communication, it is important to recognize that they can also lead to flawed or unfair judgments. People often engage in impression management by presenting themselves in ways that fit certain expectations, but observers must also be mindful of how they interpret others. The fact that stereotypical thinking exists within our schema does not mean those stereotypes are accurate, ethical, or beneficial. Relying too heavily on assumptions based on appearance, style, or attractiveness can cause people to overlook individuality and make biased evaluations. Being aware of these perceptual tendencies encourages more thoughtful communication and helps people question automatic interpretations rather than accepting them as truth.

Finally, the material objects and people that surround a person influence our perception. For example, people have been shown to make reasonably accurate judgments about a person's personality after viewing their office or bedroom (Hargie, 2011). The link between environmental cues and perception is important enough for many companies to create policies about what can and can't be displayed in personal office spaces. The arrangement of furniture also creates impressions; walking into a meeting and sitting on one end of a long boardroom table is typically less inviting than sitting at a round table or on a sofa.

Although some physical and environmental features are easier to change than others, it is useful to become aware of how these factors, which aren't necessarily related to personality or verbal and nonverbal communication, shape our perceptions.

Culture, Personality, and Perception

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

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

Culture

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

Culture and Our Senses

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

- **Sight:** People in different cultures "read" art in different ways, differing in terms of where they start to look at an image and the types of information they perceive and process.
- **Sound:** "Western" music divides an octave of music into 7 note scales using 12 half step notes in an octave, but some East Asian musical traditions use a 5 note scale, while some Persian and Middle Eastern traditions divide an octave into 24 step notes, all of which will change what we think of as "pleasing" or "harmonious' music.
- **Touch:** In some cultures it would be very offensive for a man to touch, even tap on the shoulder, a woman who isn't a relative.
- **Taste:** Tastes for foods vary greatly around the world. "Stinky tofu," which is a favorite snack of people in Taipei, Taiwan's famous night market, would likely be very off-putting in terms of taste and smell to many foreign tourists.
- **Smell:** While U.S. Americans spend considerable effort to mask natural body odor, which we typically find unpleasant, with soaps, sprays, and lotions, some other cultures would not find unpleasant or even notice what we consider "b.o." Those same cultures may find a U.S. American's "clean" (soapy, perfumed, deodorized) smell unpleasant.

Aside from differences in reactions to basic information we take in through our senses, there is also cultural variation in how we perceive more complicated constructs, like marriage, politics, and privacy. For example, in 2012 French citizens elected a new president. François Hollande moved into the presidential palace with his partner of five years, Valerie Trierweiler. They are the first unmarried couple in the country's history to occupy the presidential palace (de la Baume, 2012). Even though new census statistics show that more unmarried couples are living together than ever before in the U.S., many still disapprove of the practice, and it is hard to imagine a U.S. president in a similar circumstance as France's Hollande. Similarly, other places like Saudi Arabia and the Vatican have strong cultural aversions to such a practice.

As we have already learned, our brain processes information by putting it into categories and looking for predictability and patterns. The previous examples have covered how we do this with sensory information and with more abstract concepts like marriage and politics, but we also do this with people. When we categorize people, we generally view them as "like us" or "not like us." This simple us/them split affects subsequent interaction, including impressions and attributions. For example, we tend to view people we perceive to be like us as more trustworthy, friendly, and honest than people we perceive to be not like us (Brewer, 1999). We are also more likely to use internal attribution to explain negative behavior of people we perceive to be different from us.

You no doubt frequently hear people talking and writing about the "vast differences" between men and women. Whether it's communication, athletic ability, expressing emotions, or perception, people will line up to say that women are one way and men are the other way. While it is true that gender affects our perception, the reason for this difference stems more from social norms than genetic, physical, or psychological differences between men and women. We are socialized to perceive differences between men and women, which leads us to exaggerate and amplify what differences there actually are (McCornack, 2007). We see the stereotypes and differences we are told to see, which helps to create a reality in which gender differences are "obvious." However, numerous research studies have found that, especially in relation to multiple aspects of communication, men and

women communicate much more similarly than differently.

Various cultural identities shape how we perceive others because beliefs, attitudes, and values of the cultural groups to which we belong are incorporated into our schema. Our personalities also present interesting perceptual advantages and challenges.

Personality

Personality refers to a person's general way of thinking, feeling, and behaving based on underlying motivations and impulses (McCornack, 2007). These underlying motivations and impulses form our personality traits. Personality traits are "underlying," but they are fairly enduring once a person reaches adulthood. That is not to say that people's personalities do not change, but major changes in personality are not common unless they result from some form of trauma. Although personality scholars believe there are thousands of personalities, they all comprise some combination of the same few traits. Much research has been done on personality traits, and the "Big Five" that are most commonly discussed are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (McCrea, 2001). These five traits appear to be representative of personalities across cultures.

The Big Five Personality Traits

- **Extraversion:** Refers to a person's interest in interacting with others. People with high extraversion are sociable and often called "extroverts." People with low extraversion are less sociable and are often called "introverts."
- **Agreeableness:** Refers to a person's level of trustworthiness and friendliness. People with high agreeableness are cooperative and likable. People with low agreeableness are suspicious of others and sometimes aggressive, which makes it more difficult for people to find them pleasant to be around.
- **Conscientiousness:** Refers to a person's level of self-organization and motivation. People with high conscientiousness are methodical, motivated, and dependable. People with low conscientiousness are less focused, less careful, and less dependable.
- **Neuroticism:** Refers to a person's level of negative thoughts regarding himself or herself. People high in neuroticism are insecure and experience emotional distress and may be perceived as unstable. People low in neuroticism are more relaxed, have less emotional swings, and are perceived as more stable.
- **Openness:** Refers to a person's willingness to consider new ideas and perspectives. People high in openness are creative and are perceived as open minded. People low in openness are more rigid and set in their thinking and are perceived as "set in their ways."

We tend to focus on personality traits in others that we feel are important to our own personality. What we like in ourselves, we like in others, and what we dislike in ourselves, we dislike in others (McCornack, 2007). If you admire a person's loyalty, then loyalty is probably a trait that you think you possess as well. If you work hard to be positive and motivated and suppress negative and unproductive urges within yourself, you will likely think harshly about those negative traits in someone else.

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

Personality affects our perception, and we all tend to be amateur personality scholars given the amount of effort we put into assuming and evaluating others' personality traits. This bank of knowledge we accumulate based on previous interactions with people is used to help us predict how interactions will unfold and help us manage our interpersonal relationships. When we size up a person based on their personality, we are auditioning or interviewing them in a way to see if we think there is compatibility. We use these implicit personality theories to generalize a person's overall personality from the traits we can perceive. The theories are implicit because they are not of academic but of experience-based origin, and the information we use to theorize about people's personalities isn't explicitly known or observed but implied. We use previous experience to guess other people's personality traits; we then assume more about a person based on the personality traits we assign to them.

This process of assuming has its advantages and drawbacks. In terms of advantages, the use of implicit personality theories offers us a perceptual shortcut that can be useful when we first meet someone. Our assessment of their traits and subsequent

assumptions about who they are as a person makes us feel like we “know the person,” which reduces uncertainty and facilitates further interaction. In terms of drawbacks, our experience-based assumptions aren’t always correct, but they are still persuasive and enduring.

Perceiving the Self

Just as our perception of others affects how we communicate, so does our perception of ourselves. Our self-perception is shaped both by our own choices and by how others respond to us. The ways we present ourselves can reinforce our sense of self or influence how others perceive us. The rest of this chapter's sections explores these ideas through the concepts of self-concept, self-esteem, and self-presentation.

Self-Concept

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

Our self-concept is also formed through our interactions with others and their reactions to us. The concept of the **looking glass self** explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people’s reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us (Cooley, 1902). This reflective process of building our self-concept is based on what other people have actually said, such as “You’re a good listener,” and other people’s actions, such as coming to you for advice. These thoughts evoke emotional responses that feed into our self-concept. For example, you may think, “I’m glad that people can count on me to listen to their problems.”

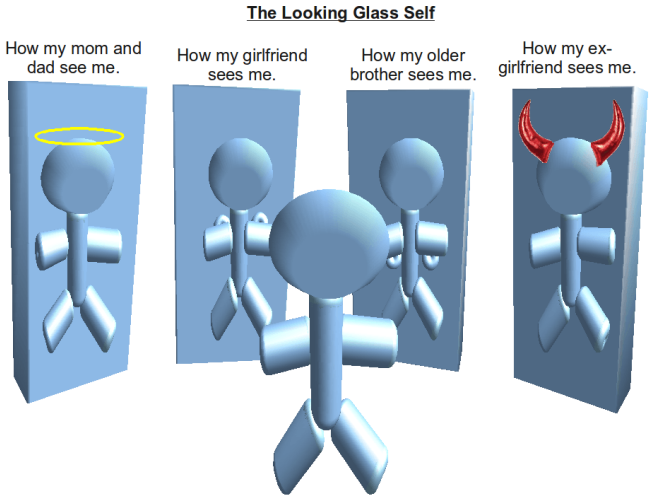


Figure 4.2.1: A diagram of the looking glass self, illustrating how individuals form their self-concept by imagining how others see them, interpreting others’ reactions, and developing feelings about themselves based on those perceived judgments. Alternative description of image. (CC BY 3.0; Rcragun via Wikimedia Commons)

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons to other people. **Social comparison theory** states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people. Social comparisons are based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference (Hargie, 2011). In terms of superiority and inferiority, we evaluate characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn’t

appropriate. **Reference groups** are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If you want to get into better shape and start an exercise routine, you may be discouraged by your difficulty keeping up with the aerobics instructor or running partner and judge yourself as inferior, which could negatively affect your self-concept. Using as a reference group of people who have only recently started a fitness program but have shown progress could help maintain a more accurate and hopefully positive self-concept.

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

We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won't stop until they get the high score on the video game or set a new school record in a track-and-field event. Some people strive to be first chair in the clarinet section of the orchestra, while another person may be content to be second chair. The education system promotes social comparison through grades and rewards such as honor rolls and dean's lists. Although privacy laws prevent individual grades from being displayed, reporting aggregate grades (the number of As, Bs, Cs, etc.) allows students to see their relative performance. This type of social comparison can motivate students, as seeing that most classmates performed better may encourage improvement. However, unreasoned comparisons can have negative effects, leading students to label themselves as "bad" and behave in ways consistent with that self-assessment, potentially worsening performance. Conversely, seeing others with similar low grades may reduce motivation to improve. This example illustrates how evaluations of the self can create cycles of thinking and behavior that relate to self-esteem and self-efficacy, key components of self-concept.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is a more specifically an evaluation of the self (Byrne, 1996). Like self-concept, self-esteem has general and specific elements. Generally, some people are more likely to evaluate themselves positively while others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively (Brockner, 1988). More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our life span and across contexts.

How we judge ourselves affects our communication and our behaviors, but not every negative or positive judgment carries the same weight. The negative evaluation of a trait that isn't very important for our self-concept will likely not result in a loss of self-esteem.

For example, drawing ability may not be a significant part of one's self-concept, so critiques in that area have little impact on self-esteem. In contrast, for an instructor, teaching ability can be central to self-concept, meaning feedback on teaching knowledge or skills may strongly affect self-esteem. Regular evaluations, from students, colleagues, or administrators, often provide constructive criticism, which, when used for self-improvement, can enhance both self-concept and self-esteem. In fact, in professional contexts, people with higher self-esteem are more likely to work harder based on negative feedback, are less negatively affected by work stress, are able to handle workplace conflict better, and are better able to work independently and solve problems (Brockner, 1988). Self-esteem isn't the only factor that contributes to our self-concept; perceptions about our competence also play a role in developing our sense of self.

Self-efficacy refers to the judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context (Bandura, 1997). Judgments about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which influences our self-concept. The following example illustrates these interconnections. Pedro performed well on his first college speech and felt confident about the next one, demonstrating high self-efficacy in public speaking. Success and positive feedback from classmates and his professor reinforced his self-efficacy, boosting his self-esteem and shaping his self-concept as a capable speaker. This increased confidence influenced his

communication and perception of others, and over time, may even guide academic and career choices. The example illustrates how self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-concept are interconnected and influenced by both personal experience and social feedback.

The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affect our feelings of self-efficacy and our self-esteem. As we saw in Pedro's example, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future (Hargie, 2011). Obviously, negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves and negative feedback does the opposite, which ultimately affects behaviors and creates the cycle. When feedback from others is different from how we view ourselves, additional cycles may develop that impact self-esteem and self-concept.

Self-discrepancy theory states that people have beliefs about and expectations for their actual and potential selves that do not always match up with what they actually experience (Higgins, 1987). To understand this theory, we have to understand the different "selves" that make up our self-concept, which are the actual, ideal, and ought selves. The actual self consists of the attributes that you or someone else believes you actually possess. The ideal self consists of the attributes that you or someone else would like you to possess. The ought self consists of the attributes you or someone else believes you should possess.

These different selves can conflict with each other in various combinations. Discrepancies between the actual and ideal/ought selves can be motivating in some ways and prompt people to act for self-improvement. For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so. Discrepancies between the ideal and ought selves can be especially stressful. For example, many professional women who are also mothers have an ideal view of self that includes professional success and advancement. They may also have an ought self that includes a sense of duty and obligation to be a full-time mother. The actual self may be someone who does okay at both but doesn't quite live up to the expectations of either. These discrepancies do not just create cognitive unease, they also lead to emotional, behavioral, and communicative changes.

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

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

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

Finally, when our actual self doesn't match up with what we think we should obtain, we are not meeting what we see as our duties or obligations, which can lead to feelings of agitation including guilt, weakness, and a feeling that we have fallen short of our moral standard (Higgins, 1987). For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so due to the guilt of reading about the increasing number of animals being housed at the facility.

Discrepancies Between Selves

The following is a review of the four potential discrepancies between selves:

- **Actual vs. Own Ideals:** We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining our desires and hopes, which leads to feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration.
- **Actual vs. Others' Ideals:** We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining significant others' desires and hopes for us, which leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment.

- **Actual vs. Others' Ought:** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting what others see as our duties and obligations, which leads to feelings of agitation including fear of potential punishment.
- **Actual vs. Own Ought:** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting our duties and obligations, which can lead to a feeling that we have fallen short of our own moral standards.

Influences on Self-Perception

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

Social and Family Influences

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

Parents and peers shape our self-perceptions in positive and negative ways. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can lead to positive views of self (Hargie, 2011).

In recent years, there has been public debate about how much positive reinforcement people, especially children, should receive, and questions have arisen about overpraise, whether praise is warranted, its effects, and its ultimate purpose. Whether praise is warranted is subjective and context-dependent, but concerns exist about potential negative effects of excessive praise. Motivation drives behavior, either intrinsically (doing something for internal satisfaction) or extrinsically (doing something for a reward or to avoid punishment). For example, completing a class documentary out of love for filmmaking reflects intrinsic motivation, whereas doing it solely for a grade or reward reflects extrinsic motivation. Praise is a form of extrinsic reward, and if it involves an actual reward, some speculate intrinsic motivation may suffer. Intrinsic motivation is more lasting than extrinsic motivation, fostering work ethic and pride in abilities, and can sustain effort over time. Extrinsic motivation fades when the reward stops. Additionally, excessive praise can give a misguided sense of ability. For example, college professors who are reluctant to fail students who produce failing work may be setting those students up to be shocked when their supervisor critiques their abilities or output once they get into a professional context (Hargie, 2011).

There are cultural differences in the amount of praise and positive feedback that teachers and parents give their children. For example, teachers give less positive reinforcement in Japanese and Taiwanese classrooms than do teachers in U.S. classrooms. Chinese and Kenyan parents do not regularly praise their children because they fear it may make them too individualistic, rude, or arrogant (Wierzbicka, 2004). So, the phenomenon of overpraising isn't universal, and the debate over its potential effects is not resolved.

Research has also found that communication patterns develop between parents and children that are common to many verbally and physically abusive relationships. Such patterns have negative effects on a child's self-efficacy and self-esteem (Morgan & Wilson, 2007). As previously stated, attributions are links we make to identify the cause of a behavior. In the case of aggressive or abusive parents, they are not as able to distinguish between mistakes and intentional behaviors, often seeing honest mistakes as intended and reacting negatively to the child. Such parents also communicate generally negative evaluations to their child by saying, for example, "You can't do anything right!" When children do exhibit positive behaviors, abusive parents are more likely to use external attributions that diminish the achievement of the child by saying, for example, "You only won because the other team was off their game." In general, abusive parents have unpredictable reactions to their children's positive and negative behavior, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child that can lead to lower self-esteem and erratic or aggressive behavior. The cycles of praise and blame are just two examples of how the family as a socializing force can influence our self-perceptions.

Culture

How people perceive themselves varies across cultures. For example, many cultures exhibit a phenomenon known as the **self-enhancement bias**, meaning that we tend to emphasize our desirable qualities relative to other people (Loughnan et al., 2011). But the degree to which people engage in self-enhancement varies. A review of many studies in this area found that people in

Western countries such as the U.S. were significantly more likely to self-enhance than people in countries such as Japan. Many scholars explain this variation using a common measure of cultural variation that claims people in individualistic cultures are more likely to engage in competition and openly praise accomplishments than people in collectivistic cultures. The difference in self-enhancement has also been tied to economics, with scholars arguing that people in countries with greater income inequality are more likely to view themselves as superior to others or want to be perceived as superior to others (even if they don't have economic wealth) in order to conform to the country's values and norms. This holds true because countries with high levels of economic inequality, like the U.S., typically value competition and the right to boast about winning or succeeding, while countries with more economic equality, like Japan, have a cultural norm of modesty (Loughnan, 2011).

Race also plays a role in self-perception. For example, positive self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to be higher in African American adolescent girls than Caucasian girls (Stockton et al., 2009). In fact, more recent studies have discounted much of the early research on race and self-esteem that purported that African Americans of all ages have lower self-esteem than whites. Self-perception becomes more complex when we consider biracial individuals, more specifically those born to couples comprising an African American and a white parent (Bowles, 1993). In such cases, it is challenging for biracial individuals to embrace both of their heritages, and social comparison becomes more difficult due to diverse and sometimes conflicting reference groups. Since many biracial individuals identify as and are considered African American by society, living and working within a Black community can help foster more positive self-perceptions in these biracial individuals. Such a community offers a more nurturing environment and a buffer zone from racist attitudes but simultaneously distances biracial individuals from their white identity. Conversely, immersion into a predominantly white community and separation from a Black community can lead biracial individuals to internalize negative views of people of color and perhaps develop a sense of inferiority. Gender intersects with culture and biracial identity to create different experiences and challenges for biracial men and women. All these challenges lead to a sense of being marginalized from both ethnic groups and interfere in the development of positive self-esteem and a stable self-concept.

There are some general differences in terms of gender and self-perception that relate to self-concept, self-efficacy, and envisioning ideal selves. As with any cultural differences, these are generalizations that have been supported by research, but they do not represent all individuals within a group. Regarding self-concept, men are more likely to describe themselves in terms of their group membership, and women are more likely to include references to relationships in their self-descriptions. Regarding self-efficacy, men tend to have higher perceptions of self-efficacy than women (Hargie, 2011). In terms of actual and ideal selves, men and women in a variety of countries both described their ideal self as more masculine (Best & Thomas, 2004). As noted earlier, gender differences are interesting to study but are very often exaggerated beyond the actual variations. Socialization and internalization of societal norms for gender differences accounts for much more of our perceived differences than do innate or natural differences between genders. These gender norms may be explicitly stated, for example, a mother may say to her son, "Boys don't play with dolls," or they may be more implicit, with girls being encouraged to pursue historically feminine professions like teaching or nursing without others actually stating the expectation.

Media

The representations we see in the media affect our self-perception. The vast majority of media images include idealized representations of attractiveness. Despite the fact that the images of people we see in magazines and on movie screens are not typically what we see when we look at the people around us in a classroom, at work, or at the grocery store, many of us continue to hold ourselves to an unrealistic standard of beauty and attractiveness. Movies, magazines, and television shows are filled with beautiful people, and less attractive actors, when they are present in the media, are typically portrayed as the butt of jokes, villains, or only as background extras (Patzer, 2008). Aside from overall attractiveness, the media also offers narrow representations of acceptable body weight.

Researchers have found that only 12 percent of prime-time characters are overweight, which is dramatically less than the national statistics for obesity among the actual U.S. population (Patzer, 2008). Further, an analysis of how weight is discussed on prime-time sitcoms found that heavier female characters were often the targets of negative comments and jokes that audience members responded to with laughter. Conversely, positive comments about women's bodies were related to their thinness. In short, the heavier the character, the more negative the comments, and the thinner the character, the more positive the comments. The same researchers analyzed sitcoms for content regarding male characters' weight and found that although comments regarding their weight were made, they were fewer in number and not as negative, ultimately supporting the notion that overweight male characters are more accepted in media than overweight female characters.

In terms of self-concept, media representations offer us guidance on what is acceptable or unacceptable and valued or not valued in our society. Mediated messages, in general, reinforce cultural stereotypes related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class. People from historically marginalized groups must look much harder than those in the dominant groups to find

positive representations of their identities in media. As a critical thinker, it is important to question media messages and to examine who is included and who is excluded.

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

Self-Presentation

How we perceive ourselves manifests in how we present ourselves to others. **Self-presentation** is the process of strategically concealing or revealing personal information in order to influence others' perceptions (Human et al., 2012). We engage in this process daily and for different reasons. Although people occasionally intentionally deceive others in the process of self-presentation, in general we try to make a good impression while still remaining authentic. Since self-presentation helps meet our instrumental, relational, and identity needs, we stand to lose quite a bit if we are caught intentionally misrepresenting ourselves.

For example, a woman who had long served as the dean of admissions for the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology was dismissed from her position after it was learned that she had only attended one year of college and had falsely indicated she had a bachelor's and master's degree (Webber & Korn, 2012). Such incidents clearly show that although people can get away with such false self-presentation for a while, the eventual consequences of being found out are dire. As communicators, we sometimes engage in more subtle forms of inauthentic self-presentation. Cases of strategic self-presentation may not ever be found out, but communicators should still avoid them as they do not live up to the standards of ethical communication.

Consciously and competently engaging in self-presentation can have benefits because we can provide others with a more positive and accurate picture of who we are. People who are skilled at impression management are typically more engaging and confident, which allows others to pick up on more cues from which to form impressions (Human et al., 2012). Being a skilled self-presenter draws on many of the practices used by competent communicators, including becoming a higher self-monitor. When self-presentation skills and self-monitoring skills combine, communicators can simultaneously monitor their own expressions, the reaction of others, and the situational and social context (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002). Sometimes people get help with their self-presentation. Although most people can't afford or wouldn't think of hiring an image consultant, some people have started generously donating their self-presentation expertise to help others. Many people who have been riding the tough job market for a year or more get discouraged and may consider giving up on their job search.

There are two main types of self-presentation: prosocial and self-serving (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002). **Prosocial self-presentation** entails behaviors that present a person as a role model and make a person more likable and attractive. For example, a supervisor may call on theie employees to uphold high standards for business ethics, model that behavior in their own actions, and compliment others when they exemplify those standards. **Self-serving self-presentation** entails behaviors that present a person as highly skilled, willing to challenge others, and someone not to be messed with. For example, a supervisor may publicly take credit for the accomplishments of others or publicly critique an employee who failed to meet a particular standard. Prosocial strategies are aimed at benefiting others, while self-serving strategies benefit the self at the expense of others.

In general, we strive to present a public image that matches up with our self-concept, but we can also use self-presentation strategies to enhance our self-concept (Hargie, 2011). When we present ourselves in order to evoke a positive evaluative response, we are engaging in self-enhancement. In the pursuit of self-enhancement, a person might try to be as appealing as possible in a particular area or with a particular person to gain feedback that will enhance one's self-esteem. For example, a singer might train and practice for weeks before singing in front of a well-respected vocal coach but not invest as much effort in preparing to sing in front of friends. Although positive feedback from friends is beneficial, positive feedback from an experienced singer could enhance a person's self-concept. Self-enhancement can be productive and achieved competently, or it can be used inappropriately. Using self-enhancement behaviors just to gain the approval of others or out of self-centeredness may lead people to communicate in ways that are perceived as phony or overbearing and end up making an unfavorable impression (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002).

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4.3: Influences on Perception

Overview

Perceptions of others are influenced by a wide array of personal, social, and environmental factors. Physiological states such as health, pain, and fatigue affect attention, patience, and judgment. Culture and co-cultures shape how social cues are interpreted, with race, ethnicity, regionalism, gender, sexuality, and ability all contributing to perception. Cognitive processes including social cognition, schemas, and scripts provide frameworks for interpreting interactions, though reliance on these frameworks can lead to stereotyping and misperceptions. Power dynamics in society can produce microaggressions, implicit bias, and discrimination that shape communication and interpersonal relationships. Social-psychological phenomena such as stereotype threat demonstrate how negative societal expectations can influence behavior and performance. Understanding these influences helps communicators navigate diversity, reduce bias, and engage more effectively in interpersonal interactions.

Learning Objectives

- Describe how physiological states, age, and cognitive abilities influence perception of others in social interactions.
- Explain the role of culture, co-cultures, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and abilities in shaping perceptions of others.
- Analyze the effects of social cognition, schemas, and scripts on forming impressions, and how reliance on these structures can lead to stereotyping.
- Evaluate the impacts of microaggressions, stereotype threat, implicit bias, and discrimination on communication and performance outcomes.
- Apply strategies to reduce perceptual errors and biases, promote inclusive communication, and navigate social power dynamics effectively.

Influencing Factors on 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 and/or 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.

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. Perhaps you have had to go back to work or school after getting having work done on your teeth or having twisted your ankle during a recreational sports event over the weekend. You would know that even a small bit of pain can be distracting. Physical hurt and discomfort may negatively affect our ability to focus,pay attention, and process sensory information (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). Our physiological wellness in any given moment can influence the manner and success with which we process perceptual information.

Culture

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: People perform traditional music and dance during a cultural show, illustrating how shared traditions, values, and expressions help communities celebrate and maintain their culture and co-cultural identities within a larger society. (CC BY-SA 2.5; Leonardolo via Wikimedia Commons)

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, ability, and so on. Most of us are steeped in the teachings of the cultural groups that we belong to from a very young age. 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 (Bonn, 2015). 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). See if your college offers a course in Intercultural Communication to dig further into these phenomena.

> Our cultural groups or cultural identities shape our perceptions of others.

We know that a strong cultural identity correlates positively with self-esteem (Phinney, et al., 1997; Bracey, et al., 2004). 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. Most people have recently been asked to self-identify their race, often when filling out an online form. Whether opening a credit card account, completing paperwork at a doctor's office, or applying for a new job, individuals are typically asked to provide this information. Our perception of our own and others' racial identities plays a significant role in shaping communication.

Race is a complex social phenomenon that works primarily to stratify members of a diverse society. As discussed in the chapter on power, racial identity is a primary factor in creating **positionality**, or the relative status of power in relation to others in our communities and society. Because of its direct connection to systems of power, race has tremendous influence on our perception of ourselves, the world, and everyone else in it. Its especially insidious as it is an immutable identity category: its literally written in our skin and we can not change it, alter it, or mute it. We have no choice but to communicate our racial identities to others upon seeing them. 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. It is imperative that we maintain mindfulness of the meaning we are making upon

perceiving the racial identities of others and how our own racial identity has created the schema to which we interpret the race of others.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a term that is often used interchangeably with heritage and race, but is slightly different. Ethnic identity is a set of ideas about one's own cultural group membership, including a self-identification within that group, a strong salience or sense of belonging in that group, and knowledge about the traditions, customs, values, and behaviors of that group. An ethnic group is often tied to a specific region of heritage or a racial group more broadly, but is more than just tracing genealogy or skin color. A person may have a family lineage that traces to Portugal, but does not speak Portuguese or eat Portuguese food, or celebrate Portuguese holidays, and otherwise doesn't hold Portuguese values. This person would not find salience in their Portuguese heritage, and therefore would likely not consider themselves ethnically Portuguese. However, someone else might trace their lineage to the Philippines, but find great comfort in cooking bistek and lumpia, attended several of their cousin's debyuts, and greets their elders with mano. This person would likely consider themselves ethnically Filipino.

The salient cultural value element of ethnic identity is important to clarify because it influences our perceptions greatly. Ethnicity can influence the ways in which we create expectations of selves and others, our moral and ethical measurements of right and wrong, and our sense of value for what is desireable and undeseireable. All of these have great influence on how we will process perceptual information in order to evaluate and respond.

Sex and Gender

Gender can be broadly described as the expectations of masculinity and femininity within a cultural group. In the U.S., 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 (masculine and feminine) that are associated with two dominant sex characteristics (male and female), there are very distinct expected traits (often opposing) for each gender. Here are some examples you may be familiar with: women are assumed to have long hair, whereas men are assumed to have short hair; men are strong and women are weak; women are emotional and men 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.

When you see a baby dressed in pink, perhaps you automatically assume the baby is female If a baby is crying, you might 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. When we perceive gender, we communicate according to that perception.

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 with 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. Although this policy was seen as a way to allow people who were not heterosexuality serve in the military, the label associated with the policy starkly highlighted an unnoticed perception of sexuality. That is, we as a society are constantly telling people about heterosexuality. Heterosexual people openly talk about the relationship partners and relationship desires. Discussing heterosexuality is even normalized with children at a young age: see every children's film involving romantic interests between a prince and a princess. "Don't Ask Don't Tell" explicitly stated that homosexuality was OK as long as it wasn't talked about, whereas heterosexuality can be openly discussed ad nauseam. "Don't Ask Don't Tell" was repealed in 2010, after 17 years, but social discrimination still limits safe and free speech for LGBTQIA+ community members in the military.

In more positive developments, 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 prohibits classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels. The social and political rhetoric surrounding sexuality influences our perceptions of selves and others along the lines of our sexual identities and perceived sexual identities of others.

Abilities

One in four (26%) adults in the U.S. live with a disability (Okoro, et al., 2018). Despite how commonplace disability is among U.S. 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. Often, able-bodied people perceive those with physical or neurological disabilities with pity, assuming that they are somehow incapable or lacking in some way. This perception is exemplified through a variety of stories that portray people with disabilities as somehow heroic for simply existing with a disability; living an otherwise normal life with a disability is somehow triumphant.

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).

Our (mis)perceptions of ability influences our perceptions, of ourselves and others.

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 U.S. 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).

As we age, 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.

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.

Physical and psychological perception of the world and others alters with the changes that come with age, but so too does our perception of those that appear older. As discussed in the sections regarding culture and ethnicity earlier, our value of the elderly is a cultural construct. A simple but effective metric to measure a cultural groups value of elderly is through individualism and collectivism. Individualism is a cultures value on the deeds and outcomes of an individual rather than the group. Dominant U.S. American culture is very individualistic; it is typically expected that young adult children will move out of their family home to "make a name for themselves." Collectivist cultures, on the contrary, value the community and family more than the individual.

Individual accolades are measured by how well they support the collective endeavors. It is not uncommon for collectivist cultural families to live with 3 or 4 generations within the same household. The level of individualism and collectivism of your cultural upbringing will influence your perception of the elderly.

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. The following sections 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, 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 are sequences of events related to a specific schema. Borrowing a metaphor from a stage play, our scripts become rehearsed expectations of how we and others should act in any given situation. Similarly, our script is related to the role we play, in this case the "role" being the intersectional identity and self concept we perceive of ourselves and perform.

Example 4.3.1 Elevator Script

A typical elevator script might go something like this:

- The elevator door opens.
- I step into the elevator, then turn around to face the elevator door.
- I do not engage in conversation with others on the elevator.
- 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.

Microagressions

In the U.S., and in many other societies, there is a social structure that provides power and access to some people (based on race, gender, age, sexuality, ability, and so on) while denying access and power to others. **Power** is the ability to control circumstances and to get things done; all individual and social relationships operate within relations of power. This definition of power highlights the ways in which culture works in the creation and privileging of certain categories of people. Power in U.S. 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.

Therefore, 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.

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.

Apologizing for Microaggressions

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 okay 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. For example, "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."

As with other concepts we've discussed on this page, microaggressions both form and are formed from our perceptions. First, the very understanding and recongition of the nature of microaggressions is tied to our standpoint and positionality. If we are in a higher position of power, we may inadvertently commit microaggressions without understanding we did any harm at all and may even get defensive when we are called out for our actions since we meant to ill effect. If we are in a lower position of power, the cumulative harmful effects of microaggressions are much more apparent to us, and this in turn influences our perceptions of systems of power and those who stand to gain from them.

Stereotype Threat

"Stereotype threat is being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group," (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 under perform on tests that measure academic aptitude (Sackett, et al., 2004).

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.

The Impact of Removing Stereotype Triggering Terms

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**. There is usually a self-reinforcing loop between our social and cultural perceptions of others, our cultural norms and cultural creations, and our institutional policies. For example, if a social group privileges and normalizes cisgender and heterosexual folks, they would likely depict queer people as deviant or villainous in popular culture, which would reinforce the perception of queer people as dangerous. If queer people are perceived as dangerous, this social group may enact laws to "protect" the population from queer people. And if there are laws against the activities of queer people, then the social group will see them as deviant and villainous. Similar cycles plainly exist in U.S. culture for marginalized populations of racial and national identity. These cycles reinforce the implicit bias and perception that lead to dangerous and violent forms of prejudice and discrimination, but are often invisible to the perceptions of those who are in positions of power. However, as discussed in our chapter on power, this is also the orgins of most social movements for equality.

Understanding the Influences on Our Perception

Overall, the ways we perceive and interpret others are shaped by a complex interaction of physical states, cultural backgrounds, and cognitive frameworks, all of which can either support or distort understanding in social interaction. Factors such as health, age, and sensory or cognitive abilities influence how clearly we take in social information, while cultural identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability, provides deeply ingrained lenses through which we interpret behavior and meaning. At the same time, mental shortcuts like schemas and scripts help us quickly organize social experiences but can also contribute to stereotyping and misjudgment when applied too rigidly.

These perceptual processes are further complicated by broader systems of power, where implicit bias, microaggressions, and discrimination can shape communication outcomes and reinforce inequality. Social-psychological effects like stereotype threat demonstrate that these influences not only affect how we see others, but also how individuals perform and experience social situations themselves. Taken together, understanding these interconnected factors is essential for developing more accurate perception, reducing bias, and fostering more inclusive and effective communication across differences.

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4.4: Improving Perception

Overview

Self-perception and perceptions of others are dynamic processes that can be enhanced through awareness, reflection, and intentional practice. Self-perception is shaped by schemas, socializing forces, self-fulfilling prophecies, and negative thinking patterns, but it can be improved through accurate self-awareness, supportive relationships, and flexible cognitive frameworks. Perception of others improves through empathetic listening, awareness of stereotypes and prejudice, self-reflection, and perception checking. Barriers such as rigid schemas, prejudice, and social pressures can distort perception, but recognizing these influences supports more accurate, positive, and inclusive understandings of both oneself and others, enhancing communication competence and interpersonal effectiveness.

Learning Objectives

- Identify common barriers to accurate self-perception, including rigid schemas, socializing forces, self-fulfilling prophecies, and distorted thinking patterns.
- Consider strategies to improve self-perception, such as self-reflection, self-affirmation, and cultivating supportive interpersonal relationships.
- Explain how stereotypes, prejudice, and cultural biases influence perceptions of others and identify methods to mitigate these effects.
- Develop empathetic listening skills and other communication strategies to enhance understanding and reduce perceptual errors in interpersonal interactions.
- Illustrate the use of perception checking to verify and adjust interpretations of others' behaviors and intentions, fostering more accurate and effective communication.

Improving Self-Perception

Our self-perception can be improved by becoming aware of how schema, socializing forces, self-fulfilling prophecies, and negative patterns of thinking can distort our ability to describe and evaluate ourselves. How we perceive others can be improved by developing better listening and empathetic skills, becoming aware of stereotypes and prejudice, developing self-awareness through self-reflection, and engaging in perception checking.

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

Since self-concept and self-esteem are so subjective and personal, it would be inaccurate to say that someone's self-concept is right or wrong. Instead, we can identify negative and positive aspects of self-perceptions as well as discuss common barriers to forming accurate and positive self-perceptions. We can also identify common patterns that people experience that interfere with their ability to monitor, understand, and change their self-perceptions. Changing your overall self-concept or self-esteem is not an easy task given that these are overall reflections on who we are and how we judge ourselves that are constructed over many interactions. A variety of life-changing events can relatively quickly alter our self-perceptions. Think of how your view of self changed when you moved from high school to college. Similarly, other people's self-perceptions likely change when they enter into a committed relationship, have a child, make a geographic move, or start a new job.



Figure 4.4.1: A person sits nervously with a tense posture, illustrating how emotions and social situations can influence context-specific self-perceptions and feelings about oneself. (CC BY 2.0; Maxwell GS via Wikimedia Commons)

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

Avoid Reliance on Rigid Schema

As was discussed earlier, schema are sets of information based on cognitive and experiential knowledge that guide our interaction. We rely on schema almost constantly to help us make sense of the world around us. Sometimes schema become so familiar that we use them as scripts, which prompts mindless communication and can lead us to overlook new information that may need to be incorporated into the schema. So, it is important to remain mindful of new or contradictory information that may warrant revision of a schema. Being mindful is difficult, especially since we often unconsciously rely on schema. Think about how when you’re driving a familiar route you sometimes fall under “highway hypnosis.” Despite all the advanced psychomotor skills needed to drive, such as braking, turning, and adjusting to other drivers, we can pull into a familiar driveway or parking lot having driven the whole way and suddenly realize we can't recall a single detail about the drive. Or perhaps you've gotten in the car on a weekday morning to have a special brunch with friends and family and then find yourself turning into the parking lot on campus because you went into an "autopilot" mode and made all the familiar turns without actually thinking about it. Driving without mindful attention can have these sometimes humorous results at the end of a dangerous process. To bring this metaphor back to stereotyping, we cannot overly rely on rigid schema. The schema will allow our perception process to move quickly and easily through familiar patterns, but the result will not always have the ethical or desirable outcome we would hope for. We have to vigilant and mindful to how our schema are influencing our actions.

Be Critical of Socializing Forces

We learned earlier that family, friends, sociocultural norms, and the media are just some of the socializing forces that influence our thinking and therefore influence our self-perception. These powerful forces serve positive functions but can also set into motion

negative patterns of self-perception. The following example illustrates the possibility for people to critique and resist socializing forces in order to improve their self-perception.

Cultural influences related to identities and difference can also lead to distorted self-perceptions, especially for people who occupy marginalized or oppressed identities. While perception research has often been used to support the notion that individuals who are subjected to discrimination, like racial and ethnic minorities, are likely to have low self-esteem because they internalize negative societal views, this is not always the case (Armenta & Hunt, 2009). In fact, even some early perception research showed that minorities do not just passively accept the negative views society places on them. Instead, they actively try to maintain favorable self-perceptions in the face of discriminatory attitudes. Numerous studies have shown that people in groups that are the targets of discrimination may identify with their in-group more because of this threat, which may actually help them maintain psychological well-being. In short, they reject the negative evaluations of the out-group and find refuge and support in their identification with others who share their marginalized status.

This is similar to a phenomenon known as **stereotype threat,** in which members of a group who is the subject of a particular stereotype expectation begin to believe that stereotype is true. For example, a common stereotype in dominant U.S. American culture is that people of Asian descent are bad drivers. Anybody can of course learn to be a safe and effective driver, but the stereotype threat will exist when an Asian person believes that they themselves have some kind of natural limitation on their ability to drive. As stated earlier, the in-group can reject these stereotypes and even find solidarity with their in-group peers over the rejection of these hurtful stereotypes, but that is emotional and intellectual energy expended in ways that others do not. There is an extra interpersonal burden on these marginalized groups to protect themselves from the cultural harms of the social forces perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

Beware of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Self-fulfilling prophecies are thought and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behavior that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true (Guyll et al., 2010). For example, let's say a student's biology lab instructor is a Chinese person who speaks English as a second language. The student falsely believes that the instructor will not be a good teacher because he speaks English with an accent. Due to this belief, the student doesn't attend class regularly and doesn't listen actively when they do attend. As a result of these behaviors, the student fails the biology lab, which then reinforces their original belief that the instructor wasn't a good teacher.

Although the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies was originally developed to be applied to social inequality and discrimination, it has since been applied in many other contexts, including interpersonal communication. This research has found that some people are chronically insecure, meaning they are very concerned about being accepted by others but constantly feel that other people will dislike them. This can manifest in **relational insecurity**, which is again based on feelings of inferiority resulting from social comparison with others perceived to be more secure and superior. Such people often end up reinforcing their belief that others will dislike them because of the behaviors triggered by their irrational belief. For example, an insecure person assumes that their date will not like them. During the date they don't engage in much conversation, discloses negative information about themself, and exhibits anxious behaviors. Due to these behaviors, their date forms a negative impression and suggests they not see each other again, reinforcing their original belief that the date wouldn't like them. This example shows how a pattern of thinking can lead to a pattern of behavior that reinforces the thinking, and so on. However, experimental research shows that self-affirmation techniques can be successfully used to intervene in such self-fulfilling prophecies. Thinking positive thoughts and focusing on personality strengths can stop this negative cycle of thinking and has been shown to have positive effects on academic performance, weight loss, and interpersonal relationships (Stinston et al., 2011).

Create and Maintain Supportive Interpersonal Relationships

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

Beware of Distorted Patterns of Thinking and Acting

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

People with low self-esteem may act in ways that overcompensate for their feelings of low self-worth and other insecurities. For example, people often turn to material possessions to try to boost self-esteem. While these purchases may make people feel better in the short term, they may have negative financial effects that can exacerbate negative self-perceptions and lead to interpersonal conflict. People also compensate for self-esteem with their relational choices. For example, someone who is anxious about their career success may surround themself with people who they deems less successful. In this case, being a big fish in a small pond helps some people feel better about themselves when they engage in social comparison.

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

Some people develop low self-esteem because they lack accurate information about themselves, which may be intentional or unintentional. A person can intentionally try to maintain high self-esteem by ignoring or downplaying negative comments and beliefs and focusing on positive evaluations. While this can be a good thing, it can also lead to a distorted self-concept. There is a middle ground between beating yourself up or dwelling on the negative and ignoring potentially constructive feedback about weaknesses and missing opportunities to grow as a person. Conversely, people who have low self-esteem or negative self-concepts may discount or ignore positive feedback.

Overcoming Barriers to Perceiving Others

There are many barriers that prevent us from competently perceiving others. While some are more difficult to overcome than others, they can all be addressed by raising our awareness of the influences around us and committing to monitoring, reflecting on, and changing some of our communication habits. We touched upon the concept of **mindfulness** in our exploration of communication competence and communication ethics, and that same theme comes back here. Improving our communication ethics can start with perception, but to improve our perception we must maintain a mindfulness of the connection between our thoughts and actions. Whether it is our lazy listening skills, lack of empathy, or stereotypes and prejudice, we must be mindful of the various filters and blinders that influence how we perceive and respond to others.

Develop Empathetic Listening Skills

Effective listening is not easy, and most of us do not make a concerted effort to overcome common barriers to listening. Our fast-paced lives and cultural values that emphasize speaking over listening sometimes make listening feel like a chore. But we should not underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information. Empathetic listening can also help us expand our self- and social awareness by learning from other people's experiences and taking on different perspectives. Empathetic listening is challenging because it requires cognitive and emotional investment that goes beyond the learning of a skill set. Developing the skill of listening is a subject that will be covered in depth in a later chapter, but remember for now that listening is an important part of overcoming prejudiced perceptions of others.

Beware of Stereotypes and Prejudice

Stereotypes are sets of beliefs that we develop about groups, which we then apply to individuals from that group. Stereotypes are schema that are taken too far, as they reduce and ignore a person's individuality and the diversity present within a larger group of people. Stereotypes can be based on cultural identities, physical appearance, behavior, speech, beliefs, and values, among other things, and are often caused by a lack of information about the target person or group (Guyll et al., 2010). Stereotypes can be positive, negative, or neutral, but all run the risk of lowering the quality of our communication.

While the negative effects of stereotypes are pretty straightforward in that they devalue people and prevent us from adapting and revising our schema, positive stereotypes also have negative consequences. For example, the "model minority" stereotype has

been applied to some Asian cultures in the United States. Seemingly positive stereotypes of Asian Americans as hardworking, intelligent, and willing to adapt to "mainstream" culture are not always received as positive and can lead some people within these communities to feel objectified, ignored, or overlooked.

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

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

Engage in Self-Reflection

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

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

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

Checking Perception

Perception checking is a strategy to help us monitor our reactions to and perceptions about people and communication. There are some internal and external strategies we can use to engage in perception checking. In terms of internal strategies, review the various influences on perception that we have learned about in this chapter and always be willing to ask yourself, "What is influencing the perceptions I am making right now?" Even being aware of what influences are acting on our perceptions makes us more aware of what is happening in the perception process. In terms of external strategies, we can use other people to help verify our perceptions.

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

uncertain.

Perception is a Flexible Skill

Overall, self-perception and the perception of others are not fixed or automatic processes, but flexible skills that can be strengthened through awareness, reflection, and intentional communication practices. Self-perception is shaped by internal factors such as schemas, social influences, and cognitive patterns, as well as external experiences that can reinforce or challenge how we see ourselves; recognizing distortions like self-fulfilling prophecies or negative thinking patterns is key to developing a more accurate and balanced self-concept.

At the same time, our perceptions of others are influenced by stereotypes, prejudice, and cultural assumptions, but these can be reduced through empathetic listening, self-reflection, and a willingness to question initial interpretations. Strategies such as perception checking and cultivating supportive relationships further help correct misunderstandings and promote more grounded, flexible interpretations of social interactions. By actively working to identify and challenge perceptual barriers, individuals can improve communication competence, reduce bias, and build more respectful and effective interpersonal relationships.

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4.5: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Perception is both a physiological and psychological process, deeply influenced by the body, mind, and social environment. Physical well-being, sensory capabilities, and cognitive functioning shape how individuals receive and interpret information from others. Aging, health conditions, or temporary stressors can compromise attention and judgment, while culture, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability shape the frameworks through which people view and categorize social interactions. These influences help explain why individuals from different backgrounds or circumstances may perceive the same situation in divergent ways.

Culture and social identity strongly impact perception. Membership in cultural groups, co-cultures, and social categories (including race, ethnicity, regional identity, gender, sexuality, and ability) provides shared beliefs and values that shape worldview and interpersonal interactions. These group memberships influence expectations, assumptions, and communication patterns, sometimes resulting in stereotypes, prejudices, or microaggressions when individuals are reduced to group representatives rather than seen as unique persons. Understanding these dynamics supports more conscious, inclusive, and accurate perception in everyday communication.

Cognitive frameworks such as schemas and scripts are central to how individuals process social information. Schemas organize knowledge and guide expectations, while scripts structure predictable sequences of social behavior. When over-relied upon, these cognitive shortcuts can lead to mindless communication, misunderstandings, and reinforcement of negative patterns such as stereotype threat and self-fulfilling prophecies. Awareness of these mental processes and maintaining flexibility in thinking helps individuals revise distorted perceptions, respond more adaptively, and reduce unintentional harm in social interactions.

Improving self-perception requires intentional reflection and critical evaluation of beliefs, social influences, and behavioral patterns. Individuals can counteract negative self-perceptions through self-reflection, self-affirmation, and supportive relationships that encourage growth rather than reinforce insecurity. Awareness of self-fulfilling prophecies and distorted thinking patterns, such as overcompensation, unrealistic expectations, or selective attention to feedback, allows for interventions that strengthen self-esteem, self-concept, and relational effectiveness.

Similarly, improving perception of others depends on deliberate effort to listen empathetically, recognize and reduce bias, and verify assumptions through perception checking. Awareness of cultural, identity-based, and societal influences, combined with openness to multiple perspectives, allows individuals to engage with greater accuracy and understanding. Integrating self-awareness with social awareness strengthens communication competence, reduces misperceptions, and promotes more equitable, empathetic, and effective interpersonal interactions.

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4.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Assumed similarity
- Attribution script
- Bias
- Discrimination
- Ethnicity
- External attributions
- Fundamental attribution error
- Halo effect
- Horn effect
- Implicit bias
- Internal attributions
- Interpretation
- Looking-glass self
- Microaggression
- Organizing
- Perception
- Perception checking
- Prejudice
- Primacy effect
- Prosocial self-presentation
- Punctuation
- Recency effect
- Reference groups
- Relational insecurity
- Schema
- Script
- Selecting
- Selective attention
- Selective distortion
- Self-discrepancy theory
- Self-efficacy
- Self-enhancement bias
- Self-esteem
- Self-fulfilling prophecies
- Self-presentation
- Self-serving bias
- Self-serving self-presentation
- Stereotype
- Stereotype threat
- Stereotyping

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4.7: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. How do rigid schemas influence both self-perception and perception of others in everyday interactions? Give a real-life example.
2. In what ways can socializing forces (family, media, culture) shape a person's self-concept without them realizing it?
3. Why are self-fulfilling prophecies so powerful in shaping outcomes in school, work, or relationships?
4. How do stereotypes function like cognitive shortcuts, and when do they become harmful?
5. What is the difference between empathetic listening and simply "hearing" someone? Why does that difference matter in reducing miscommunication?

Chapter Exercises

1. Schema Check Exercise
    1. Identify one belief you have about a group of people or a situation. Write down where that belief came from and one piece of evidence that challenges it.
2. Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Reflection
    1. Think of a time you expected something negative about yourself (e.g., failure, rejection). Describe how that expectation influenced your behavior and the outcome.
3. Perception Check Practice
    1. Write a recent interaction where you assumed someone's intent. Reframe it using this structure:
        1. "I noticed ___, I interpreted it as ___, but another possible explanation could be ___."
4. Empathetic Listening Drill
    1. In a conversation this week, your only goal is to summarize the other person's message before responding. Afterward, note how it changed the interaction.
5. Bias Awareness Log
    1. For one day, track moments where you made quick judgments about people. Note the trigger (appearance, tone, behavior) and whether you had enough information to justify that judgment.

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4.8: Alternative Descriptions for Chapter 4

Figure 4.2.1: The Looking Glass Self

The image shows a simple blue, human-like figure standing in the center and facing four tall mirror panels arranged in a semicircle. Each mirror represents how a different person in the individual's life might see them. Above the mirrors are labels identifying each perspective.

In the first mirror on the left, labeled "How my mom and dad see me," the reflected figure has a glowing halo above its head, suggesting that the parents see the person as good, kind, or morally upright.

In the second mirror, labeled "How my girlfriend sees me," the reflected figure has small white wings attached to its back, implying that the girlfriend sees the person as sweet, loving, or angelic.

In the third mirror, labeled "How my older brother sees me," the reflected figure appears mostly normal without special symbols, suggesting a more neutral or ordinary perception.

In the fourth mirror on the far right, labeled "How my ex-girlfriend sees me," the reflected figure has red devil horns on its head, implying a negative perception, such as being seen as troublesome or unkind.

The central figure is surrounded by these different reflections, visually representing the sociological idea that people form their sense of self partly by imagining how others perceive them. The contrasting symbols (halo, wings, neutral image, and devil horns) demonstrate how the same person may be viewed very differently depending on the relationship and perspective of the observer.

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5: LISTENING

Chapter Overview

Listening is one of the most frequently used yet least intentionally developed communication skills, serving as the foundation for understanding, collaboration, learning, and relationship building. Effective listening extends beyond simply hearing words by requiring active cognitive engagement, interpretation, evaluation, memory, and thoughtful response. Appreciating listening as a dynamic communication process provides a framework for understanding why it is essential across academic, professional, and personal settings while highlighting the significant influence it has on communication competence and relational success.

Developing stronger listening skills requires recognizing the barriers and habits that interfere with effective communication while cultivating more mindful, empathetic, and adaptive listening behaviors. Examining common obstacles, distorted listening practices, individual differences, cultural influences, and listening styles demonstrates that listening is a learnable skill rather than an innate ability. Through intentional practice, self-awareness, and compassionate engagement with others, individuals can improve their communication effectiveness and strengthen relationships across diverse contexts.



Figure 5.1: Attentive listening is a foundational communication skill that requires more than simply hearing words; it involves active engagement, understanding, empathy, and thoughtful response. The image illustrates how mindful attention to a speaker can support effective communication, collaboration, learning, and stronger interpersonal relationships. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Blmurch via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Define listening as an active communication process and distinguish it from hearing and obedience.
- Explain the cognitive stages of listening and evaluate the factors that influence effective message interpretation.
- Identify barriers and ineffective listening practices that reduce communication competence and relationship quality.
- Analyze how identity, culture, neurodivergence, and communication context shape listening behaviors and listening styles.
- Apply mindful, active, empathetic, and compassionate listening strategies to improve communication effectiveness across personal, academic, and professional contexts.

5.1: Listening (Re)Defined

5.2: Barriers to Listening

5.3: Ineffective and Distorted Listening Practices

5.4: Practicing Effective Listening
5.5: Chapter Review
5.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools
5.7: Discussion and Exercises
5.8: References

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5.1: Listening (Re)Defined

Overview

For both communication practitioners (that's all of us) and communication scholars (... also all of us!), listening is done a disservice. In general, the amount of time we spend considering and practicing our listening skills compared to the impact it has in our communication and relational success is extremely disproportionate. That is, listening is incredibly important and we never give it enough consideration. This chapter aims to correct that as best we can. In this page, we will start our expansive exploration of listening by providing clear definitions and descriptions of what listening is that makes it distinct from obeying as well hearing. Once we understand what listening is not, we'll expand our understanding of what listening is and how it applies to communication overall.

Learning Objectives

- Define listening and distinguish it from hearing and obedience.
- Explain the five stages of the listening process and their role in meaning-making.
- Describe how listeners actively construct and interpret verbal and nonverbal messages.
- Examine the importance of listening in academic, professional, and interpersonal relationships.
- Recognize listening as a learnable communication skill that requires intentional effort and practice.

What Listening is Not

Lets get two things out of the way first: what is listening not?

Listening is NOT Obeying

Think of the ways in which we might decry someone else's listening practices. The first example may be in a group meeting, perhaps in a classroom team meeting or a sports practice or huddle. You may chime in with some ideas, but the group decides to go in a different direction. As it happens, the results are less than ideal and in hindsight your ideas would have been useful. You might say something like "you should have listened to me!" or perhaps more exasperatedly "why doesn't anyone ever listen to me?!" Although if our goal for communication is intelligibility, we all understand what your intended meaning is. But for our purposes here, its important to point out that this is a bit of a misuse of the term "listen." It may be more accurate to say "why doesn't anyone ever respect me?!" or "you should have followed my direction." Its entirely possible that your team did listen to you, they just didn't do what you had suggested. They were listening, they just weren't obeying, and those are two different things.

Listening is NOT Hearing

Although many people use the terms interchangeably, hearing and listening are not the same thing. **Hearing** is an accidental and automatic brain response to sound that requires no effort. We are surrounded by sounds constantly such as airplanes overhead, lawn mowers running, dishes clattering in the kitchen. Most of the time, we hear these incidental noises without giving them much attention, and our brains filter them out unless they signal something important, like the ring of a cell phone. In other words, hearing is accidental, involuntary, and effortless.



Figure 5.1.1: Listening Vs. Hearing. (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0; Attias, Johnson, Goding, & Wrench via Stand Up, Speak Out)

Listening, on the other hand, is purposeful and requires concentration. It is focused, voluntary, and intentional. Listening means actively paying attention to verbal and nonverbal messages in order to understand meaning. Unlike hearing, listening demands motivation and effort. For example, when you listen closely to a friend share their feelings, or when you focus during a lecture, you are engaging in active listening. Because listening is not automatic, it can vary in quality.

To take this differentiation further, hearing is a physiological phenomenon of processing sound waves as they move through our ear canals, the ear drum, the ossicles, the cochlea, and then to our brains, meaning it is a function of our bodies *should our bodies be able to do so*. Not every body is capable of hearing. Listening, on the other hand, is a cognitive process, in which our minds receive and process meaning from all symbolic messages. Every body is capable of listening, even those that are not capable of hearing. Later in this chapter, we will explore why we sometimes fail to listen as effectively as we might be able to and how we can strengthen our ability to become active, critical listeners. But make no mistake: not everyone can hear, but everyone can listen.

What Listening Is

At first, listening may seem easy to define, but it is often more complex than we think. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines listening as “to pay attention to sound, to hear something with thoughtful attention, to be alert to catch an expected sound” (*Listen*, 2020, n.p.). While useful, this definition oversimplifies listening because it does not fully include verbal and nonverbal dimensions or the active, cognitive processes involved. So lets move beyond our casual understanding and the dictionary definition and into a more expansive communication definition.

Towards a Definition of Listening

Communication scholars have long debated how to define listening. Some emphasize the listener’s role in making interaction effective, while others highlight the importance of both verbal and nonverbal communication (Barker and Fitch-Hauser, 1986; Glenn, 1989; Wolvin and Coakley, 1996; Worthington and Bodie, 2018). Major communication organizations have also provided definitions. The International Listening Association (ILA, 1995) defines listening as “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.” Similarly, the National Communication Association (1998) describes listening as a process that includes comprehension, evaluation, empathy, and appreciation.

Fassett, Warren, & Nainby (2018) offer a beautifully simple definition of Listening in their book Communication: A Critical/Cultural Introduction. They call listening "meeting another in the moment in the active and engaged spirit of dialogue." Although it does leave us to wonder what they mean by "engaged spirit of dialogue." But with that in mind, our working definition of **listening** is "the active and engaged process of creatively and empathically generating meaning in collaboration with others."

Definition: Listening

Listening is the active and engaged process of creatively and empathically generating meaning in collaboration with others.

Listening is a Process

Listening is not a single act but a complex process that involves multiple components working together. As Figure 5.1.1 illustrates, this varied multi-part process involving several stages.... can happen in a nanosecond. Communication researchers also describe five major stages: receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding (Wolvin and Coakley, 1996). Each stage is active and interconnected, shaping how we interpret and respond to messages in both personal and professional contexts.

(opens in new window)
Stages of Listening. Details in text.

Figure 5.1.2: Stages of Listening: Recieving, Understanding, Remembering, Evaluating, Responding (CC BY NC SA; Hollingsworth, Linsenmeyer, Elwood, Hanrahan, & Walker, edited by Weinland et al. via OKS Library)

Receiving

The first step of the listening process is **receiving**, also called perception. At this stage, listeners become aware of tremendous amounts of symbolic stimuli and select cues to focus on. For example, when you walk into a party, you may hear background music, laughter, and clinking glasses, smells from food and drinks, you might see clothing and costumes and decorations, but you instinctively tune in to your friends' voices. This selective focus allows you to absorb the conversation while filtering out irrelevant noise. Without this ability, communication would be overwhelming, as every symbol and stimuli would compete equally for your attention.

Understanding

The second step is **understanding**, which involves attending to and making sense of the symbolic message. This stage is where cultural background and prior knowledge influence interpretation. For instance, a coach telling an athlete to "push harder" may be understood as encouragement by one person but as criticism by another. Research shows that listeners use both context and prior experiences to interpret meaning accurately (Imhof, 2008).

In addition, meaning is created by placing messages into context, and it requires active concentration. For instance, putting away your phone and telling a colleague, "Go ahead, I'm listening," signals intentional focus. Interpretation also occurs at this stage, where listeners assign meaning based on both verbal and nonverbal cues. Ambiguous messages can complicate understanding. If a supervisor says, "We should meet sometime next week," without specifying a day or time, the message can be interpreted in multiple ways. Listening fidelity, the degree to which the listener's understanding matches the speaker's intended meaning, is essential to effective communication (Mulanax and Powers, 2001; Powers and Bodie, 2003).

Remembering

Remembering refers to the ability to retain information after receiving and understanding it. This step is essential for learning and decision-making. For example, a healthcare worker must remember a patient's symptoms to provide proper care. Memory strategies, such as taking notes or repeating information, help reinforce listening accuracy. Studies indicate that memory plays a central role in academic and workplace listening, where retaining details is often linked to success (Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, and Cooper, 2008).

In addition, this step demonstrates that the listener has internalized the message and can recall it later. However, memory is selective, and what people recall may differ from what was originally stated (Tyagi, 2013). Short term memory processes immediate information, such as recalling points from a lecture, but it can fade quickly, often within 30 seconds if not reinforced. Long-term memory allows for storage over weeks, months, or years, and stronger memories are easier to retrieve. For example, many people vividly remember where they were during major historical events like September 11, 2001 or January 6, 2021. In

contrast, they may struggle to remember what they had for lunch last week. Wolvin and Coakley (1996) note that the most common reason for forgetting is that the message was never fully learned in the first place.

Evaluating

Evaluating is the stage where listeners assess the message and the messenger to arrive at a value judgment or emotional reaction to the message. At this point, listeners decide how much they agree with the speaker or whether the information is useful. For example, while listening to a political debate, you might evaluate whether a candidate's arguments are supported by evidence or shaped by bias. Critical evaluation helps listeners separate facts from opinions and avoid misinterpretation. Research shows that careful evaluation leads to more accurate communication and decision-making (Burbules and Rice, 1991).

Responding

Responding is the final stage, where listeners provide feedback through verbal and nonverbal signals. This stage either demonstrates attentiveness and understanding or reveals confusion. Listeners often use backchannel cues such as "uh-huh," "right," or nodding their heads to indicate they are following along. Nonverbal signals like eye contact, leaning forward, or smiling can also encourage the speaker to continue. For example, in a classroom discussion, students who ask clarifying questions or paraphrase a teacher's point show they are actively engaged. Responding completes the listening process by confirming the exchange of meaning.

Listening, then, is not a passive act but a dynamic process that requires attention and effort. By becoming aware of each stage, individuals can strengthen their listening skills, leading to better relationships, learning, and communication.

The Importance of Listening

Listening is important because it is the communication skill we use most often in our daily lives. In one of the earliest studies on communication, Rankin (1926) found that adults spend about 42% of their communication time listening, compared with 32% speaking. More recent studies confirm that people spend at least half their day listening, whether to other people or to media (Janusik and Wolvin, 2009).

Listening also matters because it helps us avoid misunderstandings. If you misinterpret a friend's request, a teacher's assignment, or a supervisor's instruction, your response may be ineffective. Yet many of us sometimes "fake" listening by nodding along, rehearsing responses instead of paying attention, or drifting in and out of conversations.

Research has shown that listening affects almost every type of interpersonal relationship. For example, listening plays an important role in how students learn from teachers (Imhof, 2008), how friends connect (Bodie, 2012), how romantic partners maintain healthy relationships (Hoskins, Woszidlo, and Kunkel, 2016), and how employees interact with supervisors (Kristinsson, Jonsdottir, and Snorrason, 2019). Strong listening improves trust, reduces conflict, and deepens understanding across personal, academic, and professional contexts.

As mentioned prior, listening is more than simply hearing words, it is an active process of understanding, interpreting, and responding. Strong listening skills are essential for success in many areas of life, from the classroom to the workplace to personal relationships. Scholars argue that listening is the most frequently used communication skill, yet also the one most often taken for granted (Brownell, 2012). Below, we explore the importance of listening across four key areas: academic success, professional benefits, personal benefits, and public speaking.

Academic Success

In academic settings, listening is crucial for learning and achievement. Research has shown that students spend nearly half of their communication time listening, making it the most dominant skill in education (Wolvin and Coakley, 1996). For example, when a student listens carefully to a lecture or class discussion, they are better able to retain and apply knowledge on exams and assignments. Active listening strategies such as note taking, asking clarifying questions, and summarizing what was heard, help students engage more deeply with course material.

Furthermore, studies show a link between listening skills and GPA. Imhof and Janusik (2006) found that students with stronger listening abilities reported higher academic performance. In collaborative classroom environments, listening also builds respect

among peers, as students who listen attentively to others' ideas contribute to more productive group projects and discussions.

Professional Benefits

Listening is one of the most valued skills in the workplace. Employers consistently rank oral and listening skills among the most sought-after competencies in employees. In professional contexts, listening enables employees to understand instructions, resolve conflicts, and provide better customer service. For example, a healthcare worker who listens closely to a patient's symptoms is more likely to deliver accurate and empathetic care. Similarly, managers who listen actively to their teams foster trust, improve morale, and increase productivity. Research also suggests that effective listening is positively related to leadership effectiveness, with leaders who listen well being rated higher by their employees (Brownell, 2012).

Personal Benefits

Listening is equally important in personal relationships, where it helps build trust, empathy, and connection. Poor listening can create misunderstandings, while attentive listening strengthens bonds. For example, when a friend shares a problem, being fully present and listening without interrupting communicates care and support.

Research shows that active listening contributes to relationship satisfaction. Bodie et al. (2012) found that people perceive greater relational closeness when their partners demonstrate strong listening behaviors. Listening also enhances emotional intelligence, helping individuals manage conflicts more effectively and respond to others with empathy. In everyday life, good listening skills improve interactions with family, friends, and communities, making relationships more meaningful and resilient.

Listening is a complex phenomenon that we engage en constatnly throughout our day that has tremendous impact on our personal, professional, romantic, and familial relationships. The quality of our listening skills directly reflects and influences the quality of our relationships and lives. We should continue to understand how best to develop this skill.

Attributions

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5.2: Barriers to Listening

Overview

We have established that listening is a taken-for-granted communication phenomenon that has tremendous impact and importance in our relationships and our lives. But if it is something so central to our relationships and so frequent in our experiences, why then are we not better at it? Why aren't we all just the most amazing listeners all of the time? On this page, we will unpack that, by first understanding the variety of barriers that stand between us and exceptional listening practices, and then describing several common behaviors we engage in that seem like good and effective listening, but are certainly not so.

Learning Objectives

- Identify common internal and external barriers that reduce listening effectiveness.
- Explain how information overload, complexity, and speech–thought differentials affect comprehension.
- Examine how prejudice and unconscious bias influence listening behaviors.
- Evaluate the effects of environmental distractions and listener fatigue on communication.
- Apply strategies for minimizing listening barriers through mindful and intentional listening practices.

Understanding Barriers for Better Listening

Now that we know that listening is an active and cognitive process—it is a skill that we must engage—we can begin understand why we don't do it all the time. Lets 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. Or what if a speaker condenses so many statistics into the presentation that you cannot keep track of all the numbers? Or if a friend of yours returns home for the summer after some time away at college studying abroad, and they start giving you a rapid fire rundown of all the events that have happened since they were gone. You might become overwhelmed and you'll probably find yourself tuning out at some point. That's information overload.

Similar to information overload is **information complexity,** which occurs when the message being communicated is highly detailed, technical, dense, or layered with advanced concepts that are all necessary to process the intended meaning of the message. I distinctly remember my time a community college advanced calculus class. It was my fourth math class and I was honestly just taking it because I was good at math and enjoyed studying it. However, for reasons I cannot remember I had missed two class meetings and by the time I rejoined the class, there was a whole set of vernacular and vocabulary that I had missed, but the instructor was operating under the assumption we all understood. On that first day back, I was spending so much cognitive energy to process and understand the language being used on the class days that I had missed that I wasn't effectively listening to the lecture of the new concepts we were learning today. It became so complex in my mind that I eventually just shut down and stopped listening for that lecture. In hindsight, I probably should have just raised my hand and asked for clarification.

To cope with information overload or information complexity, 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.

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. 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.

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. When this happens, we may stop effectively listening to someone because we are convinced we already know what they are going to say. 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?

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 noise**

In addition to internal distractions, we also experience **external noise** 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.

Fatigue (or Lack of Effort)

One of the most common challenges for both speakers and listeners is attention span. A person can only maintain focused

attention for a limited time. Neil Postman (1985) argued that modern audiences who are conditioned by television and, more recently, digital media, struggle with sustained attention. Nicholas Carr (2010) echoes this concern, suggesting that frequent internet use encourages surface level scanning rather than deep listening.

This all makes sense when we understand listening to be a cognitive process that must be *actively engaged*. Effective listening takes focused attention that we must opt into and commit to. All of this language (active engaging process) describes something that takes work, and work takes energy, and energy is a renewable but finite resource for many of us. There are two ways of understanding how this becomes a barrier to communication, depending on the circumstances. The first is that we have been engaging in this work for so long that we simply run out of energy. We all have a threshold to which we can engage in any activity, and when we hit that threshold we just simply cannot do it anymore. We are simply too fatigued. However, it is also possible that we are simply not putting in the effort. We have the energy, we are just choosing not to expend it on the active process of effective listening. This can be due to any of the barriers mentioned above, or perhaps a disconcerting level of apathy.

Remember that endurance athletes like ultra-marathoners were not born with the ability to run over 100km (approximately 62 miles) without stopping, but developed the skill slowly over time. It starts by running one lap around a track (400m), then two laps, then four laps (1600m), then a 5K (5 kilometer) race, then a 10K, then a half-marathon (21K), then a full marathon (42K), then ultra-marathons beyond that. Exploration of the connection between attention span in an era of algorithmically tailored short-form media is ongoing, but initial studies do not look good: attention spans are dropping. But much like the endurance athlete, we can train ourselves to be more mindful and focused for longer durations in our listening practices. And given the significant impact listening has to the quality of our relationships, it would behoove us to condition our minds to listen for longer.

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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5.3: Ineffective and Distorted Listening Practices

Overview

There are a multitude of barriers to effective listening, such as internal and external noise, lack of effort or fatigue, information overload or complexity, among others. Whenever we run up against a barrier to effective listening without having trained or prepared ourselves to overcome that barrier, we often fall into a pattern of behavior that is known as an **ineffective** or **distorted listening practice.** These are all communication behaviors that might appear or seem to be listening, but are falling far short of our listening potential and can be harmful to our communication competence in the short term and our relationship satisfaction in the long term. This page discusses several of these distorted listening practices and offers some guidance to avoid them.

Learning Objectives

- Identify common ineffective listening practices and distinguish them from effective listening behaviors.
- Explain how distorted listening habits negatively affect interpersonal communication and relationships.
- Analyze the role of culture, assumptions, and emotional reactions in shaping ineffective listening practices.
- Evaluate the ethical and relational consequences of interrupting, eavesdropping, and other harmful listening behaviors.
- Develop greater self-awareness of personal listening habits and strategies for replacing ineffective behaviors with more constructive listening practices.

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. However, communication ethics calls on us to be mindful of our impact, not only our intent. So even though we may have had benevolent intent while pseudo-listening, the negative consequences are still real and our responsibility to correct.

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. Students may fall into pseudo-listening when an instructor is lecturing, but the moment the instructor says "this will be on the next test!" suddenly every student is alert and focused. 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 the name of one of your family members. 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.

Selective listening is arguably the distorted listening practice that is most the antithesis of truly effective listening. As we'll discuss further in the next chapter, truly effective listening involves an empathetic receiving of the information the other person is offering. If we are striving to be the greatest listeners possible in order to be a positive force in all of our relationships, then we must mindfully position ourselves as desiring whatever new information the other person has to offer us. We must put ourselves in a state of mind that is hoping for and searching for the shared newness of perception that comes with listening to anyone. Selective listening, on the other hand, puts us in a default position of "I already know what is important and what is not," which effectively eliminates the possibility that the other person will have something new or valuable to share. Selective listening is a common distorted listening practice, and is arguably the true opposite of effective listening.

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 they found Toni's calendar and looked at what they had planned for the next few weekends. Crystal was able to see that Toni 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."
>
> Toni: "Well, 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?"
>
> Toni: "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?"
>
> Toni: "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: "Toni, 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 had a already perceived that Toni was lying and that led to aggressive listening on Crystal's part. Crystal's perception put them into a mode of attack. Little did Crystal know that Toni was meeting with FS Catering Company to plan Crystal's surprise birthday party. Instead, Crystal's aggressive listening style potentially had detrimental effects on their relationship with Toni. Furthermore, this may be a manipulative behavior known as a secret test, which we will discuss more in our chapter on the Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication. In any case, asking clarifying questions before making assumptions would have been more productive, and both Crystal and Toni might have felt better about the exchange and the outcome.

Narcissistic Listening



Figure 5.3.1: Narcissistic Personality Disorder by Henry T. McLin on Flickr is licensed CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0

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."

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.At times, this type of response is not done maliciously. A conversation may genuinely remind you of something you have done that is similar, and sharing similarities is an important response to self-disclosure in an effort to build relationship connections. So the mere act of talking about ourselves is *not* narcissistic listening.

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 50,000 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

It's important to note that every message has layers of meaning in just the single message. One utterance or one gesture can have a direct definition meaning, a slang or "in-group" meaning, meaning that construct our relationship to each other, meaning that reinforces cultural teachings, and more. There are layers and depth to every message and a multitude of histories and context clues needed to unpack all of it.

Often referred to as “literal listening,” **insensitive listening** focuses only on the content level of meaning exclusively. Insensitive listeners do not explore the nonverbal cues that accompany the message, or the emotional resonance of what is being communicated, etc. 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, since there is more meaning in a message than simply information being transmitted. 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.

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.

If someone comes from a high-context culture where indicators of listening mean that we only nod as a response to our parents, rather than commenting back, and perhaps also do not make direct eye contact when listening because at times that could appear to be disrespectful. 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 I remember learning as a child was not to interrupt. It was so important to my parents to instill proper manners that we developed a code for when I wanted to tell them something if we were talking to other people, either on the phone or in person. I was to put my hand on their arm or leg, depending on how tall I was at the time. This served as a nonverbal acknowledgment that they were aware that I had something to say and then during a break in the conversation would ask, "What did you want to tell me?" Sometimes our hands remained in the same place for several long minutes!

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. I remember a time seeing a concert at the Greek Theater in Berkeley, CA, a venue that holds about 8,000 people. During a particularly quiet and emotional performance by the band, I heard a group of people about 50 feet from the stage shout something I couldn't quite hear. Then they repeated it louder, this time with dozens of lights from phones shining up. They then shouted a third time with so many people that they fully interrupted the show and the artist stopped the song. It turned out there was a medical emergency in the middle of the crowd and they needed help. The singer, with their microphone and high vantage point, called for aid and directed services to the patron in need. 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 5.3.2: Eavesdropping By A. Strakey on Flickr is licensed CC-BY-ND 2.0

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. Author David Sedaris has a quote, "when you read someone's diary, you get what you deserve." It is natural and advisable that not every single person knows everything about us. We are not supposed to fully know all the things in someone else's head. Private thoughts and private conversations are not always conniving and sinister, sometimes they are just not for you. 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 you may learn things you wish you hadn't known, and also others could easily be angry with you.

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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5.4: Practicing Effective Listening

Overview

We have so far discussed that listening is a crucial part of the communication process, and that listening itself is a complex cognitive process. Becasue listening is such a complex process, there are many barriers to success and many ways in which it can go awry. But also because it is so crucial in the communication process (and therefore crucial to creating and maintaining effective relationships), it is important that we improve our listening skills. On this page, we will explore various ways of improving both our understanding of listening as a phenomenon and our skills as listeners.

Learning Objectives

- Explain how identity, culture, and neurodivergence influence listening tendencies and communication behaviors.
- Differentiate among various listening styles and identify contexts in which each is most appropriate.
- Describe the principles of compassionate critical listening and its role in effective communication.
- Apply active listening strategies, including mindfulness, paraphrasing, questioning, and constructive feedback.
- Develop empathetic listening practices that foster understanding, respect, and stronger interpersonal relationships.

Identity and Culture Effect Listening

In previous sections, we have discussed the ways in which our identities are a social construct: over our lifetimes, we learn who we are expected to be, then to greater or lesser extents perform to those expectations. This process of social constructing identities applies to many primary identities, particularly in this case identities like gender and culture, which in turn influences the behaviors exhibited by those identities. For example, many US American women are socialized to be more empathic with their listening practices and listen to build rapport and bonds with others, while US American men are socialized to be more action-oriented and listen for information to find solutions to problems. The social construction of identities reinforces certain social behaviors; we are socially rewarded for aligning our behaviors with the expectations of our identities. The result is that many of us have a predisposition towards certain communication behaviors that align with our identities, and this is true of listening as well.

Neurodivergence has an effect on our listening practices as well. Remember that neurodivergence refers to any structured, consistent way that brains work differently for a group of people than they do for the majority of others. Common examples include autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, and generalized anxiety disorder. Listening is a cognitive process. Remember that the middle three steps of the listening process are understanding, remembering, and evaluating. Depending on the specific neurodivergence and the spectrum or range to which that neurodivergence is experienced, the listening process will be effected. A neurodivergent person may have a predisposition to focusing on a message for long periods of time, but only one message at a time. Or perhaps be able to process lots of disparate information at once, but not for long periods of time. Perhaps a predisposition to being able to analyze information with high rationality, or perhaps a disposition to feel greatly empathetic. The particular predispositions as a result of neurodivergence can have an effect on listening.

However, in both instances—identity and neurodivergence—these primary elements of our self create a *predisposition* towards particular listening practices. Over time, we develop listening habits and practices that align with either the natural tendencies of our neurotype or the positively reinforced behaviors of our cultural and social identities. Understanding our predispositions to listening is important and informative for mindful reflection of who we are and what we are doing and why. But make no mistake, these predispositions are not *prescriptive or determinate*. It is not that a person with ADHD *cannot* focus and listen for extended periods of time, its just that it is naturally far more challenging for them than a neurotypical person. It is not that a US American man *cannot* listen empathically and respond emotionally, its just that they have typically not practiced it. This creates a dialectic tension in that two opposing things become true at the same time: it would be morally and ethically good to extend grace and understanding to ourselves and others when our predispositions create listening thresholds and struggles, while at the same time always striving to be the best listener that the specific context we are in asks of us.

Types of Listening

As we should know by now in our exploration of communication, context is everything but context is dynamic. The shifting nature of the situation we are ever present will shift the communications skills needed. As the context changes and shifts, so should our approach to listening. Lets take a brief tour of some listening styles that may be appropriate depending on the context we are in.

Action-Oriented

Action-Oriented listening values clear, organized, and error-free messages. Typically, **action-oriented listening** engages in communication as though they are organizing their "action" list to make things happen, like a builder or engineer. Action-oriented listening style is commonly used when receiving instruction (i.e., What are the directions? What do I need to do next? When's my next deadline? etc.). However, with interpersonal relationships, an action-oriented listener is likely thinking "What can I *do* about this?" and not necessarily connecting with the other person's emotions. This style contrasts that of a people-oriented listener. It can be highly beneficial in task-oriented situations, such as the workplace, but has different effects on interpersonal relationships. Action-oriented listening is very appropriate when coming to the end of a meeting and decisions need to be made about what steps must be taken next, but is much less appropriate during emotional self-disclosure or other social bonding.

Content-Oriented

Content-oriented listening (sometimes called informational listening) aims to hear all of the information being presented before forming any sort of judgment. Content-oriented listening is constantly evaluating and analyzing the information received. Common professions for the content-oriented listener are politicians, judges, and academics, particularly those in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. As an example, you are likely using content-oriented listening if you enjoy hearing presidential debates to evaluate your political views. In interpersonal relationships, content-oriented listening aims to "hear out" the other person, ask for elaboration, details, and clarifications in an objective manner, and may ask potentially probing follow-up questions to understand what is happening as deeply as they can. To help exemplify, consider the different types of podcasts someone might listen to. Content-oriented listening is appropriate when listening to a news podcast, but we can change our listening style when listening to a humorous or personal-story podcast.

Time-Oriented

Time-oriented listening is used typically when one or both communicators is acting within a tight window of a schedule in order to accomplish goals**.** When you are communicating with someone, you want the person to get to the point of their story quickly while you are checking the clock to be sure to make your next appointment on time or get going on your next task. If you are using time-oriented listening, you might even avoid eye contact, or interrupt to move the conversation along and end it promptly. As a result, this type of listening can appear insensitive or uncaring toward others. A prime example of a time-oriented listening is an emergency room doctor who wants you to get to the point of the matter quickly so they can do a proper diagnosis before moving on to the next patient. They are bound to serve patients in rapid succession due to the time-sensitive climate of an emergency room. To some, this approach may come off as uncaring, although that is not necessarily how the doctor feels.

Inspirational Listening

Inspirational listening is used when our disposition is toward being moved or changed in some way. We may find ourselves seeking out guidance or advice from respected people around us, either in our immediate social circle (like a relative or a teachers) or from parasocial forms or mass media forms (inspirational leaders, motivational speakers or faith teachers). If our personal orientation in this context is seeking motivation, then we will likely engage in inspirational listening, which is characterized by listening for the motivation we are seeking.

Appreciative Listening

Sometimes, we listen just because its nice and it feels good. Appreciative listening (sometimes called listening for pleasure) is most often deployed when engaging in art, like music, television, or movies. Appreciative listening is characterized by the gratitude of sharing in this experience. We might enjoy sitting around a table with friends and family, listening to stories and playing games. We might listen to audiobooks or comedy specials just to enjoy the stories told. Sometimes we listen just to enjoy the connection it creates.

People-Oriented

People-oriented listening (or empathic listening or listening to support others) tunes in to people's emotions, feelings, and moods (Bodie & Worthington, 70). This listening style is geared towards relationship building when listening to someone communicate with you, often being considered the type of person who will "lend an ear." People-oriented listening is characterized by an openness and willingness to find common interests with the other person and listen to others without judgment. People-oriented listening allows emotional space for people to express themselves, which is particularly valuable in interpersonal relationships.

For example, if your significant other comes home in a bad mood, venting to you about their challenging workday and lack of sleep, you might respond with "I'm so sorry you had a bad day. I can see how frustrating that situation is for you. I know when I haven't had enough sleep, everything seems ten times as frustrating, too. Tell me more about what's going on. How are you feeling?" This is an empathetic response, typical of a people-oriented listener, that demonstrates compassion and understanding without judgment.

Combining Styles

People tend to have a predisposition to a dominant listening style; however, most research indicates that people will use at least two different listening styles. That being said, people are not typically comfortable using all styles. For example, a person who is predominantly a content-oriented listener but also people-oriented would want to hear everything out and take time to analyze the details while acknowledging other people's feelings or challenges with empathetic language. That same person is likely not comfortable as an action-oriented or time-oriented listener. Likewise, an action-oriented listener who also has time-oriented tendencies will usually shy away from people-oriented or content-oriented listening styles. That being said... this is why you're taking this class and reading this book. Different combinations of listening styles can exist within each person and we all have the capacity to expand our listening skills. Once you identify your dominant listening style(s), you can create awareness around how and why you listen the way you do and work to make adjustments where necessary to improve your listening skills.

Towards Compassionate Critical Listening

Fassett, Warren, & Nainby (2018) discuss what they call **compassionate critical listening.** Their definition of compassionate critical listening is "a mode of engagement with a communicator that is reflective of the conditions that affect our ability to listen, even as we make an honest and generous effort to hear others in their true complexity." There is a certain ideal beauty behind this definition. They discuss the phenomenon of **listening as a stance:** the way we listen to different communicators is indicative of our position in relation to those we are listening to. Do we listen to children the same way we listen to adults? Do we listen to feminine folks the same way we listen to masculine folks? Do we listen to accented speakers with the same empathy as native speakers? Who we listen to and how we listen to them indicates our stance towards different people and different topics. To become more critical in our listening skills, we need to practice mindful awareness of our listening practice and be thoughtful of what how we are listening and what we are gaining through our listening practice. To become more compassionate in our listening skills, we must aim to de-center ourselves in the communication and be empathetic with those we are communicating with. There are several key elements to build towards compassionate critical listening:

Mindfulness

Julia T Wood (2020) defines mindfullness simply as "being fully present in the moment." Its a concept borrowed from Buddhism that is simple to understand but much more challenging to practice, and is crucial for effective listening. Wood goes on to describe miindfulness as "one of the highest compliments we can pay to others because it conveys that the relationship matters to us." Mindfulness is a present awareness of what is happening right now, both in our external situation around us (where we are and who we are communicating with) and also our internal situation (preoccupations, prejudgment, monopolizing, etc.). Mindfulness requires commitment another person and to the integrity of the communication process that builds the connection between ourselves and the other person. Its the crucial first step towards improving our communication practices.

Active

While practicing our mindfulness to understand and reflect upon our communication behaviors in the context we are in, we must always choose to expend the effort to engage in positive and affirming listening practices. This is what is commonly known as

being an active listener. Active listening often involves deliberate and intentional behavioral choices:

- Eliminate distraction: Turn off your phone, mute notifications, and remove physical or mental distractions when listening to someone. This demonstrates respect and allows you to focus on the speaker's message.
- Use verbal and nonverbal feedback: Active listening involves both verbal cues (e.g., "I see," "Tell me more") and nonverbal behaviors like nodding, open posture, and appropriate eye contact (Bodie et al., 2012).
- Paraphrase and repeat: Repeat back what you heard in your own words to confirm understanding. For example, "It sounds like you're overwhelmed with school and work. Is that right?"
- Ask sophisticated questions: These are questions that reflect understanding while seeking clarification. For example, "I hear you saying that the meeting didn't go well. Was that because of the team's feedback or something else?"
- Provide constructive feedback: Focus on specific behaviors or ideas rather than personal criticism. Offer feedback that is respectful, balanced, and includes clear suggestions for improvement. For example, "Your introduction grabbed my attention. Slowing down during your main points would make your message even clearer."
- Listen to understand before evaluating: Before offering feedback or disagreeing, suspend judgement and make sure you fully understand the speaker's message. Ask clarifying questions if needed so your response is accurate, fair, and helpful.
- Accept feedback openly: Listen to feedback without becoming defensive, ask follow-up questions when appropriate, and use constructive suggestions as opportunities to improve your communication skills.

Empathy

Empathy is an active, relational practice that involves understanding another person's perspective and emotionally connecting with their felt experience, without imposing judgment, offering unsolicited advice, or centering oneself. In dominant US culture, we have a predisposition to listen in order to give advice or reassurance and then to follow-up by explaining our own positions or feelings. Empathy, on the other hand, requires us to fucus full attention on the other person's message. In the book Nonviolent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg (2015), he states that "intellectual understanding of a problem blocks the kind of presence that empathy requires. When we are thinking about people's words and listening to how they connect to ourselves, we are looking at people, not with them." The presence that empathy requires is not easy to maintain. In order to be empathetic in our listening, we must view every interaction with the wonder of a child experiencing the world anew.

To come back to Fassett, Warren, & Nainby (2018):

> Taking the stance of compassionate critical listeners is an opportunity to enact change. Though we may not immediately know or recognize the change our practices as listeners enact, we can take on the stance of compassionate critical listeners with a specific goal in mind. The goal that informs our stance of compassionate cortical listening is **to listen to others as if we might learn something.**

Listen mindfully. Listen actively. Listen empathically. And we just might learn something.

Attributions

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5.5: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Listening is presented as an intentional, active communication process that differs fundamentally from hearing and obedience. Rather than passively receiving sounds, effective listeners collaborate in constructing meaning through receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. Because listening is central to nearly every communication interaction, it plays a critical role in learning, workplace effectiveness, interpersonal relationships, and overall communication competence.

Although listening is essential, numerous barriers frequently interfere with its effectiveness. Information overload, message complexity, differences between speaking and thinking speeds, unconscious prejudice, environmental distractions, technological interruptions, fatigue, and lack of effort all reduce the listener's ability to accurately interpret messages. Recognizing these barriers allows individuals to develop practical strategies that improve attention, comprehension, and engagement.

In addition to external and internal barriers, people often develop ineffective listening habits that weaken communication and relationships. Behaviors such as pseudo-listening, selective listening, defensive listening, aggressive listening, narcissistic listening, insensitive listening, interrupting, and eavesdropping may appear to involve listening but ultimately distort meaning, reduce trust, and hinder meaningful interpersonal connection. Greater self-awareness allows communicators to recognize these patterns and intentionally replace them with healthier listening behaviors.

Listening is also influenced by individual identities, cultural backgrounds, neurodivergence, and the demands of different communication contexts. Because communication situations vary considerably, effective listeners adapt their listening styles to meet changing relational, informational, emotional, and task-oriented needs. Understanding personal listening predispositions creates opportunities to intentionally expand one's communication skills rather than becoming limited by habitual behaviors.

Strong listening ultimately requires mindfulness, active engagement, empathy, and a willingness to learn from others. Compassionate critical listening encourages communicators to remain fully present, suspend premature judgment, ask thoughtful questions, provide supportive feedback, and seek genuine understanding before evaluation. Developing these practices strengthens communication competence while fostering more respectful, collaborative, and meaningful relationships.

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5.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Action-oriented listening
- Aggressive listening
- Compassionate critical listening
- Content-oriented listening
- Defensive listening
- Distorted listening practices
- Eavesdropping
- Empathy
- Evaluating
- External noise
- Hearing
- Information complexity
- Information overload
- Insensitive listening
- Internal noise
- Interrupting
- Listening
- Mental lag
- Narcissistic listening
- People-oriented listening
- Prejudgment
- Pseudo-listening
- Receiving
- Remembering
- Responding
- Selective listening
- Shift response
- Time-oriented listening
- Understanding

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5.7: Discussion and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. How does understanding the difference between hearing, listening, and obeying change the way you think about communication? Provide an example of a situation where someone may have listened but did not agree or act on what was said.
2. Which listening barrier (information overload, speech–thought differences, prejudging, distractions, or fatigue) do you experience most often, and how does it affect your ability to understand others? What strategies could you use to reduce its impact?
3. Why do ineffective listening practices such as pseudo-listening, defensive listening, or selective listening often occur even when people have good intentions? How can awareness of these behaviors help improve communication?
4. How do identity, culture, and personal experiences influence the way people listen and interpret messages? Discuss how recognizing these influences can help communicators become more effective listeners.
5. What does compassionate critical listening require from a communicator beyond simply paying attention? How might mindfulness, active listening, and empathy change the quality of conversations and relationships?

Chapter Exercises

1. Listening vs. Hearing Reflection
    1. For one day, pay attention to moments when you hear sounds versus moments when you intentionally listen to messages. Record three examples of each and reflect on:
        1. What made the experience hearing rather than listening?
        2. What additional effort was required when you were actively listening?
        3. How did intentional listening affect your understanding of the message?
2. Listening Barrier Assessment
    1. Identify the listening barriers that most commonly affect you by reflecting on recent conversations in academic, professional, or personal settings. Complete the following:
        1. Identify three situations where your listening was limited by a barrier.
        2. Describe the barrier involved (e.g., distraction, fatigue, information overload, prejudgment).
        3. Explain what you could have done differently to improve your listening effectiveness.
3. Ineffective Listening Self-Audit
    1. Track your listening behaviors for one week and identify moments when you engaged in an ineffective listening practice. For each example, record:
        1. The situation and people involved.
        2. The listening behavior you demonstrated (e.g., pseudo-listening, interrupting, selective listening, defensive listening).
        3. How the behavior affected the interaction.
        4. One alternative response that would have demonstrated more effective listening.
4. Listening Style Exploration
    1. Determine your dominant listening style by reflecting on how you typically respond in different communication situations. Consider:
        1. Do you tend to focus on solutions, emotions, details, deadlines, motivation, or enjoyment?
        2. Which listening style(s) feel most natural to you?
        3. Which style(s) are more challenging?
        4. Identify one situation where adapting your listening style could improve communication.
5. Compassionate Critical Listening Practice
    1. Have a conversation with someone whose perspective differs from your own. Your goal is not to debate or persuade, but to practice compassionate critical listening. During the conversation:
        1. Avoid interrupting or preparing your response while the other person is speaking.
        2. Ask at least three questions designed to better understand their perspective.
        3. Paraphrase what you heard before sharing your own thoughts.
    2. Reflect afterward:
        1. What did you learn about the other person?

2. What assumptions did you have to set aside?
3. How did listening first affect the quality of the conversation?

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5.8: References

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6: VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Chapter Overview

Language is a central force in interpersonal communication that does far more than simply transmit information. It is used to express observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs while also shaping identity, relationships, and social reality. Language is expressive, powerful, relational, dynamic, and sometimes playful, and everyday choices in wording and communication style influence meaning and the development of relationships over time. The way people speak and select words has a significant impact on how messages are interpreted in both personal and professional contexts.

Language is also shaped by social and cultural contexts that influence how meaning is created and understood. Social norms, conversational structures, and social roles guide interaction, while culture shapes communication styles, expectations, and interpretations. Differences in accents, dialects, and cultural practices can affect understanding and interpersonal impressions. Communication barriers such as apprehension, ethnocentrism, and bias can interfere with effectiveness, while communication competence develops through practice, awareness, and skills like cultural empathy and responsible language use.



Figure 6.1: A public speaker addresses an audience, illustrating how language functions as a powerful interpersonal tool that shapes meaning, identity, and relationships. The image reflects how communication is influenced by social and cultural contexts, including norms, roles, and audience expectations, which affect how messages are interpreted. (CC BY-SA 2.0; The Democratic Alliance via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Explain how language functions expressively, powerfully, relationally, dynamically, and socially in interpersonal communication.
- Differentiate between observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs in effective verbal communication.
- Analyze how social norms, conversational structures, and cultural contexts shape meaning and interaction.
- Describe communication barriers such as communication apprehension, ethnocentrism, bias, and cultural differences in language use.
- Apply strategies for responsible, inclusive, and competent communication to reduce defensiveness and improve interpersonal effectiveness.

6.1: Functions of Language

6.2: Language, Culture, and Society

6.3: Language Barriers and Improving Communication
6.4: Chapter Review
6.5: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools
6.6: Discussions and Exercises
6.7: References

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6.1: Functions of Language

Overview

Language is a powerful and flexible tool that does more than convey information. In everyday interactions, it is used to express thoughts, emotions, observations, and needs, while also shaping relationships, identities, and social realities. Five key functions of language (expressive, powerful, fun, dynamic, and relational) illustrate how communication can influence others, create meaning, build or divide relationships, and evolve over time. Understanding these functions supports more intentional and effective communication in both personal and professional contexts.

Learning Objectives

- Identify and distinguish between observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs in verbal communication.
- Explain how language expresses identity and influences credibility.
- Describe how language can be used as a tool for control and action (performative language).
- Recognize the dynamic nature of language, including the role of neologisms and slang.
- Analyze how language can both build and damage interpersonal relationships.

Five Functions of Language

Various utterances make up our daily verbal communication. Some of our words convey meaning, some convey emotions, and some actually produce actions. Language also provides endless opportunities for fun because of its limitless, sometimes nonsensical, and always changing nature. In this section, we will learn about the five functions of language, which show us that language is expressive, language is powerful, language is fun, language is dynamic, and language is relational.

Language is Expressive

Verbal communication helps us meet various needs through our ability to express ourselves. In terms of instrumental needs, we use verbal communication to ask questions that provide us with specific information. We also use verbal communication to describe things, people, and ideas. Verbal communication helps us inform, persuade, and entertain others. It is also through our verbal expressions that our personal relationships are formed. At its essence, language is expressive. Verbal expressions help us communicate our observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1995).

Expressing Observations

When we express observations, we report on the sensory information we are taking or have taken in. Eyewitness testimony is a good example of communicating observations. Witnesses are not supposed to make judgments or offer conclusions; they only communicate factual knowledge as they experienced it. For example, a witness could say, “I saw a white Mitsubishi Eclipse leaving my neighbor’s house at 10:30 PM.” As we learned previously in relation to perception, observation and description occur in the first step of the perception-checking process. When you are trying to make sense of an experience, expressing observations in a descriptive rather than evaluative way can lessen defensiveness, which facilitates competent communication.

Expressing Thoughts

When we express thoughts, we draw conclusions based on what we have experienced. In the perception process, this is similar to the interpretation step. We take various observations and evaluate and interpret them to assign them meaning (a conclusion). Whereas our observations are based on sensory information (what we saw, what we read, what we heard), thoughts are connected to our beliefs (what we think is true/false), attitudes (what we like and dislike), and values (what we think is right/wrong or good/bad). Jury members are expected to express thoughts based on reported observations to help reach a conclusion about someone’s guilt or innocence. A juror might express the following thought: “The neighbor who saw the car leaving the night of

the crime seemed credible and the defendant seemed to have a shady past. I think he's trying to hide something." Sometimes people intentionally or unintentionally express thoughts as if they were feelings. For example, when people say, "I feel like you're too strict with your attendance policy," they aren't really expressing a feeling; they are expressing a judgment about the other person (a thought).

Expressing Feelings

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

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



Figure 6.1.1: Two people argue intensely during a protest outside Columbia University while former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaks nearby, capturing how expressions of anger can feel confrontational and emotionally charged, yet still play an important role in public dialogue and human connection. Public expressions of anger can challenge, unsettle, and connect people at the same time. (CC BY-SA 3.0; David Shankbone via Wikimedia Commons)

In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous our emotions will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, happy is mild, delighted is moderate, and ecstatic is intense; ignored is mild, rejected is moderate, and abandoned is intense (Hargie, 2011).

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

you're in need of emotional support or want validation of an emotional message you just sent, waiting for a response could end up negatively affecting your emotional state.

Expressing Needs

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

Four Types of Verbal Expressions

Observation: Report of sensory experiences or memories.

- Example: "Pauline asked me to bring this file to you."

Thought: Conclusion about or judgment of experiences and observations.

- Example: "Students today have much less respect for authority."

Feeling: Communicating emotions.

- Example: "I feel at peace when we're together."

Need: Stating wants or requesting help or support.

- Example: "I'm saving money for summer vacation. Is it okay if we skip our regular night out this week?"

Language is Powerful

The contemporary American philosopher David Abram wrote, "Only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world" (Abram, 1997). This statement encapsulates many of the powerful features of language. Next, we will discuss how language expresses our identities, affects our credibility, serves as a means of control, and performs actions.

Language Expresses Our Identities

Words or phrases can express who we are and contribute to the impressions that others make of us. We've already learned about identity needs and impression management and how we all use verbal communication strategically to create a desired impression. In our chapters on social construction of identity, we discussed the phenomenon of ascribed and avowed identities. Ascribed being those identity descriptors put unto us from others, avowed being those that come up from within and we choose for ourselves. But in either case, the communication of who we are is largely rooted in language itself.

The power of language to express our identities varies depending on the origin of the label (self-chosen or other imposed) and the context. People are usually comfortable with the language they use to describe their own identities but may have issues with the labels others place on them. A powerful social phenomenon is what is known as **linguistic reclamation,** in which a pejoratively ascribed identity label is given to a marginalized group, but that group then uses that label as a positive identity marker. There are a few examples of people who have taken a label that was imposed on them, one that usually has negative connotations, and intentionally used it in ways that counter previous meanings. For example, popularized during the civil rights movement was the phrase "Black is beautiful" that repositioned Black as a positive identity marker for African Americans. Similarly, the "queer" movement of the 1980s and 90s that reclaimed the word queer as a positive identity marker for some gay, lesbian,

bisexual, and transgender people. We may be seeing a modern version of this for feminine folks and the word "bitch" becoming a term of endearment within feminine groups. Even though some people embrace reclaimed words, they still carry their negative connotations and are not openly accepted by everyone. This is also where context becomes very important, as only the negatively affected marginalized group has the ability to reclaim and alter the negative connotation associated with these labels.

Language Affects Our Credibility

People make assumptions about your credibility based on how you speak and what you say. Even though we've learned that meaning is in people rather than words and that the rules that govern verbal communication, like rules of grammar, are arbitrary, these norms still mean something. You don't have to be a perfect grammarian to be perceived as credible. In fact, if you followed the grammar rules for written communication to the letter you would actually sound pretty strange, since our typical way of speaking isn't as formal and structured as writing. But you still have to support your ideas and explain the conclusions you make to be seen as competent. You have to use language clearly and be accountable for what you say in order to be seen as trustworthy. Using informal language and breaking social norms we've discussed so far wouldn't enhance your credibility during a professional job interview, but it might with your friends at a party. Politicians know that the way they speak affects their credibility, but they also know that using words that are too scientific or academic can lead people to perceive them as perhaps pompous or stifled, which would hurt their credibility. Politicians and many others in leadership positions need to be able to use language to put people at ease, relate to others, and still appear confident and competent.

Language is a Means of Control

Control is a word that has negative connotations, but our use of it here can be positive, neutral, or negative. Verbal communication can be used to reward and punish. We can offer verbal communication in the form of positive reinforcement to praise someone. We can withhold verbal communication or use it in a critical, aggressive, or hurtful way as a form of negative reinforcement.

Directives are utterances that try to get another person to do something. They can range from a rather polite ask or request to a more forceful command or insistance. Context informs when and how we express directives and how people respond to them. Promises are often paired with directives in order to persuade people to comply, and those promises, whether implied or stated, should be kept in order to be an ethical communicator. Keep this in mind to avoid arousing false expectations on the part of the other person (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990).

Rather than verbal communication being directed at one person as a means of control, the way we talk creates overall climates of communication that may control many. Verbal communication characterized by empathy, understanding, respect, and honesty creates open climates that lead to more collaboration and more information exchange. Verbal communication that is controlling, deceitful, and vague creates a closed climate in which people are less willing to communicate and less trusting (Brown, 2006).

Language is a Building Block

A collection of philosophical perspectives, starting with J.L. Austin's 1955 book *How to do Things With Words,* continuing through the 1966 book by Berger and Luckmann *The Social Construction of Reality,* and through today with scholars in the field of Discourse and Social Interaction, it is well established that language does more than just describe the world around us or facilitate transaction of needed exchange, but rather language can and does build the network of our social worlds.

Some language is actually more like an action than a packet of information. Saying, "I promise," "I guarantee," or "I pledge," does more than convey meaning; it communicates intent. Such utterances are called **commissives**, as they mean a speaker is committed to a certain course of action (Crystal, 2005). Of course, promises can be broken, and there can be consequences, but other verbal communication is granted official power that can guarantee action. The two simple words "I do" can mean that a person has agreed to an oath before taking a witness stand or assuming the presidency. It can also mean that two people are now bound in a relationship recognized by the government and/or a religious community. These two words, if said in the right context and in front of the right person, such as a judge or a faith leader, bring with them obligations that cannot be undone without additional steps and potential negative repercussions. In that sense, language is much more than "mere words."

In some cases, the language that makes our laws is intentionally vague. In courts all over the nation, the written language intersects with spoken language as lawyers advocate for particular interpretations of the written law. The utterances of judges and juries set precedents for reasonable interpretations that will then help decide future cases. Imagine how powerful the words "We the jury find the defendant..." seem to the defendant awaiting their verdict. The sentences handed down by judges following a verdict are also performative because those words impose fines, penalties, or even death. Some language is deemed so powerful

that it is regulated. Hate speech, which we will learn more about later, and slander, libel, and defamation are considered powerful enough to actually do damage to a person and have therefore been criminalized.

Language is Fun

Word games have long been popular. Before Words with Friends there was Apples to Apples, Boggle, Scrabble, and crossword puzzles. Writers, poets, and comedians have built careers on their ability to have fun with language and in turn share that fun with others. The fun and frivolity of language becomes clear as teachers get half-hearted laughs from students when they make puns and people vie to construct the longest palindromic sentence (a sentence that as the same letters backward and forward).

The productivity and limitlessness of language we discussed earlier leads some people to spend an inordinate amount of time discovering things about words. For example, contranyms. **Contranyms** are words that have multiple meanings, two of which are opposites. For example, sanction can mean "to allow" and "to prevent," and dust can mean "to remove particles" when used in reference to furniture or "to add particles" when used in reference to a cake. These are just two examples of humorous and contradictory features of the English language. A fun aspect of language enjoyed by more people than a small community of word enthusiasts is humor.

There are more than one hundred theories of humor, but none of them quite captures the complex and often contradictory nature of what we find funny (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006). Humor is a complicated social phenomenon that is largely based on the relationship between language and meaning. Humor functions to liven up conversations, break the ice, and increase group cohesion. We also use humor to test our compatibility with others when a deep conversation about certain topics like politics or religion would be awkward. Bringing up these topics in a lighthearted way can give us indirect information about another person's beliefs, attitudes, and values. Based on their response to the humorous message, we can either probe further or change the subject and write it off as a poor attempt at humor (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006). Using humor also draws attention to us, and the reactions that we get from others feeds into our self-concept. We also use humor to disclose information about ourselves that we might not feel comfortable revealing in a more straightforward way. Humor can also be used to express sexual interest or to cope with bad news or bad situations.

We first start to develop an understanding of humor as children when we realize that the words we use for objects are really arbitrary and can be manipulated. This manipulation creates a distortion or incongruous moment in the reality that we had previously known. Some humor scholars believe that this early word play (for example, calling a horse a turtle and a turtle a horse) leads us to appreciate language-based humor like puns and riddles (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006). It is in the process of encoding and decoding that humor emerges. People use encoding to decide how and when to use humor, and people use decoding to make sense of humorous communication. Things can go wrong in both of those processes. We can all relate to the experience of witnessing a poorly timed or executed joke (a problem with encoding) and of not getting a joke (a problem with decoding).

Language is Dynamic

As we already learned, language is essentially limitless. We may create a one-of-a-kind sentence combining words in new ways and never know it. Aside from the endless structural possibilities, words change meaning, and new words are created daily. In this section, we'll learn more about the dynamic nature of language by focusing on neologisms and slang.

Neologisms

Neologisms are newly coined or used words. Newly coined words are those that were just brought into linguistic existence. Newly used words make their way into languages in several ways, including borrowing and changing structure. Taking is actually a more fitting descriptor than borrowing, since we take words but don't really give them back. In any case, borrowing is the primary means through which languages expand. English is a good case in point, as most of its vocabulary is borrowed and doesn't reflect the language's Germanic origins. English has been called the "vacuum cleaner of languages" (Crystal, 2005). Weekend is a popular English word based on the number of languages that have borrowed it. We have borrowed many words, like chic from French, karaoke from Japanese, and caravan from Arabic.

Structural changes also lead to new words. **Compound words** are neologisms that are created by joining two already known words. Keyboard, newspaper, and giftcard are all compound words that were formed when new things were created or conceived. We also create new words by adding something, subtracting something, or blending them together. For example, we can add affixes, meaning a prefix or a suffix, to a word. Affixing usually alters the original meaning but doesn't completely change it. Ex-husband and kitchenette are relatively recent examples of such changes (Crystal, 2005). New words are also formed when clipping

a word like examination, which creates a new word, exam, that retains the same meaning. Lastly, we have the phenomenon of **portmanteau,** in which we clip words and then compound them, forming new words by blending old ones together. Words like breakfast and lunch blend letters and meaning to form a new word: brunch. Or the word "blog" being born of a combination of "web" (short for website) and "log" (as in, to keep a record of).

Existing words also change in their use and meaning. The digital age has given rise to some interesting changes in word usage. Before Facebook, the word friend had many meanings, but it was mostly used as a noun referring to a companion. The sentence, I'll friend you, wouldn't have made sense to many people just a few years ago because friend wasn't used as a verb. Google went from being a proper noun referring to the company to a more general verb that refers to searching for something on the Internet (perhaps not even using the Google search engine). Meanings can expand or contract without changing from a noun to a verb. Gay, an adjective for feeling happy, expanded to include gay as an adjective describing a person's sexual orientation. Perhaps because of the confusion that this caused, the meaning of gay has contracted again, as the earlier meaning is now considered archaic, meaning it is no longer in common usage.

Another interesting and somewhat lighthearted language phenomenon is the **retronym.** A **retronym** is when a word is retroactively created when social and cultural evolution has changed the meaning of the initial word. For example, from 1914 to 1918, most of the world was embroiled in The Great War. No matter who you are, it is entirely likely that your nation and your ancestors were effected by The Great War, as it encompassed most of the world. If you're unfamiliar with the phrase "The Great War," it is because you exist in the world as it exists after 1945. When World War II raged from 1939-1945, it was clear that The Great War was redefined now with the new context. During and after World War II, the previous war now had a retronym of World War I. Other retronyms include "landline" (they used to just be "phones" until the "smartphone" became a "phone") or "snail mail" (was just "mail" until electronic mail proliferated) or "acoustic guitar" (was just "guitar" until the electric guitar was popularized).

Slang

Slang is a great example of the dynamic nature of language. **Slang** refers to new or adapted words that are specific to a group, context, and/or time period; regarded as less formal; and representative of people's creative play with language. Research has shown that only about 10 percent of the slang terms that emerge over a fifteen-year period survive. Many more take their place though, as new slang words are created using inversion, reduction, or old-fashioned creativity (Allan & Burridge, 2006). **Inversion** is a form of word play that produces slang words like sick, wicked, and bad that refer to the opposite of their typical meaning. Reduction creates slang words such as pic, sec, and later from picture, second, and see you later. New slang words often represent what is edgy, current, or simply relevant to the daily lives of a group of people. Many creative examples of slang refer to illegal or socially taboo topics like sex, drinking, and drugs. It makes sense that developing an alternative way to identify drugs or talk about taboo topics could make life easier for the people who partake in such activities. Slang allows people who are in "in the know" to break the code and presents a linguistic barrier for unwanted outsiders. Taking a moment to think about the amount of slang that refers to being intoxicated on drugs or alcohol or engaging in sexual activity should generate a lengthy list.

It can be difficult to identify the slang we use at any given moment because it is worked into our everyday language patterns and becomes very natural. Just as we learned here, new words can create a lot of buzz and become a part of common usage very quickly. The same can happen with new slang terms. Most slang words also disappear quickly, and their alternative meaning fades into obscurity. For example, you don't hear anyone using the word macaroni to refer to something cool or fashionable. But that's exactly what the common slang meaning of the word was at the time the song "Yankee Doodle" was written. Yankee Doodle isn't saying the feather he sticks in his cap is a small, curved pasta shell; he is saying it's cool or stylish.

Language is Relational

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

Language Can Bring Us Together

Interpersonally, verbal communication is key to bringing people together and maintaining relationships. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, our use of words like I, you, we, our, and us affect our relationships. "**We language**" includes the words we, our, and us and can be used to promote a feeling of inclusiveness. "**I language**" can be useful when expressing thoughts, needs, and

feelings because it leads us to “own” our expressions and avoid the tendency to mistakenly attribute the cause of our thoughts, needs, and feelings to others. Communicating emotions using “I language” may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying, “You’re making me crazy!” you could say, “I’m starting to feel really anxious because we can’t make a decision about this.” Conversely, “**you language**” can lead people to become defensive and feel attacked, which could be divisive and result in feelings of interpersonal separation.

The **"I Language"** Formula

When wanting to create a dialogue about something that is potentially contentious, the very specific language choice to begin that dialogue is very important. Using the word "you" can trigger defensiveness whch can further raise the communication climate and cause greater tension. So we should practice "I Language," which not only uses the word "I" to own our thoughts but has a specific formulaic process to begin a tough conversation without starting an argument or fight. Here are the step:

1. Describe observable phenomenon. Without any judgment or evaluation, describe exactly what happened. Not your perspective or opinion, but exactly what happened. If we stick to the phenomenon that everyone observed, then nobody can argue.
2. Using the word "I," describe our reaction to that phenomenon. This is where the "I Language" part really comes in. We have to own our own feelings and reactions. So we must describe what happened, and then how we felt when that happened, using the word "I." If we own our own feelings, this is also inarguable; your feelings are your own.
3. Using the word "I," describe our interpretation of this event. Given what happened (not arguable) and our own feelings of what happened (not arguable), describe how you are making sense of this. Again, using the word "I" to own that this our interpretation and our understanding...
4. Ask for perspective and clarification. By using "I" to describe our own perspectives, we are tacitly (or explicitly) acknowledging that this is partial and incomplete. We can only see things from our perspective (which is valid!) but we must also recognize that it is not the only perspective. We must perception check to see if there is any other way of understanding this.

For example:

> "In my last email, I stated that I was planning on completing my tasks before the end of next week. I also told you that if we needed them sooner, to please just let me know and I would make it a higher priority. The next time I heard from you two days after that, you told me you had completed those tasks by yourself. When you did this, I felt disrespected and invaluable, which made me fearful and angry. It seemed to me like you did not trust me to do my work or you did not respect me enough to trust that I can manage my own time and make good on my commitments. But maybe I am missing something. Can you help me understand what happened here from your perspective?

This message covers all four parts of the "I Language" formula, and at no point is there any accusatory "you language" or even a moment where a decent and reasonable person can argue. There may be differing perspectives and some tensions to unpack and work out, but we can now accomplish that without a fight.

Aside from the specific words that we use, the frequency of communication impacts relationships. Of course, the content of what is said is important, but research shows that romantic partners who communicate frequently with each other and with mutual friends and family members experience less stress and uncertainty in their relationship and are more likely to stay together (McCornack, 2007). When frequent communication combines with supportive messages, which are messages communicated in an open, honest, and nonconfrontational way, people are sure to come together.

Moving from the interpersonal to the sociocultural level, we can see that speaking the same language can bring people together. When a person is surrounded by people who do not speak their native language, it can be very comforting to run into another person who speaks the same language. Even if the two people are strangers, the ease of linguistic compatibility is comforting and can quickly facilitate a social bond. We’ve already learned that language helps shape our social reality, so a common language leads to some similar perspectives. Of course, there are individual differences within a language community, but the power of shared language to unite people has led to universal language movements that advocate for one global language.

Serious attempts to create a common language, sometimes referred to as a lingua franca or auxiliary language, began in the 1600s as world exploration brought increased trade and Latin was no longer effective as the language of international business. Since then, hundreds of auxiliary languages have been recorded but none have achieved widespread international usage or been officially recognized as an international language (Crystal, 2005). While some such movements were primarily motivated

by business and profit, others hoped to promote mutual understanding, more effective diplomacy, and peaceful coexistence. Esperanto, which means “hopeful,” is the most well-known and widely used auxiliary language that was intended to serve as a common international language. Esperanto was invented by a Polish eye doctor at the end of the 1800s and today has between one and two million fluent speakers worldwide. Many works of literature and important manuscripts like the Bible and the Qur’an have been translated into Esperanto, and many original works of literature and academic articles have been written in the language. Some countries also broadcast radio programs in Esperanto. Several barriers will have to be overcome in order for an auxiliary language like Esperanto to gain international acceptance. First, there would have to be a massive effort put into a period of simultaneous learning; otherwise it is difficult to motivate people to learn a language that is not necessary for their daily lives and that no one else speaks. Second, as we have learned, people take pride in their linguistic identity and find pleasure in playing with the rules of language, creatively inventing new words and meanings that constantly change a language. Such changes may be impossible to accommodate in an auxiliary language. Lastly, the optimism of an internationally shared language eventually gives way to realism. If a shared language really brings peaceful coexistence, it becomes challenging to explain that all the civil wars and other conflicts that have been fought between people who speak the same language.

As new languages are invented, many more languages are dying. Linguists and native speakers of endangered languages have also rallied around so-called dying languages to preserve them. In the United States, Cajun French in Louisiana, French Canadian in Maine, and Pennsylvania Dutch are examples of language communities that are in danger of losing the language that has united them, in some cases for hundreds of years (Dorian, 1986). Although American English is in no danger of dying soon, there have been multiple attempts to make English the official language of the U.S. Sometimes the argument supporting this proposition seems to be based on the notion that a shared language will lead to more solidarity and in-group identification among the speakers. However, many of these movements are politically and ideologically motivated and actually seek to marginalize and/or expel immigrants, typically immigrants who are also people of color. The U.S. isn’t the only country that has debated the merits of officially recognizing only certain languages. Similar debates have been going on for many years regarding whether French, English, or both should be the official language in Quebec, Canada, and which language(s) (French, Dutch, or Flemish) should be used in what contexts in Belgium (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). In such cases, we can see that verbal communication can also divide people.

Language Can Separate Us

Whether it’s criticism, teasing, or language differences, verbal communication can also lead to feelings of separation. Language differences alone do not present insurmountable barriers. We can learn other languages with time and effort, there are other people who can translate and serve as bridges across languages, and we can also communicate quite a lot nonverbally in the absence of linguistic compatibility. People who speak the same language can intentionally use language to separate. The words us and them can be a powerful start to separation. Think of how language played a role in segregation in the U.S. as the notion of “separate but equal” was upheld by the Supreme Court and how apartheid affected South Africa as limits, based on finances and education, were placed on the Black majority’s rights to vote. Symbols, both words and images, were a very important part of Hitler’s rise to power in the 1930s and ’40s in Europe. Various combinations of colored stars, triangles, letters, and other symbols were sewn onto the clothing or uniforms of people persecuted by the Nazis in order to classify them. People were labeled and reduced to a few defining traits instead of being recognized as whole human beings, a shift that enabled widespread oppression, violence, and killing.

At the interpersonal level, unsupportive messages can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and actual separation or dissolution of a relationship. It’s impossible to be supportive in our communication all the time, but consistently unsupportive messages can hurt others’ self-esteem, escalate conflict, and lead to defensiveness. People who regularly use unsupportive messages may create a toxic win/lose climate in a relationship. Six verbal tactics that can lead to feelings of defensiveness and separation are global labels, sarcasm, dragging up the past, negative comparisons, judgmental “you” messages, and threats (McKay, Davis & Fanning, 1995).

Common Forms of Unsupportive Messages

Global Labels: Labeling someone irresponsible, untrustworthy, selfish, or lazy calls his or her whole identity as a person into question. Such sweeping judgments and generalizations are sure to only escalate a negative situation.

- Example: “You’re a liar.”

Sarcasm: Even though sarcasm is often disguised as humor, it usually represents passive-aggressive behavior through which a person indirectly communicates negative feelings.

- Example: “No, you didn’t miss anything in class on Wednesday. We just sat here and looked at each other.”

Dragging up the Past: Bringing up negative past experiences is a tactic used by people when they don’t want to discuss a current situation. Sometimes people have built up negative feelings that are suddenly let out by a seemingly small thing in the moment.

- Example: “I should have known not to trust you when you never paid me back that $100 I let you borrow.”

Negative Comparisons: Holding a person up to the supposed standards or characteristics of another person can lead to feelings of inferiority and resentment. Parents and teachers may unfairly compare children to their siblings.

- Example: “Jade graduated from college without any credit card debt. I guess you’re just not as responsible as her.”

Judgmental “You” Messages: Accusatory messages are usually generalized overstatements about another person that go beyond labeling but still do not describe specific behavior in a productive way.

- Example: “You’re never going to be able to hold down a job.”

Threats: Threatening someone with violence or some other negative consequence usually signals the end of productive communication. Aside from the potential legal consequences, threats usually overcompensate for a person’s insecurity.

- Example: “If you don’t stop texting back and forth with your ex, both of you are going to regret it.”

Language is Both Flexible and Powerful

Language is far more than a tool for exchanging information; it is a flexible and powerful system that shapes how individuals express themselves, interpret experience, and build relationships. Through expressive functions, people communicate observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs in ways that influence understanding and reduce or create ambiguity depending on clarity and intent. At the same time, language plays a powerful role in constructing identity, establishing credibility, and even performing actions that carry real-world consequences, while also functioning as a means of influence and control within interpersonal and social contexts. Its dynamic and playful nature is evident in constantly evolving slang, neologisms, and humor, showing how language adapts to cultural change over time. Finally, language is deeply relational, capable of both strengthening and damaging connections depending on how it is used, with supportive communication fostering closeness and unsupportive patterns contributing to conflict or separation. Understanding these functions highlights the importance of intentional, reflective, and ethical language use in creating effective communication and healthier relationships.

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6.2: Language, Culture, and Society

Overview

Language both shapes and is shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which it is used. Meaning is created through interaction, guided by social norms, conversational structures, and roles that influence how people speak and interpret messages. Culture affects language use through differences in values, accents, dialects, and communication styles, as well as through accommodation and code-switching. Language can also reflect and reinforce cultural biases, making ethical, inclusive, and mindful communication essential in diverse interpersonal contexts.

Learning Objectives

- Explain how social norms, roles, and conversational structures shape verbal communication.
- Describe how culture influences language, meaning, and communication practices.
- Distinguish between accents and dialects and explain how they affect perception.
- Define communication accommodation and code-switching and explain why people use them.
- Identify examples of cultural bias in language and apply strategies for more inclusive communication.

Language and Social Context

Society and culture influence the words that we speak, and the words that we speak influence society and culture. Such a cyclical relationship can be difficult to understand, but many of the examples throughout this chapter and examples from our own lives help illustrate this point. One of the best ways to learn about society, culture, and language is to seek out opportunities to go beyond our typical comfort zones. Studying abroad, for example, brings many challenges that can turn into valuable lessons.

We arrive at meaning through conversational interaction, which follows many social norms and rules. As we've already learned, rules are explicitly stated conventions ("Look at me when I'm talking to you.") and norms are implicit (saying you've got to leave before you actually do to politely initiate the end to a conversation). To help conversations function meaningfully, we have learned social norms and internalized them to such an extent that we do not often consciously enact them. Instead, we rely on routines and roles (as determined by social forces) to help us proceed with verbal interaction, which also helps determine how a conversation will unfold. These are known as constitutive rules. Our various social roles influence meaning and how we speak. For example, a person may say, "As a longtime member of this community..." or "As a first-generation college student..." Such statements cue others into the personal and social context from which we are speaking, which helps them better interpret our meaning.

One social norm that structures our communication is **turn taking**. People need to feel like they are contributing something to an interaction, so turn taking is a central part of how conversations play out (Crystal, 2005). Although we sometimes talk at the same time as others or interrupt them, there are numerous verbal and nonverbal cues, almost like a dance, that are exchanged between speakers that let people know when their turn will begin or end. Conversations do not always neatly progress from beginning to end with shared understanding along the way. There is a back and forth that is often verbally managed through rephrasing ("Let me try that again,") and clarification ("Does that make sense?") (Crystal, 2005)

We also have certain units of speech that facilitate turn taking. **Adjacency pairs** are related communication structures that come one after the other (adjacent to each other) in an interaction (Crystal, 2005). For example, questions are followed by answers, greetings are followed by responses, compliments are followed by a thank you, and informative comments are followed by an acknowledgment. These are the skeletal components that make up our verbal interactions, and they are largely social in that they facilitate our interactions. When these sequences don't work out, confusion, miscommunication, or frustration may result.

A common humorous observation is that people will open conversations the same way every time: "hello, how are you?" and the response is always some variation of "Good, and you?" followed by "just fine, thank you." But nobody is fine all the time! And nobody really cares! What would happen if the clerk at the grocery store asked "how are you today?" and you responded by dumping stories of woe regarding your health, your finances, the state of the world? Yikes! However, when we set aside the humor of this particular perspective, we see that these routine interactions ("How are you?" "Good! And you?") serve a function. They are what is

known as **phatic communication,** which is linguistic communication used to establish a particular social function. True, nobody is *really* asking "how are you today?"; your barista is not your therapist. But by engaging in the phatic communication exchange, we are establishing that we are both seeing each other as human beings, which is actually an important communicative act.



Figure 6.2.1: Two people sit facing one another in conversation, taking turns speaking and listening as they exchange verbal and nonverbal cues that guide the flow of interaction and mutual understanding. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Matt @ PEK via Wikimedia Commons)

Some conversational elements are highly scripted or ritualized, especially the beginning and end of an exchange and topic changes (Crystal, 2005). Conversations often begin with a standard greeting and then proceed to “safe” exchanges about things in the immediate field of experience of the communicators (a comment on the weather or noting something going on in the scene). At this point, once the ice is broken, people can move on to other more content-specific exchanges. Once conversing, before we can initiate a topic change, it is a social norm that we let the current topic being discussed play itself out or continue until the person who introduced the topic seems satisfied. We then usually try to find a relevant tie-in or segue that acknowledges the previous topic, in turn acknowledging the speaker, before actually moving on. Changing the topic without following such social conventions might indicate to the other person that you were not listening or are simply rude.

Ending a conversation is similarly complex. We’ve all been in a situation where we are “trapped” in a conversation that we need or want to get out of. Just walking away or ending a conversation without engaging in socially acceptable “leave-taking behaviors” would be considered a breach of social norms. Topic changes are often places where people can leave a conversation, but it is still routine for us to give a special reason for leaving, often in an apologetic tone (whether we mean it or not). Generally though, conversations come to an end through the cooperation of both people, as they offer and recognize typical signals that a topic area has been satisfactorily covered or that one or both people need to leave. It is customary in the United States for people to say they have to leave before they actually do and for that statement to be dismissed or ignored by the other person until additional leave-taking behaviors are enacted. When such cooperation is lacking, an awkward silence or abrupt ending can result. In some cultures, silence is not preferred and even more so, is uncomfortable. Silence is not viewed the same way in other cultures, which leads us to our discussion of cultural context.

Language and Cultural Context

Culture isn’t solely determined by a person’s native language or nationality. It’s true that languages vary by country and region and that the language we speak influences our realities, but even people who speak the same language experience cultural differences because of their various intersecting cultural identities and personal experiences. We have a tendency to view our language as a whole more favorably than other languages. Although people may make persuasive arguments regarding which languages are more pleasing to the ear or difficult or easy to learn than others, no one language enables speakers to communicate more effectively than another (McCornack, 2007).

From birth we are socialized into our various cultural identities. As with the social context, this acculturation process is a combination of explicit and implicit lessons. A child in Colombia, which is considered a more collectivist country in which people value group membership and cohesion over individualism, may not be explicitly told, “You are a member of a collectivistic culture,

so you should care more about the family and community than yourself." This cultural value would be transmitted through daily actions and through language use. Just as babies acquire knowledge of language practices at an astonishing rate in their first two years of life, so do they acquire cultural knowledge and values that are embedded in those language practices. At nine months old, it is possible to distinguish babies based on their language. Even at this early stage of development, when most babies are babbling and just learning to recognize but not wholly reproduce verbal interaction patterns, a Colombian baby would sound different from a Brazilian baby, even though neither would actually be using words from their native languages of Spanish and Portuguese (Crystal, 2005).

The actual language we speak plays an important role in shaping our reality. Comparing languages, we can see differences in how we are able to talk about the world. In English, we have the words grandfather and grandmother, but no single word that distinguishes between a maternal grandfather and a paternal grandfather. But in Swedish, there's a specific word for each grandparent: morfar is mother's father, farfar is father's father, farmor is father's mother, and mormor is mother's mother (Crystal, 2005). In this example, we can see that the words available to us, based on the language we speak, influence how we talk about the world due to differences in and limitations of vocabulary. The notion that language shapes our view of reality and our cultural patterns is best represented by the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that–to a greater or lesser degree–our language shapes our ideas and guides our view of social reality (Martin & Nakayama, 2025). In the previous example of Swedish words for grandparents, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would tell us that a person raised speaking Swedish would have greater salience in their perception of their grandparents and family ancestry. Speakers of languages that gender nouns (Spanish, for example) may also begin to perceive those nouns as having gendered characteristics. The language we speak influences our perception of the world.

Culturally influenced differences in language and meaning can lead to some interesting encounters, ranging from awkward to informative to disastrous. In terms of awkwardness, you have likely heard stories of companies that failed to exhibit communication competence in their naming and/or advertising of products in another language. For example, in Taiwan, Pepsi used the slogan "Come Alive with Pepsi" only to later find out that when translated it meant, "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead" (Kwintessential Limited, 2012). Similarly, American Motors introduced a new car called the Matador to the Puerto Rico market only to learn that *Matador* means "killer," which wasn't very comforting to potential buyers (Kwintessential, 2012). At a more informative level, the words we use to give positive reinforcement are culturally relative. In the U.S. and England, parents commonly positively and negatively reinforce their child's behavior by saying, "Good girl" or "Good boy." There isn't an equivalent for such a phrase in other European languages, so the usage in only these two countries has been traced back to the puritan influence on beliefs about good and bad behavior (Wierzbicka, 2004). In terms of disastrous consequences, one of the most publicized and deadliest cross-cultural business mistakes occurred in India in 1984. Union Carbide, an American company, controlled a plant used to make pesticides. The company underestimated the amount of cross-cultural training that would be needed to allow the local workers, many of whom were not familiar with the technology or language/jargon used in the instructions for plant operations to do their jobs. This lack of competent communication led to a gas leak that immediately killed more than two thousand people and over time led to more than five hundred thousand injuries (Varma, 2012).

Dialects

Dialects are versions of languages that have distinct words, grammar, and pronunciation. Dialects can vary by region, class, or ancestry, and they influence the impressions that we make of others. Research shows that people tend to think more positively about others who speak with a dialect similar to their own and think more negatively about people who speak differently. Of course, many people think they speak normally and perceive others to have an accent or dialect. Although dialects include the use of different words and phrases, it's the tone of voice that often creates the strongest impression. For example, a person who speaks with a Southern accent may perceive a New Englander's accent to be grating, harsh, or rude because the pitch is more nasal and the rate faster. Conversely, a New Englander may perceive a Southerner's accent to be syrupy and slow, leading to an impression that the person speaking is uneducated.

Customs and Norms

Social norms are culturally relative. The words used in politeness rituals in one culture can mean something completely different in another. For example, "thank you" in American English acknowledges receiving something (a gift, a favor, a compliment), in British English it can mean "yes" similar to American English's "yes, please." In French "merci" can mean "no" as in "no, thank you" (Crystal, 2005). Additionally, what is considered a powerful language style varies from culture to culture. Confrontational language, such as swearing, can be seen as powerful in Western cultures, even though it violates some language taboos, but would be seen as immature and weak in Japan (Wetzel, 1988).

Gender also affects how we use language, but not to the extent that most people think. Furthermore, its important to reinforce that gender is socially constructed, therefore if there is a gendered difference in communication styles, that isn't an innate and essential characteristic but rather one that has been practiced and taught. Although there is a widespread belief that men are more likely to communicate in a clear and straightforward way and women are more likely to communicate in an emotional and indirect way, a meta-analysis of research findings from more than two hundred studies found only small differences in the personal disclosures of men and women (Dindia & Allen, 1992). Men and women's levels of disclosure are even more similar when engaging in cross-gender communication, meaning men and woman are more similar when speaking to each other than when men speak to men or women speak to women. This is due to the internalized pressure to speak about the other gender in socially sanctioned ways, in essence reinforcing the stereotypes when speaking to the same gender but challenging them in cross-gender encounters. Researchers also dispelled the belief that men interrupt more than women do, finding that men and women interrupt each other with similar frequency in cross-gender encounters (Dindia, 1987). These findings, which state that men and women communicate more similarly during cross-gender encounters and then communicate in more stereotypical ways in same-gender encounters, can be explained with communication accommodation theory.

Communication Accommodation and Code-Switching

Communication accommodation theory is a theory that explores why and how people modify their communication to fit situational, social, cultural, and relational contexts (Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973). Within communication accommodation, conversational partners may use **convergence**, meaning a person makes their communication more like another person's. People who are accommodating in their communication style are seen as more competent, which illustrates the benefits of communicative flexibility. In order to be flexible, of course, people have to be aware of and monitor their own and others' communication patterns. Conversely, conversational partners may use divergence, meaning a person uses communication to emphasize the differences between their conversational partner and themselves.

Convergence and divergence can take place within the same conversation and may be used by one or both conversational partners. Convergence functions to make others feel at ease, to increase understanding, and to enhance social bonds. **Divergence** may be used to intentionally make another person feel unwelcome or perhaps to highlight a personal, group, or cultural identity. For example, African American women use certain verbal communication patterns when communicating with other African American women as a way to highlight their racial identity and create group solidarity. In situations where multiple races interact, the women usually don't use those same patterns, instead accommodating the language patterns of the larger group. While communication accommodation might involve anything from adjusting how fast or slow you talk to how long you speak during each turn, **code-switching** refers to changes in accent, dialect, or language (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). There are many reasons that people might code-switch. Regarding accents, some people hire vocal coaches or speech-language pathologists to help them alter their accent. If a Southern person thinks their accent is leading others to form unfavorable impressions, they can consciously change their accent with much practice and effort. Once their ability to speak without their Southern accent is honed, they may be able to switch very quickly between their native accent when speaking with friends and family and their modified accent when speaking in professional settings.

Additionally, people who work or live in multilingual settings may code-switch many times throughout the day, or even within a single conversation. Increasing outsourcing and globalization have produced heightened pressures for code-switching. Call center workers in India have faced strong negative reactions from British and American customers who insist on "speaking to someone who speaks English." Although many Indians learn English in schools as a result of British colonization, their accents prove to be off-putting to people who want to get their cable package changed or book an airline ticket. Now some Indian call center workers are going through intense training to be able to code-switch and accommodate the speaking style of their customers. What is being called the "Anglo-Americanization of India" entails lessons on American culture (using things like *Sex and the City* DVDs), and the use of Anglo-American-sounding names like Sean and Peggy (Pal, 2004). As our interactions continue to occur in more multinational contexts, the expectations for code-switching and accommodation are sure to increase. It is important for us to consider the intersection of culture and power and think critically about the ways in which expectations for code-switching may be based on cultural biases.

Language and Cultural Bias

Cultural bias is a skewed way of viewing or talking about a group that is typically negative. Bias has a way of creeping into our daily language use, often under our awareness. Culturally biased language can make reference to one or more cultural identities, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability. There are other sociocultural identities that can be the subject of biased language, but we will focus our discussion on these five. Much biased language is based on stereotypes and myths that influence the words we use. Bias is both intentional and unintentional, but as we've already discussed, we have to be accountable

for what we say even if we didn't "intend" a particular meaning. Remember, meaning is generated; it doesn't exist inside our thoughts or words. We will discuss specific ways in which cultural bias manifests in our language and ways to become more aware of bias. We must continue to use guidelines for ethical communication that we have already discussed and strive to increase our competence. The following discussion also focuses on bias rather than preferred terminology or outright discriminatory language.

Language Marking Identities

Think about your current Communication Studies professor; the teacher of this class. Now imagine yourself telling a story about your professor to a friend of yours who hasn't met them yet. How would you describe them? Would you say "My Communication Professor is a cool guy (gender)?" Or maybe "I have this Communication Professor who is this hilarious queer Asian woman (sexuality, race, and gender)?" or maybe "Really tall Black guy, walks with a cane (body, race, gender, ability)"?

One way in which language subtly but dangerously reinforces cultural bias is through the phenomenon of **marking identities.** Marking identities is the linguistic practice of explicitly identifying identity characteristics of others. Recall our conversations of intersectionality (we all contain a multitude of identities simultaneously) and of the selection step of perception (we notice what is salient). Every person always has a tremendous amount of identity characteristics all of the time, but we often use language to highlight only certain specific elements of someone's identity. By using our language to mark these identities, we are linguistically stating that these are noticeable or salient, which also means they are perceived to either be important or unusual, strange, or abnormal. But no matter the reason *why* we mark the identity, the effect is the same: we normalize its invisible opposite. By using language to highlight one identity, we are reinforcing that the inverse is not worth highlighting, which makes it normal. And by normalizing those identities, we are reinforcing the privilege associated with them.

Consider that in the following sections about language and its correlation to identity categories.

Race

People sometimes use euphemisms for race that illustrate bias because the terms are usually implicitly compared to the dominant group (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). For example, referring to a person as "urban" or a neighborhood as "inner city" can be an accurate descriptor, but when such words are used as a substitute for racial identity, they illustrate cultural biases that equate certain races with cities and poverty. Using adjectives like articulate or well-dressed in statements like "My Black coworker is articulate" reinforces negative stereotypes even though these words are typically viewed as positive. Terms like nonwhite set up whiteness as the norm, which implies that White people are the norm against which all other races should be compared. Biased language also reduces the diversity within certain racial groups. For example, referring to anyone who looks like they are of Asian descent as Chinese or everyone who "looks" Latino/a as Mexicans. Some people with racial identities other than White, including people who are multiracial, use the label person/people of color to indicate solidarity among groups, but it is likely that they still prefer a more specific label when referring to an individual or referencing a specific racial group.

Gender

Language has a tendency to exaggerate perceived and stereotypical differences between men and women. The use of the term opposite sex presumes that men and women are opposites, like positive and negative poles of a magnet, which is obviously not true or men and women wouldn't be able to have successful interactions or relationships. A term like other gender doesn't presume opposites and acknowledges that male and female identities and communication are more influenced by **gender**, which is the social and cultural meanings and norms associated with males and females, than **sex**, which is the physiology and genetic makeup of a male and female. One key to avoiding gendered bias in language is to avoid the generic use of he when referring to something relevant to males and females (this use of the masculine to refer to everyone is sometimes known as *androcentricity* and can reinforce patriarchal systems). Instead, you can informally use a gender-neutral pronoun like they or their or you can use his or her (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). Other words reflect the general masculine bias present in English. The following word pairs show the gender-biased term followed by an unbiased term: waitress/server, chairman/chair or chairperson, mankind/people, cameraman/camera operator, mailman/postal worker, sportsmanship/fair play. Common language practices also tend to infantilize women but not men, when, for example, women are referred to as chicks, girls, or babes. Since there is no linguistic equivalent that indicates the marital status of men before their name, using Ms. instead of Miss or Mrs. helps reduce bias.

While we're at it, lets just cover a brief vocabulary lesson around non-binary gender terms. First, **non-binary** is a term for anyone that feels their gender identity exists outside of the normative "masculine" or "feminine" expectations. **Queer** is a term that has

an umbrella slightly larger than non-binary, as it can be an avowed term for anyone that feels their gender or sexual identities is outside of normal expectations in any way. **Trans** or **transgender** is an avowed umbrella term for anyone that is performing or expressing a gender identity that is different than the sex designated at birth (note that "different" does not mean "opposite" necessarily and can also include genders outside the binary). There are many other terms that have more specific definitions within the scope of non-binary, such as genderqueer and genderfluid. The most ethical consideration when using gendered language is to just ask for the avowed identity markers. Whatever language someone uses to describe themselves, we should use that language to describe them.

Age

Language that includes age bias can be directed toward older or younger people. Descriptions of younger people often presume recklessness or inexperience, while those of older people presume frailty or disconnection. The term elderly generally refers to people over sixty-five, but it has connotations of weakness, which isn't accurate because there are plenty of people over sixty-five who are stronger and more athletic than people in their twenties and thirties. Even though it's generic, older people doesn't really have negative implications. More specific words that describe groups of older people include grandmothers/grandfathers (even though they can be fairly young too), retirees, or people over sixty-five (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). Referring to people over the age of eighteen as boys or girls isn't typically viewed as appropriate.

Sexual Orientation

Discussions of sexual and affectional orientation range from everyday conversations to contentious political and personal debates. The negative stereotypes that have been associated with homosexuality, including deviance, mental illness, and criminal behavior, continue to influence our language use (American Psychological Association, 2012). Terminology related to gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) people can be confusing, so let's spend some time raise our awareness about preferred labels. First, **sexual orientation** is the term preferred to sexual preference (preference suggests a voluntary choice, as in someone has a preference for cheddar or American cheese). You may also see **affectional orientation** included with sexual orientation because it acknowledges that GLB relationships, like heterosexual relationships, are about intimacy and closeness (affection) that is not just sexually based. Most people also prefer the labels gay, lesbian, or bisexual to homosexual, which is clinical and doesn't so much refer to an identity as a sex act. Language regarding romantic relationships contains bias when heterosexuality is assumed. Comments comparing GLB people to "normal" people, although possibly intended to be positive, reinforces the stereotype that GLB people are abnormal. Don't presume you can identify a person's sexual orientation by looking at them or talking to them (gender is not the same as sexual orientation). Don't assume that GLB people will "come out" to you. Given that many GLB people have faced and continue to face regular discrimination, they may be cautious about disclosing their identities. However, using gender neutral terminology like partner and avoiding other biased language mentioned previously may create a climate in which a GLB person feels comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation identity. Conversely, the casual use of phrases like that's gay to mean "that's stupid" may create an environment in which GLB people do not feel comfortable.

Ability

People with disabilities make up a diverse group that has increasingly come to be viewed as a cultural/social identity group. People without disabilities are often referred to as able-bodied. As with sexual orientation, comparing people with disabilities to "normal" people implies that there is an agreed-on definition of what "normal" is and that people with disabilities are "abnormal." Disability is also preferred to the word handicap. Just because someone is disabled doesn't mean they are also handicapped. The environment around them rather than their disability often handicaps people with disabilities (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). Ignoring the environment as the source of a handicap and placing it on the person fits into a pattern of reducing people with disabilities to their disability; for example, calling someone a paraplegic instead of a person with paraplegia. In many cases, as with sexual orientation, race, age, and gender, verbally marking a person as disabled isn't relevant and doesn't need spotlighting. Language used in conjunction with disabilities also tends to portray people as victims of their disability and paint pictures of their lives as gloomy, dreadful, or painful. Such descriptors are often generalizations or completely inaccurate.

Engaging Ethically

Language is deeply intertwined with social and cultural context, meaning that communication is not simply about transmitting information but about actively constructing shared understanding through interaction. Social norms such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and conversational scripts guide how conversations begin, develop, and end, while social roles help shape how

speakers position themselves and how their messages are interpreted. Culture further influences language through differences in values, communication styles, and linguistic structure, as well as through variations in accents and dialects that can affect how speakers are perceived and evaluated.

In addition, communicative practices such as accommodation and code-switching demonstrate how people adapt their language to fit social and cultural expectations, often navigating issues of identity, belonging, and power. At the same time, language can reflect and reinforce cultural bias when stereotypes or assumptions are embedded in everyday speech, highlighting the importance of mindful and inclusive communication. Understanding the relationship between language, society, and culture allows communicators to engage more ethically, adapt more effectively across contexts, and reduce misunderstandings in diverse interpersonal interactions.

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6.3: Language Barriers and Improving Communication

Overview

Communication is a learned skill that continues to develop over time, rather than a fixed ability we automatically gain through experience alone. In interpersonal communication, language barriers, especially communication apprehension, can significantly affect how effectively we interact with others. Communication apprehension refers to the fear or discomfort people experience in various speaking situations, and it can vary depending on context such as public speaking, group discussion, or intercultural interaction. Cultural factors also play a major role in shaping communication competence, including how we interpret meaning, practice perspective-taking, and avoid ethnocentric thinking. Developing cultural empathy, social intelligence, and cultural sensitivity helps individuals better understand others and reduce misunderstandings. Additionally, responsible communication practices, such as avoiding blaming language and using more neutral, accurate phrasing, support healthier and more effective interactions. Together, these skills help individuals navigate barriers, reduce defensiveness, and strengthen both personal and professional relationships.

Learning Objectives

- Define communication apprehension and explain how it can vary across different communication contexts.
- Identify common language barriers that interfere with effective interpersonal communication.
- Explain how culture influences communication behavior, meaning, and interpretation.
- Apply concepts of cultural empathy, social intelligence, and cultural sensitivity to real-life communication situations.
- Demonstrate responsible communication strategies that reduce defensiveness and improve clarity in interaction.

Encountering Language Barriers

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. 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. We may not fully understand the reason(s) that we have high communication apprehension in some realms but not others. However, 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 United States 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.



Figure 6.3.1: A woman holds her head in distress, symbolizing the emotional and cognitive strain associated with communication anxiety. This expression of internal stress can reflect fear of judgment or difficulty expressing oneself in social or professional contexts. (CC0 1.0; MismibaTinasheMadando via Wikimedia Commons)

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, i.e., attempt to understand the other person's perspective.

We had previously discussed the concept of **rhetorical sensitivity** in the context of communication competence. Remember that rhetorical sensitivity is the ability to be attuned to the multitude of variables in a communication event that will inform the most effective communication choices. We can bring into that a more specific framing of **cultural sensitivity.** 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 culturally sensitive.

To do so effectively, however, we must 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.

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 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," we 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." There is always 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. Perhaps you been on the opposite end of a non-apology. For example, "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.

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). The following section focuses on four main types of defensive communication: dogmatism, superiority, indifference, and control messages.

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, that is 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. 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. In the infamous "Milgram Experiment" at Stanford university, some random participants were randomly selected to be prison guards and to act as such, and 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 a child exhibits "bad behavior," instead of focusing on the consequences of the child's actions, one can focus on the benefits of positive behavior.

Prejudice & Discrimination

As discussed in the chapter on perception, we all build a schema that maps our expectations as a way to organize the world and everyone in it. Our schema predisposes us to stereotyped thinking. If we are not mindful and careful, these stereotypes can

slide into prejudice and discrimination. **Prejudice** is defined as “a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information” (Tatum, 2017, p. 85), and **discrimination** is an action that negatively impacts a person or group of people based on prejudice perspectives of that group. 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 (Ştefăniță & Buf, 2021). It is used in multiple contexts and against many types of targets, but most commonly against marginalized people. Although we may often say things that are unkind and hurtful, hate speech has the effect of radically dehumanizing a group of people and members of that group. The receipt of hate speech results in fear and anxiety (Crichton, 2019). Remember that our language choices are an action, and action has consequences. We must always be mindful and ethical with our communication choices.

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. 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.

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.

Avoiding being Muted

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.

Sharpening our Communication Skills

Our communication skills are attained over time and honed with practice. There are many things we can do to sharpen our skills to help us become more competent with our communication. We want to consider the reason for our communication, what goals we have, understand our perspectives, own our thoughts and emotions, and precision in the language we choose. There are many reasons we communicate. To explain how this can help us to improve our verbal style, in this section we examine how we communicate to show gratitude and support, when we have to deliver bad news, and to clarify or avoid misunderstandings.

Show Gratitude

As humans we need validation and confirming messages. We should show this support often. The Gottman Institute gives many helpful tips and ideas on how to improve our relationships, and showing gratitude is at the top of the list. This includes nonverbal means such as sending thank-you cards and remembering birthdays to those who celebrate, but verbally expressing gratitude, telling someone they are appreciated, and showing gratitude when someone has taken an action, can be validating. Even when the actions our relational partners take are small, showing gratitude tells the person they are seen and appreciated. This improves relational satisfaction, is a relational maintenance strategy, and can improve overall life satisfaction. Daily gratitude messages accumulate and result in an increase in relational satisfaction (Chang, et al., 2021). If we take the time to express gratitude, it will improve our relationships. For example, if you took out the trash and never received acknowledgement, it could feel like a thankless job. When your roommate, spouse, or child says, "thank you for taking out the trash," you know they noticed that you were doing something in part for them, and they showed gratitude to you. In that moment you would feel appreciated, and that would extend to how you feel about the person(s) showing you gratitude.

Send a Supportive Message

Supportive messages play many roles in improving our verbal communication. Emotionally supportive messages increase problem-solving (Kimbler, et al., 2012). Supportive messages even extend to the online realm. When online bystanders offer supportive messages to targets of cyberbullying, these messages moderate the mental and emotional damage experienced as a result (High & Young, 2018). Repetitive supportive messages have been shown to lower the dropout rates in high school students (Strom & Boster, 2011). In our relationships, emotional support can lower the "perceptions of stress, anger, and dejection" (Pederson & Mclaren, 2017, p. 804). Validating messages can increase relational satisfaction and help improve our relationships overall. Take for instance, a time when you were feeling low, and had a friend send a message of support. That kind of support can significantly change your outlook on the situation and strengthen your perception of the relationship with that person. We can be our biggest critics and our support systems help us to moderate this. Therefore, these supportive messages improve our communication and our relationships.

Deliver Bad News and Condolence

At times we are tasked with difficult but necessary communication, such as delivering bad news or portraying our condolences. We have been in positions where we have had to tell a friend or loved one something that would hurt them. During the pandemic, many people dealt with getting COVID-19, and telling others they were exposed, while many unfortunate people had to tell others that the worst had happened, and death had occurred. Communicating such difficult information in a competent way requires care, clarity, and sensitivity. We start with empathy. It is important to be empathetic, but also to show our empathy to others. We do so by verbally expressing our gratitude, showing support, and being there to listen and engage in perspective-taking. We do not need to have gone through what someone else has to be empathetic. Empathy can take many forms, but listening is a primary action we can take. This also means giving others space to heal when they want privacy. Empathy is perspective-taking, meaning that you consider what you would want if you were in their situation.

Avoid Misunderstandings

We have all experienced a time when we were misunderstood, perhaps even in a setting where clarity was paramount, such as a professional setting. There are ways to attempt to avoid misunderstandings, and there are things we can do when inevitable misunderstandings occur.

We do our best to be clear and articulate in our language, but challenges can arise when people do not share the same language or when cultural differences affect communication. We can use nonverbal communication in conjunction with our language. Although our understanding of nonverbals may be different, when nonverbals are paired with language it can increase our ability to be understood.

Once a misunderstanding occurs, its severity may vary depending on the situation. For example, if the misunderstanding could cost a company money, it would be considered severe. In that case, we can follow the steps to a “good apology” from Dr. Randy Pausch. Start by stating remorse, then take personal responsibility and then ask what you can do to help make it right. If the misunderstanding is less severe (perhaps you misspoke and your relational partner does not understand what you are asking from them) then clarity is key. We often find ourselves restating requests with different terms to avoid misunderstandings. Language is subjective and relates to our lived experience, so different terms can mean different things. Restating your request using different phrases can help with clarity.

Avoiding Common Errors

There are many tools and tips we can utilize in a general sense. There are three “errors” we can avoid to help: the **shared knowledge error** (when we assume everyone knows what we know), the **shared opinion error** (when we assume everyone agrees with what we are saying), and the **monopolization error** (when we dominate the conversation and do not allow others to engage in the conversation). When we are aware of these errors, we can avoid committing them.

Take a Dual Perspective

We want to avoid ethnocentrism. In that same context, we strive to see things from others’ perspectives. Empathy, perspective taking, or “dual perspective” relates to how we want to walk in another person’s shoes when communicating. When we try to see that there are more perspectives than just our own, we open ourselves to dual perspectives. When we fail to see that there is more than just our perspective, we may alienate our communication partners. Therefore, using this dual perspective or empathy, we can become communication competent.

Elevating Communication with Intentional Practice

Effective communication depends on far more than simply exchanging words; it requires awareness, adaptability, and ongoing skill development across a wide range of interpersonal and cultural contexts. The barriers and challenges discussed, such as communication apprehension, cultural differences, bias, and defensive communication patterns, highlight how easily misunderstandings can arise when these factors are not recognized or addressed. Simultaneously, the strategies outlined throughout this section demonstrate that communication competence can be strengthened through intentional practice, including cultural empathy, responsible language use, perspective-taking, and ethical interaction. By integrating these approaches, individuals are better equipped to navigate complex communication environments, reduce defensiveness and misunderstanding, and build more respectful, inclusive, and effective personal and professional relationships.

Attributions

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6.4: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Language serves multiple essential functions in interpersonal communication, especially its expressive role. People use language to communicate observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs, each of which differs in level of subjectivity and interpretation. Observations focus on sensory facts, thoughts involve judgments and interpretations, feelings express emotional experiences, and needs communicate requests or wants. Understanding these distinctions helps reduce misunderstanding and improves clarity in everyday interaction.

Language is also powerful because it influences identity, credibility, and social action. Individuals use language to express who they are, while also navigating labels that may be self-chosen or socially imposed. Credibility is shaped by how people speak, including clarity, accountability, and adherence to social expectations in different contexts. In addition, language can function as a form of control through directives, reinforcement, and message framing, while performative language demonstrates that certain utterances actually do something in the world, such as making promises or legal declarations.

The relational nature of language in shaping interpersonal connections is also evident. Conversation is structured through social patterns such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and appropriate topic transitions that help interactions flow smoothly. The use of “I,” “you,” and “we” language influences whether communication fosters connection or defensiveness, especially when responsibility is unclear or shifted onto others. Language also plays a role in relationship development and maintenance, while humor and everyday expression can strengthen bonds or create distance depending on how messages are received.

Language is dynamic and shaped by cultural context. New words and meanings constantly emerge through neologisms, slang, and shifts in usage, reflecting the evolving nature of communication. Cultural influences affect dialects, accents, politeness norms, and interpretation of meaning, which can lead to both misunderstanding and deeper insight across differences. These variations demonstrate that language is not fixed but continuously shaped by social experience, identity, and interaction.

Communication barriers and the development of communication competence are also addressed. Communication apprehension can limit effectiveness in certain contexts, especially public speaking or intercultural communication, but it can be managed through awareness and practice. Skills such as cultural empathy, social intelligence, and cultural sensitivity help reduce ethnocentrism and improve understanding across differences. Responsible communication practices, including reducing blame, using neutral language, and avoiding defensiveness, strengthen clarity and relationships. Overall, competence in communication depends on ongoing learning, reflection, and ethical use of language in diverse situations.

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6.5: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Adjacency pairs
- "But" statements
- Code-switching
- Communication accommodation theory
- Commissives
- Control messages
- Contranyms
- Convergence
- Cultural empathy
- Cultural sensitivity
- Defensiveness
- Dialect
- Directives
- Divergence
- Ethnocentrism
- Hate speech
- "I" language
- Indifference
- Inversion
- Linguistic reclamation
- Muted group theory
- Neologisms
- Phatic communication
- Portmanteau
- Retronym
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
- Slang
- Superiority
- Turn taking
- "We" language
- "You" statements

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6.6: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. The chapter outlines five functions of language (expressive, powerful, fun, dynamic, relational). Choose one recent conversation you had and identify at least two of these functions. How did they shape the interaction and outcome?
2. Why is it difficult for people to separate observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs in everyday communication? Provide an example of a message that mixes these categories and rewrite it in a clearer way.
3. How does culture influence the way we interpret meaning in communication? Share an example of a misunderstanding that could occur due to cultural differences in language use, tone, or expectations.
4. Communication apprehension varies by situation (e.g., public speaking, group discussions, intercultural communication). In which context do you experience the most apprehension, and what strategies might help reduce it?
5. The chapter discusses cultural bias, prejudice, and the language of responsibility. Why is it important to shift from "you statements" to more neutral or responsible phrasing? How might this improve relationships in personal or professional settings?

Chapter Exercises

1. Language Function Identification Log
    1. For one full day, record five different conversations (in-person, text, or online). For each, identify which functions of language were present (expressive, powerful, fun, dynamic, relational). Briefly explain your reasoning.
2. Observation, Thought, Feeling, and Need Rewrite Practice
    1. Rewrite the following message into four separate, clear statements:
        1. "I feel like you never respect my time and it really makes me frustrated when you show up late."
    2. Then label each rewritten part as:
        1. Observation
        2. Thought
        3. Feeling
        4. Need
3. Culture and Miscommunication Scenario Analysis
    1. Create a short scenario (3–5 sentences) where a misunderstanding occurs due to cultural differences (accents, dialects, norms, or expectations). Then explain:
        1. What caused the misunderstanding?
        2. How it could be resolved using cultural empathy or accommodation?
4. Communication Apprehension Reflection Plan
    1. Identify one situation where you experience communication apprehension (public speaking, group participation, intercultural interaction, etc.). Then:
        1. Describe your physical, emotional, and cognitive reactions.
        2. List two specific strategies to reduce apprehension in that context.
5. Bias and Responsible Language Revision
    1. Revise each of the following biased or defensive statements into more responsible, neutral, or inclusive language:
        1. a. "You never listen to me."
        2. b. "That's so stupid."
        3. c. "The elderly are always confused."
        4. d. "You guys need to fix this problem."
    2. For each revision, briefly explain how your wording reduces bias or defensiveness.

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7: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Chapter Overview

Nonverbal communication is a fundamental part of how people create and interpret meaning in interpersonal relationships. Rather than being limited to facial expressions or gestures, nonverbal communication encompasses a wide range of behaviors and cues, including body movement, eye behavior, touch, physical distance, vocal qualities, appearance, artifacts, environment, scent, and the use of time. These channels work alongside verbal communication to reinforce, substitute for, or contradict words; regulate conversations; communicate emotion; shape perceptions; express identity; influence others; and establish and maintain relationships. At the same time, nonverbal communication is often more ambiguous and involuntary than verbal communication, making mindful interpretation especially important.

Nonverbal communication is shaped by culture, context, relationships, and power. The same gesture, amount of eye contact, physical distance, touch, vocal quality, or use of time can communicate very different meanings depending on the people involved and the situation. Developing nonverbal competence therefore requires more than learning what particular behaviors supposedly "mean." It requires awareness, observation, self-monitoring, cultural humility, attention to context, and ethical consideration of how power and privilege shape both the messages people send and the meanings others assign to those messages.



Figure 7.1: Several people conversing in a group setting using a variety of nonverbal communication forms, namely hand gestures and eye contact, illustrating the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication. (CC BY 2.0; Beatrice Murch via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Define nonverbal communication and distinguish it from verbal communication while explaining how the two systems work together to create meaning.
- Explain the major principles and functions of nonverbal communication, including its emotional, relational, perceptual, regulatory, influential, and identity-related functions.
- Identify and analyze major channels of nonverbal communication, including kinesics, oculesics, haptics, proxemics, vocalics, artifacts, appearance, environment, olfactics, and chronemics.
- Apply concepts of nonverbal immediacy, cultural variation, contextual interpretation, and self-monitoring to interpersonal and professional interactions.
- Evaluate nonverbal communication ethically by considering ambiguity, cultural differences, identity, accessibility, power, privilege, positionality, and the potential difference between communicative intent and impact.

7.1: Principles and Functions of Nonverbal Communication
7.2: Nonverbal Communication Channels
7.3: Nonverbal Communication Skills and Competence
7.4: Chapter Review
7.5: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools
7.6: Discussions and Exercises
7.7: References

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7.1: Principles and Functions of Nonverbal Communication

Overview

Nonverbal communication is a central component of interpersonal meaning-making and differs from verbal language. The material examines the major principles and functions of nonverbal communication, emphasizing emotional, ambiguous, involuntary, cultural, perceptual, relational, and identity-related dimensions.

Learning Objectives

- Define nonverbal communication and distinguish it from verbal communication, including the role of language and sign languages.
- Explain why nonverbal communication can be more emotionally expressive, ambiguous, involuntary, and culturally variable than verbal communication.
- Identify the major functions of nonverbal communication, including reinforcing, substituting, contradicting, influencing, regulating interaction, affecting relationships, and expressing identity.
- Analyze how nonverbal communication shapes perceptions, relationships, emotions, and interpersonal interactions.
- Evaluate the role of cultural norms and social power in the interpretation and ethical use of nonverbal communication.

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!). As we will unpack later in the chapter, this description even distinguishes the words we say (verbal) from the tone of voice we use to say them (nonverbal).

Another important distinction is that verbal communication covers the process of generating shared meaning with the use of language and words... but it doesn't specify that these words must be spoken. Verbal communication is the use of any language and words, including those words written and typed (though, that is a combination of verbal and nonverbal since the words are written using objects and devices). The distinguishing characteristic of verbal communication is not that it is spoken, but that it follows a shared culturally constructed set of syntactical and grammatical rules. Therefore: sign language is **not** nonverbal communication. It is a language that follows a set of constitutive rules, and is verbal communication.

Definition: Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal Communication is the generation of shared meaning without the use of language or words.

Principles of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication has a distinct history and has evolved separately from verbal communication, due to its unique functions. For example, nonverbal communication is primarily biologically based, while verbal communication is primarily

culturally based. This is evidenced by the fact that some nonverbal communication has similar meaning across cultures, while no verbal communication systems share that same universal recognizability (Andersen, 1999). Nonverbal communication also evolved earlier than verbal communication and served an early and important survival function that helped humans later develop verbal communication.

Due to this differing evolution and development of nonverbal communication, it has a particular and unique set of considerations and conditions that important to understand.

Nonverbal Communication Conveys Important Emotional Messages

The evolutionary history of nonverbal communication belies a tie between nonverbal communication and human emotion. We may rely more on nonverbal signals in situations where verbal and nonverbal messages conflict and in situations where emotional or relational communication is taking place (Hargie, 2011).

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

Micro-expressions

The involuntary nature of much nonverbal communication makes it more difficult to control or “fake.” For example, although you can consciously smile a little and shake hands with someone when you first see them, it’s difficult to fake that you’re “happy” to meet someone. Nonverbal communication leaks out in ways that expose our underlying thoughts or feelings. These spontaneous, unrehearsed expressions and gestures are known as micro-expressions. **Micro-expressions** are fleeting, involuntary facial expressions that inadvertently slip through when individuals attempt to conceal or repress their genuine feelings. These can manifest as subtle movements of the entire face or as isolated muscle contractions. Through extensive exploration, it has been revealed that specific facial expressions associated with a single emotion can occur within a time frame ranging from 0.5 seconds to 4 seconds. Some may persist throughout the entire face, while others transpire too swiftly to be precisely measured, confirming the existence of micro-expressions. (Yang, 2024)

Have you ever tried to conceal your surprise, suppress your anger, or act joyful even when you weren’t? Most people whose careers don’t involve conscious manipulation of nonverbal signals find it difficult to control or suppress them. While we can consciously decide to stop sending verbal messages, our nonverbal communication always has the potential of generating meaning for another person. The teenager who decides to shut out his dad and not communicate with him still sends a message with his “blank” stare (still a facial expression) and lack of movement (still a gesture). In this sense, nonverbal communication is “irrepressible” (Andersen, 1999).

Spokespeople, lawyers, or other public representatives who are the “face” of a politician, celebrity, corporation, or organization must learn to control their facial expressions and other nonverbal communication so they can effectively convey the message of their employer or client without having their personal thoughts and feelings leak through. Poker players, therapists, police officers, doctors, teachers, and actors are also in professions that often require them to have more awareness of and control over their nonverbal communication.

In contrast, there are situations in which verbal communication carries more weight than nonverbal cues. For example, during a round table discussion, intelligence or security briefings, or political discussions, where the primary goal is exchanging information, it is verbal content that accounts for most of the meaning. Even so, a key principle of nonverbal communication is that it typically plays a stronger role in interpersonal and emotionally driven interactions.



Figure 7.1.1: About 65 percent of the meaning we derive during interactions comes from nonverbal communication. (CC BY 2.0; Gideon via Flickr)

Nonverbal Communication is More Ambiguous

Verbal Communication can consist of several factors that contribute to message ambiguity and potential misunderstandings; however, nonverbal communication is even more ambiguous. As with verbal communication, most of our nonverbal signals can be linked to multiple meanings, but unlike words, many nonverbal signals do not have any one specific meaning. If you've ever had someone wink at you and didn't know why, you've probably experienced this uncertainty. Did they wink to express their affection for you, their pleasure with something you just did, or because you share some inside knowledge or joke?

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

Nonverbal Communication Is More Involuntary

Most of our nonverbal communication practices are quite intentionally sent, like hand gestures, hair styles, or clothing attire. However there is also a large portion of nonverbal communication that is not only unintentional but also immutable and incontrollable by the sender of these messages. In these instances, the receiver of the nonverbal message has the entire and sole responsibility of ethically and mindfully interpreting the meaning of the message.

The lower stakes category of involuntary nonverbal communication is bodily functions. What is someone communicating when they yawn, or sneeze, or cry? These often occur completely out of the control of the sender, and there likely was no intended meaning in this symbolic message. So what does it mean? As we discussed earlier, nonverbal communication is very ambiguous, and so the meaning could be any number of things. Is the other person ill, fatigued, bored, stressed, all of the above? The receiver of this message must be very careful to not immediately assume the meaning of the message since the sender couldn't control this at all.

The higher stakes category of involuntary nonverbal communication comes from race and ethnicity within systems of power. Specifically, we can consider skin color and accents. The meaning of symbolic messages is socially constructed, and skin tone and vocal intonation are symbolic messages with meaning attached to them, and therefore are forms of nonverbal communication. However, people cannot control the color of their skin eyes or hair, and multilingual people cannot control the accent with which they speak. It is the sole responsibility of the receiver of these involuntary nonverbal messages to mindfully and ethically decode a proper meaning of the message.

Nonverbal is Culturally Based

Although there are elements of nonverbal communication that are biologically/evolutionarily based (such as the connection between nonverbal communication and emotion), it is *also* true that nonverbal communication is culturally based. Successful interactions with individuals from other cultures are partially based on the ability to adapt to or understand the nonverbal behaviors associated with different cultures. If we do not know the appropriate nonverbal communication with someone from another culture, then we must at least acknowledge that there is a need to be flexible, and ask. There are specific aspects of nonverbal communication that differ depending on the culture. When entering a new culture, we must learn the rules of the culture.

Regarding recognizing differences, you may encounter someone from a culture that communicates very differently from you and perhaps in an unexpected way. Expectations and meanings around physical touch, personal distance, vocal inflections, and more are rooted in cultural norms and values. Researching and understanding the nonverbal communication of different countries before entering the country can often mean a smoother entry phase, whether conducting business or simply visiting.

Nonverbal Communication Creates Perception

Upon meeting someone, more often than not we receive nonverbal communication about the other person first. Consider a situation in which you and a good friend are waiting outside a restaurant for a table, and you will soon be joined by a friend of your friend whom you have not yet met. As you are waiting outside, your friend says "oh! Here they come!" and waves to a person walking up the sidewalk. When you see this new person... what will be the first thing you notice? Their hair? Their clothes? Their height? Their race? Whatever the case may be, your first perception of this person will be rooted in nonverbal communication, and from there you will move through the perception process of selecting, organizing (and stereotyping!), and interpreting the information you have received about this person. As discussed in other chapters, if we are not mindful of our process of perceiving others, we will likely slide from stereotyping into prejudice and into discrimination, and all that starts with nonverbal communication.

Functions of Nonverbal Communication

As we've already learned, verbal and nonverbal communication are two parts of the same system that often work side by side, helping us generate meaning. A primary function of nonverbal communication is to convey meaning by reinforcing, substituting for, or contradicting verbal communication. Nonverbal communication is also used to influence others and regulate conversational flow. Perhaps even more important are how nonverbal communication functions as a central part of relational communication and identity expression.

Nonverbal Communication By Reinforcing

In terms of reinforcing verbal communication, gestures can help describe a space or shape that another person is unfamiliar with in ways that words alone cannot. Gestures also reinforce basic meaning—for example, pointing to the door when you tell someone to leave. Facial expressions reinforce the emotional states we convey through verbal communication. For example, smiling while telling a funny story better conveys your emotions (Hargie, 2011). Vocal variation can help us emphasize a particular part of a message, which helps reinforce a word or sentence's meaning. For example, saying "How was *your* weekend?" conveys a different meaning than saying "How was your *weekend*?"

Nonverbal Communication By Substituting

Nonverbal communication can substitute for verbal communication in a variety of ways. Nonverbal communication can convey much meaning when verbal communication isn't effective because of language barriers. **Language barriers** are present when a person hasn't yet learned to speak or loses the ability to speak.

Example 7.1.2 Babies Communicate Nonverbally

Scenario: Justice, a nervous new parent, goes to their baby's crib and sees that the baby is awake with an expression of discomfort on their little face. The baby's nose is pink and wrinkled as if she is unhappy about something. Justice registers that the baby needs to be changed. Justice gently picks up their baby and changes the diaper, which was indeed in need of changing. After a few moments of play, Justice sets the baby back down in the crib, and the baby smiles and coos for a few moments before drifting off to sleep.

Impact: Babies who have not yet developed language skills make facial expressions at a few months old that are similar to those of adults and therefore can generate meaning (Oster, Hegley, & Nagel, 1992).

People who cannot use spoken language, such as infants, individuals with undeveloped or impaired language skills, or those who temporarily or permanently lose language, can still communicate nonverbally. This is also true when people speak different languages, such as in cross-cultural situations. While learning the local language is helpful when traveling, basic gestures like pointing or showing size and shape are often enough for simple communication.

Nonverbal communication is also useful in a quiet situation where verbal communication would be disturbing; for example, you may use a gesture to signal to a friend that you're ready to leave the library. Crowded or loud places can also impede verbal communication and lead people to rely more on nonverbal messages. Getting a server or bartender's attention with a hand gesture is definitely more polite than yelling, "Hey, dude!" There are also times when it's just better not to say something aloud. If you want to point out a person's unusual outfit or signal to a friend that you think his or her date is weird, you're more likely to do that nonverbally, at least at the beginning.

Nonverbal Communication By Contradicting

Nonverbal communication can convey meaning by contradicting verbal communication. As we learned earlier, we often perceive nonverbal communication to be more reliably honest than verbal communication. This is especially true when we receive mixed messages or messages in which verbal and nonverbal signals contradict each other. For example, a person may say, "You can't do anything right!" in a mean tone but follow that up with a wink, which could indicate the person is teasing or joking. Or perhaps say the words "You can't do anything right!" but with the particular up-and-down tonal inflection indicated sarcasm. Sometimes this contradiction between verbal and nonverbal messages is used intentionally for humor or other similar emotional responses. But other times the contradiction may simply be unclear or confusing. Mixed messages lead to uncertainty on the part of receivers, which leads us to look for more information to try to determine which message is more credible. If we are unable to resolve the discrepancy, we are likely to react negatively and potentially withdraw from the interaction (Hargie, 2011). Persistent mixed messages can lead to relational distress and hurt a person's credibility in professional settings.



Figure 7.1.2: We send mixed messages when our verbal and nonverbal communication contradict each other. If this woman said she was excited about seeing you, would you believe her? (CC BY-NC 2.0; Bored via Flickr)

Nonverbal Communication Influences Others

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

Aside from deception, we can use nonverbal communication to "take the edge off" a critical or unpleasant message in an attempt to influence the reaction of the other person. We can also use eye contact and proximity to get someone to move or leave an area. For example, hungry diners waiting to snag a 'first-come, first-served' spot in a crowded restaurant send messages to the people who have already eaten and paid that it's time to go. People on competition reality television shows play what they've come to term as a "social game." The social aspects of the game involve the manipulation of verbal and nonverbal cues to send strategic messages about oneself in an attempt to influence others. Nonverbal cues such as length of conversational turn, volume, posture, touch, eye contact, and choices of clothing and accessories can become part of a player's social game strategy. Although reality television isn't a reflection of real life, people still engage in competition and strategically change their communication to influence others, making it important to be aware of how we nonverbally influence others and how they may try to influence us. Your public speaking instructor may have encouraged you to deliver a speech standing tall, to dress "professionally," to speak clearly and enunciate projecting to the back of the room, and avoid use of vocal fillers. Although many of these considerations are rooted in racism, classism, sexism, and ableism, there is truth that these nonverbal communication strategies may have an influencing effect on our audience. Many use nonverbal communication for this type of influence. What other ways can you think of that we use nonverbal communication to gain favor or influence the behavior of others?

Nonverbal Communication Regulates Conversational Flow

Conversational interaction has been likened to a dance, where each person has to make moves and take turns without stepping on the other's toes. Nonverbal communication helps us regulate our conversations so we don't end up constantly interrupting each other or waiting in awkward silences between speaker turns. Pitch, which is a part of vocalics, helps us cue others into our conversational intentions. A rising pitch typically indicates a question, and a falling pitch indicates the end of a thought or the end of a conversational turn. We can also use a falling pitch to indicate closure and hand off the conversation to whomever wants to speak next. We also signal our turn is coming to an end by stopping hand gestures and shifting our eye contact to the person who we think will speak next (Hargie, 2011). Conversely, we can "hold the floor" with nonverbal signals even when we're not exactly sure what we're going to say next. Repeating a hand gesture or using one or more verbal fillers can extend our turn even though we are not verbally communicating at the moment.

Nonverbal Communication Affects Relationships

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

Tie signs are nonverbal cues that communicate intimacy and signal the connection between two people. These relational indicators can be objects such as wedding rings or tattoos that are symbolic of another person or the relationship, actions such as sharing the same drinking glass, or touch behaviors such as hand-holding (Afifi & Johnson, 2005). **Touch behaviors** are the most frequently studied tie signs and can communicate much about a relationship based on the area being touched, the length of time, and the intensity of the touch. Kisses and hugs, for example, are considered tie signs, but a kiss on the cheek is different from a kiss on the mouth, and a full embrace is different from a half embrace. If you consider yourself a "people watcher," take note of the various tie signs you see people use and what they might say about the relationship.

Immediacy behaviors play a central role in bringing people together and have been identified by some scholars as the most important function of nonverbal communication (Andersen & Andersen, 2005). **Immediacy behaviors** are verbal and nonverbal

behaviors that lessen real or perceived physical and psychological distance between communicators and include things like smiling, nodding, making eye contact, and occasionally engaging in social, polite, or professional touch (Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007). Immediacy behaviors are a good way of creating rapport, or a friendly and positive connection between people. Skilled nonverbal communicators are more likely to be able to create rapport with others due to attention-getting expressiveness, warm initial greetings, and an ability to get "in tune" with others, which conveys empathy (Riggio, 1992). These skills are important to help initiate and maintain relationships.

While verbal communication is our primary tool for solving problems and providing detailed instructions, nonverbal communication is our primary tool for communicating emotions. This makes sense when we remember that nonverbal communication emerged before verbal communication and was the channel through which we expressed anger, fear, and love for thousands of years of human history (Andersen, 1999). Touch and facial expressions are two primary ways we express emotions nonverbally. Given many people's limited emotional vocabulary, nonverbal expressions of emotion are central to our relationships.

Think About This 4.1.1 "Getting Real": Teachers and Immediacy Behaviors

Research shows the importance of teachers' use of immediacy behaviors in educational settings (Richmond, Lane, & McCroskey, 2006). Immediacy behaviors are verbal and nonverbal actions that reduce physical or psychological distance between communicators and positively influence student learning, teacher evaluations, and teacher–student relationships (Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007). Research consistently shows that effective use of immediacy behaviors enhances learning across different contexts and levels, while also leading to more favorable student evaluations, which can impact a teacher's career. Students often form quick judgments about teachers based on nonverbal cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, posture, and movement, which shape perceptions of credibility, confidence, and approachability. Although commonly studied in teaching, immediacy behaviors are also valuable in other interpersonal settings, including workplaces, sales, and politics. The following are examples of immediacy behaviors that can be effectively used by teachers:

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

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

Nonverbal Communication Expresses Our Identities

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

Aside from our physical body, artifacts, which are the objects and possessions that surround us, also communicate our identities. Examples of artifacts include our clothes, jewelry, and space decorations. In all the previous examples, implicit norms or explicit

rules can affect how we nonverbally present ourselves. For example, in a particular workplace, it may be a norm (implicit) for people in management positions to dress casually, or it may be a rule (explicit) that different levels of employees wear different uniforms or follow particular dress codes. We can also use nonverbal communication to express identity characteristics that do not match up with who we actually think we are. Through changes to nonverbal signals, a capable person can try to appear helpless, a guilty person can try to appear innocent, or an uninformed person can try to appear credible.

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7.2: Nonverbal Communication Channels

Overview

People communicate nonverbally through diverse channels that often operate together rather than independently. The material explores kinesics, oculesics, haptics, proxemics, vocalics, artifacts and environment, physical appearance, olfactics, and chronemics, with particular attention to cultural variation and the ways these channels shape interpersonal meaning.

Learning Objectives

- Identify and define the major channels of nonverbal communication, including kinesics, oculesics, haptics, proxemics, vocalics, artifacts, appearance, environment, olfactics, and chronemics.
- Describe how specific nonverbal behaviors, such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, physical distance, vocal qualities, and silence, communicate meaning.
- Analyze how cultural norms influence interpretations of gestures, eye behavior, touch, personal space, vocal characteristics, appearance, scent, and time.
- Differentiate among types of touch, proxemic zones, vocal characteristics, and cultural orientations toward time.
- Apply knowledge of multiple nonverbal channels to interpret interpersonal situations while avoiding assumptions that assign a single fixed meaning to a behavior.

Types of Nonverbal Communication

"You cannot not communicate." If you are alive, you are communicating. This truth is due the fact that there are a plethora of channels–both voluntary and involuntary– through which we communicate nonverbally. 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.

In this section we will discuss several of the categories and specific channels through which we communication nonverbally. Its important to note, however, that in our lived experience nonverbal communication never happens truly in isolation; it always happens in combination with other nonverbal communication channels or verbal communication channels. So although we will try to separate them into separate categories for the sake of our discussion and understanding in this book, these categories blend together quite a bit in our lives. The primary categories of nonverbal communication channels we will discuss are:

1. Kinesics
2. Oculesics
3. Vocalics
4. Haptics
5. Proxemics
6. Artifacts
7. Appearance
8. Environment
9. Olfactics
10. Chronemics

Kinesics

The word **kinesics** comes from the root word *kinesis*, which means “movement,” and refers to the study of communicating with the use of body movements. This section outlines the use of gestures, head movements, posture, eye contact, and facial expressions as nonverbal communication.

Gestures

Gestures are the ways in which we communicate using our hands and arms. There are three main types of gestures: adaptors, emblems, and illustrators (Andersen, 1999). **Adaptors** are gestures that indicate a speaker's mental and emotional state. Adaptors can be targeted toward the self, objects, or others. In regular social situations, adaptors result from uneasiness, anxiety, or a general sense that one is not in control of one's surroundings. Many of us subconsciously touch our hair, shake our legs, and blindly scroll on our phones (artifacts! discussed later) during class, activities, meetings, or while waiting for an appointment, simply as a way to do something with our excess energy.

Common self-touching behaviors like scratching, twirling hair, or fidgeting with fingers or hands are considered **self-adaptors**. Some self-adaptors manifest internally, as coughs or throat-clearing sounds. Some people use object adaptors, such as various fidget items, though as mentioned before, this is a combination of a gesture with an artifact (two nonverbal communication channels in one!).

Emblems are gestures that have a specific, agreed-upon meaning. These are still different from the language used by the deaf community or others who communicate using American Sign Language (ASL). Even though they have a generally agreed-upon meaning, emblems are not part of a formal sign system like ASL that is explicitly taught to a group of people. A hitchhiker's raised thumb, the "OK" sign with thumb and index finger connected in a circle with the other three fingers sticking up, and the raised middle finger are all examples of emblems that have an agreed-on meaning or meanings within a culture. Emblems can be still or in motion; for example, waving our hand back and forth in front of our face to communicate an unpleasant smell, or rolling your hands over and over in front of you says "Move on."



Figure 7.2.1: Emblems are gestures that have a specific meaning. In the United States, a thumbs-up can mean "I need a ride" or "OK!". In other countries, it might have a very different, agreed-upon meaning. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Thumbs Up via Flickr)

Just as we can trace the history of a word, or its etymology, we can also trace some nonverbal signals, especially emblems, to their origins. Holding up the index and middle fingers in a "V" shape with the palm facing in is an insult gesture in Britain that basically means "up yours." This gesture dates back centuries to the period in which the primary weapon of war was the bow and arrow. When archers were captured, their enemies would often cut off these two fingers, which was seen as the ultimate insult and worse than being executed, since the archer could no longer shoot his bow and arrow. Holding up two fingers was a provoking gesture used by archers to show their enemies that they still had their shooting fingers (Pease & Pease, 2004).

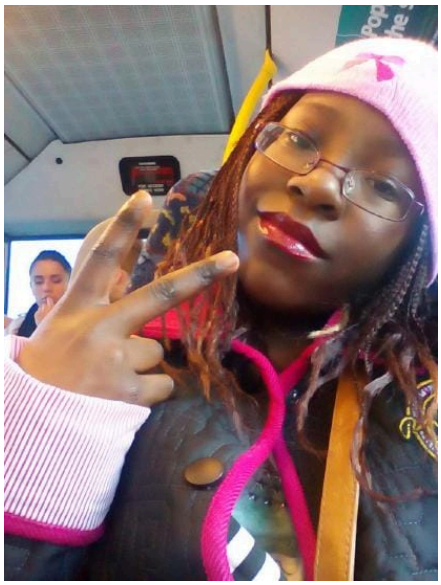


Figure 7.2.2: Holding up the index and middle fingers in a “V” shape with the palm facing in is an insulting gesture in the UK. In the United States, the same gesture symbolizes 'Goodbye' or 'Peace Out'. The meaning of this gesture has evolved over time and across cultures. (CC BY SA 3.0; NickyKushonga 123 via Wikimedia Commons)

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

Head Movements and Posture

Head movements and posture can be grouped because they are often both used to acknowledge others and communicate interest or attentiveness. In terms of head movements, a head nod is often a sign of acknowledgement in cultures where the formal bow is no longer used as a greeting. In these cases, the head nod essentially serves as an abbreviated bow. An innate head movement is the head shake back and forth to signal “no.” This nonverbal signal begins at birth, even before a baby can know that it has a corresponding meaning. Babies shake their head from side to side to reject their mother’s breast and later shake their head to reject attempts to spoon-feed (Pease & Pease, 2004). This biologically based movement then sticks with us to be a recognizable signal for “no.” We also move our head to indicate interest. For example, a head up typically indicates an engaged or neutral attitude, a head tilt indicates interest and is an innate submission gesture that exposes the neck and subconsciously makes people feel more trusting of us, and a head down signals a negative or aggressive attitude (Pease & Pease, 2004).

Though widely recognized with the same meanings, the head nod to indicate 'yes' and the head shake to indicate 'no' are not, however, universal. In Bulgaria, for example, a nod means the opposite of agreement; rather, a head nod in Bulgaria indicates disagreement, while shaking the head from side to side indicates agreement (Moretti, Greco, Andonova, & Giagtzidou, 2020). India has a somewhat similar gesture for agreement, which can be a side-to-side shaking of the head, or a "head bobble," which is similar to making the infinity sign with one's head.

Facial Expressions

Our faces are the most expressive part of our bodies. Think of how photos are often intended to capture a particular expression “in a flash” to preserve for later viewing. Even though a photo is a snapshot in time, we can still interpret much meaning from a human face caught in a moment of expression, and basic facial expressions are recognizable by humans all over the world. Much research has supported the universality of a core group of facial expressions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust. The first four are especially identifiable across cultures (Andersen, 1999). However, the triggers for these expressions and the cultural and social norms that influence their displays are still culturally diverse. If you’ve spent much time with babies, you know that they’re capable of expressing all these emotions. Getting to see the pure and innate expressions of joy and surprise on a baby’s face is what makes playing peek-a-boo so entertaining for adults. As we get older, we learn and begin to follow display rules for

facial expressions and other signals of emotion, and also learn to better control our emotional expression based on the norms of our culture.

Smiles are powerful communicative signals and a key immediacy behavior. Although facial expressions are typically viewed as innate and several are universally recognizable, they are not always connected to an emotional or internal biological stimulus; they can actually serve a more social purpose. For example, most of the smiles we produce are primarily made for others and are not just an involuntary reflection of an internal emotional state (Andersen, 1999). These social smiles, however, are slightly but perceptibly different from more genuine smiles. People generally perceive smiles as more genuine when the other person smiles "with their eyes." This particular type of smile is difficult to fake because the muscles around the eye that are activated when we spontaneously or genuinely smile are not under our voluntary control. It is the involuntary and spontaneous contraction of these muscles that moves the skin around our cheeks, eyes, and nose to create a smile that's distinct from a fake or polite smile (Evans, 2001). People can distinguish the difference between these smiles, which is why photographers often engage in cheesy joking with adults or use props with children to induce a genuine smile before they snap a picture.

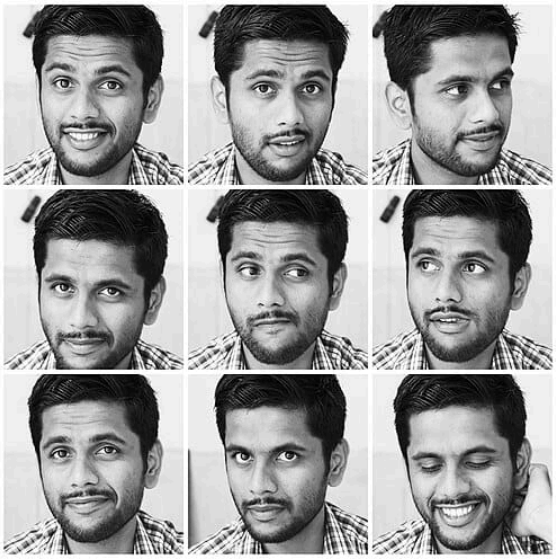


Figure 7.2.5: A collage of a man displaying various emotions, some genuine, some fake. Photographers often joke with their subjects to induce genuine smiles before snapping their pictures (CC BY SA 4.0; Kuiperbharat Wikimedia Commons)

Oculesics

We also communicate through eye behaviors, primarily eye contact. While eye behaviors are often studied under the category of kinesics, they have their own branch of nonverbal studies called **oculesics**, which comes from the Latin word *oculus*, meaning "eye."

Eye contact serves several communicative functions, ranging from regulating interaction to monitoring interaction to conveying information to establishing interpersonal connections. In terms of regulating communication, we use eye contact to signal to others that we are ready to speak, or we use it to cue others to speak. I'm sure we've all been in that awkward situation where a teacher asks a question, no one else offers a response, and they look directly at us as if to say, "What do you think?" In that case, the teacher's eye contact is used to cue us to respond. During an interaction, eye contact also changes as we shift from speaker to listener. U.S. Americans typically shift eye contact while speaking—looking away from the listener and then looking back at his or her face every few seconds. Toward the end of our speaking turn, we make more direct eye contact with our listener to indicate that we are finishing up. People know not to interrupt when we are in deep thought because we naturally look away from others when we are processing information.

Eye contact can also be used to intimidate others. We have social norms about how much eye contact we make with people, and those norms vary depending on the setting and the person. Expectations Violations Theory tells us that we learn the intricacies of the norms in response to the various settings and participants through violating those norms. Every time we register that we have made someone uncomfortable, we make a mental note to not do that again. Through infinite trial and error, we eventually learn the expected behavior. This is important, because getting it wrong can create a bit of a social faux pas. Staring at another person in some contexts could communicate intimidation, while in other contexts it could communicate flirtation. As we learned,

eye contact is a key immediacy behavior, and it signals to others that we are available for communication. Once communication begins, if it does, eye contact helps establish rapport or connection. We can also use our eye contact to signal that we do not want to make a connection with others. For example, in a public setting like an airport or a gym where people often make small talk, we can avoid making eye contact with others to indicate that we do not want to engage in small talk with strangers.

Eye contact has many functions in nonverbal communication. Below are a few ways to use eye contact.

Specific Functions of Eye Contact

This list reviews the specific functions of eye contact:

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

Haptics

Think of how touch has the power to comfort someone in a moment of sorrow when words alone cannot. This positive power of touch is countered by the potential for touch to be threatening because of its connection to sex and violence. To learn about the power of touch, we turn to **haptics**, which refers to the study of communication by touch. We probably get more explicit advice and instruction on how to use touch than any other form of nonverbal communication. A lack of nonverbal communication competence related to touch could have negative interpersonal consequences; for example, if we don't follow the advice we've been given about the importance of a firm handshake, a person might make negative judgments about our confidence or credibility. A lack of competence could have more dire negative consequences, including legal punishment, if someone is touched inappropriately (intentionally or unintentionally). Touch is necessary for human social development, and it can be welcoming, threatening, or persuasive. Research projects have found that students evaluated a library and its staff more favorably if the librarian briefly touched the patron while returning their library card, that feminine restaurant servers received larger tips when they touched patrons, and that people were more likely to sign a petition when the petitioner touched them during their interaction (Andersen, 1999).

Different Types of Touch

There are several types of touch, including functional-professional, social-polite, friendship-warmth, love-intimacy, and sexual-arousal touch (Heslin & Apler, 1983). At the **functional-professional** level, touch is related to a goal or part of a routine professional interaction, which makes it less threatening and more expected. For example, we let barbers, hairstylists, doctors, nurses, tattoo artists, and security screeners touch us in ways that would otherwise be seen as intimate or inappropriate if not in a professional context (do *not* get professional touch confused with intimate touch). On a social level, we must note that there are over 8 billion people on the planet, and sometimes our bodies will touch one another's. At the **social-polite** level, socially sanctioned touching behaviors help maintain polite cultural norms, initiate interactions, and show that others are included and respected. A handshake, a pat on the arm, and a pat on the shoulder are examples of social-polite touching. A handshake is actually an abbreviated hand-holding gesture, but we know that prolonged hand-holding would be considered too intimate and therefore inappropriate at the social-polite level. The mediated trop of the "meet-cute" often begins with hands touching in an otherwise innocuous situation, such as a barista handing a cup of coffee to a patron. Please don't misunderstand the dramatic storytelling. As cute as it is in a romantic comedy film, sometimes our bodies simply touch others, and these touches often communicate politeness and inclusion, not friendship or intimacy.

Of course, touch is also important at more intimate levels. At the **friendship-warmth** level, touch is more important and more ambiguous than at the social-polite level. At this level, touch interactions are important because they serve a relational maintenance purpose and communicate closeness, liking, care, and concern. The types of touching at this level also vary greatly, from more formal and ritualized to more intimate, which means friends must sometimes negotiate their own comfort level with various types of touch and may encounter some ambiguity if their preferences don't match up with their relational partner's. In a friendship, for example, too much touch can signal sexual or romantic interest, and too little touch can signal distance

or unfriendliness. The line between touch that communicates distance, friendship, and romance must be negotiated within the relationship. At the **love-intimacy** level, touch is more personal and is typically only exchanged between significant others, such as best friends, close family members, and romantic partners. Touching faces, holding hands, and full embraces are examples of touch at this level. Although this level of touch is not sexual, it does enhance feelings of closeness and intimacy and can lead to **sexual-arousal touch,** which is the most intimate form of touch, as it is intended to physically stimulate another person.

Touch is also used in many other contexts—for example, during play (e.g., arm wrestling), during physical conflict (e.g., slapping), and during conversations (e.g., to get someone's attention) (Jones, 1999). We also inadvertently send messages through accidental touch (e.g., bumping into someone).



Figure 7.2.6: A couple on a date relaxing together. What type of touch behaviors are present in this photo? (CC BY SA 2.0; Adam Jones via Wikimedia Commons)

During a first date or less formal initial interactions, quick, fleeting touches indicate interest. For example, a pat on the back is an abbreviated hug (Andersen,1999). In general, the presence or absence of touching cues us into people's emotions. So as the daters sit across from each other, one person may lightly tap the other's arm after they said something funny. If the daters are sitting side by side, one person may cross their legs and lean toward the other person so that each person's knees or feet occasionally touch. Touching behavior as a way to express feelings is often reciprocal. A light touch from the other will follow a light touch from one dater to indicate that the first touch was OK. While verbal communication could also be used to indicate romantic interest, many people feel too vulnerable at this early stage in a relationship to put something out there in words. If your date advances a touch and you are not interested, it is also unlikely that you will come right out and say, "Sorry, but I'm not really interested." Instead, due to common politeness rituals, you would be more likely to respond with other forms of nonverbal communication, like scooting back, crossing your arms, or simply not acknowledging the touch.

Demand Touch

Perhaps the touch that is most important to understand is **demand touch.** Demand touch is a touch that might appear to be polite, friendly, or intimate, but in fact only communicates power. For example, we discussed how a handshake can be a social or polite touch, but if one of the people shaking hands squeezes unnecessarily hard and does not release, the message being communicated can be one of intimidation and power rather than politeness. Friends may wrestle or spar in a playful way, but aggressive physical fighting is not what friends do. And sexual assault is never about intimacy or romance; it is strictly about power.

Proxemics

Proxemics refers to the study of how space and distance influence communication. We only need to look at how space shows up in common metaphors to see that space, communication, and relationships are closely related. For example, when we are content with and attracted to someone, we say we are "close" to them. When we lose connection with someone, we may say they

are “distant.” In general, space influences how people communicate and behave. Smaller spaces with a higher density of people often lead to breaches of our personal space bubbles. If this is a setting where such density is expected in advance, such as at a crowded concert or on a train during rush hour, we make various communicative adjustments to manage the space issue. Unexpected breaches of personal space can lead to negative reactions, especially if we feel someone has voluntarily violated our space, meaning that a crowding situation didn’t force them into our space. Proxemics can often be in an indicator of the relationship between the participants depending on the context.

Proxemic Distances

We all have varying definitions of what our “personal space” is, and these definitions are contextual and depend on the situation and the relationship. Although our bubbles are invisible, people are socialized into the norms of personal space within their cultural group. Scholars have identified four zones for US Americans, which are public, social, personal, and intimate distance (Hall, 1968). Even within a particular zone, interactions may differ depending on whether someone is in the outer or inner part of the zone.

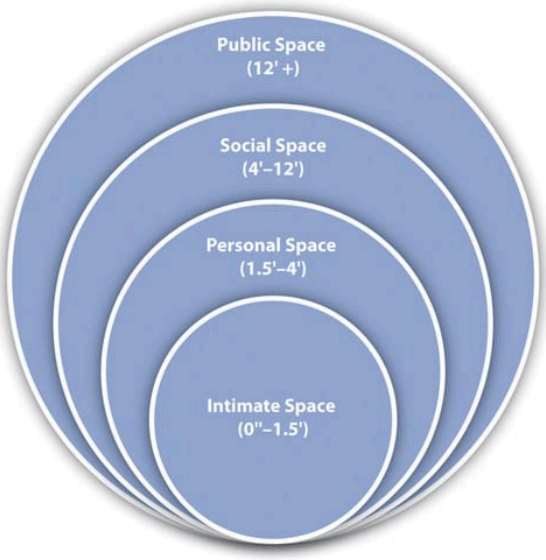


Figure 7.2.7: Proxemic Zones of Personal Space. A graphic showing four concentric circles, depicting proxemic space ranges in relationships. Alternative description of the image.

Public Space

Public and social zones refer to the space quite far away from our bodies and the communication that typically occurs in these zones is formal and not intimate. **Public space** starts about twelve feet from a person and extends out from there. This is the least personal of the four zones and would typically be used when a person is engaging in a formal speech and is removed from the audience to allow the audience to see, or when a high-profile or powerful person, like a celebrity or executive, maintains such a distance as a sign of power or for safety and security reasons. We are often not obligated or expected to acknowledge or interact with individual people who enter our public zone.

Social Space

Communication that occurs in the **social zone**, which is roughly four to twelve feet away from our body, is typically in the context of a professional or casual interaction, but not intimate. This distance is preferred in many professional settings because it reduces the suspicion of any impropriety. The expression “keep someone at arm’s length” means that someone is kept out of the personal space and kept in the social/professional space. If two people held up their arms and stood so just the tips of their fingers were touching, they would be around four feet away from each other, which is perceived as a safe distance because the possibility for intentional or unintentional touching doesn’t exist. It is also possible to have people in the outer portion of our social zone, but not feel obligated to interact with them. When people come much closer than six feet to us, we often feel obligated to at least acknowledge their presence.

Personal Space

Personal space is the zone are reserved for friends, close acquaintances, and significant others. The exact measurement of personal space varies depending on cultural context; people from dense urban areas expect smaller amounts of personal space than those from sprawling suburban or rural areas, but it typically extends from 1.5 feet to 4 feet away from our body. Even though we are getting closer to the physical body of another person, we may use verbal communication at this point to signal that our presence in this zone is friendly and not intimate. Even people who know each other could be uncomfortable spending too much time in this zone unnecessarily.

Intimate Space

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

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

Vocalics

Vocalics, often also referred to as paralinguistics, refers to to all the ways in which we communicate meaning using our voices other than speaking words. This can be the tone with which we speak words, the sonic quality of our voice, or other vocalizations we make that are not words.

Tone of Voice

Our voices are dynamic instruments that can be manipulated and adjusted in a multitude of ways. A common expression is "it wasn't what you said so much as *how you said it.*" The "what you said" part is verbal communication, but the "how you said it" part describes the tone of voice used when saying the words. When considering the tone with which we spoke words, we are actually describing minor and minute variations of voice in three distinct ways.

The first way in which we change our voice to alter meaning is **pitch.** Pitch describes the highness or lowness of a frequency of sound. We all have a natural or comfortable speaking pitch that fits our bodies and vocal chords, and if we speak in a pitch that is higher than normal it often is associated with excitement or playfulness, while lowering the pitch below what is typical or natural indicates a seriousness or aggressiveness to the words. The second change we can make is **volume,** which is description of the loudness or softness of our voice. Beyond behind a tool to ensure our voice carries exactly as far as we need or intent, he volume of our words can communicate intimacy or anger or joy or frustration. The final variable that influences what we consider tone of voice is **rate,** which describes the speed at which we are articulating the words. As with the other two variables, we have socially and culturally practiced a rate that is natural to us, but increasing to faster rate often indicates excitement or other heightened emotional resonance, while a slower rate indicates a thoughtfulness or deliberateness.

Manipulating pitch, volume, and rate can manipulate the meaning associated with the message.

Timbre

Timbre refers to the quality given to a sound by its overtones: such as the resonance by which the ear recognizes and identifies a voiced speech sound. Its a term borrowed from musical performance and instrumentation. A clarinet and a trumpet both play in the same key and have the same range, however if the same musical composition was played on these instruments you would instantly recognize which one was which, because of their distinct timbres. Our voices are similarly instruments that have a unique timbre, mostly determined predominantly by the physiology of the speaker: the size and shape of the vocal chords and air passages influence the timbre of someone's voice.

Despite being predominantly a natural and biological feature of our vocal chords, vocal timbre is socially constructed to have meaning embedded in it and with that comes power dynamics. There is a classic scene in the 1952 Gene Kelly film "Singin' In The Rain" in which a silent film star is receiving voice and diction lessons in order to prepare her for a role in "talkie" movies. The silent film star has a comically exaggerated thin and nasally timbre to her voice, and the coach is attempting to teach her to use "long round tones" to deliver the line "I can't stand him" (look it up; its pretty funny). But this humorous clip speaks to the ways in which we infer meaning through the sonic quality of someones voice. Often, characteristics that are associated with lower class and less credibility are thin, nasal, or raspy such as a vocal fry. Timbre is one of the forms of nonverbal communication that listeners must be very mindful of to ensure they are not inferring unethical or erroneous meaning in a symbolic message the speaker cannot control.

Accents (not Dialects)

Dialects are versions of languages that may have distinct pronunciation, but certainly have distinct variations of grammar and language. Dialects can vary by region, class, or ancestry, and they influence the impressions that we make of others. Dialects to involve some element of vocalics, but since dialects primarily distinguish themselves based on word and language usage, we'll save that for the chapter on verbal communication.

Slightly different than timbre, **accent** describes the distinctive pattern of pronunciation, intonation, stress, and pitch characteristic of a specific group of people, geographic region, social class, or native language influence. (Lustig & Koester, 2006). There can be multiple accents within one dialect. For example, people in the Appalachian Mountains of the eastern U.S. speak a dialect of American English that is characterized by remnants of the linguistic styles of Europeans who settled the area a couple hundred years earlier. Even though they speak this similar dialect, a person in Kentucky could still have an accent (that is, intonation and stress of the shared dialect) that is distinguishable from a person in western North Carolina. Ultimately, accents all arise from the same phenomenon but fall into two categories. As people from different regions of the world settle together with different languages, over generations of time the people who settled in this place blend together their languages to create a distinct manner of speaking the unified language. For example, English speakers of New Orleans and surrounding areas of southern Louisiana have a distinct "Creole" accent that is a unique combination of French, Spanish, and English speaking influence. One place accents come from is regionality, and regions often develop their unique accents through the history of migrants and settlers of that particular region.

The other place that accents come from is being multilingual. Every language contains within it a certain rhythmic and tonal pattern of speaking, and in our lifetimes of speaking that language our throats, mouths, and tongues become very accustomed to the sounds associated with that language. As we learn new languages, these rhythmic and tonal patterns of our primary language start to bleed into our way of speaking the secondary language. Then these both might bleed into our tertiary language. And so on and so forth.

Despite being a marker of the tremendous intellectual skill of being multilingual, dominant U.S. American culture tends to look down on accented speakers. Accented speakers are often the recipients of microagressions, being asked where they are from or being fawned over and exoticized due the sound of their accents, or worse being scolded and told to "speak English." Once again, accent is an involuntary nonverbal communication channel that must be mindfully interpreted by the listener, as the speaker cannot easily control the meaning of the symbolic message of their accent.

Pauses and Silences

Pauses and silences are an important part of creating meaning during an interaction. Pauses draw attention to important parts of messages. The “pregnant pause” is an extra-long pause that precedes particularly weighty information. Pauses are a type of

silence that are brief in nature, but prolonged silence such as minutes, hours, or even days can be used to convey meaning as well. Consider a conversation in which the other person does not respond to you. What meaning is conveyed? Is the individual thinking? Is the individual hurt, angry, or too shocked to speak? Myriad meanings of silence help emphasize the significance of silence and that it is as impactful as verbal communication, if not more so.

Artifacts and Environment

Artifacts is the broad category of nonverbal communication through items and objects. This is a wide ranging category that includes everything from the buildings we live or work in, the way we decorate our homes, the vehicle we use, and the ways we adorn our bodies with clothes, jewelry, and other accessories. Our artifacts are a primary way in which many people choose to communicate their group affiliations, from ritualistic cultural garb (like a wedding dress or sari), school uniforms, or fandom merchandise. People can also use artifacts to indicate their social or political group affiliations, such as the red "Make America Great Again" hat and the rainbow pride flag.

In the United States, many people use artifacts to communicate messages about social class. Through advertising and marketing, many brands have created an image of being "high-end," and if we see a person wearing clothing, carrying a handbag, or driving a car that is of a brand that we know to be "high-end" and expensive, we will perceive these people as being in a high social class, which also comes with power and influence. Of course, much of the U.S. economic system is driven by consumer debt, so people can acquire these designer goods without actually having the financial means to responsibly do so, but perception is as powerful as reality. Even if a person is not in a certain social class standing by their bank account alone, they can deceive others into believing they are by appearing as they are; the perception becomes reality in the mind of the listener. Consider what it means to look "professional." Does someone who appears to be professional necessarily carry the characteristics that come with that label?

Speaking of artifacts and the characteristics that come with them, there are many times in which a person's self-expression through artifacts are challenged or restricted. Many schools and workplaces have dress codes. The supreme court has ruled numerous times to limit what can and cannot be worn as clothing in various public contexts. In the 2010s, many European countries developed laws that prohibited the wearing of burkas and other veils and face coverings typically worn by muslim women. In many ways, controlling someone's self expression through artifacts is controlling power in culture.

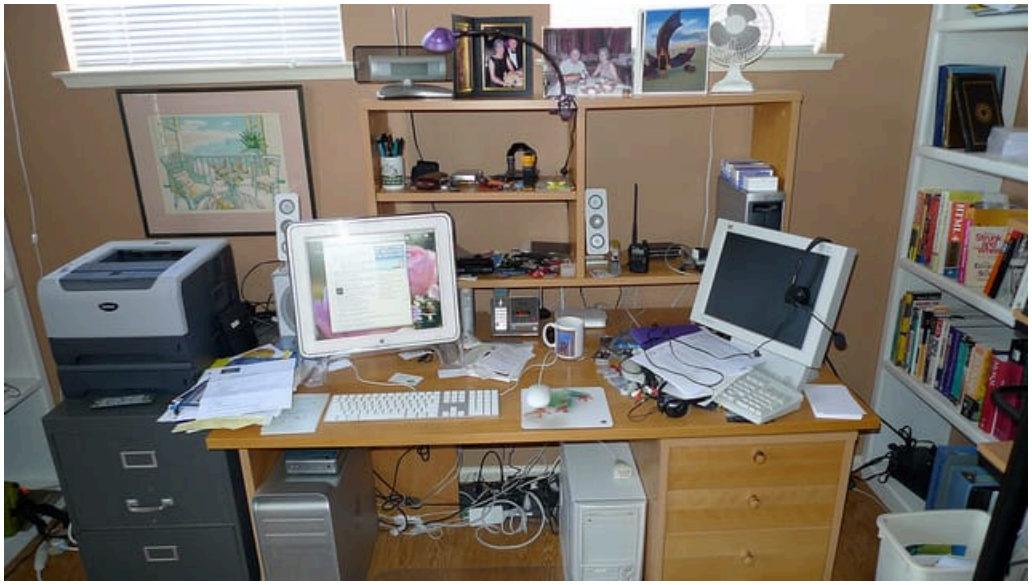


Figure 7.2.8: The objects that surround us send nonverbal cues that may influence how people perceive us. What impression does a messy, crowded office make? (CC BY-NC 2.0; Phil Stripling via Flickr)

Finally, the physical environment in which we interact also affects our verbal and nonverbal communication. This is included because we can often manipulate the nonverbal environment, similar to how we would manipulate our gestures or tone of voice to suit our communicative needs. The books that we display on our coffee table, the magazines a doctor keeps in their waiting room, the placement of fresh flowers in a foyer, or a piece of mint chocolate on a hotel bed pillow all send particular messages and can easily be changed. The placement of objects and furniture in a physical space can help create a formal, distant, friendly, or intimate climate. In terms of formality, we can use nonverbal communication to convey dominance and status, which helps define and negotiate power and roles within relationships. Consider the layout of furniture in your professor's office. Some

professors may have their furniture situated around the edge of the room, creating an open space in the middle for meetings. Other professor's may have a desk in the middle of the room for them to sit on one side and students and other guests sitting on the other, creating a clear barrier between them. In what ways does a library's environment communicate order and logic and reasoning, while that of a casino communicates chaos and franticness?

Physical Appearance

In an era of dating apps, we are often bombarded with a series of images and make simple yes/no decisions on potential partners. What are we basing this perception on? Most likely, its solely physical appearance. Although not one of the traditional categories of nonverbal communication, we really should discuss physical appearance as a nonverbal message. Whether we like it or not, our physical appearance has an impact on how people relate to us and view us. Someone's physical appearance is often one of the first reasons people decide to interact with each other in the first place.

Dany Ivy and Sean Wahl argue that physical appearance is a very important factor in nonverbal communication: (Ivy & Wahl, 2019)

> The connection between physical appearance and nonverbal communication needs to be made for two important reasons: (1) The decisions we make to maintain or alter our physical appearance reveal a great deal about who we are, and (2) the physical appearance of other people impacts our perception of them, how we communicate with them, how approachable they are, how attractive or unattractive they are, and so on.

In fact, people ascribe all kinds of meanings based on their perceptions of how we physically appear to them. Everything from your height, skin tone, smile, weight, and hair (color, style, lack of, etc.) can communicate meanings to other people.

Physical Appearance and Society

Unfortunately, someone's physical appearance has been shown to impact their lives in a number of different ways:

- Physically attractive students are viewed as more popular by their peers.
- Physically attractive people are seen as smarter.
- Physically attractive job applicants are more likely to get hired.
- Physically attractive people make more money.
- Physically attractive journalists are seen as more likable and credible.
- Physically attractive defendants in a court case were less likely to be convicted, and if they were convicted, the juries recommended less harsh sentences.
- Taller people are perceived as more credible.
- People who are overweight are less likely to get job interviews or promotions.

Now, this list is far from perfect and doesn't necessarily take every possible scenario into account. Furthermore, there are some differences between women and men in how they perceive attraction and how they are influenced by attraction. Moreover, culture can play a large part in how physical attractiveness impacts peoples' perceptions.

There are groups in the United States that are attempting to help break down these walls within our society. For example, in the past few years, there has been a movement known as body positivity. In reality, the idea of body positivity isn't that new. In 1996, Connie Sobczak and Elizabeth Scott founded The Body Positive. In her 2014 book, embody: Learning to Love Your Unique Body (And Quiet that Critical Voice), Connie Sobczak defined body positive as "a way of living that gives you permission to love, care for, and take pleasure in your body throughout your lifespan. Struggles will inevitably occur, especially during times of transition or imbalance." (Sobczak, 2014) Sobczak goes on to note that practicing body positivity "allows you to find what you need to live with as much self-love and balanced selfcare as possible. Experiences of conflict and suffering become opportunities to learn what is required to further your growth so you can find greater contentment and peace." (Sobczak, 2014) The Body Positive has created a basic model for body positivity that consists of five basic competencies: reclaim health, practice intuitive self-care, cultivate self-love, declare your authentic beauty, and build community.

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?

Attributions

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7.3: Nonverbal Communication Skills and Competence

Overview

Competent and ethical nonverbal communication requires awareness, immediacy, and attention to relational and professional contexts. The material emphasizes self-monitoring, context, power, positionality, and the distinction between communicative intent and communicative impact.

Learning Objectives

- Explain the components of an effective mindset toward nonverbal communication, including awareness, belief in its importance, and self-analysis.
- Describe nonverbal immediacy and identify behaviors that can increase physical and psychological closeness.
- Analyze how nonverbal communication contributes to the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.
- Apply nonverbal communication concepts to professional contexts, including feedback, interviews, leadership, mentoring, and workplace relationships.
- Evaluate nonverbal communication through an ethical lens that considers power, privilege, positionality, intent, impact, and accessibility.

The Nonverbal Mindset

When it comes to effective communication, you need to develop an appropriate mindset towards nonverbal communication. First, individuals must be aware that nonverbal communication plays a significant role in creating meaning.

Second, individuals must believe nonverbal communication is important and impactful. Awareness of nonverbal communication without the belief that it is important can result in negative outcomes. For example, students in nonverbal communication begin to learn about the importance of clothing and general appearance in creating impressions. Some students “rebel” against the idea that appearance and clothing matter stating, “people should accept me no matter what I am wearing.” While this would be ideal, the fact of the matter is that humans size up other humans using visual cues in initial interactions.

Lastly, individuals can analyze their nonverbal communication. This can be accomplished in several ways. Individuals might observe the behavior of individuals who seem to be liked by others and to whom others are socially attracted. The individual should then compare the behaviors of the “popular” person to their own behaviors. What differences exist? Does the other individual smile more, make more or less eye contact, engage in more or less touch, etc.? Based on this comparison, individuals can devise a plan for improvement or perhaps no improvement is needed!

Nonverbal Immediacy

In addition to awareness of nonverbal communication, believing that nonverbal communication is important and analyzing one’s own behavior, individuals should be aware of nonverbal immediacy. **Immediacy** is defined as physical and psychological closeness. More specifically, Mehrabian defines immediacy as behaviors increasing the sensory stimulation between individuals. (Mehrabian, 1972) Immediacy behaviors include being physically oriented toward another, eye contact, some touch, gesturing, vocal variety, and talking louder. Immediacy behaviors are known to be impactful in a variety of contexts.

Nonverbal Communication in Relational Contexts

A central, if not primary, function of nonverbal communication is the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Further, people who are skilled at encoding nonverbal messages have various interpersonal advantages, including being more popular, having larger social networks consisting of both acquaintances and close friends, and being less likely to be lonely or socially anxious (Riggio, 1992).

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

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

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

Nonverbal Communication in Professional Contexts

Surveys of current professionals and managers have found that most report that nonverbal skills are important to their jobs (DePaulo, 1992). Although important, there is rarely any training or instruction related to nonverbal communication, and a consistent issue that has been reported by employees has been difficulty with mixed messages coming from managers. Interpreting contradictory verbal and nonverbal messages is challenging in any context and can have negative effects on job satisfaction and productivity. As a supervisor who gives positive and negative feedback regularly and/or in periodic performance evaluations, it is important to be able to match nonverbal signals with the content of the message. For example, appropriate nonverbal cues can convey the seriousness of a customer or coworker complaint, help ease the delivery of constructive criticism, or reinforce positive feedback. Professionals also need to be aware of how context, status, and power intersect with specific channels of nonverbal communication. For example, even casual touching of supervisees, mentees, or employees may be considered condescending or inappropriate in certain situations. A well-deserved pat on the back is different from an unnecessary hand on the shoulder to say hello at the start of a business meeting.

In professional contexts, managers and mentors with nonverbal decoding skills can exhibit sensitivity to others' nonverbal behavior and better relate to employees and mentees. In general, interpreting emotions from nonverbal cues can have interpersonal and professional benefits. Aside from bringing financial rewards, nonverbal communication also helps create supportive climates. Bosses, supervisors, and service providers like therapists can help create rapport and a positive climate by consciously mirroring the nonverbal communication of their employees or clients. In addition, mirroring the nonverbal communication of others during a job interview, during a sales pitch, or during a performance evaluation can help put the other person at ease and establish rapport. Much of the mirroring we do is natural, so trying to overcompensate may actually be detrimental, but engaging in self-monitoring and making small adjustments could be beneficial (DePaulo, 1992).

You can also use nonverbal communication to bring positive attention to yourself. Being able to nonverbally encode turn-taking cues can allow people to contribute to conversations at relevant times, and getting an idea or a piece of information or feedback in at the right time can help bring attention to your professional competence. Being able to encode an appropriate amount of professionalism and enthusiasm during a job interview can also aid in desired impression formation since people make

judgments about others' personalities based on their nonverbal cues. A person who comes across as too enthusiastic may be seen as pushy or fake, and a person who comes across as too relaxed may be seen as unprofessional and unmotivated.

Nonverbal Communication and Power

In my very first year as a college instructor, I was teaching the Fundamentals of Oral Communication class at my university where I was finishing my graduate degree. A class of college freshmen, they were giving a major research presentation. After every student's presentation we took a moment for questions regarding content and feedback for the speaker. One student, a very athletic and muscular young man (we knew about his build because he wore t-shirts every day that accentuated his muscular frame) made a comment on the speaker's appearance. The speaker–a young woman–was wearing a thin sheer blouse that was moderately see-through with a colorful bra underneath, as was a not unpopular fashion at the time. This wasn't an accident; this was an outfit that made the speaker feel beautiful and confident. But the young man in the audience felt it important to tell the speaker that her outfit was distracting and recommended she wear something else.

What followed in my class was a lengthy discussion about the nature of privilege, power, entitlement, and nonverbal communication. Why does he get to wear revealing clothing without critique, and she does not? Why does he feel so entitled and responsible to comment and influence control on the fashion choices of others? The young man likely had good intentions by offering constructive feedback to the young woman. But his position of power made him naive to the impact of making her feel self-conscious and unsure.

The final important consideration to increase our skill and competence of nonverbal communication is mindfulness of power. To remind us, positionality described the ways in which our position of power relative to others in our social system creates our perception of the world and all things in it. Similarly, our positionality will influence our perception of nonverbal communication. Some examples were explicitly mentioned in our discussion of nonverbal communication (like **demand touch,** for one). But lets run through some other examples:

- A person in a higher power position may repeatedly and continually try to make eye contact with someone in a lower power position in a public space. The higher power person may think this is flirting, but the lower power person may find it intrusive and uncomfortable.
- A person in a higher power position may sit in a classroom and sit in one chair, put their backpack on a chair next to them, and put their feet on a chair in front of them. The higher power person is just making themselves comfortable, but everyone else may find it intrusive.
- A boutique shop owner may remodel the entrance to their store with beautiful stone steps that are reminiscent of high fashion of Italy. The higher power person is communicating sophistication and class, but the lower power person with physical disability finds it an unwelcoming barrier to entry.

In a previous example about code-switching and communication accommodation in Indian call centers, the move toward accent neutralization is a response to the "racist abuse" these workers receive from customers (Nadeem, 2012). Anger in Western countries about job losses and economic uncertainty has increased the amount of racially targeted verbal attacks on international call center employees. It was recently reported that more call center workers are now quitting their jobs as a result of the verbal abuse and that 25 percent of workers who have recently quit say such abuse was a major source of stress (Gentleman, 2005). Such verbal attacks are not new; they represent a common but negative way that cultural bias explicitly manifests in our perception of accented speakers.

An important consideration of communication ethics is to reflect not only upon our intent but also our impact. The NCA credo of communication ethics tells us that to be ethical communicators we must be responsible for the short- and long- term consequences of our communication actions. If we are in a position of high power, the effect of our power and privilege are likely invisible to us. We may not see the way that our nonverbal communication is effecting those around us. We must be vigilantly mindful of our position of power to ensure that we are communicating nonverbally ethically.

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7.4: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Nonverbal communication is the generation of shared meaning without the use of language or words. Although verbal and nonverbal communication are often discussed as separate systems, they operate together in everyday interaction. Nonverbal communication can be especially influential in interpersonal and emotionally driven interactions because many nonverbal behaviors are connected to emotion and occur with less conscious control than verbal messages. This relative involuntariness can allow emotions to “leak” through facial expressions, gestures, posture, vocal qualities, and other behaviors, while also making nonverbal messages difficult to interpret accurately.

Several principles distinguish nonverbal communication from verbal communication. Nonverbal messages tend to be more ambiguous because they generally lack the explicit grammatical rules that structure language, and their meanings depend heavily on context and cultural norms. They can also be involuntary, meaning receivers must be careful not to assign intentional meaning to behaviors that a communicator cannot control, including bodily functions, physical characteristics, and accents. At the same time, nonverbal communication is culturally shaped and plays a major role in perception and identity. The ways people dress, move, use space, speak, decorate their environments, and interact with others can influence how they are perceived and how they express identities and group affiliations.

Nonverbal communication performs several important functions in interaction. It can reinforce verbal messages, substitute for words, or contradict what is being said. It also influences others, regulates conversational turn-taking, communicates relational closeness and emotion, and expresses identity. Concepts such as tie signs and immediacy behaviors illustrate how nonverbal communication can communicate intimacy, rapport, attentiveness, and connection. In addition, the many channels of nonverbal communication (including kinesics, oculesics, haptics, proxemics, vocalics, artifacts, appearance, environment, olfactics, and chronemics) provide people with numerous ways to communicate simultaneously.

Since nonverbal communication is so multidimensional, competence requires attention to specific channels and to the contexts in which they operate. Gestures can illustrate ideas or function as culturally recognized emblems; eye contact can regulate interaction, express engagement, or intimidate; touch can communicate politeness, friendship, intimacy, or power; and physical distance can signal relationships and boundaries. Vocalics communicate through pitch, volume, rate, timbre, accents, pauses, and silences, while artifacts, physical appearance, environments, scent, and time can communicate identity, status, cultural values, and relational expectations. These channels rarely operate independently, and their meanings must be interpreted in combination rather than through simplistic rules.

Finally, effective nonverbal communication requires a mindset grounded in awareness, intentional self-analysis, and ethical mindfulness. Nonverbal immediacy can help create physical and psychological closeness, while skilled nonverbal encoding and decoding can support relationships, professional interactions, and supportive communication. Yet nonverbal communication is also connected to power and privilege: behaviors that feel comfortable or neutral to one person may be intrusive, exclusionary, or threatening to another. Ethical communicators therefore consider both intent and impact, recognize how positionality shapes interpretation, and remain attentive to cultural differences, accessibility, identity, and unequal power when sending and interpreting nonverbal messages.

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7.5: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Accent
- Artifacts
- Chronemics
- Demand touch
- Gestures
- Haptics
- Immediacy
- Immediacy behaviors
- Kinesics
- Language barriers
- Micro-expressions
- Nonverbal communication
- Oculesics
- Olfactics
- Paralinguistics
- Pitch
- Proxemics
- Rate
- Tie signs
- Timbre
- Touch behaviors
- Volume

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7.6: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. How do verbal and nonverbal communication work together to create meaning? Describe a situation in which verbal and nonverbal messages reinforce one another and a situation in which they contradict one another. How might a receiver determine which interpretation is most appropriate?
2. Why is context essential when interpreting nonverbal communication? Choose two nonverbal channels (for example, eye contact, touch, physical distance, gestures, or vocalics) and explain how the same behavior could communicate different meanings depending on the culture, relationship, setting, or power dynamics involved.
3. How does nonverbal communication shape interpersonal relationships and perceptions of identity? Consider the roles of immediacy behaviors, tie signs, appearance, artifacts, environment, and emotional expression in creating connection, distance, belonging, or perceptions of others.
4. How should communicators respond when they encounter an involuntary nonverbal cue? Discuss how a receiver can ethically interpret behaviors such as an accent, physical characteristic, facial expression, bodily function, or vocal quality without making unjustified assumptions about the communicator's personality, intentions, abilities, or identity.
5. How does power influence the production and interpretation of nonverbal communication? Using examples from interpersonal, educational, workplace, or public settings, explain how positionality can affect personal space, touch, appearance, accessibility, eye contact, or other nonverbal behaviors. How might communicators account for both intent and impact?

Chapter Exercises

1. Nonverbal Observation Journal
    1. Observe a naturally occurring interaction in a public or shared setting, such as a campus, workplace, café, transit station, or community space. Without recording identifying information, document several nonverbal behaviors you observe across multiple channels, such as kinesics, eye behavior, proxemics, vocalics, touch, artifacts, or chronemics.
    2. For each behavior, describe what you observed, identify at least two possible interpretations, and explain what additional contextual information would be needed before confidently assigning meaning.
2. Mixed-Message Analysis
    1. Think of a fictional or personally experienced interaction in which verbal and nonverbal messages contradicted one another.
    2. Analyze the interaction by identifying the verbal message, the nonverbal message, the possible reasons for the discrepancy, and the ways the receiver might respond. Then rewrite or reenact the interaction so that the verbal and nonverbal messages are more congruent.
3. Nonverbal Channel Self-Assessment
    1. Select three nonverbal channels that you use frequently, such as eye contact, gestures, vocalics, proxemics, touch, appearance, or time. For each channel, identify behaviors you use effectively and one behavior you might want to monitor or develop.
    2. Create a brief plan for self-monitoring that includes a specific behavior to observe, the context in which you will observe it, and a strategy for determining whether a change would actually improve your communication.
4. Culture and Context Case Study
    1. Working individually or in small groups, analyze a scenario involving a potential cross-cultural nonverbal misunderstanding. The scenario should include at least two nonverbal channels; for example, a difference in eye contact and personal space, or a difference in touch and expectations about time.
    2. Identify the assumptions each communicator might make, explain how cultural norms could contribute to the misunderstanding, and propose a culturally responsive way to address the situation.
5. Power, Privilege, and Nonverbal Communication
    1. Analyze a situation in an interpersonal, educational, workplace, or public setting in which power affects nonverbal communication. Consider behaviors such as touch, eye contact, physical space, clothing, accessibility, posture, appearance, or environmental design.
    2. Identify the communicators' relative positions of power, explain how positionality could affect their interpretations, distinguish intent from impact, and propose an ethical alternative that would create a more inclusive interaction.

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8: EMOTIONS AND COMMUNICATION CLIMATE

Chapter Overview

Emotions are complex parts of human experience that are closely connected to feelings, physiological responses, cognitive interpretations, personality, culture, relationships, and communication. Emotional experiences can vary from person to person and can change depending on the situation, the people involved, and the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. Emotional expression also occurs through both verbal and nonverbal communication, while cultural expectations, social roles, and communication climates influence how emotions are expressed, interpreted, and managed.

Emotional intelligence, emotional awareness, and emotional management can contribute to more effective interpersonal communication. Understanding facilitative and debilitative emotions, recognizing irrational thinking and negative self-talk, developing supportive communication climates, responding nondefensively to feedback, and providing constructive feedback can help individuals communicate more effectively and maintain healthier relationships.



Figure 8.1: An embarrassed woman illustrates nonverbal emotional expression and the influence of emotions on communication. (CC BY 2.0; Michael via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Examine how emotions are influenced by culture, personality, relationships, cognition, and physiological responses.
- Describe how emotional intelligence and emotional awareness can improve interpersonal communication.
- Analyze the difference between facilitative and debilitative emotions and ways to manage them.
- Identify how confirming, disconfirming, supportive, and defensive communication behaviors affect communication climates.
- Explain how nondefensive responses and constructive feedback can improve interpersonal relationships.

8.1: Defining Emotions

8.2: Emotions in Relationships and Communicating Our Emotions

8.3: Managing and Coping with Emotions

8.4: Constructing Communication Climate

8.5: Chapter Review
8.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools
8.7: Discussions and Exercises
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8.1: Defining Emotions

Overview

Emotions are heavily influenced by our social interactions and communication with others. Often, we find ourselves focused on the feeling we are experiencing in the moment rather than on the ability to accurately address the emotional stimulus related to the resulting emotional effects. There are many experiences that shape what emotions we experience, how we interact with these emotions, and how we come to recognize and address our emotions. This chapter focuses on what emotions are; how they are shaped by our culture and environment and shape our perspectives; how to overcome emotional challenges; and how to utilize our skills to ensure our emotions help us achieve our communication goals within our interpersonal relationships. From internal communication to external communication with others, emotions are used to create, interpret, and inform our understanding of relationships more deeply. We will start by examining what emotions are and then move into understanding how we utilize emotions in our everyday communication experiences. We will end the chapter by discussing ways in which we can positively impact our emotional perspectives in order to manage them effectively.

Learning Objectives

- Define emotions and distinguish among emotions, feelings, moods, and personality.
- Explain how physiological, cognitive, cultural, environmental, personality, and relational factors influence emotional experiences.
- Describe how social roles, cultural expectations, communication climates, and relationships shape how emotions are expressed, interpreted, and managed.
- Identify how verbal and nonverbal communication (including physiological cues, facial expressions, body language, vocal qualities, and silence) communicates emotional states.
- Apply strategies for developing emotional awareness, managing emotional expression, and using emotions to communicate more effectively in interpersonal relationships.

Emotions Defined

From the film "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix"

> Hermione: "Obviously she's feeling sad about Cedric, and therefore confused about liking Harry and guilty about kissing him, conflicted because Umbridge is threatening to sack her mum from her job at the ministry, and frightened of failing her OWL's because she's so busy worrying about everything else."
>
> Ron: One person couldn't feel all that. They'd explode.
>
> Hermione: Just because you've got the emotional range of a teaspoon.

Emotions and related terms can be misunderstood, so we will start by defining what emotions are. There are many ways to conceptualize and define emotions, but one thing that most definitions have in common is articulating them as far more than a physiological or hormonal response. Kory Floyd (2024) defines emotions as "the body's multidimensional response to any event that enhances or inhibits one's goals." And Jeremy Pober (2018) says “emotions are constituted by a process of categorizing the self as being in an emotional state." Julia T Wood (2020) puts it all together and says emotions are "our experience and interpretation of internal sensations as they are shaped by physiology, perceptions, language, and social experiences."

Definition: Emotions

Emotions are "our experience and interpretation of internal sensations as they are shaped by physiology, perceptions, language, and social experiences."

Emotions are not synonymous with feelings. Emotions are more than the feelings we experience, although feelings are a significant part of emotions. Feelings can be fleeting, while emotions are not fleeting and tend to be accompanied by physiological and nonverbal changes. Emotions are connected to self-concept, social context, cultural dimensions, cognitive interpretations, personality, and expression.

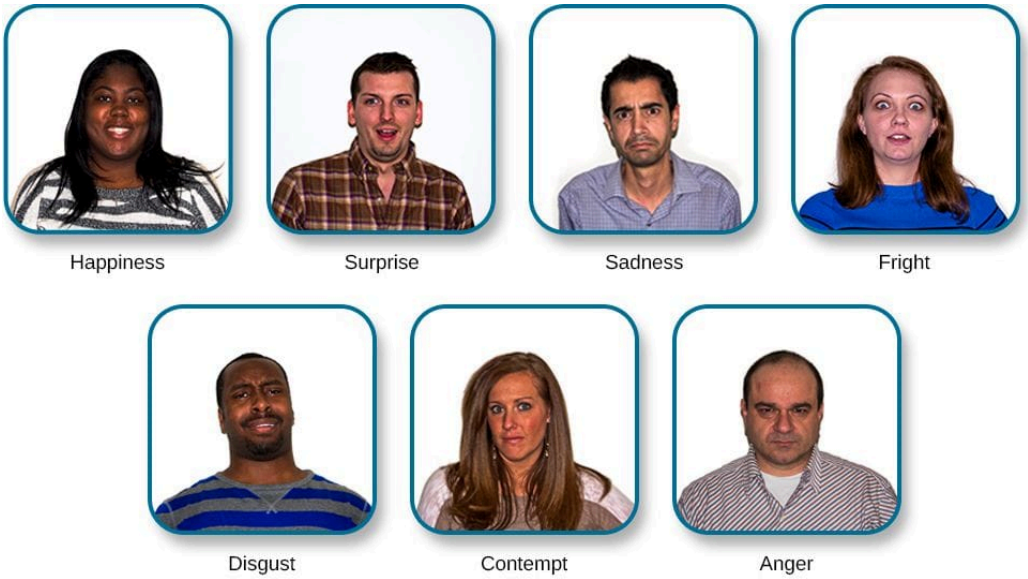


Figure 8.1.1: Common facial expressions illustrate how emotions can be communicated and recognized through nonverbal cues. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Lilyapps123 via Wikimedia Commons)

Feelings, emotions, and moods are often things we consider automatic or simply part of our physiological responses. However, emotions and feelings, and specifically how we value and express them, are more influenced by our upbringing and society than might be expected.

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. However, our emotions affect other emotions and experiences. We interpret and react differently based on our personality traits, our cultural background, and the ways in which culture and society shape not only the emotions we experience but also how we react during communication events.

Cultural Dimensions

Russell (2021) explains that emotions are defined and explained through **cultural dimensions**. This means that each culture defines emotions and their characteristics according to that culture's environment. Culture is a blend of our lived experience and includes our group memberships. This means that culture is not limited to race, ethnicity, geographical location, political affiliation, socioeconomic status, or the like, but rather includes who we are as people on the whole.

One theory that can help us consider how we learned how to feel is the **dimensions of cultural variability** (Hofstede, 1980), which is based on a global study conducted by researcher Geert Hofstede in the 1970s. Although culture has changed considerably since this theory was first developed, the dimensions covered in this theory can help us begin to understand some of the ways cultures, and specifically nationalities, communicate and behave. According to the theory, every country exists on a scale between two extremes, high or low, of each dimension. For now, we will focus on the dimension of Achievement, formerly termed Masculinity.

According to the theory, in a high Achievement society, success is marked by winning and material gain. Within an Achievement-based society, emotions may not be expressed outwardly as often and may be communicated about within relationships in more subtle ways. In contrast, in a society that is low in this dimension and considered a highly Nurturing society, success is based on cooperation, quality of life is an asset, and emotions may be more overtly expressed and outwardly displayed.

While the research within Hofstede's studies has many limitations, it does help us understand how society impacts our communication surrounding emotions and emotional expression.

Emotions are often seen as inherently negative. Expressions such as "Why are you so emotional?" or "That person is too emotional" illustrate how emotionality can be framed as undesirable. Beyond these uncomplimentary descriptions, why do we see emotions as negative? Why is it considered a bad idea to "be emotional?" As humans, we are interconnected with our emotions. We even have sayings such as "Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?", "Don't be so emo," or "Don't be so salty." These sayings reinforce Hofstede's principle that our perception and expression of our own emotions is socially and culturally taught. Language such as this creates and reinforces perceptions of who is allowed to experience which emotions and to what degree they can both feel and express them.

Our emotions relate to our interpretation of events with others, our perceptions of those events, and our reaction as a result. Since we communicate in our interpersonal relationships from our identity outward, and that affects our perceptions, our personality and self-concept affect our emotions. We embody our emotions. We experience events differently, and the same is true of our emotions.

We experience multiple emotions simultaneously (Pober, 2018). Consider the last time you felt incredibly excited. What other emotions were you experiencing? For example, receiving an invitation to go on a date with someone you really like may produce excitement as well as nervousness, apprehension, invigoration, and reluctance. It is common to experience different emotions at the same time. One emotion can fuel another emotion and spur a chain of reactions as emotions are experienced. Russell (2012) further defined emotions as a "cluster of events with unclear boundaries and no single cause" (p. 140). A sense of happiness may turn to elation, pride, and a sense of giddiness, whereas apprehension may create or increase the likelihood of nervousness, reluctance, and fear.

Social Conventions and Roles

There are many unwritten rules of communication that discourage direct expressions of most emotions. "Being emotional" is largely seen as negative, and our roles in certain contexts are affected. For example, workplace environments generally require professionalism. 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**, which are actions that would result in our communication partner losing face. The phrase "saving face" is often used in this context. 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 significant relationship to how we interact with others as well as how we perceive ourselves internally. It is important to 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, including when and why we mask and how masking can be used to preserve face, as well as to our reluctance or openness to engage in conversations related to our emotions. Gender expression is also related to the cultural climate in which we were raised 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. A **mask** is our presenting self that we use to conceal certain aspects of ourselves. In a social setting or role, we may use masking or choose to engage in discourse related to emotions to promote relational growth. For example, certain emotions 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, sadness, or anger in the workplace so as not to 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 begin to identify stereotypes and biases within our social conventions and societal roles.

With the many roles we take on, we utilize these tools to be communication competent. We should be aware of **emotional labor**, the expectation to manage emotions in work environments. Some settings require extensive masking, which can take a toll on us as individuals and within our interpersonal relationships. If we mask at work all day, we may become exhausted. The more we mask or avoid engagement with 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.

Emotions Are Relational

Not only do we internally experience emotions and become affected by the emotions of others, but we also create **chain emotions**. Robert Plutchik's wheel of emotions showcases eight central emotions that polarize one another. The eight emotions are joy and sadness, trust and disgust, fear and anger, and surprise and anticipation. These eight central emotions then extend outward and inward on the wheel, showcasing the intensity of the emotions that can be felt.

For example, an extension of joy could be serenity, optimism, or ecstasy, while an extension of sadness could be pensiveness, remorse, or grief. These chain emotions can be felt seemingly all at once or over time as our emotions grow or subside. As a situation develops, emotions such as ecstasy and nervousness or anticipation might turn to optimism.

Emotions are relational. We are interdependent, which means that we mutually affect each other. We do this relationally and physically through our communication climate. The way we experience our emotions is related to the types of relationships we have developed. When a person is sick, there may be someone who provides comfort. Simply thinking about that person or having that person nearby may result in the person feeling less sick, smiling, or even feeling physically stronger. Family members, or other people we consider our caretakers, tend to have this effect depending on the relationships we have with them.

The **communication climate**, or social tone of the relationship that we have with our partners, affects our emotions. There are physical spaces and people that allow us to feel like we can be our true and authentic selves, while in other spaces and relationships we may use a mask. At work, for example, although we are still ourselves, we may avoid certain language used in other contexts, refrain from sharing personal stories, or avoid certain details to meet the professional climate.

Many people have experienced an unexpected event that created sadness, anger, or frustration before entering an environment where they did not want to share those emotions, resulting in the masking of those emotions. One example describes a parent whose father had cancer and who recognized that there was a small window of time before his father passed away. Because lectures had already been planned and there was a desire to avoid students becoming a support system, masking was used. This is commonplace in many professional settings but is also used in other contexts.

Many people have had to conceal information from others, which results in the use of a mask. The saying "wear many hats" describes the way people present certain aspects of themselves while concealing others. Masking can be emotionally laborious and result in negative effects. In the film *Encanto*, the character Luisa develops an eye twitch from masking all the time. She is the strength in her family and does not want to admit to feeling weak at times, so she uses a mask.

When it comes to emotions, people tend to use masks without being conscious of the decision to do so. Masking is common when people experience negative emotions. This is related to the physiological changes experienced with emotions.

Physiological Changes

Emotions are a deep-seated process that is happening continuously. When an event happens that results in an emotion occurring, we experience physiological changes. These include sweating, an increase in heart rate, a flush in the face, and the various physiological and nonverbal responses experienced with emotions. Consider the last time you felt an extreme emotion, like a red-hot anger or joyful ecstacy. What did you experience physiologically? You may have experienced a sense of raciness, perhaps an increased heart rate. You may have felt hot all over or become sweaty. Our bodies react in conjunction with the emotions we are experiencing. Therefore, physiological changes are a part of our emotions.

Research has consistently found that emotions impact and are impacted by our physical selves (Tyng et al., 2017). Most notably, Tyng et al. (2017) found that external sources of emotions are accompanied by internal physiological factors that impact the heart, lungs, gut, and so forth. Our body expresses emotions through blood flow in order to regulate homeostatic balances. For example, someone in a state of anger generates more "heat," or excess blood flow throughout the body near the head, chest, and arms. Someone at the opposite end of the spectrum, in a neutral state, generates less physical "heat," so blood flow to extremities such

as the arms and legs is “cooled,” or slowed down.

When interacting with someone with whom a person wants a romantic relationship, that person might feel happy and nervous at the same time. Those two emotions may both be expressed through the same physiological changes, including jittery movements, increased heart rate, and sweaty palms. The same can be true of more unfavorable emotions. When a fight or argument occurs within an interpersonal relationship, it can cause emotions of anger, anticipation, anxiety, and doubt. Those emotions can manifest physiologically as rapid heart rate, sweating, increased breathing patterns, and jitteriness.

Cognitive Dimensions and Personality

Emotions are an important aspect of how we build social interactions with people around us. Whether interacting with strangers or people who have a significant impact on our lives, people tend to consciously or unconsciously monitor, observe, and regulate emotions around others. Our interactions with others help shape our own emotions as well as aspects of our personalities and moods. But what is the difference between these terms? We have defined emotion earlier in this chapter, but how do we distinguish between an emotion, a mood, and personality?

One of the biggest differences is the longevity of the experience. Emotions may last seconds to minutes, while moods can last hours to days. A **mood** is built from a 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 example describes a person who identifies as having a “grumpy” personality. Even photographs from childhood may show a tendency toward a pout, and the person may take pride in thinking of the “glass as half empty” more often than not. This is understood as part of the person’s personality. However, having a “grumpy” personality does not mean that every day is experienced as a bad mood. There can be days, weeks, and months filled with good moods as well as periods of bad moods. A person may regularly share laughter and joyful emotions with friends and loved ones while also experiencing emotions of love and grief. Although the personality may be described as “grumpy,” the mood may tend to be positive, while the emotions experienced at a particular moment may be neutral.

As discussed earlier, we integrate our culture, self-concept, and personality when we examine how emotions are processed. We consciously and unconsciously experience emotions. When we use cognitions, we interpret emotions and understand what circumstances led to an emotion, called the **activating event**. Emotions can be driven by this cognitive dimension (Kriegel, 2014).

Our interpretation and interaction with our emotions relates to our personalities. Emotions, personality, and behavior are interrelated (Mobbs, 2020). Personality is a relatively fixed set of characteristics based on our lived experience and our genetic makeup. Emotions are affected by the type of personality we have.

Personality types have been used in two primary models, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Big Five model, which includes openness, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. Personality type has been related to different levels of depression and anxiety, which could be improved with early intervention (Rickles et al., 2021). Understanding our personalities and how they relate to our emotions can help us become effective communicators in our relationships. Emotions entail cognitive dimensions and personality, and this leads to how emotions are expressed.

The Big Five Personality Traits

Personality can be seen as a dimension of an individual, where 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 tend to be five major dimensions called the Big Five personality traits.

Figure 8.1.1: The Big Five model describes personality through five broad traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. (CC BY-SA 4.0; MissLunaRose12 via Wikimedia Commons)

The Big Five personality traits are an important aspect of understanding emotion and interpersonal communication. The outcomes of this model are used to help make important predictions about individual behaviors and outcomes. The Big Five personality traits help us understand individual experiences and provide ways to put into words and categorize how our emotions interact with our behaviors. The model 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” (Stachl et al., 2020).

Neuroticism refers to a person's vulnerability to debilitative 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 internal support through these notable emotional charges is the skill of emotional stability.

Conscientiousness includes aspects of personality such as organization, planning, and dependability. It includes characteristics such as being diligent, careful, and mindful of the work one is doing and having self-discipline. A key characteristic of this personality trait is working toward these characteristics and having them as a goal to achieve, even if that may not always be the outcome. For example, a person may not always be the best at organizing and keeping a room clean, but may still strive to be diligent and place value on these behaviors.

Openness to experiences and open-mindedness are terms used to describe the ability to welcome new ideas, information, and 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 reach conclusions from new ideas.

Agreeableness is the habit of being kind, compassionate, warm, and cooperative. This is in contrast to traits such as suspicion, mistrust, combativeness, and unfriendliness.

Extraversion refers to how outgoing or sociable a person is. Extroverted personality traits include high energy, talkativeness, assertiveness, and being action-oriented. This is in contrast to introversion, where 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 identify patterns and 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 burnout 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 combinations of personality traits are found across professional careers.

Nonverbal Expression

We often express our emotions nonverbally. When we do not have a cognitive connection to the emotion that we are experiencing, sometimes our nonverbal expression is an indicator of our emotional state. There are many forms of nonverbal expression. We have implicit and explicit forms of emotional expression that develop over time and are largely culturally based (Tracy et al., 2013).

For instance, in European and other Western societies, nonverbal expressions of overconfidence, particularly when we do not feel confident, are viewed as more positive (Tenney et al., 2019). Explicit expression of emotion is connected to power and status (Shariff & Tracy, 2009), meaning how we respond to the emotions we are experiencing can help earn or lose respect and power. Explicit and implicit expressions of emotions are seen from infancy and form **dyadic nonverbal patterns** (Harrison & Beebe, 2018). These patterns help us to fully understand messages being exchanged. We display explicit expressions through our nonverbals, specifically facial expressions and body language. We are both implicitly and explicitly communicating our emotional state with our relational partners.

Implicit expressions of emotions can be cognitively complex. As discussed, we may be aware of or lack awareness of our emotions and of our expressions of those emotions. Consider stress. When we experience stress, it tends to be implicitly expressed. Successful management of stress can avoid negative effects, such as anger (Suzuki & Tanaka, 2021). If a person perceives that they are physically hot and that it is harder to mask, this could imply that they are upset or angry. If a person is unaware of these expressions, others may not realize that the person is truly angry. Becoming aware of implicit and explicit expressions of emotions can help us become more competent communicators.

Verbal Expression

Emotions are verbally expressed. We do not always explicitly verbally express our emotions because we may not be aware of what emotions we are experiencing. However, we express ourselves verbally, and at times our emotions are evident. For example, when

asked if we are upset, we may say “no!” while our volume, tone, and nonverbals tell a contradictory story.

We cognitively interpret many of our emotions. We know that we are experiencing an emotion, and this knowledge can help us or become destructive depending on how we react. One example describes a parent whose son was in the hospital when the outcome was uncertain. The situation involved a range of negative emotions, including stress, fear, frustration, heartbreak, and feeling overwhelmed. These emotions resulted in a range of expressions. The parent lashed out at a partner who was out of town verbally and then used stonewalling nonverbally. The partner was not responsible for the situation, but the anger and frustration were clear in the parent’s expressions. The parent would yell or become silent on the phone when explaining the latest update from the doctor to family members.

Silence is culturally seen as either positive or negative. In Western society, it is largely seen as negative, whereas in other cultures silence is an important tool without a negative perception. In the example above, stress and anxiety were high, and the fear and situation were not being managed effectively, which made the experience harder. Had the stress and anxiety been managed, communication with doctors and family members could have been more effective, and nonverbal expressions could have been more productive.

Coping with challenging emotions, such as fear and anxiety, is addressed at the end of the chapter. There are many influences that affect our emotional expression.

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8.2: Emotions in Relationships and Communicating Our Emotions

Overview

Emotions are deeply rooted within our relationships, and language that is appropriate in one relationship may be a faux pas in another. Understanding the relational context of emotional communication is essential to understanding how emotions influence interpersonal interactions. Although suppressing emotions can contribute to negative emotional experiences, emotions remain connected to our identities, relationships, and communication.

Emotional intelligence, emotional awareness, and emotional contagion play important roles in interpersonal communication. Distinguishing between emotional traits and emotional states, understanding the relationship between empathy and sympathy, and recognizing cultural differences in emotional expression help explain how people experience, interpret, and communicate emotions.

Learning Objectives

- Define emotional intelligence and identify its five key components.
- Explain emotional awareness and distinguish between emotion traits and emotion states.
- Define emotional contagion and describe how emotions can be transferred through interpersonal communication.
- Distinguish between empathy and sympathy and explain how they relate to emotional contagion.
- Explain how culture and cultural display rules influence emotional expression, empathy, and emotional contagion.

Emotional Intelligence

Many of us are familiar with the term IQ, or "intelligence quotient," which research has historically used to study standards of human intelligence (flawed as it may be). In parallel to IQ, researchers also study **emotional intelligence**, or EQ, which measures our ability to process emotions and emotional information (Alegre et al., 2019). EQ is a form of social intelligence that helps us manage our emotions within social interactions. It helps regulate our emotions and influences how we express them.



Figure 8.2.1: A person in thought illustrates the internal processing involved in recognizing and understanding emotional information. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Amitc008 via Wikimedia Commons)

Having a high level of emotional intelligence means being able to demonstrate self-awareness of our own emotions and regulate and balance them, while also monitoring and accurately understanding the emotions of 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).

Five Key Elements of Emotional Intelligence

Self-awareness is the conscious understanding of our character, feelings, emotions, desires, personality, and individuality. It includes elements of humility, self-confidence, and awareness of our impact on others.

Self-regulation is the ability to respond to emotional stimuli in ways that promote facilitative control over feelings, thoughts, and physiological responses. It includes emotional flexibility, comfort with ambiguity, and openness to change.

Self-motivation is the drive to set attainable goals using personal desire rather than external influence. It includes organization, commitment, and optimism.

Empathy is listening for an understanding of another person's feelings or emotions with the goal of validating that person. Empathic listening is a higher-level form of listening and therefore requires more energy. It includes elements of intercultural communication competence and nonverbal awareness.

Social skill is the ability to build and maintain relationships through effective interaction with others and the management of social norms and rules within communication. It includes verbal and nonverbal communication norms, intercultural communication competence, and active listening.

Emotional Awareness

Although relationships affect our emotions, relationships themselves do not experience emotions. We experience emotions as interpersonal members of relationships. Within the study of emotional intelligence, researchers have expanded their understanding into more precise applications. One area that has developed from the original research on EQ 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 aware of what emotions are present.

Emotional awareness is a skill and practice that can be challenging for many, as it must be honed and maintained during the times when it is less needed; that is, when our emotions are in a regulated state. Emotional awareness is most important when it is most challenging; that is, when we are in a heightened emotional state. Emotional peaks are often experienced at its height during adolescence, when individuals are experiencing puberty and developing their understanding of themselves in relation to other people. During this period, it can also be difficult to regulate emotions (Agnoli et al., 2019). Because of the physiological and emotional changes occurring during this period of development, the transition into adulthood can involve many challenges. Learning and growing in emotional intelligence and emotional awareness is crucial to the development of self-concept and self-esteem, which also help shape emotional intelligence and awareness (Agnoli et al., 2019).

We are constantly affected by the people around us and manage emotional responses within those interactions. When examining the communication of emotions with other people, there are two primary ways emotions can be classified: 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 personality and demonstrate a habitual and prolonged set of baseline emotions. Emotion traits are inherently linked to the theoretical framework of the Big Five personality traits discussed earlier in this chapter (Alegre et al., 2019).

For example, when considering conscientiousness, neuroticism, and agreeableness, an emotional trait might be described as being an “anxious person,” where an individual may not be effective at regulating feelings of worry or fear. Another person might define themselves as a “people-pleaser” if they are consistently focused on other people's needs and attending to those needs rather than their own.

Emotion states exist in smaller “windows” of time, and experiencing them is much less dependent on personality. Emotion states are emotions experienced during a specific moment and are generally influenced by the conversations, interactions, and individuals present. Emotion states come and go more easily than moods or personality, and they can change from one moment to the next.

Some emotion states are connected “directly to other people, like anger, envy, jealousy, hate and shame” (The Libarynth, n.d.). We may find that we feel joy and comfort in the presence of certain people in our lives, while we may feel annoyance or frustration when interacting with others. Emotional awareness allows us to recognize these different emotional states and understand the connections and reasons for experiencing particular 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 will be discussed later in this chapter.

Emotional Contagion

Emotions are like yawns: they are contagious. When we see someone yawn, it can create the urge to yawn ourselves, and emotions can work in a similar way. This “emotional yawn” is called **emotional contagion**. Emotional contagion occurs when we are exposed to other individuals' emotions during social interactions. Our instincts can influence these social interactions and create alignment with the emotional states we perceive in others (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021).

Emotional contagion can be both a conscious and unconscious reaction. When we are in social settings with people to whom we feel close and whom we identify as significant individuals in our lives, we may pick up on and be impacted by their emotional states more quickly and without conscious reasoning, as though there is an “automatic” connection with the person. Other interactions may require us to appraise, or assess, the emotional state of another person before establishing our own reaction (The Libarynth, n.d.). Both reactions are part of emotional awareness and contribute to balancing communication so that it is effective and appropriate.

Emotions can be transferred from one individual to another through a wide array of communicative expressions. Physical features may create an emotional response, such as the urge to smile when someone smiles at us. Vocal expressions can also transfer emotions. When someone becomes tearful while speaking, for instance, we may find ourselves holding back tears as well. Posture or kinesics can communicate emotional states, such as when we see someone slump into a chair and experience a sense of their exhaustion. Through our nervous system, including the brain and nerve cells that transmit information, we are able not only to perceive the emotions of others but also to experience aspects of those emotions ourselves.

Empathy vs. Sympathy

Emotional contagion relates to the concepts of empathy and sympathy. **Sympathy** is the ability to understand our own experiences and emotional reactions to the environment around us and use those experiences as a way to compare them with other individuals who may be having similar emotional experiences. Sympathy involves projecting our emotions onto other people, where we may feel bad for the person but do not see ourselves as agents within the other person's emotional state.

Empathy, in contrast, is sharing the emotional experience with another person by demonstrating emotional awareness and experiencing aspects of that person's emotional state. Empathy is directly connected to emotional contagion. In order to feel empathy, we rely on our instincts to align with the communicative expressions conveyed by another person. Empathy can be expressed in phrases such as “I understand how hard this is.”

Empathy is a learned skill that not everyone has or enacts in the same way. Some individuals may not experience empathy at all, may experience heightened levels of empathy, or may experience it at levels similar to others. Regardless of how empathy is experienced, differences in empathy do not mean that an individual cannot communicate effectively. They may mean that certain aspects of emotional expression do not occur as easily or in the same manner as they do for others.

For example, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized by greater difficulty with certain aspects of communication and social functioning than may be experienced by neurotypical individuals. Individuals who have ASD may express emotions and empathy in various ways that look different, such as displaying an overabundance of emotional expression and empathy or displaying very little. These differences can affect the amount and form of emotional contagion experienced at the individual level.

Cultural Understanding

Another example of how empathy and emotional contagion may be expressed differently is through cultural understanding. All cultures have different display rules regarding emotional expression, and these rules affect the ways emotions are communicated and how others respond to them. Research has shown that within many cultures, negative emotional reactions and the subsequent impact of emotional contagion create different display rules, resulting in different measures of emotional contagion depending on the context (Kuang et al., 2019).

One example of differences across cultures involves expressions of love. While some cultures express love outwardly through public displays of affection such as holding hands, kissing, or hugging, other cultures do not welcome these overt demonstrations of affection in public settings. Similar with cultural expressions of grief. Some cultures may grieve communally and loudly, with tears and sobs and cries, while other cultures may grieve in a more stoic or isolated way. These differences demonstrate the importance of understanding cultural context when interpreting emotional expression and emotional responses.

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8.3: Managing and Coping with Emotions

Overview

Managing emotions can be difficult because many factors, including aspects of our internal and external selves, may influence or be influenced by the emotions we experience. Self-concept and self-esteem can have a significant impact on our emotions and our ability to communicate effectively when those emotions are intense. Managing emotions does not mean suppressing them or making them disappear; instead, it involves understanding how we react to the emotions we experience and developing greater awareness and control over those reactions.

The distinction between facilitative and debilitative emotions provides a framework for understanding how emotional reactions can either support or interfere with effective communication. Strategies involving irrational thinking, self-talk, activating events, self-compassion, emotional neutrality, cultural awareness, and social support can help individuals manage challenging emotions and maximize facilitative emotional experiences.

Learning Objectives

- Explain what managing emotions means and distinguish emotional management from emotional suppression.
- Distinguish between facilitative emotions and debilitative emotions.
- Identify and apply the four steps for minimizing debilitative emotions.
- Explain how self-talk, self-compassion, neutrality, and cultural context influence emotional experiences.
- Identify strategies for maximizing facilitative emotions and finding support when coping with challenging emotions.

Context for Managing Emotions

Managing emotions can be difficult given the many different factors, including aspects of our internal and external selves, that may be impacting or impacted by the emotions we are experiencing. For example, self-concept and self-esteem have a significant 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. Instead, it explains how we are reacting to the emotions we are feeling. There are unlimited ways we can react, just as there are unlimited emotions or combinations of emotions we can feel at any given time.

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. At the same time, they are self-aware enough to recognize that there are productive and nonproductive ways to react.

Facilitative and Debilitative Emotions

Its important to note here that our understanding of emotions in general and our emotions in particular is a social construct. First and foremost, emotions themselves are *information*. It is *data* we are mindfully collecting about ourselves and our current situations and context. At first, all of our emotions are teaching us something that we should know about how we feel in the situation we are currently in. However, there may be a limit where our emotions shift from being information or data we collect to becoming consuming and overpowering. Assessing and 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 distinguish between facilitative emotions, or helpful emotions, and debilitative emotions, or harmful emotions, allows us to understand that our emotional reactions affect not only ourselves and our internal dialogue but also the way in which we interact and engage with others.

When we explore the wide range of possible emotions a person could feel, we can generally classify most of those emotions into one of two categories. The difference between these categories largely relies on the intensity of the emotion itself.

Facilitative emotions can result in constructive behavior and positive outcomes. These emotional states feel supportive and benefit personal growth. They include neutral emotions, such as contentment. Intense positive emotions may not last long, but

they can create positive moods. Facilitative emotions focus attention on aspects that bring the individual joy and happiness.

Debilitative emotions can result in destructive behavior and negative outcomes. These emotions tend to take control and become overwhelming. They can take a long time to recover from or "snap out" of, creating negative moods. Debilitative emotions are fostered by irrational thinking and are often focused on negative self-talk.

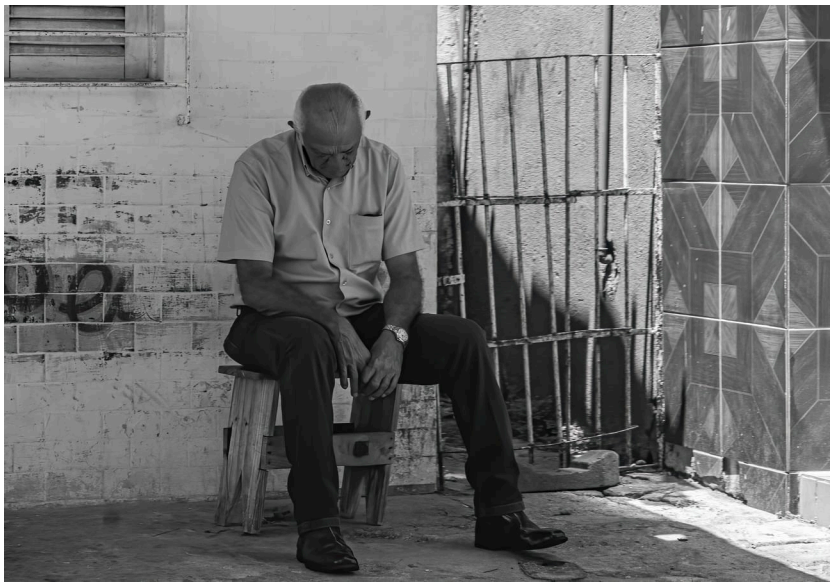


Figure 8.3.1: A thoughtful person illustrates the importance of reflecting on emotions and choosing how to respond to them. (CC0 1.0; Wilfredor via Wikimedia Commons)

For example, if a coworker makes us annoyed because of a certain action or behavior, we can generally move past that emotion quickly and continue working without allowing the emotion or the individual causing it to impact our work. However, if instead of annoyance we were feeling anger or even rage, it might become more difficult to continue working in that environment. The emotion might take over in that moment, making it harder to ensure that our actions and communication are effective and appropriate.

Another important factor that contributes to debilitative emotions is the longevity of the emotion. There is a difference between feeling something for a moment and allowing that emotion to pass and allowing the emotion to become part of a person's mindset and way of thinking. Debilitative emotions can take longer to recover from and tend to linger or become more easily intensified into more dramatic emotional experiences.

For example, if you are having a bad day at work, it may be easier for that bad day to be made worse by small things than for the day to become better. If a coworker has already annoyed you when you arrive at work, it may be easier to feel annoyed by customers throughout the day as well. This can make it more difficult to smile or act friendly when new customers enter the store, creating a negative emotional spiral throughout the day's interactions.

Minimizing Debilitative Emotions

Debilitative emotions are fostered by irrational thinking. **Irrational thinking** occurs when our mind wanders down a path of thought that links things together that are unrelated or causes us to 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 we are feeling or about the interactions that caused those emotions.

In order to overcome debilitative emotions, there are four steps that can help minimize them and reduce how much impact they have over us. These steps can help us manage emotions both in the moment and over 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 gauge the intensity and severity of the emotion we are experiencing. By naming the emotion, we are better able to gain self-awareness of

what that emotion is doing to us both physically and emotionally.

Consider whether the emotion changes over time or stays the same. Does it become more intense, or does it seem to fade? Are there certain people, places, things, phrases, or other factors that bring the emotion back or make it worse?

For example, if you are aware that you are working with a coworker with whom you typically do not get along, it is important to recognize that you may become more easily agitated around that person. You may shorten conversations with the coworker or try to stay busy in areas where you are less likely to interact with them. This can help you avoid communication that might cause you to internalize the annoyance. It also allows you to focus on communicating with customers and actively putting a smile on your face, which may help change your mood internally as well.

Step 2: Note the Activating Event

What caused this emotion to develop? Does it relate to the setting you are in? Does it relate to the types of people you are communicating with or interacting with? Perhaps specific topics of conversation tend to make a debilitative emotion “rise to the surface.”

One example describes a difficult relationship with a mother that extends across the majority of a person's life. Conversations about weight or physical features can result in extreme anger, crying, or nearly crying. Looking back at these incidents can help identify the activating event, or what creates these extreme and long-lasting emotions. Once the connection between certain topics of conversation and debilitative emotions is recognized, it becomes possible to anticipate when those interactions might occur and develop a greater sense of control over how they are handled or whether they should be avoided altogether.

Step 3: Record Self-Talk

Recording our self-talk is an important part of changing internal dialogue and taking back control of the way we allow an emotion to occupy space internally. Returning to the workplace example, allowing aggravation toward a coworker to grow might lead to the belief that the entire job is unpleasant. Although the coworker may not be present all the time, interactions with that person can begin to affect the overall experience of the workplace.

This might also begin to impact self-concept regarding work ethic and interactions with customers. Repeating internal dialogue such as “I hate this place” might perpetuate conflict with customers or coworkers that we do not want to occur.

In the example involving the difficult relationship with a mother, a person might believe that arguments would not occur if their weight, body, or exercise habits were different. The person may begin to believe that they are responsible for the arguments because of the way they look.

Step 4: Dispute Irrational Beliefs

The final step in minimizing debilitative emotions is to dispute irrational beliefs. A person is not a “bad person” because they do not get along with all of their coworkers, nor is a person's physical size or shape responsible for a difficult relationship with their mother.

When we begin to monitor and take specific note of the self-talk that debilitative emotions produce, we can start to see how irrational those emotions can become. Being able to see the logic, or lack of logic, in our own thought patterns allows us to recognize when an emotion is taking control of what we know to be true and real. Even the self-talk described in the earlier examples demonstrates a disconnect between the thoughts and the interaction causing the emotions.

This does not mean that 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 identify our own irrational beliefs is not always as easy as it sounds. It is much easier to write the process into four steps than it is to practice it in real-life examples, especially when attempting to do so in the moment when emotions are controlling us. The goal is to challenge internal dialogue by asking questions. 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 debilitative emotions are challenging to complete and require time, practice, and patience. It is

important to remember that becoming a more competent communicator takes time and that “perfection” does not exist. Once we reach a point where we continuously remember to monitor our emotional reactions, note the events that tend to activate certain debilitative emotions, recognize our self-talk, and pinpoint the thoughts and beliefs interfering with our lives, we can begin to work on changing our self-talk.

There are many ways to approach changing self-talk, but some of the most common advice stems from treating ourselves as we would treat a friend, based on cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) through self-compassion. **Self-compassion** essentially means being kind to ourselves, understanding that we are all learning and growing and that growth involves making mistakes.

It is also important to remember that everyone is critical of themselves from time to time and that our minds can sometimes 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 debilitative emotions from spiraling and allow more facilitative emotions to emerge.

Maximizing Facilitative Emotions

Now that we have considered ways to overcome debilitative emotions, it is equally important to learn how we can maximize facilitative emotions. All emotions exist in tandem with one another. While one moment we may feel a high level of a positive emotion, the next moment we may experience a neutral or negative emotion.

When working toward maximizing facilitative, or positive, emotions, it is important to keep three ideas at the forefront: emotions are complex, neutrality in emotions is facilitative, and culture impacts how facilitative emotions are constructed.

Emotions Are Complex

Emotions are complex aspects of our identities. In the same way that we view the intersection of our identities as 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 exist in a vacuum, and they are often difficult to distinguish because multiple emotional reactions may be experienced at the same time. Because of these complexities, modeling facilitative emotions will look different for each person.

Research has consistently shown that maximizing facilitative emotions depends strongly on “fit,” or the ways in which 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 ensure that the strategies being used 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 can help create habitual commitment and increase the likelihood that the facilitative emotion will be increased and sustained (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

Neutrality in Emotions Is Facilitative

This also leads to an understanding of neutrality in emotions. **Neutrality** is defined as “feeling indifferent, nothing in particular, and a lack of preference one way or the other.” The term indifferent does not 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, relating back to the complexity of emotions. 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 a 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 simply feeling “OK” rather than feeling “good” or “great.”

Neutrality could have a “range of potential consequences, including helping people cope” with a given environment. As such,

neutral emotions are not negative. They are stable in long-term understandings of our mood and personality traits. This connects back to our definition of facilitative emotions as emotions that allow us to progress forward in a positive way (Gasper et al., 2019).

When looking at facilitative emotions and considering ways to foster them, it is important to be mindful and realistic about 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 reach a level of neutrality in building facilitative emotions is an important skill.

Culture Impacts How Facilitative Emotions Are Constructed

Research demonstrates that emotions are social interactions created within our interpersonal interactions and social environments. As discussed throughout this book, culture has an important impact on interpersonal interactions because our social environments are culturally constructed. Emotions also impact and are impacted by culture (Cho et al., 2019).

Geert Hofstede’s foundational research on 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 the values of individual versus group needs are heightened.

Research on emotions has traditionally emphasized intrapersonal and individualized aspects, such as personal self-esteem and internal dialogue, as separate from interpersonal, communal communication (Cho et al., 2019). These ideas showcase an individualistic understanding of emotion as a cultural value but do not fully showcase a collectivistic understanding.

Within collectivistic cultures, such as East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian cultures, emotional values gravitate toward prioritizing group needs as well as emotional well-being (Tsai, 2021). There are many ways in which emotions are similar across cultures, including physiological responses to emotions, but there are also important ways in which emotional behaviors differ. These differences are important to understand in order to create effective and appropriate interpretations of emotional responses within communication interactions.

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. While there is no “one size fits all” method to maximizing facilitative emotions, research does show that some strategies are likely to work given commitment and longevity of practice (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Julia Hotz (2024) summarizes these effectively in her book "Connection Cure: The Prescriptive Power of Movement, Nature, Art, Service, and Belonging" regarding ways in which we can socially and culturally promote wellness:

- **Movement:** Finding opportunities to regularly engage in any kind of physical activity, as simple as a walk, can promote emotional wellness and facilitative emotions.
- **Nature:** Spending time whenever possible in natural settings, either on a hike through an isolated area or just sitting in the grass under a tree at a neighborhood park.
- **Art:** Engaging in creativity and artistic expression, primarily through the creation but also through consumption, in any form or medium.
- **Service:** Using whatever tools or facilities we have at our disposal to be supportive and kind to our communities.
- **Belonging:** Taking time to maintain connection to friends and family, or to join or cultivate groups around shared experiences.

First, any consistent engagement of these five pilars will result in positive cultivation of facilitative emotions. Second, combining these five pillars can have a synergistic upwelling of facilitative emotions. For example, if you were to join a hiking club, you would be moving your body in nature while belonging to a group.

Social and cultural practices may not always be the only method of reducing debilitative emotions and producing facilitative emotions, but it something available to all of us that can possibly create greater emotional wellbeing.

Ways to Find Support

Throughout this chapter, we have explored the variety of ways our emotions can manifest. We have also discussed ways to understand where our emotions stem from, both internally and within our social environments. One thing has been made clear throughout each section of this chapter: emotions are challenging at times, and being able to manage our emotions is an essential part of our communication and interpersonal relationships.

When we are in tune with ourselves and have emotional awareness, it can help us in many aspects of life, including decision-making, conflict management, relational satisfaction, and self-esteem.

There are some emotions that are more difficult than others to manage and can not only impact our short-term emotional state but can also physically alter our personality and our sense of self. Emotions such as grief, trauma, depression, anxiety, stress, and anger are emotional experiences that can often feel invisible but are valid.

During these challenging emotions, it can feel extremely difficult to express what the emotions feel like, not only to others but even to ourselves. It can feel impossible to reach out for support or know where to turn to find empathy, but it is an extremely important step in being able to cope with these emotions.

Among our basic needs as human beings are social needs: we need to find others who are like us and with whom we can express ourselves. During times when we feel threatened by our emotions, finding support and being able to talk through our emotions is a vital step in creating a positive outlook.

This step has the ability to create a positive change in mood and allows us to continue to function in daily life. Finding support comes in many forms, and the kind of support we need in one instance may differ from what we need in another. Having the ability to draw from our support resources allows us to find what we need in order to confront these feelings.

It is important to remember that we are not a burden to other people, that we are not weak, and that every person needs to be supported by others throughout life. We can provide that support for someone else when they need it and provide empathy for their situation.

Attributions

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8.4: Constructing Communication Climate

Overview

Communication climate refers to the overall emotional atmosphere created by the people involved in an interaction and the communication they bring to it. Communication climates can range from confirming, in which people feel valued and acknowledged, to disconfirming, in which people may feel ignored, devalued, or unimportant.

Messages and behaviors contribute to confirming and disconfirming communication climates in different ways. Attending, affirming, and accepting messages can promote supportive interactions, while disregarding, disparaging, and denouncing messages can contribute to negative climates; however, the meaning of a communicative behavior can vary depending on factors such as culture, context, status, and the relationship between communicators.

Learning Objectives

- Define communication climate and explain how it influences interpersonal interactions and relationships.
- Distinguish between confirming and disconfirming communication climates and identify attending, affirming, accepting, disregarding, disparaging, and denouncing messages.
- Explain how culture, context, status, relationships, and communication behaviors influence the interpretation of confirming and disconfirming messages.
- Describe how defensive and supportive communication behaviors affect communication climates, conflict, and interpersonal interactions.
- Apply strategies for responding to feedback non-defensively and providing constructive feedback that promotes supportive and confirming communication climates.

Communication Climate

As rain drops from the sky, our mood sometimes seems to drop, too. It may feel like a coincidence when a dreary day leaves us feeling less positive. As the Carpenters sang, “Rainy days and Mondays always get me down.” Rain can and does put a damper on the mood.

Similarly, the “climate” of our interpersonal communication may influence our mood. When someone acknowledges our ideas, we may feel “warm” inside because of that positive validation. On the other hand, we might experience a “cold,” empty feeling if our ideas are ignored or attributed to someone else. Communication climate can be thought of as a kind of “interpersonal communication weather report.”

Consider an interaction between a parent and a young child. A child approaches a parent who is busy preparing food and begins talking about wanting to go outside. The parent remains focused on cooking and responds with “We’ll see” before the child has finished speaking. The child then asks the parent to look at them so they know the parent is listening and explains that “We’ll see” really means “no.” This interaction illustrates how a message can communicate more than its literal words. Although the parent verbally responded, the lack of attention and nonverbal engagement communicated a different message.

Communication climate is the the overall emotional tone, mood, or relational atmosphere created by the interaction between individuals. If family gatherings are associated with tension, or getting together with friends is associated with having a good time, we are responding to the communication climate, the overall mood created by the people involved and the type of communication they bring to the interaction. Communication climate is often assessed on a spectrum of **confirming climates**–ones of recognition and respect–on one end of the spectrum, and **disconfirming climates**–disrespect and unappreciative value–on the other. Most people prefer confirming climates because they foster emotional safety as well as personal and relational growth. However, relationships are likely to fall somewhere between the two extremes of completely confirming and completely disconfirming climates. And this communication climate is socially constructed.

Messages That Shape Communication Climate

Confirming and disconfirming responses are part of everyday interpersonal interactions. A response can communicate whether another person is being acknowledged, valued, and engaged with or whether they are being ignored or devalued.

Confirming climates can be examined through attending, affirming, and accepting messages. Disconfirming climates can be examined through disregarding, disparaging, and denouncing messages. All of these types of messages can be conveyed both verbally and nonverbally.

Messages of Confirming Climates

Attending Messages

Attending messages indicate recognition and confirmation of another person's existence. For example, when a family member arrives home and we greet them with, "Welcome home! I'm so glad to see you," we are confirming their existence. Likewise, when we answer the phone, we say, "Hello" as a greeting to the person on the other end. Imagine the awkwardness of not being recognized if someone answers the phone in silence.

Attending messages are so important that Walmart hires "greeters" whose purpose is to make customers feel welcome as they enter. Many other retailers have followed suit, and customers often hear, "Hi! Welcome to [name of store]" upon entering a store. Attending messages are the most basic form of confirmation. A simple nod or wink of acknowledgment can go a long way toward establishing a positive communication climate.

Affirming Messages

Affirming messages go beyond attending to also convey our interest and concern for the other person. Nodding while listening or laughing appropriately at a funny story are nonverbal affirmations of interpersonal engagement.

When a significant other says they had a really bad day at work and the response is, "I'm sorry to hear you had a bad day. Do you want to have some coffee and cake and tell me about it?" the response acknowledges and addresses the other person's feelings.

Accepting Messages

Accepting messages are the strongest of confirming messages. An accepting message acknowledges a person's feelings as valid through agreement and/or showing support.

Suppose a friend becomes upset after a fight with their partner. Responding with, "Wow, I can understand why you are upset," endorses their right to feel upset. When we allow people to own their emotions and do not tell them how to feel, we create supportive climates that provide a safe environment for them to work through their problems.

Disconfirming Climates

Attending, affirming, and accepting have both confirming and disconfirming attributes, while disconfirming messages can also be classified as disregarding, disparaging, and denouncing.

Disregarding Messages

Disregarding messages can be understood as the opposite of attending. They convey to the other person that they are unimportant or even nonexistent.

In recent times, attachment to electronic devices has made phubbing an easy and common way of disregarding people in face-to-face interactions. **Phubbing** (phone + snubbing) occurs when we snub or ignore others by giving our attention to electronic devices. Typical phubbers fail to provide nonverbal cues that communicate recognition, such as eye contact or a smile. Additionally, phubbing behaviors are seen as signs of disrespect. Phubbing can occur from either the giving or receiving end, or

both. Awareness of phubbing can encourage greater mindfulness of the messages communicated through these behaviors (Kelly et al., 2018).

Disparaging Messages

Disparaging messages range from passive-aggressive to openly aggressive, showing discord and disgust. Sometimes, a disparaging message can appear to be a compliment. For example, Ching-Heng received the comment, "You have such good penmanship [compliment] for a left-hander [implying somehow that all left-handers' writing is messy]."

Bullying is a form of aggressive, disparaging conduct that has received considerable attention. According to stopbullying.gov, bullying involves "unwanted, aggressive behavior… that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

Physical, in-person bullying has long been a problem. With increased use and reliance on electronic devices, cyberbullying has also become a significant concern. "**Cyberbullying** includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021).

Many cyberbullies may experience the **disinhibition effect** (Suler, 2004). Hiding behind electronic devices and being removed from face-to-face interactions can bring out behaviors that individuals might otherwise lack the courage to display. As a result, online name-calling, put-downs, and similar behaviors in comments and social media forums can contribute to negative interpersonal experiences and social anxiety.

Denouncing Messages

Being **denounced** is the worst form of disconfirmation. When we are denounced, we are excluded, banished, or shunned intentionally. Most people have probably experienced this, either as the person giving or receiving the behavior, at some point.

According to Parramore (2014), being denounced can hurt even more than being bullied. At least when we are bullied, we receive some form of attention or feedback, albeit negative. When denounced, we are ostracized and made to feel nonexistent, as though we are not even worth the effort required to be bullied.

Experiences can range from receiving the silent treatment from an angry parent to being ghosted by friends or being outright stonewalled by a significant other. The person denouncing another is exercising almost abusive power by intentionally excluding the other person and making them feel diminished.

When too many disconfirming messages are sent and received, people generally become defensive. When we are defensive, we are, first and foremost, protecting our own interests. The likely results tend not to be productive, but instead escalate whatever conflict already exists.

Confirming and Disconfirming Responses

Many behaviors may be interpreted differently, as disconfirming at one end of the continuum or confirming at the other end. Cultural norms can play an important role in the confirmation-disconfirmation continuum.

There are many ways to say "no" without using the word "no" in some cultures. For example, a master's thesis published in November 2020 investigated "50 ways to say 'No' in Japanese: A study in refusals among Japanese people" (Maciejewski, 2020). As the author stated in the abstract of the thesis: "indirectness as a polite refusal strategy in Japanese can often lead to misunderstandings since indirectness is not always regarded as polite in other languages." Such indirectness could be interpreted as an ambiguous or irrelevant disconfirming response by someone outside of Japanese culture.

A **tangential response** is a response in which the speaker briefly acknowledges a person's contribution to a conversation but then immediately changes the direction of the discussion. This can be a potentially disconfirming response because, although the person is acknowledged, the gist of what they said is not addressed. The conversation partner may therefore feel disconfirmed because the topic is changed and their contribution is effectively ignored.

A tangential response can also be used in classroom discussions when a speaker wants to acknowledge a student's question or comment but needs to move the discussion forward because of time constraints. In such cases, the speaker can affirm the

student's contribution by thanking them by name and acknowledging the value of their contribution before moving to the next topic. This approach allows the student to be heard and acknowledged while still keeping the discussion moving.

It is important to note that different communication behaviors may carry more than one intended message and, in turn, may have more than one possible interpretation. The continuum shown in the accompanying figure represents how interpretations can move between disconfirming and confirming responses. Confirming and disconfirming messages are not "absolute." They can vary in degree of positivity and negativity, moving from invalidating and denying to acknowledging and validating.

A person might perceive a response from a conversation partner as either disconfirming or confirming. The interpretation may depend on several factors, including culture, context, status, and relationship. It is important to remain flexible when interpreting what another person might mean because communication styles and strategies can differ.

Here are several examples of communication behaviors that could be regarded as disconfirming at times but confirming in other interactions.

No Overt Response

One conversation partner gives no overt response to the other. That person is not acknowledged verbally or nonverbally.

Example 8.4.1 When Silence Speaks

The situation: Jordan is telling a coworker about an idea for improving a team project. After Jordan finishes speaking, the coworker looks down at their computer and says nothing. There is no eye contact, nod, verbal response, or other visible acknowledgment.

Jordan may interpret the lack of response as a disconfirming message:

- "They completely ignored what I said."
- "Maybe my ideas are not important."
- "I am not worth responding to."
- "They do not even think my contribution deserves an acknowledgment."

However, the same behavior could have a confirming or face-saving interpretation, depending on the circumstances:

- "Maybe they are thinking carefully about what I said."
- "Perhaps they do not want to respond before they have something meaningful to contribute."
- "Maybe they are avoiding an immediate response because they do not want to embarrass or contradict me publicly."
- "Their silence may be a way of preserving face rather than dismissing my contribution."

Consider: Before deciding that silence means rejection, what other information might you need? What role might the relationship, setting, or culture play in interpreting the silence?

Interrupting a Conversation Partner

A conversation partner jumps right into what the other partner is saying. The interrupted partner might view this behavior as a way to silence their voice and viewpoint, a disconfirming type of communication.

Example 8.4.2 When Voices Overlap

The situation: During a group discussion, Maya begins explaining her perspective on a new project. Before she finishes her sentence, Alex jumps in and begins explaining his own idea.

Maya may interpret the interruption as a disconfirming message:

- "What I have to say is not important."

- “Alex thinks his ideas matter more than mine.”
- “He is not really listening to me.”
- “He is trying to take control of the conversation.”
- “My contribution was not worth allowing me to finish.”

But interruption can also have a confirming interpretation, particularly when the communicators have an established conversational rhythm:

- “Alex is excited because we are thinking along the same lines.”
- “He understood where I was going before I finished explaining.”
- “Our ideas are connecting so quickly that we are building on each other’s comments.”
- “His interruption may be a sign of enthusiasm rather than an attempt to silence me.”

Consider: How might the meaning change if Alex is a close friend, a supervisor, a stranger, or someone from a culture where overlapping speech is common?

Mixed or Ambiguous Signals

One conversation partner gives the other mixed verbal and nonverbal signals or communicates an ambiguous message.

Example 8.4.3 When Messages Conflict

The situation: Taylor asks a friend, “Are you upset with me?” The friend responds, “No, everything is fine,” but avoids eye contact, speaks quietly, and quickly changes the subject.

Taylor may experience these conflicting messages as disconfirming or confusing:

- “They are saying one thing but communicating something completely different.”
- “Maybe they are not being honest with me.”
- “I cannot tell what they really mean.”
- “Maybe they are intentionally avoiding the conversation.”
- “I do not know whether I should believe the words or the nonverbal cues.”

The same behavior could also have a confirming interpretation:

- “Maybe my friend needs time to figure out how they feel.”
- “They may not be ready to talk about the issue yet.”
- “Perhaps they are trying to avoid embarrassing me or creating conflict.”
- “Maybe ‘everything is fine’ is an indirect way of saying they do not want to discuss the issue right now.”
- “Their response may reflect a cultural or relational preference for indirect communication.”

Consider: When verbal and nonverbal messages conflict, how might you avoid jumping to conclusions about another person's intentions?

Changing the Topic

One conversation partner changes the topic. This can leave a person feeling disconfirmed.

Example 8.4.4 When the Conversation Shifts

The situation: Sam tells a friend, “I have been really stressed about my new job. I am not sure I am doing well.” The friend responds, “Speaking of work, did you see the email from our manager?” The conversation immediately shifts to another topic.

Sam may interpret the topic change as disconfirming:

- “They did not really hear what I was saying.”
- “My feelings are not important to them.”
- “Maybe they do not want to listen to me.”
- “I opened up about something important, and they brushed it aside.”

However, the topic change could also have a confirming interpretation:

- “Maybe my friend knows I am uncomfortable talking about this and is giving me an opportunity to move on.”
- “Perhaps they are trying to give me a face-saving way out of a difficult conversation.”
- “Maybe they do not know how to respond but still want to stay connected.”
- “Perhaps they are trying to keep the conversation moving because of the setting or time available.”

Consider: A topic change in a casual conversation with a friend may have a different meaning than the same behavior during a classroom discussion, workplace meeting, or difficult interpersonal conversation.

These examples demonstrate that communication behaviors do not have one universal meaning. A lack of response, interruption, ambiguous message, or change in topic may feel disconfirming in one interaction and confirming in another. How we interpret a behavior depends on the culture, context, relationship, and status of the communicators, as well as the verbal and nonverbal cues surrounding the interaction. Tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and other contextual information may reinforce or contradict the words being spoken.

It is also important to consider both intent and impact. A communicator may intend to be respectful, supportive, or face-saving, while the other person may experience the message as dismissive or disconfirming. Conversely, a behavior that initially appears dismissive may have been intended to show respect or protect the other person's feelings. These differences are especially important when considering high-context and low-context communication, because cultures and relationships vary in how much meaning is communicated directly through words versus indirectly through context and nonverbal cues.

Ultimately, effective communication requires more than labeling a behavior as confirming or disconfirming. It requires us to consider how meaning is created between communicators and to remain open to interpretations that may differ from our own. Developing this awareness can help us reduce misunderstandings, respond more thoughtfully, and create more supportive communication climates.

Defensiveness and Supportiveness

Jack Gibb’s six pairs of supportive and defensive behaviors provide a framework for understanding communication climate: description versus evaluation, collaboration versus control, straightforwardness versus manipulation, empathy versus indifference, equality versus superiority, and flexibility versus certainty. Examining these contrasting behaviors helps illustrate how different communication approaches can either contribute to defensiveness and conflict or encourage supportiveness and productive interaction.

Our natural instinct when we feel threatened is to become defensive. As defensive communicators, we focus on protecting ourselves and our interests, which is not necessarily a bad thing because we must learn to stand up for ourselves. Unfortunately, defensiveness can become a negative cycle that creates defensiveness in others and causes conflicts to escalate.

Defensive behaviors such as rolling the eyes, not listening, making excuses, or blaming others can cause a communication partner to argue more loudly, walk away, blame the other person in return, or gunnysack. Gunnysacking is a nonproductive conflict tactic in which a person saves up or “gunnysacks” complaints until they burst with anger, spilling all their grievances at once. These defensive behaviors can cause communicators to “make a mountain out of a molehill.” As defensiveness increases, disconfirming communication climate increases, and the ability to communicate effectively often decreases.

Conversely, supportive climates create calmer and more productive communication outcomes. This allows communicators to focus more effectively on the intent and meanings of messages.

In 1965, psychologist Jack Gibb identified six pairs of supportive and defensive behaviors to provide a context for learning about and understanding communication climate: description versus evaluation, collaboration versus control, straightforwardness versus manipulation, empathy versus indifference, equality versus superiority, and flexibility versus certainty. Each pair represents contrasting communication behaviors that can influence how people perceive and respond to interpersonal interactions.

Description vs. Evaluation

Description is neutral and focuses on facts; evaluation includes blame or judgment.

Description: “I feel left out when you go to the mall without me.”
Evaluation: “You always leave me out when you go to the mall.”

Collaboration vs. Control

Collaboration values everyone’s ideas; control pushes one person’s way.

Collaboration: “Let’s share what has worked and what hasn’t worked.”
Control: “I’m right. We’re doing it my way.”

Straightforwardness vs. Manipulation

Straightforwardness is honest and direct; manipulation uses hidden intentions or pressure.

Straightforwardness: “You didn’t get a raise because your sales volume was lower this quarter.”
Manipulation: “If you worked harder like John, you might have gotten a raise.”

Empathy vs. Indifference

Empathy shows understanding and concern; indifference shows little or no concern.

Empathy: “I know you’re going through a rough time. I hope extending the deadline helps.”
Indifference: “Everyone has problems. If you miss the deadline, you’ll pay the penalty.”

Equality vs. Superiority

Equality treats others with fairness and respect; superiority acts as if one person is better or more capable.

Equality: “I struggled when I first started, too. Let me help you.”
Superiority: “I’ve shown you this a million times. Move over and let me do it.”

Flexibility vs. Certainty

Flexibility is open to new ideas; certainty assumes one way is always right.

Flexibility: “Let’s see how this new technology could help us work smarter.”
Certainty: “I’ve done this a million times. This is the only way to fix it.”

Responding Non-Defensively to Feedback and Criticism

We need to reflect on how we react to criticism from others and develop skills for responding constructively. This requires taking the time and making the effort to process feedback 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, set defenses aside and engage active listening and empathy skills. For empathy, keep in mind that it may be just as difficult for the person giving feedback as it is for the person receiving it. Active listening is important because it can prevent

us from jumping to conclusions and becoming defensive. By putting defensiveness aside, we may learn something helpful and constructive.

Upon receiving feedback, whether in person or in writing, the following strategies can help us react to and acknowledge the feedback.

Use the Feedback WALLET

Potentially negative initial reactions to feedback can be reframed as opportunities for reflection, planning, and future action. Keep the acronym WALLET in mind and use these suggestions: Wait, Avoid attacking back, Listen, Learn, Engage in planning, and Take control.

Wait

Take a moment to digest the information before making a response or decision. Take a breath. Give yourself time to hear, review, and contemplate the information being shared. Taking time to think about and reflect on feedback can help prevent jumping to conclusions. This is possibly one of the most important strategies to take from the “feedback WALLET.”

Avoid Attacking Back

It is human nature to become defensive when confronted with something unpleasant, such as receiving feedback. Listen with an open mind and resist the urge to rebut every point of “criticism” from your communication partner.

Listen

Focus your attention and energy on actively listening to the feedback. Identify the key points being made, and ask for clarification and/or examples to help you better understand the messages being shared.

Learn

Reframe feedback and criticism as opportunities to learn and grow. Even if you do not agree with the feedback, there is always something to be learned from how others perceive you.

Engage in Planning

Do not make excuses. Make a plan instead. Begin developing a plan of action to correct the issue or work toward a solution. This demonstrates initiative in problem-solving.

Take Control

“Responsibility” is not the same as “fault.” It is easy 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?” Doing so changes your perception from self-pity and playing the blame game to taking action and looking for opportunities.

Giving Constructive Feedback

Providing constructive feedback is a key factor in supporting 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 areas of weakness and fostering personal and professional growth.

Simply giving feedback does not necessarily help the recipient improve. Providing good, positive, and constructive feedback is not an easy task. Several considerations are important:

- Are you in a position to comment or provide feedback?
- Is the recipient ready to receive your feedback? If not, you may be entering a negative communication climate that is unlikely to improve. Timing is important.
- Does the other person want your feedback? If the answer is no, another way of addressing the problem at hand may be necessary.

If the recipient is open and ready to engage in a feedback discussion, keep the following considerations in mind.

Be Positive

Especially when feedback includes criticism, start and end with positives. Sandwiching criticisms and corrections between positive points and what the recipient is doing well can help the message be received more positively. See the figure for a diagram of the “Feedback Sandwich.”

Avoid Using Absolutes or Negative Words

Absolutes include words such as always, never, or don’t. Avoiding absolutes communicates openness to different interpretations, solutions, and the “gray” areas. Psychological research has shown that humans tend to focus more on negatives as we attempt to make sense of the world. With this in mind, try to replace negative words and phrases with positive ones.

Avoid Comparison

According to social comparison theory, it is natural for people to compare themselves with others. However, these comparisons can also result in resentment and frustration when they portray us as less capable or successful. Avoid comparing people and situations.

Be Specific

Avoid evaluative adjectives and instead use descriptive words that are precise and straightforward. Address specific issues, behaviors, or attitudes that can be improved and/or changed. When suggesting improvements or changes, specify what is expected and how to achieve it.

Overall, for feedback to be positive, it needs to:

- Be given and received at the right time and in the right place.
- Be given with positive points and a specific plan of action.
- Be based on facts and information directed toward working toward a solution.

The Feedback Sandwich

Research suggests that the feedback sandwich, which combines positive comments with constructive criticism, can be an effective approach to delivering corrective feedback when used appropriately (Prochazka et al., 2020).

The feedback sandwich involves sandwiching criticisms and corrections between confirming comments. This approach provides positive points alongside areas for improvement and can help create a more supportive climate when feedback includes criticism or correction.

Overall, using our communication skills to mindfully and continually create a confirming communication climate will lead to more positive, fulfilling interpersonal relationships.

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8.5: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Emotions are complex experiences that involve more than temporary feelings. They include physiological reactions, cognitive interpretations, personality, culture, relationships, and verbal and nonverbal expression. People may experience multiple emotions at the same time, and emotional responses can change as situations and interpretations change. These emotional experiences are closely connected to self-concept and influence how people understand themselves and communicate with others.

Personality, culture, social conventions, and social roles all influence emotional experiences and expression. The Big Five personality traits provide a framework for understanding how characteristics such as neuroticism, conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness, and extraversion relate to emotions and behavior. Cultural display rules also influence which emotions are considered appropriate to express, while professional expectations, gender roles, masking, and emotional labor can affect how openly people communicate their emotions.

Emotional intelligence and emotional awareness help individuals recognize, understand, and regulate emotions in interpersonal interactions. Self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills can support more effective communication. Emotional contagion demonstrates how emotional states can spread between people through facial expressions, vocal qualities, posture, and other communicative behaviors, while the distinction between empathy and sympathy highlights different ways of responding to another person's emotional experience.

Managing emotions involves understanding and regulating emotional reactions rather than suppressing emotions or attempting to eliminate them. Facilitative emotions can support productive behavior, while debilitative emotions can interfere with communication and daily functioning. Monitoring emotional reactions, identifying activating events, examining self-talk, and disputing irrational beliefs can help reduce the effects of debilitative emotions, while self-compassion, emotional neutrality, culturally appropriate strategies, and social support can help promote healthier emotional experiences.

Communication climate describes the overall emotional atmosphere between people and can influence how safe, valued, or threatened individuals feel during interactions. Confirming messages such as attending, affirming, and accepting can create supportive climates, while disregarding, disparaging, and denouncing can create disconfirming climates. Defensive behaviors can escalate conflict, whereas supportive behaviors such as description, collaboration, straightforwardness, empathy, equality, and flexibility can encourage more productive interactions. Responding to feedback through the WALLET strategy and providing specific, timely, and constructive feedback can further strengthen communication and interpersonal relationships.

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8.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Accepting messages
- Affirming messages
- Agreeableness
- Attending messages
- Bullying
- Chain emotions
- Communication climate
- Confirming climate
- Conscientiousness
- Cyberbullying
- Debilitative emotions
- Denounce
- Disconfirming climate
- Disinhibition effect
- Disparaging messages
- Disregarding messages
- Dyadic nonverbal patterns
- Emotion states
- Emotional contagion
- Emotional intelligence
- Emotional labor
- Empathy
- Extraversion
- Face
- Facilitative emotions
- Irrational thinking
- Mask
- Neuroticism
- Neutrality
- Openness
- Self-awareness
- Self-motivation
- Self-regulation
- Social skill
- Sympathy
- Trait emotional awareness

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8.7: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. How do culture, personality, and relationships interact to shape the way a person experiences and expresses emotions? Give an example in which two people might experience the same situation but communicate their emotions differently.
2. What is the difference between emotional management and emotional suppression? Why might attempting to eliminate or hide an emotion completely be less effective than understanding and regulating the response to that emotion?
3. How can the same communication behavior be interpreted as either confirming or disconfirming? Discuss how culture, context, status, or the relationship between communicators could change the meaning of a behavior such as interrupting, changing the subject, or remaining silent.
4. Think about a situation in which you or someone else became defensive during a disagreement. Which of Gibb's supportive/defensive communication pairs best describes what happened, and how could the interaction have been reframed to create a more supportive climate?
5. How could the WALLET strategy change the way someone responds to criticism? Which step (Wait, Avoid attacking back, Listen, Learn, Engage in planning, or Take control) do you think would be most difficult to practice, and why?

Chapter Exercises

1. Emotional Reaction Journal
    1. Think of a recent situation that produced a strong emotional response. Record the emotion, its intensity, the physiological reactions you noticed, the activating event, your self-talk, and how you responded. Then identify whether your response was facilitative or debilitative and describe one alternative response that might have been more productive.
2. Communication Climate Analysis
    1. Observe or recall an interaction between two people and identify at least three messages that contributed to the communication climate. Classify each as attending, affirming, accepting, disregarding, disparaging, or denouncing, and explain how each message could have affected the people involved.
3. WALLET Role-Play
    1. Work with a partner to create a realistic situation in which one person receives difficult feedback. Have the recipient initially respond defensively, then repeat the interaction using all six steps of the WALLET strategy. Compare the two interactions and identify how the communication climate changed.
4. Supportive Communication Rewrite
    1. Take five defensive or disconfirming statements, such as accusations, blame, absolute statements, or dismissive responses, and rewrite each using supportive communication. For each revision, identify whether you used description, collaboration, straightforwardness, empathy, equality, or flexibility.
5. Feedback Practice Exercise
    1. Develop a short piece of constructive feedback for a classmate, coworker, friend, or fictional character. Make the feedback specific, timely, descriptive rather than judgmental, and focused on behaviors that can be changed. Deliver or write the feedback using positive framing, avoiding comparisons and absolutes, and conclude with a specific plan for improvement or follow-up.

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9: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Chapter Overview

Interpersonal conflict is a natural and unavoidable part of human communication that arises when individuals perceive incompatible goals, needs, values, or resources. Rather than being inherently negative, conflict exists on a continuum that ranges from simple disagreement to emotionally charged relational struggle. Understanding how conflict develops requires recognizing its communicative nature, the role of interdependence, and the ways that personal perceptions shape whether disagreements escalate or remain manageable. Additionally, conflict is influenced by cultural expectations, identity concerns, and broader relational dynamics that shape how individuals interpret and respond to tension.

Since conflict is shaped by both internal attitudes and external communication patterns, individuals rely on a range of strategies to manage it. These include distinct conflict management styles, learned behavioral responses that can either escalate or reduce tension, and constructive communication skills that promote understanding and resolution. When handled poorly, conflict can damage trust and weaken relationships; however, when approached thoughtfully, it can foster growth, deepen connection, and improve communication. Effective conflict management ultimately depends on awareness, adaptability, and the willingness to engage in respectful, collaborative problem-solving.



Figure 9.1: Two people in a heated face-to-face conflict, with two others holding them back, illustrating how interpersonal conflict arises from perceived incompatible goals, values, or needs, and how it can escalate through communication and emotional interpretation. The restraint also suggests the role of social intervention and the possibility of de-escalation through constructive conflict management. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Blaine A. White via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Explain the nature of interpersonal conflict and how it differs from disagreement.
- Identify and compare major conflict management styles and their effects on relationships.
- Analyze how learned communication behaviors can escalate or de-escalate conflict.
- Apply key communication skills that support effective conflict resolution.
- Evaluate conflict as both a potential problem and an opportunity for relational growth.

9.1: Defining Interpersonal Conflict

9.2: Conflict Management Styles, Goals, and Outcomes

9.3: Unproductive Conflict
9.4: Effective Conflict Resolution
9.5: Chapter Review
9.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools
9.7: Discussions and Exercises
9.8: References

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9.1: Defining Interpersonal Conflict

Overview

Understanding conflict begins with distinguishing it from simple disagreement. While disagreements involve differences of opinion, they do not necessarily include negative emotions or relational strain. Conflict emerges when disagreement is accompanied by negative affect, incompatibility, and communicative tension that can escalate interactions from ordinary argumentation into more serious relational struggles. A key factor influencing whether disagreements escalate is an individual's tolerance for disagreement, which shapes how personally individuals interpret opposing viewpoints.

Scholars emphasize that conflict is an interactive and communicative process that requires interdependence and perceived incompatibility between people or groups. Conflict can involve differences in goals, values, needs, resources, or beliefs, and it is not inherently destructive. While some perspectives frame conflict as harmful and relationship-damaging, others view it as a normal and potentially beneficial part of interpersonal communication. These differing perspectives set the stage for understanding how conflict functions within relationships and how it can either undermine or strengthen them depending on how it is managed.

Learning Objectives

- Differentiate between disagreement and interpersonal conflict.
- Explain how tolerance for disagreement influences the escalation of conflict.
- Define conflict as a communicative and interactive process between interdependent individuals.
- Identify the key conditions that contribute to the emergence of interpersonal conflict.
- Compare negative and positive perspectives on the role of conflict in relationships.

Understanding Conflict

It is key to differentiate a conflict from a disagreement. A **disagreement** is a difference of opinion and often occurs during an **argument**, or a verbal exchange between two or more people who have differing opinions on a given subject or subjects. It's important to realize that arguments are not conflicts, but if they become verbally aggressive, they can quickly turn into conflicts. One factor that ultimately can help determine if an argument will escalate into a conflict is an individual's tolerance for disagreement. James McCroskey, along with his colleagues, initially defined **tolerance for disagreement** as whether an individual can openly discuss differing opinions without feeling personally attacked or confronted. People that have a high tolerance for disagreement can easily discuss opinions with pretty much anyone and realize that arguing is perfectly normal and, for some, even entertaining. People that have a low tolerance for disagreement feel personally attacked any time someone is perceived as devaluing their opinion. From an interpersonal perspective, understanding someone's tolerance for disagreement can help in deciding if arguments will be perceived as the other as attacks that could lead to verbally aggressive conflicts. However, not all conflict is necessarily verbally aggressive nor destructive.

Conflict is an interactive process occurring when conscious beings (individuals or groups) have opposing or incompatible actions, beliefs, goals, ideas, motives, needs, objectives, obligations resources and/or values.

Definition: Conflict

Conflict is an interactive process occurring when conscious beings (individuals or groups) have opposing or incompatible actions, beliefs, goals, ideas, motives, needs, objectives, obligations resources and/or values.

First, conflict is interactive and inherently communicative. Second, two or more people or even groups of people who can think must be involved. Lastly, there are a whole range of different areas where people can have opposing or incompatible opinions. [Insert text here.]

Differing Perspectives on Conflict

As with many areas of interpersonal communication, no single perspective exists in the field related to interpersonal conflict. There are generally two very different perspectives that one can take. Herbert W. Simmons (1972) was one of the first to realize that there were two very different perspectives on conflict. On the one hand, there are scholars who see conflict as a disruption in a normal working system, which should be avoided. On the other hand, some scholars view conflict as a normal part of human relationships.

Conflict as a Disruption in a Normal Working System

The first major perspective of conflict was proposed by James C. McCroskey and Lawrence R. Wheeless. McCroskey and Wheeless (1976) described conflict as a negative phenomenon in interpersonal relationships:

> "Conflict between people can be viewed as the opposite or antithesis of affinity. In this sense, interpersonal conflict is the breaking down of attraction and the development of repulsion, the dissolution of perceived homophily (similarity) and the increased perception of incompatible differences, the loss of perceptions of credibility and the development of disrespect."

From this perspective, conflict is something inherently destructive. McCroskey and Virginia P. Richmond went further and argued that conflict is characterized by antagonism, distrust, hostility, and suspicion.

This more negative view of conflict differentiates itself from a separate term, disagreement, which is simply a difference of opinion between two or more people or groups of people. Richmond and McCroskey note that there are two types of disagreements: substantive and procedural. A **substantive** disagreement is a disagreement that people have about a specific topic or issue. For example, if you and your best friend want to go eat at two different restaurants for dinner, then you're engaging in a substantive disagreement. Whereas **procedural disagreements** are "concerned with procedure, how a decision should be reached or how a policy should be implemented" (Richmond & McCroskey, 2005). So, if your disagreement about restaurant choice switches to a disagreement on how to make a choice (flipping a coin vs. rock-paper-scissors), then you've switched into a procedural disagreement.

A conflict then is a disagreement plus negative affect, or when you disagree with someone else and you don't like the other person. It's the combination of a disagreement and dislike that causes a mere disagreement to turn into a conflict. Ultimately, conflict is a product of how one communicates this dislike of another person during the disagreement. People in some relationships end up saying very nasty things to one another during a disagreement because their affinity for the other person has diminished. When conflict is allowed to continue and escalate, it "can be likened to an ugly, putrid, decaying, pus-filled sore" (Richmond & McCroskey, 2005).

From this perspective, conflicts are ultimately only manageable; whereas, disagreements can be solved. Although a disagreement is the cornerstone of all conflicts, most disagreements don't turn into conflicts because there is an affinity between the two people engaged in the disagreement.

Conflict as a Normal Part of Human Communication

The second perspective of the concept of conflict is very different from the first one. As described by Dudley D. Cahn and Ruth Anna Abigail (2014), conflict is a normal, inevitable part of life. Cahn and Abigail argue that conflict is one of the foundational building blocks of interpersonal relationships. One can even ask if it's possible to grow in a relationship without conflict. Managing and overcoming conflict makes a relationship stronger and healthier. Ideally, when interpersonal couples engage in conflict management (or conflict resolution), they will reach a solution that is mutually beneficial for both parties. In this manner, conflict can help people seek better, healthier outcomes within their interactions.

Ultimately, conflict is neither good nor bad, but it's a tool that can be used for constructive or destructive purposes. Conflict can be very beneficial and healthy for a relationship.

How Conflict can be Beneficial for Relationships

- Conflict helps people find common ground.

- Conflict helps people learn how to manage conflict more effectively for the future.
- Conflict provides the opportunity to learn about the other person(s).
- Conflict can lead to creative solutions to problems.
- Confronting conflict allows people to engage in an open and honest discussion, which can build relationship trust.
- Conflict encourages people to grow both as humans and in their communication skills.
- Conflict can help people become more assertive and less aggressive.
- Conflict can strengthen individuals' ability to manage their emotions.
- Conflict lets individuals set limits in relationships.
- Conflict lets us practice our communication skills

When one approaches conflict from this vantage point, conflict can be seen as an indispensable resource in interpersonal relationships. However, both parties must agree to engage in prosocial conflict management strategies for this to work effectively.

These two perspectives demonstrate that conflict can be viewed either as a harmful disruption or as a natural and potentially productive part of relationships. Understanding these differing viewpoints helps establish a foundation for examining how conflict operates within everyday interpersonal interactions.

Interpersonal Conflict

While scholars may disagree about whether conflict is inherently negative or potentially beneficial, most definitions of interpersonal conflict share several common elements. To better understand how conflict develops and affects relationships, it is important to examine the defining characteristics of interpersonal conflict itself. **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).

Definition: 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).

Aspects of Interpersonal Conflict

- **Interdependence:** Interpersonal conflict occurs in part because individuals are connected and depend on one another.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Interference from others:** Interference from others can come from any outsider who gets in the way of your relationship.

These aspects of interpersonal conflict highlight that conflict is rarely caused by a single issue alone. Instead, conflict often emerges through a combination of competing goals, limited resources, relationship dynamics, and perceived interference. Building on these ideas, researchers Cahn and Abigail explain the specific conditions necessary for interpersonal conflict to occur. According to Cahn and Abigail (2012), interpersonal conflict requires four factors to be present:

1. the conflict parties are interdependent,
2. they have the perception that they seek incompatible goals or outcomes or they favor incompatible means to the same ends,
3. the perceived incompatibility has the potential to adversely affect the relationship leaving emotional residues if not addressed, and
4. there is a sense of urgency about the need to resolve the difference.

Let's look at each of these parts of interpersonal conflict separately.

People are Interdependent

According to Cahn and Abigail (2014), "**interdependence** occurs when those involved in a relationship characterize it as continuous and important, making it worth the effort to maintain." From this perspective, interpersonal conflict occurs when we are in some kind of relationship with another person. For example, it could be a relationship with a parent/guardian, a child, a coworker, a boss, a spouse, etc. In each of these interpersonal relationships, we generally see ourselves as having long-term relationships with these people that we want to succeed. Notice, though, that if you're arguing with a random person on a subway, that will not fall into this definition because of the interdependence factor. We may have disagreements and arguments with all kinds of strangers, but those don't rise to the level of interpersonal conflicts.

Struggle over Incompatible Goals

An important element to an interpersonal conflict is the *struggle:* the felt and/or expressed need for a resolution. There may be situations in which all the elements are there–interdependent parties have perceived incompatible goals and scarce resources–but it may not rise to the level of a conflict because there is no felt need for a resolution. Consider perhaps a family whose child has moved out of the family home, and now the remaining parents are deciding what to do with the child's now vacant room. Maybe one parents wants to make it a study with desks and books, but the other parent wants to make it a home gym with workout equipment. These are interdependent parties with perceived incompatible goals... but one parents says to other "ok. We'll go with your idea." There was no conflict because there was no expressed need for a resolution.

Different Perspectives on Achieving the Same Outcome

An incompatible goal occurs when two people want different things. For example, imagine you and your best friend are thinking about going to the movies. They want to see a big-budget superhero film, and you're more in the mood for an independent artsy film. In this case, you have pretty incompatible goals (movie choices). You can also have incompatible means to reach the same end. Incompatible means, in this case, "occur when we want to achieve the same goal but differ in how we should do so" (Cahn & Abigail, 2014). For example, you and your best friend agree on going to the same movie, but not about at which theater you should see the film.

Some Sense of Urgency to Resolve Conflict

Lastly, there must be some sense of urgency to resolve the conflict within the relationship. The conflict gets to the point where it must receive attention, and a decision must be made or an outcome decided upon, or else. If a conflict reaches the point where it's not solved, then the conflict could become more problematic and negative if it's not dealt with urgently.

Now, some people let conflicts stir and rise over many years that can eventually boil over, but these types of conflicts when they arise generally have some other kind of underlying conflict that is causing the sudden explosion. For example, imagine your spouse has a particularly quirky habit. For the most part, you ignore this habit and may even make a joke about the habit. Finally, one day you just explode and demand the habit must change. Now, it's possible that you let this conflict build for so long that it finally explodes.

Sometimes people let irritations or underlying conflict percolate inside of them until they reach a boiling point, which leads to the eventual release of pressure in the form of a sudden, out of nowhere conflict. In this case, even though the conflict has been building for some time, the eventual desire to make this conflict known to the other person does cause an immediate sense of urgency for the conflict to be solved.

Overall, interpersonal conflict develops when interdependent individuals perceive incompatible goals, experience emotional tension, and feel pressure to resolve their differences. Factors such as communication styles, emotional reactions, and relationship dynamics all shape how conflict unfolds. However, conflict is also influenced by larger social and cultural forces, which affect how people interpret disagreements and choose to respond to them.

Conflict Can Negatively Affect the Relationship if Not Addressed

Next, interpersonal conflicts can lead to very negative outcomes if the conflicts are not managed effectively. If there is a felt need for resolution, and even more significantly if there is an expressed need for a resolution, and yet the conflict is not addressed, there can be damaging and toxic results to the relationships.

Examples of Conflict Managed Ineffectively

- One partner dominates the conflict, and the other partner caves-in.
- One partner yells or belittles the other partner.
- One partner uses half-truths or lies to get their way during the conflict.
- Both partners only want to get their way at all costs.
- One partner refuses to engage in conflict.

When conflict is mismanaged, one or both partners can start to have less affinity for the other partner, which can lead to a decreasing in liking, decreased caring about the relational partner, increased desire to exit the relationship, increased relational apathy, increased revenge-seeking behavior, and beyond. All of these negative outcomes could ultimately lead to conflicts becoming increasingly more aggressive (both active and passive) or just outright conflict avoidance.

Culture and Conflict

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 U.S., **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, reflect, and ask yourself: How do I want other people to see me? 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 U.S., 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** 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 U.S., 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 U.S., 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 U.S., 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.

Face-negotiation theory demonstrates that culture strongly influences how individuals approach conflict, protect identity, and maintain relationships. Cultural values such as individualism, collectivism, communication style, and power distance shape whether people approach conflict directly or indirectly and how they balance concern for themselves and others. In addition to culture, another important influence on conflict communication is gender and the expectations society places on gender roles.

Gender Communication and Conflict

There are often preconceived notions, schema, and stereotypes surrounding the ways in which men and woman address and navigate conflict, with the assumption that the strategies will differ wildly on the gender binary. 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. Often, young girls 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?

Research on gender and conflict suggests that communication behaviors are shaped less by biological sex and more by socialization, cultural expectations, family upbringing, and personal identity. While stereotypes often portray people of different genders as communicating in fundamentally different ways, conflict styles vary widely among individuals. Understanding these influences encourages people to avoid relying on stereotypes and instead focus on adapting communication to the unique person and situation. Beyond culture and gender, technological changes have also transformed how people experience and manage interpersonal conflict.

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 (Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, Grindr, etc.), how we communicate with our friends (Instagram, X, etc.), how we share hobbies (YouTube, Twitch, Patreon, etc.), and how we communicate at work (Teams, Zoom, etc.). 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 Instagram, have become sources of conflict, changed how we handle conflict, and contributed to problematic conflict behaviors.



Figure 9.1.1: A collage of social media and communication platforms illustrating how internet technologies and mobile apps have transformed interpersonal communication across dating, friendships, entertainment, and work, while also shaping how conflict is initiated, experienced, and managed in digital environments. (CC BY 2.0; Jason Howie via Wikimedia Commons)

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 U.S. (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*" (Lenhart et al., 2020) 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 posting, 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). 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.

Tips for Mitigating and Managing Conflict Online

Before calling someone out through social media, consider these tips:

- If you are going to send a harshly worded e-mail, text, or post, consider having a trusted friend review the message first.
- Take some time to pause and cool down before sending critical or combative messages.
- Ask yourself how you would feel if you were on the receiving end of the message.
- 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.

Digital communication has created new opportunities and challenges for interpersonal conflict management. While technology allows people to communicate quickly and express difficult feelings from a distance, it can also increase misunderstandings, reduce emotional cues, and encourage harmful behaviors such as flaming, public shaming, and avoidance. Whether conflict occurs face-to-face or online, effective conflict management requires mindfulness, empathy, emotional control, and thoughtful communication.

By understanding the interpersonal, cultural, gendered, and technological factors that shape conflict, individuals can develop healthier strategies for navigating disagreements and strengthening relationships.

Attributions

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9.2: Conflict Management Styles, Goals, and Outcomes

Overview

Conflict management refers to the ways individuals attempt to handle and resolve disagreements in interpersonal relationships. People develop distinct conflict styles based on factors such as personality, culture, upbringing, communication patterns, and relational goals. These styles are shaped by how individuals balance concern for their own needs with concern for others' needs, and they influence both the communication behaviors used during conflict and the outcomes that follow.

The five major conflict management styles (integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising) represent different combinations of self-concern and other-concern. Each style has strengths and limitations depending on the situation, relationship, and stakes involved. In addition to understanding these styles, it is important to recognize that conflict is often driven by underlying goals and needs, and that outcomes vary depending on how conflict is managed.

Learning Objectives

- Define conflict management and explain how it influences interpersonal communication.
- Identify how concern for self and concern for others shape conflict management styles.
- Describe the five conflict management styles and their key characteristics.
- Evaluate when each conflict style is most and least appropriate.
- Explain how conflict management styles influence relational outcomes and communication effectiveness.

Five Approaches to Conflict Management

Conflict management is the process of trying to find effective strategies to minimize and solve problems associated with different conflict goals. When we look at how we negotiate the conflict in our relationships, we find that typical patterns of communication occur. Your personal style of conflict management style is shaped by a variety of factors, such as your gender, age, culture, personality, family communication patterns, and goals for the situation. Furthermore, your conflict management style is a mix of factors, such as your nonverbal signals (eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice), the verbal message you use, and your focus on concern for yourself versus concern for the other party.

Your concern for yourself versus your concern for the other person will shape how you approach a conflict, the strategies you use to negotiate, and the outcome you desire. **Concern for self** refers to the degree to which you try to meet your own needs and goals in a conflict situation. **Concern for others** refers to the degree to which you try to meet the needs of the other person in the conflict. Various combinations of concern for self versus concern for others result in five conflict management styles, including integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising (Rahim, 2000). In this section, we examine five approaches to conflict management. Take some time to reflect on your approach to conflict and see if you can identify your style.

Integrating

If you display high concern for your own needs, while at the same time honoring the needs of others, you may prefer the **integrating** style of conflict management (Rahim, 1983). Integrating, also known as **collaborating** (see Kilman & Thomas, 1977), consists of problem-solving, open communication, open confrontation of conflict, assertiveness, and cooperation (Rahim, 2000). Integrating may be the best approach for resolving conflict when two people who live or work closely together need to solve a problem (such as agreement on how to raise children), when buy-in is needed from the other person (such as a couple agreeing on a car purchase), for long-term planning (such as planning to have children), and when dealing with strategies for solving problems. Although research has shown that an integrating approach to conflict is associated with satisfying relationships, it may not be appropriate when dealing with small issues, when quick decisions are needed, when people do not care about the outcomes, and when people lack problem-solving training (Rahim, 2000). If you try to solve every problem with an integrating approach, you may find yourself and the other party exhausted by the constant emphasis on conflict.

Example 9.2.1 Integrating Approach

Scenario: Jordan and Alex are roommates who disagree about how to handle household chores. Jordan prefers a structured weekly cleaning schedule, while Alex prefers to clean whenever things look messy. Instead of arguing or giving in, they sit down and openly discuss their concerns, priorities, and daily routines. Together, they design a flexible rotating schedule that includes clear responsibilities but allows adjustments when needed.
Impact: Both Jordan and Alex feel heard and respected, and the final agreement increases fairness and accountability. Their living environment becomes more organized, and their ability to communicate about future conflicts improves.

Obliging

Do you ever find yourself sacrificing your needs to make someone else happy or to keep the peace in the relationship? This is known as the **obliging** or accommodating style of conflict management, which consists of high concern for others and low concern for self (Rahim, 1983). We use an obliging approach for a variety of reasons, including that we don't find the conflict to be important, we want to keep harmony in the relationship, or we lack the assertive communication skills to advocate for our own needs. Obliging can be an appropriate response to conflict when the conflict is more important to the other person, when you are willing to make a sacrifice now in return for something later, when you have less power in the relationship, or when you are clearly wrong (Rahim, 2000). Obliging can be beneficial to keeping the peace. An interesting study looked at how members in a university medical department resolved their conflicts and found that an obliging style was related to low levels of workplace stress and low levels of perceived conflict (Friedman et al., 2000).

Example 9.2.2 Obliging Approach

Scenario: Taylor and Sam are deciding what movie to watch. Taylor strongly prefers an action film, while Sam casually mentions wanting to watch a romantic comedy but says they don't really care that much. Taylor chooses the romantic comedy anyway, even though it's not their preference, to keep things easy and avoid disagreement.
Impact: Sam feels appreciated and comfortable, which helps maintain harmony in the moment. However, Taylor may quietly feel that their own preferences are often set aside, which could build mild resentment over time if this pattern continues.

Dominating

Have you ever met someone who needs to always be right? They might be exhibiting the **dominating** style of conflict management, which occurs when we focus on our own needs at the expense of others (Rahim, 1983). This approach is competitive in nature, with a win-lose orientation to conflict. People who practice a dominating approach may ignore the needs of others, be inflexible, try to win at all costs, and use their position of power to impose their will upon others (Rahim, 2000). There are times in life when we may need to use a dominating style of conflict management, such as when the outcome to the conflict might be harmful to you, or if you are involved in an inherently competitive situation, such as a job interview where only one person can get the job. Regular use of a dominating approach to a conflict may be harmful to interpersonal relationships in that it may lead the losing party to feel unhappy in the relationship.

Example 9.2.3 Dominating Approach

Scenario: Casey and Morgan are working on a group presentation. Casey takes control of the project early on, assigns roles without discussion, and overrides Morgan's suggestions for the structure because they believe their approach will earn a higher grade. Casey insists on final decision-making authority and moves forward without further input.
Impact: The project is completed efficiently and reflects Casey's vision, but Morgan feels dismissed and undervalued. While short-term productivity may increase, trust and collaboration in the partnership are weakened, creating tension for future group work.

Avoiding

Have you ever been in a situation when you chose not to deal with a conflict? This is known as an **avoiding** approach to conflict,

which consists of physical and emotional evasion of topics, situations, and people that evoke conflict. This approach consists of a low concern for self and low concern for others, and is sometimes viewed negatively in United States culture. However, other cultures might not view avoidance negatively, as this approach may be used to preserve harmony in relationships and contribute to maintaining long-term relationships (Ting-Toomey, 1988). This approach to a conflict may be appropriate if the issue is of little importance to you, if you or the other person need time to cool off, or if the disadvantages outweigh the benefits of confrontation (Rahim, 2000). Avoidance is not appropriate when quick action is needed on your part, when decision making is required, or when parties are "unwilling to wait" (Rahim, 2000).

Example 9.2.4 Avoiding Approach

Scenario: Riley and their coworker Pat have a disagreement about how to prioritize tasks for a shared project. After a tense exchange, Riley chooses not to revisit the conversation, avoids one-on-one interactions, and communicates only through minimal written updates. The issue is left unresolved.
Impact: Immediate tension decreases because the conflict is not actively engaged, but underlying frustration remains. Miscommunication continues, and the lack of resolution leads to inefficiency and potential misunderstandings in future tasks.

Compromising

In U.S. culture, many of us have been taught to solve our problems by **compromising**, sharing, or splitting the difference. The compromising style of conflict management consists of medium concern for self and medium concern for others. This approach involves finding a middle ground in the conflict situation. Compromising can be effective when you and the other person have equal power, when you need a quick and temporary solution, when you can't reach a consensus, and when your conflict goals are mutually exclusive. Although compromising may have many benefits for finding quick solutions, it is not always perfect. Ongoing use of compromising can lead you to feel like your needs are not being met. Furthermore, compromise can be ineffective when there are power imbalances (such as a boss and employee) problems are complex (such as deciding how to pay for college), long-term solutions are needed, or when dealing with value conflicts (such as values of family, commitment, and trust) (Rahim, 2000).

Example 9.2.5 Compromising Approach

Scenario: Jamie and Pat are planning a weekend together. Jamie wants to go hiking for the whole day, while Pat wants a relaxing weekend at home. After discussion, they agree to hike in the morning and stay in for the evening, splitting the difference so neither person fully gets their ideal outcome.
Impact: Both individuals feel they made concessions and received part of what they wanted. The solution works in the short term, but neither person is fully satisfied, and repeated reliance on compromise may prevent deeper preference alignment over time.

Understanding Your Style

Understanding your conflict management styles can provide insight on how to improve conflict encounters (Conerly & Tripathi, 2004). No one style is better than others, rather we should consider adjusting our style based on our goals, the other person in the conflict, and the needs of the situation. It is important to be aware that styles can be perceived differently (Gross & Guerrero, 2000). There are divergent cultural expectations of conflict, and you may be perceived differently based on your gender, age, race, and situation. For example, there are other cultural variations when it comes to preference for conflict styles, such as emotionally expressive responses, seeking out third parties, or using a passive-aggressive approach to sidestep direct confrontation of the conflict (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). A study of 200 college students working in teams found that the students perceived integrating as the most effective and avoiding as an ineffective and inappropriate response to conflict. Within marriages, satisfied couples report using integrating, compromising, and obliging styles, and less satisfied couples report using dominating and avoiding styles of conflict management (Rahim et al., 2004).

Having an understanding of your conflict management style, as well as the approach used by people in your life, can help you navigate what can sometimes be a frustrating experience. In addition to understanding your conflict management style, it is important to understand responses to conflict that can aggravate the conflict, or worse, lead to the dissolution of the relationship.

The five approaches to conflict management demonstrate that people handle disagreements in different ways depending on their goals, personalities, relationships, and communication styles. Some approaches emphasize collaboration and mutual problem-solving, while others prioritize harmony, competition, compromise, or avoidance. Understanding these conflict management styles can help individuals adapt their communication strategies to fit specific situations and relationships more effectively. In addition to recognizing how people manage conflict, it is also important to understand the deeper goals and needs that often drive conflicts in the first place.

Conflict Goals

Have you ever been in a conflict or disagreement that ended up feeling like an extended game of tug-of-war? When we experience conflict, it can feel like each person is pulling in a different direction related to our own needs and goals. When we experience conflict in our relationships, the strife is generally related to one of four goals: content, relational, identity, and process. Identifying the underlying source of your conflict can help you understand your own needs as well as help you empathize with others.

Content Goals

Content or topic goals refer to what we want and need for both our day-to-day and long-term life. These goals tend to feel tangible and concrete, and they can center on issues such as how we spend our money and our time, as well as how we live day-to-day. For example, Jamie was really upset with their spouse, Jordan, because of how they squeezed the toothpaste out of the tube. Jamie liked to squeeze the toothpaste from the end of the tube and Jordan squeezed the tube wherever they grabbed it. This one little conflict turned into a major battle of wills and revealed deeper relational and identity issues.

Relational Goals

Relational goals refer to our preferences for what we would like our relationships to be like. Relational goals center on issues like who we are to each other, what is the power distribution in the relationship, and what our future looks like. Relational goals can become a source of conflict when people have different expectations about the relationship or there is uncertainty about the relationship. For example, the digital world has created many new terms and acronyms for dating and relationships. DTR means "define the relationship." When individuals use this term, it means that they would like to have a conversation about the direction of their relationship. Are we just friends, are we FWB (friends with benefits), or are we a couple? Negotiating who we are to each other can become a major source of conflict in interpersonal interactions.

Identity Goals

Identity goals refer to the image we would like to present to the world. Conflict over identity goals can occur when our public image is threatened and when we do not feel valued in an interaction, relationship, or specific setting. To illustrate, consider Emma's personal story:

> When I was 20 years old, I fell in love with a woman for the first time. Mia, my girlfriend, was so much more confident than me and already proudly out with her family and friends. She encouraged me to tell my family, but honestly, I was scared. My mom is deeply religious, and my father said more than once he would never walk his daughters down the aisle unless it was to marry a man. I wanted Mia and my family to love me for who I am, but I was not ready to come out to my family. I felt like I was either going to lose Mia or be dropped by my family. When I finally came out to my family, I had the love and support of my mom and sisters. My dad first threatened me to get over it or move out, but thankfully my mom stepped helped smooth things over (Emma, student, age 25).

As we consider Emma's example, we can see that how we identify ourselves and how we are perceived by our loved ones can be a source of conflict. In addition to being a common source of family conflict, identity conflicts can also occur with friends, at school, and at work.

Process Goals

Process goals refer to our ideas about how we should communicate about and resolve conflicts. For example, some people believe that it is best to not go to bed angry, but others may believe that if you sleep on it, you will feel better in the morning. In addition to trying to solve conflicts, people in these situations also need to negotiate the best time to try and resolve issues.

Process goals can have deeper cultural and social meanings that shape our perceptions of appropriate conflict management. Some cultures may rely on authority rule, while other cultures place value on equal participation. For example, while the U.S. government has been characterized by division and animosity, American Indigenous tribal governments are communal and based on reaching consensus with their membership (Alvarez, 2011).

If you find yourself struggling repeatedly with conflict over the same topic goals, a deeper relational or identity issue is likely at hand. Take the example of the conflict over squeezing the toothpaste tube. On the surface, how one squeezes toothpaste out of the tube seems like a small topic issue. However, the repeated struggles over the toothpaste may indicate that the couple might be engaged in a power struggle (relational goal) or need for validation in the relationship (identity goal).

Now that you understand common sources of conflict, let's turn our attention to three possible conflict outcomes.

Conflict Outcomes

In most professional sporting events in the U.S., we celebrate winners and do what we can to not be a loser. This approach to conflict can translate into our relationships when we attempt to "win at all costs." Conversely, in the Japanese Professional Baseball League games can end in a tie. A tie is considered almost as good as a win and will not hurt a team's record. These different approaches to winning help illustrate different outcomes to conflict. **Conflict outcomes** refer to the possible ways a conflict is solved and how the people involved perceive the results. Game Theory uses the metaphor of winning and losing games to help show distinct ways conflict can be resolved (Spangler, 2003). According to Game Theory, when we negotiate conflict there are three potential outcomes: win-win, win-lose, and lose-lose. Understanding the different conflict outcomes can help you to recognize some of your own conflict patterns and give you insight into how you may approach conflict in the future.

- **Win-win:** A win-win outcome occurs when both parties in the conflict are satisfied with the outcome. The win-win approach to conflict usually involves collaboration and problem-solving, in combination with assertive, honest communication.
- **Win-lose:** A win-lose outcome occurs when one party in the conflict gets what they want, and the other party is left to feel they were defeated. This approach to conflict is characterized by competition or a belief that only one side in the conflict can win. While win-lose is appropriate in some situations, the disadvantage to this approach is that if one party in a relationship is always on the losing end, they can become discouraged and dissatisfied in their relationship.
- **Lose-Lose:** A lose-lose outcome occurs when neither party achieves their goals or both parties are unhappy with the conflict outcome. Many examples can be considered lose-lose, such as an employee quitting a job they love, with employers who appreciate them, because they can't resolve the person's work-from-home request, or a couple who love each other very much but break up because they can't agree on a timeline for their future. Clearly, these outcomes do not sound ideal (Barwick-Snell & Walker, 2017).

To better understand conflict outcomes, consider the case a recent graduate of the California State University system. Before graduation, this graduate submitted applications to several different companies. They were thrilled when they were offered their dream job at a gaming company. However, when they sat down to discuss the details with Human Resources, they were offered a lower position with less pay than originally promised. What would you do if you found yourself in a comparable situation? Would you reject the job altogether, feeling like it was a case of bait and switch? This would be a lose-lose outcome, because the graduate would lose out on their dream job and the company would lose a talented employee. Would you accept the company's terms and ask how to move up quickly into the promised position? This would create a win-lose outcome, where the graduate would lose out on what the company originally promised, and the company would get a short-term win by saving money. Would you make a counteroffer to the company, reminding them of the position and salary that was originally offered? In this case, they graduate made a counteroffer that was accepted by the company, leading to a win-win outcome.



Figure 9.2.1: Two people shaking hands, symbolizing a negotiated resolution to conflict and illustrating a win-win outcome in which both parties reach mutual agreement and satisfaction. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Amtec Photos via Wikimedia Commons)

There is not one conflict outcome that will suit all situations. Conflict outcomes depend on the topic, the situation, and the people involved. It is important to consider how much you value the relationship and what is at stake with the conflict. Is it a lifelong relationship? A professional relationship? Casual? Often figuring out how much you value the relationship will inform the conflict outcome. Your style of conflict management can also shape the conflict outcome.

How we negotiate or bring closure to conflicts is a function of one's conflict management style. Conflict outcomes are shaped by the goals of the individuals involved, the value they place on the relationship, and the conflict management strategies they choose to use. While some conflicts result in mutually satisfying win-win outcomes, others may leave one or both parties feeling frustrated or defeated.

Understanding conflict management styles, conflict goals, and possible outcomes can help individuals approach disagreements more thoughtfully and effectively. Rather than viewing conflict as something purely negative, recognizing the dynamics of conflict can help people communicate more constructively, strengthen relationships, and develop healthier ways of navigating challenges in both personal and professional settings.

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9.3: Unproductive Conflict

Overview

Learned communication responses to conflict refer to habitual, often automatic behaviors that individuals use during disagreement, many of which can unintentionally damage relationships. When people feel emotionally activated during conflict, they may rely on unproductive communication patterns such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. These behaviors, known as Gottman's "Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse," can escalate tension, reduce understanding, and weaken relational trust over time.

Beyond the Four Horsemen, additional destructive conflict behaviors include strategies like gunnysacking, kitchen sinking, blame, manipulation, and more. These responses often create cycles of escalation, misunderstanding, and emotional harm, even if they are used with short-term intent to gain control or protect oneself. However, awareness of these patterns is essential because it allows individuals to replace harmful habits with healthier communication strategies that support resolution, empathy, and relationship maintenance.

Learning Objectives

- Define learned communication responses to conflict and explain why they develop.
- Identify Gottman's Four Horsemen and describe how each damages relationships.
- Explain the antidotes to destructive communication patterns in conflict.
- Recognize common unproductive conflict behaviors such as gunnysacking, kitchen sinking, and blame.
- Evaluate how destructive communication patterns escalate conflict and reduce relational satisfaction.

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.



Figure 9.3.1: A woman sitting alone by a window, reflecting a moment of emotional withdrawal that can follow conflict, illustrating how learned unproductive communication responses may lead individuals to disengage, escalate internal frustration, or damage relational connection rather than resolve the underlying issue. (CC BY 2.0; Leonardo Aguiar via Wikimedia Commons)

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.

Dysfunctional Communication Styles

- **Criticism:** Verbally attacking personality or character.
- **Contempt:** Attacking sense of self with an intent to insult or abuse.
- **Stonewalling:** Withdrawing to avoid conflict and convey disapproval, distance, and separation.
- **Defensiveness:** Victimizing yourself to ward off a perceived attack and reverse the blame.

(Gottman, n.d.).

Although these communication patterns can be highly destructive, Gottman's research also suggests that negative conflict behaviors can be replaced with healthier and more constructive responses. By recognizing these dysfunctional patterns, individuals can begin developing communication habits that strengthen relationships instead of damaging them.

Antidotes to Dysfunctional Communication

- **Gentle Start Up (Criticism):** Talk about yourself using "I" statements and express a positive need.
- **Build Culture of Appreciation (Contempt):** Remind yourself of your partner's positive qualities and find gratitude for positive actions.
- **Psychological Self-Soothing (Stonewalling):** Take a break and spend that time doing something soothing and distracting.
- **Take Responsibility (Defensiveness):** Accept your partner's perspective and offer any apology for any wrongdoing.

(Gottman, n.d.).

The antidotes to the Four Horsemen provide practical strategies for interrupting destructive conflict cycles and promoting healthier communication. Using gentle communication, appreciation, personal responsibility, and emotional self-soothing can reduce defensiveness and help individuals approach disagreements more collaboratively. To better understand how these destructive patterns appear in everyday interactions, let us now examine each of the Four Horsemen in greater detail.

Criticism

Criticism occurs when we publicly or privately call out someone's faults in a negative manner. **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.

Contempt

Contempt refers to the extreme dislike of another person and may include negative verbal and nonverbal expressions towards another person. 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.

Defensiveness

Defensiveness is a common response to feedback and criticism. When people are engaging in **defensiveness**, 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

Stonewalling 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. 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.

Example 9.3.1 Dysfunctional Communication in Action

- **Criticism:**
  - Dakota tells their roommate, "You're so lazy. You never clean up after yourself, and you clearly don't care about anyone else in this apartment."
- **Contempt:**
  - Emerson rolls their eyes during an argument and says sarcastically, "Wow, what a brilliant idea. I guess I shouldn't expect much better from you."

- **Defensiveness:**
  - When Harper's coworker says they missed an important deadline, Harper responds, "Well, maybe if you gave me clearer instructions, this wouldn't have happened. Besides, everyone else was behind too."
- **Stonewalling:**
  - During a disagreement with their partner, Finley stops responding, avoids eye contact, crosses their arms, and begins scrolling on their phone while the other person is still trying to talk.

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.

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. 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

Beltlining refers to a boxing move that means to hit below the belt. In terms of conflict, **beltlining** refers to using intimate information against each other to cause hurt and anger.

Force

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.

Research on dating violence indicates that it remains a significant issue among adolescents and young adults, although prevalence estimates vary depending on how it is measured and the population studied. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2015), approximately 21% of college students report experiencing dating violence from a current partner, and 32% report experiencing dating violence from a previous partner. More recent surveillance data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggest that dating violence is also prevalent among adolescents, with about 1 in 12 high school students reporting physical dating violence in the past year and about 1 in 10 reporting sexual dating violence (CDC, 2025). Together, these findings highlight that dating violence continues to affect a substantial portion of young people across both high school and college populations, despite differences in measurement and sampling across studies.

Manipulation

Manipulation includes one party being extremely charming and even generous to help sway the conflict outcome in their direction.

Personal Rejection

Personal rejection 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.

Counterpunch

Counterpunch 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.

Labeling

Labeling 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.

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.

Example 9.3.2 Barriers to Conflict Management in Action

- **Gunnysacking:**
  - Parker stays quiet about several frustrations for months, but during a small disagreement suddenly says, "You never listen to me, you forgot my birthday, and you embarrassed me at dinner last month too."
- **Kitchen Sinking:**
  - Rowan and their sibling are arguing about borrowing the car, and Rowan says, "This is just like when you ruined our vacation two years ago."
- **Blame:**
  - Sawyer tells their classmate, "This whole problem is your fault because you never communicate properly."
- **Beltlining:**
  - Alex knows their friend feels insecure about losing a previous job and says during an argument, "Maybe this is why nobody wanted to keep you employed."
- **Force:**
  - River becomes angry during a disagreement and throws a chair across the room to intimidate the other person.
- **Manipulation:**
  - Blake showers their roommate with compliments and offers to buy them dinner right before asking them to give up their side of an ongoing disagreement.
- **Personal Rejection:**
  - Lane stops answering texts and avoids all affection after an argument, hoping the other person will apologize first.
- **Counterpunch:**
  - When Reese says, "I felt hurt when you interrupted me earlier," Devon replies, "Well, you're always late, so don't act like you're perfect."
- **Labeling:**
  - Kai tells their coworker, "You're just selfish and impossible to work with."
- **Silencers:**

- During a conflict discussion, Jules begins yelling loudly over the other person and slams their hands on the table, making it difficult to continue the conversation calmly.

As illustrated by these examples, there are a variety of ways we can worsen conflict, hurt the other person, and hurt our relationships. In the following section, we will turn our attention to positive communication behaviors that you can use to resolve your differences.

As we can see, conflict can quickly become destructive when people rely on harmful communication patterns such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, blame, manipulation, or aggression. These learned responses often escalate disagreements, damage trust, and weaken relationships over time. However, increasing awareness of these unproductive behaviors also creates opportunities for change. By recognizing dysfunctional conflict patterns and replacing them with constructive communication strategies such as empathy, accountability, active listening, and respectful dialogue, individuals can manage conflict in healthier and more productive ways. Ultimately, effective conflict management is not about avoiding disagreements altogether, but about learning how to navigate them in ways that preserve both the relationship and the dignity of the people involved.

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9.4: Effective Conflict Resolution

Overview

Conflict can be a challenging and emotionally charged experience, but it also presents meaningful opportunities for growth, understanding, and stronger relationships. Rather than viewing conflict as something to avoid, it can be reframed as a natural part of interpersonal communication that, when managed effectively, helps people clarify expectations, improve communication, and build trust. Constructive conflict allows individuals to better understand themselves and others while working toward mutually beneficial solutions.

Effective conflict resolution depends on communication skills that promote empathy, reflection, and collaboration. Strategies such as mindfulness, perception checking, active listening, assertiveness, and emotional intelligence help individuals navigate disagreements more productively. In addition, structured approaches like the integrative conflict resolution model and practices such as apology and forgiveness provide pathways for repairing relationships and resolving deeper issues. When combined, these tools help transform conflict from a destructive force into an opportunity for connection and growth.

Learning Objectives

- Explain how conflict can function as an opportunity for relational growth and understanding.
- Identify key communication skills that support effective conflict resolution.
- Apply strategies such as mindfulness, perception checking, and active listening in conflict situations.
- Describe the steps of the integrative conflict resolution model.
- Explain the roles of apology, forgiveness, and third-party support in resolving interpersonal conflict.

Using Conflict as an Opportunity

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.

Conflict does not automatically damage relationships. In many cases, conflict can encourage growth, improve communication, clarify expectations, and strengthen trust between people. When individuals approach disagreements with respect, empathy, and a willingness to listen, conflict can create opportunities for deeper understanding and collaborative problem-solving. Rather than viewing conflict as something to avoid at all costs, it can be helpful to view it as a natural part of interpersonal relationships that, when handled constructively, can lead to positive change. The following section explores specific communication skills that can help individuals navigate conflict more effectively and create more productive outcomes.

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. 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

Bracketing 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

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

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is a key component of successful conflict negotiation. When preparing to engage in conflict, check in with your EQ and ask yourself:

- 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 EQ while engaging in conflict resolution will contribute to maintaining and strengthening the relationship rather than solely focusing on winning the argument.

Example 9.4.1 Effective Conflict Resolution Skills in Action

- **Mindfulness:**
  - Jordan notices they are feeling frustrated during a disagreement with their roommate about chores. Before responding, they take a deep breath and say calmly, "I want to talk about this without blaming each other. Can we figure out a solution together?"
- **Perception Checking:**
  - Jordan notices they are feeling frustrated during a disagreement with their roommate about chores. Before responding, they take a deep breath and say calmly, "I want to talk about this without blaming each other. Can we figure out a solution together?"
- **Being Unconditionally Constructive:**
  - Casey's friend raises their voice during an argument about canceled plans. Casey responds respectfully, saying, "I can tell this situation is frustrating. I'd still like us to talk through it without insulting each other."
- **The 5 to 1 Rule:**
  - Morgan and their partner are discussing financial stress. During the conversation, Morgan says, "I know we disagree about budgeting right now, but I really appreciate how hard you work and how supportive you've been lately."
- **Bracketing:**
  - Avery and their sibling begin arguing about several family issues at once. Avery says, "We're bringing up a lot of different concerns. Let's focus first on planning the holiday schedule, and then we can discuss the other topics later."
- **Active Listening:**
  - Riley listens as their classmate explains why they felt excluded from a group project. Riley responds, "So what I'm hearing is that you felt left out when decisions were made without you. Is that right?"
- **Assertiveness:**
  - Riley listens as their classmate explains why they felt excluded from a group project. Riley responds, "So what I'm hearing is that you felt left out when decisions were made without you. Is that right?"
- **Empathy:**
  - Skylar's friend is upset after being criticized by a supervisor. Skyler says, "I can understand why that hurt your feelings. If I were in your position, I'd probably feel discouraged too."
- **Emotional Intelligence (EQ):**
  - Before discussing a conflict with a teammate, Quinn realizes they are exhausted and irritated after a long day. Instead of starting the conversation immediately, they say, "I want us to have a productive discussion, but I don't think I'm in the best mindset right now. Can we talk tomorrow morning?"

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.

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.

- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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, partner, 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

As has been discussed 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.



Figure 9.4.1: Two people embracing in a gesture of reconciliation, illustrating how apology and forgiveness can help repair relational harm after conflict and rebuild emotional connection despite hurt feelings or misunderstandings. (CC BY-SA 2.0; scem.info via Wikimedia Commons)

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.

As with the other communication skills you have learned throughout this book, apology and forgiveness take practice and patience. When should you forgive? Forgiveness is not easy, and in some circumstances, not likely or possible. However, when it is possible and/or warranted, it is helpful to remind ourselves 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.

Conflict is an inevitable part of interpersonal relationships, but it does not have to result in damaged connections or lasting resentment. By practicing effective communication skills such as mindfulness, empathy, active listening, assertiveness, and emotional intelligence, individuals can approach disagreements in ways that encourage collaboration and understanding. The integrative conflict resolution model demonstrates that peaceful conflict management is often a process that requires patience, reflection, and mutual effort. In addition, apology and forgiveness provide pathways for healing and rebuilding trust after harm has occurred. While some conflicts may require outside support through mediation, counseling, or professional assistance, developing healthy conflict resolution skills can strengthen relationships, improve communication, and create opportunities for personal and relational growth.

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9.5: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Understanding interpersonal conflict begins with recognizing that not all disagreements are conflicts. While disagreement involves differences in opinion, conflict emerges when those differences are paired with emotional tension, perceived incompatibility, and communicative strain. Conflict is shaped by interdependence, meaning it typically occurs in relationships where people care about or rely on one another. It is also influenced by perception, emotional responses, and the degree to which individuals interpret differences as personal threats or manageable issues.

One of the most important insights from this chapter is that people approach conflict in different ways. Conflict management styles such as integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising reflect how individuals balance concern for themselves and others. No single style is universally best; instead, effectiveness depends on the situation, the relationship, and the desired outcomes. Understanding these styles helps individuals become more intentional in choosing responses rather than reacting automatically.

However, conflict is often shaped not only by style but also by learned communication behaviors that can damage relationships. Patterns such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling can escalate tension and reduce relational satisfaction over time. Additional behaviors like gunnysacking, blame, and manipulation further illustrate how poorly managed conflict can create cycles of misunderstanding and emotional harm. Recognizing these patterns is essential for interrupting negative cycles before they become entrenched.

In contrast to destructive behaviors, effective conflict management relies on intentional communication skills. Mindfulness, empathy, active listening, assertiveness, perception checking, and emotional intelligence all help individuals approach conflict more constructively. Structured models, such as integrative conflict resolution, provide step-by-step processes for defining issues, generating solutions, and evaluating outcomes collaboratively. These strategies emphasize cooperation, clarity, and mutual respect.

Finally, conflict should not be viewed only as a problem to eliminate but also as an opportunity for growth. When handled well, conflict can strengthen relationships, clarify expectations, and deepen understanding between individuals. Apology and forgiveness play important roles in repairing harm and rebuilding trust after conflict. While some situations require outside support such as mediation or counseling, most everyday conflicts can be improved through mindful communication and a willingness to engage constructively.

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9.6: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Argument
- Avoiding
- Bracketing
- Collaborating
- Compromising
- Concern for others
- Concern for self
- Conflict
- Conflict management
- Conflict mediation
- Conflict negotiation
- Conflict outcomes
- Content goals
- Contempt
- Criticism
- Defensiveness
- Disagreement
- Dominating
- Face-negotiation theory
- Flaming
- Identity goals
- Integrating
- Interdependence
- Obliging
- Procedural disagreement
- Process goals
- Relational goals
- Stonewalling
- Substantive disagreement
- Tolerance for disagreement
- Unconditionally constructive

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9.7: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between a disagreement and interpersonal conflict, and why does this distinction matter in understanding relationships?
2. How can an individual's tolerance for disagreement influence whether a conflict escalates or stays manageable?
3. Which conflict management style (integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, compromising) do you think is most common in your own communication, and why might that be?
4. How do cultural values (such as individualism vs. collectivism or power distance) shape the way people approach and interpret conflict?
5. Why are the "Four Horsemen" (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling) so damaging to relationships, and how might their antidotes improve communication?

Chapter Exercises

1. Conflict Style Self-Assessment Reflection
    1. Identify a recent interpersonal conflict you experienced. Write a short reflection describing:
        1. Which of the five conflict styles you used most (integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, compromising).
        2. Whether the outcome was effective or ineffective.
        3. One alternative style you could have used and why.
2. "Four Horsemen" Identification Practice
    1. Watch or recall a real or fictional conflict (TV show, movie, or personal experience). Identify:
        1. Any examples of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stonewalling.
        2. The likely impact each behavior had on the relationship.
        3. One antidote that could have improved the interaction.
3. Rewriting a Conflict Conversation
    1. Take the following statement and rewrite it using healthier communication strategies (I-statements, empathy, or assertiveness):
        1. "You never listen to me and you always mess things up."
    2. Then briefly explain what changed and why the new version is more effective.
4. Conflict Style Role-Play
    1. In pairs or small groups, role-play a scenario (roommates, coworkers, friends disagreeing on plans). Each person must be assigned a conflict style:
        1. integrating
        2. obliging
        3. dominating
        4. avoiding
        5. compromising
    2. After the role-play, discuss:
        1. How each style affected the outcome.
        2. Which styles led to more productive communication?
        3. What would have improved the interaction?
5. Integrative Conflict Resolution Model Application
    1. Think of a real conflict (past or current). Apply the integrative model step-by-step:
        1. Define the conflict.
        2. Write one "I-statement."
        3. Identify each person's perspective (empathy).
        4. Brainstorm at least 3 possible solutions.
        5. Choose one solution and evaluate how you would test it.

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10: DARK SIDE

Chapter Overview

The dark side of interpersonal communication refers to communication behaviors that can negatively affect relationships, self-esteem, trust, safety, and well-being. Communication can fall on the light or dark side depending on the situation, the type and closeness of the relationship, the intentions behind the behavior, how often it occurs, how severe it is, power differences, and whether it interferes with basic psychological needs.

Negative relational communication can take many forms, including deception, gaslighting, jealousy, secret tests, gossip, verbal and emotional abuse, bullying, physical aggression, intimate partner violence, and harmful social media behaviors. These behaviors can sometimes have neutral or even positive purposes, but they can become harmful when they involve manipulation, control, repeated aggression, or damage to another person's trust, self-esteem, relationships, or safety. Recognizing these behaviors and using communication skills such as assertiveness, boundary setting, perception checking, and support seeking can help people respond more effectively.



Figure 10.1: A distressed man illustrates how harmful communication can contribute to emotional distress, isolation, and diminished well-being. (CC0 1.0; Fotorech via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Examine how context, relationships, intentions, frequency, and severity can affect whether communication is harmful.
- Identify different forms of deception, gaslighting, jealousy, secret tests, and gossip.
- Describe how verbal abuse, bullying, aggression, and intimate partner violence can affect people and relationships.
- Identify the benefits and risks of social media communication, including cyberbullying, sexting, stalking, and disinhibition.
- Describe healthy ways to respond to harmful communication, such as using assertiveness, setting boundaries, checking perceptions, seeking support, and prioritizing safety.

10.1: Introduction to the Dark Side of Communication

10.2: Aggression in Relationships

10.3: Deception and Gaslighting

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10.1: Introduction to the Dark Side of Communication

Overview

Interpersonal relationships can involve both positive and negative communication exchanges. Like the dark side of the moon, the dark side of relationships exists alongside the light side, and understanding it requires examining negative relational communication in relation to what is known about relationships more broadly (Duck, 1994).

The study of the dark side of communication considers how perceptions of communication behaviors can vary according to the situation, relationship, intentions, frequency, and severity of those behaviors. Negative relational communication can also affect psychological needs, providing a foundation for understanding specific forms of dark-side communication.

This chapter examines the dark side of communication by exploring deception, jealousy, social media, bullying, intimate partner violence, emotional abuse, secret tests, and other potentially harmful aspects of relationships. It concludes by reviewing communication skills that can help individuals respond effectively to the dark side. Some of the content in this chapter may be emotionally challenging or difficult to process. Safety and well-being are important considerations when examining harmful aspects of interpersonal relationships, and resources are provided to support emotional and physical well-being.

Learning Objectives

- Define the dark side of communication and explain how it relates to the light side of interpersonal communication.
- Identify the two key dimensions used to understand the dark side of communication.
- Explain how perceptions of communication behaviors influence whether they are viewed as aversive or acceptable.
- Identify factors that can contribute to negative relational communication.
- Recognize common forms of communication associated with the dark side of relationships.

The Dark Side of Communication

“Like the dark side of the moon, the dark side of relationships can be found to co-exist in the same entity as the light side. We need to explore and understand it not in itself but in its relation to everything else that has ever been learned about relationships” (Duck, 1994, p. 20).

On any given day, communication may involve both positive and negative exchanges. In their landmark book *The Dark Side of Communication*, Spitzberg and Cupach (1994) examined aspects of interpersonal communication that were often considered undesirable and therefore had not been widely studied. In recent years, research on the dark side of communication has grown, largely because of increased acknowledgment that not all aspects of interpersonal communication are positive and because changing social norms may contribute to people being simply “meaner and nastier” to their relational partners than in the past (Kowalski, 2001, p. 6).

The **dark side of communication** consists of two key dimensions: the degree to which something is considered acceptable by society and the degree to which something serves to improve a relationship (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). The light and dark sides of communication are connected because acceptable behaviors can lead to negative outcomes, while sometimes positive outcomes are the result of unacceptable behaviors. We must be wary and aware of both.

Awareness of the negative side of relational communication is an essential step in preventing these problems from occurring in the first place.

Perception Is Key

Whether a communication behavior falls on the light or dark side may largely be determined by how the situation is perceived, the type of relationship involved, and the intentions attributed to the other person. Numerous factors can determine whether someone perceives a communication behavior as aversive (Kowalski, 2001).

Example 10.1.1 Identifying Whether or Not a Relationships Falls on the Dark Side

Inspired by Kowalski's (2001) book, *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, the following questions can help identify whether communication in a relationship falls on the dark side.

Do Certain People in Your Life Leave You Doubting Yourself and Questioning Your Perceptions?

- Certain communication behaviors associated with the dark side can negatively affect our self-concept and self-esteem.

Is There a Power Imbalance in the Relationship?

- Relationships involving power imbalances, such as those between a boss and employee or a parent and child, may be more likely to experience aspects of the dark side.

How Close Are You to the Other Person?

- The closer the relationship, the more likely we are to experience pain when faced with communication associated with the dark side.

How Frequent Is the Questionable Communication Behavior?

- A one-time transgression may be forgiven, whereas repeated negative behaviors are more likely to fall into the dark side.

How Severe Is the Communication Behavior?

- Mild behavior may be accepted, but even a single severe occurrence can derail a relationship.

Does the Behavior Interfere With Your Basic Psychological Needs?

- Consider whether the behavior interferes with basic psychological needs, such as the need to belong, have a sense of control, and experience self-esteem.

Common Dark Side Communication Practices

With these questions, we can begin to investigate and understand if communication practices are positively serving our relationship satisfaction and goals. These are crucial questions to be mindful of, as we might have been socially and culturally taught that some of these behaviors are natural, normal, common, even recommended, when they are in fact creating disconfirming communication climates at best and violence at worst. There are many very common forms of communication that can cast a shadow on relationships, including deception, secret tests, jealousy, gaslighting, verbal aggression and abuse, with particular modes on social media.

Lets begin to unpack them.

Jealousy

Have you ever found yourself feeling jealous in a relationship? If you are like most people, you may have experienced both ends of jealousy, including feeling the emotion and finding yourself in a relationship with a jealous partner. Like other aspects of the dark side of communication, jealousy can have both positive and negative aspects.

Jealousy is a feeling of hostility or resentment to a perceived advantaged rival, and can involve how people think, feel, and respond to a perceived threat to a relationship. Although much reference is made to the "green-eyed monster" of jealousy in romantic relationships, it can also occur with friends, siblings, coworkers, and other people in our daily lives. Jealousy can be triggered by events, such as thinking your partner is flirting with someone attractive, but it can occur even in the absence of an actual rival. How we experience jealousy can be influenced by a variety of factors, including personality, culture, attachment styles, and the unique characteristics of the relationship.

Jealousy has been linked to relationship dissatisfaction, as well as increases in deception and relationship violence (Elphinston et al., 2013; Guerrero et al., 2005). Jealousy can show itself in different forms, including cognitive, behavioral, or emotional jealousy (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998).

Cognitive jealousy occurs when you experience negative thoughts about your partner's behavior or a third party whom you believe is interfering in your relationship. For example, if someone starts texting your partner late at night and sending pictures and flirtatious messages, you may find yourself questioning the other person's motives.

Emotional jealousy refers to the emotions that are mixed in with your jealous experience, such as hurt, anger, and fear.

Behavioral jealousy occurs when you take steps to monitor your partner, such as checking their phone, tracking their location, or trying to limit and/or control who they associate with.

Managing Jealousy

As with other aspects of the dark side of communication, jealousy can serve both negative and positive functions in relationships. Previous research has suggested that jealousy is related to six communication functions: preserving self-esteem, maintaining or protecting the relationship, reducing uncertainty about both the primary and rival relationship, restoring balance in the relationship, and reassessing the relationship (Guerrero & Anderson, 1996). One potentially positive outcome of jealousy is that it can motivate people to take steps to improve their relationship (Henniger & Harris, 2014), such as investing time and effort in the relationship. This must be tied to positive and constructive conflict negotiation and communication practices. As discussed in the chapter on conflict, navigating and negotiating conflict in effect ways can help peopele in an interpersonal relationship build from the strain. It is often challenging to perceive our boundaries and expectations until they are made clear that they have been crossed. When this happens, it can be an opportunity for parties in a relationship to communicate and discuss the nature of these boundaries and expectatios, and therein lies the opportunity or growth. This can also be applied to jealousy, if it is responded to appropriately.

What is the best way to manage feelings of jealousy when they arise? Think about what you find to be the healthiest response to jealousy. Research has shown that using a **self-reliance strategy** may work best (Salovey & Rodin, 1988). This approach calls for you to acknowledge your feelings while not letting the triggering event derail you from what you were doing.

Furthermore, research suggests that following up a triggering event with calm discussions about jealous feelings through self-disclosure and demonstrating increased affection toward partners can lead to the most positive outcomes in these situations (Kennedy-Lightsey, 2018).

Secret Tests

In the classic teen movie *Mean Girls*, a story of high school students jockeying for power, the four main characters engage in a four-way phone conversation designed to unknowingly undermine each other. This scene showcases **secret tests**, a form of communication whereby individuals use a variety of direct and indirect strategies to learn information about each other and their relationship (Baxter & Wilmot, 1984).

Secret tests, commonly referred to as game-playing, are often used when there are questions about the status of a relationship or when a relationship is going through changes. You are more likely to find secret tests when at least one person in the relationship has low self-esteem, talking about the relationship is considered taboo, or the relationship is in a state of decline.

Research has largely examined the use of secret tests in romantic relationships, but these strategies to reduce uncertainty can also be found in family, friendship, and work relationships. Secret tests are included as a type of communication from the dark side because they can be manipulative, hurtful, and negative.

Types of Secret Tests

Third-party tests involve going through the other party's friends or family to learn their feelings. For example, imagine that Alexis has a crush on Bryce. Rather than reaching out to talk to Bryce, Alexis connects with Bryce's friends through social media to find out if they are single and whether Bryce might be interested in talking.

Triangle tests involve using a third party to make your partner jealous. For example, Riley and Quinn go to a party, and Riley talks

to other people to try to make Quinn jealous.

Fidelity tests involve determining whether or not your partner remains faithful. For example, Logan leaves their partner alone with someone very attractive to see how they respond.

Directness tests involve making specific statements or self-disclosures in the hope that the other person will reciprocate. For example, Jordan tells Sawyer, “I think I am falling in love with you” in hopes that Sawyer will confess the same feelings.

Separation tests involve increasing the physical distance between partners, such as geographically, to see if the relationship can withstand the distance. For example, Blake and Robin go away to school on opposite sides of the country to see if their relationship can withstand being apart.

Endurance tests involve introducing costs to the relationship to see how the other person responds. There are three typical endurance tests: negative behavior, self-criticism, and effort tests. Negative behavior involves treating your partner poorly to see if they will tolerate the behavior. Self-criticism entails criticizing oneself to the point that it becomes irritating, to see if your partner will disagree and defend you. Effort tests involve making demanding requests of the partner to see how committed they are to the relationship.

Public presentation tests occur when individuals test their relationship status through public declarations about the relationship, such as introducing someone as their significant other or changing their relationship status on social media.

Indirect suggestion tests include roundabout strategies such as joking about the relationship status and using nonverbal indicators such as increased touching through hand-holding and hugs. For example, Kai frequently jokes with Jamie, calling them "girlfriend" to see how they react.

As you review secret tests in relationships, you may recognize occasions when other people used this form of communication with you or when you used these techniques with others. It can be helpful to develop competent communication strategies for responding to secret tests.

Communication Strategies to Respond to Secret Tests

It is important to recognize that secret tests can break down trust in relationships. If you find yourself using any of the secret tests listed here, work on developing your assertiveness to seek answers to your questions more directly with the other person.

If someone in your life is using secret tests with you, it is worthwhile to develop a response strategy. Consider trying one of these communication strategies:

- Seek answers about why the person is using secret tests. Are they insecure, or are you unwilling to share in the exchange of ideas about your relationship?
- Respond assertively. For example, "I noticed that you introduced me to your family as your girlfriend. We have not really discussed our relationship status, and I think we should do so before we move forward."
- Counter with perception checking. "I have noticed lately that your friends have been asking me about our relationship. Is there something you would like to know, or are your friends curious about your life?"
- Use clarifying questions and statements. "So, would you like me to take you to the airport? I only do that for people I care about. I am happy to take you to the airport," or "So, you would like me to take you to the airport? I only do that for the people that I am closest to, and I don't think we are there yet."

Gossip

The word gossip easily conjures up questionable images of “malicious rumors, put-downs, or the breathless propagation of a tabloid scoop” (Gottfried, 2019). As it turns out, gossip is not necessarily so sinister. It is also a social skill that helps us connect by spreading information. Researchers essentially define **gossip** as “talking about people who aren’t present” (Robbins & Karan, 2019).

Figure 10.1.1: Two people whisper to each other, illustrating how gossip involves sharing information about people who are not present. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Robert Thivierge via Wikimedia Commons)

According to David Ludden, professor of psychology at Georgia Gwinnett College and author of *The Psychology of Language: An*

Integrated Approach, gossiping can be positive or neutral as well as negative. In fact, Robbins and Karan (2019) found gossip to be quite mundane. Their observational study found that most gossip tended to be neutral rather than positive or negative. Neutral topics may include sharing updates about friends and family.

Their study concluded that the average person gossips about 52 minutes a day. Of that, only about 15% was negative gossip, 9% was positive, and an overwhelming 75% was “boring” and neutral information. Additionally, while women tend to be associated with the reputation of gossiping, they found that men gossip just as much as women.

Dunbar (2004) believes that without gossip, society would not exist. Gossiping can be a way to stay informed when our network or society becomes too large to manage and observe by ourselves. Furthermore, Roy Baumeister, Liqing Zhang, and Kathleen Vohs (2004) suggest that gossip is part of human socialization and cultural learning, offering teachable situations about what society finds socially acceptable and unacceptable.

For example, parents may use the parable of “the boy who cried wolf” to tell their children about a neighbor who got in trouble for lying. As a result, we learn from a young age that lying is bad and that gossip can serve “to keep people in check, morally speaking” (Robbins & Karan, 2019).

The usefulness of gossip does not come without a dark side. Perhaps that is why we are quick to associate gossip with something bad and reprehensible. When the information transmitted benefits no one and is intended to harm, that is gossip that should be avoided (Feinberg et al., 2012).

Considerations of Dark Side communication involve multiple variables. We must be mindful of our discussion of communication ethics, and if the long and short term consequences are good and just. We must also consider not only the intent of the communication actions but also the impact; we may mean well but still create harm. There are many common forms of communication that can end up on the Dark Side of communication if they are allowed to transcend boundaries of acceptable behavior or are used deceptively to hurt trust. The forms of communication discussed here all fall into some element of grey area where we have to be vigilant and mindful as communicators to ensure nobody is getting hurt. However, some elements of interpersonal communication are much more clearly unethical and land on the Dark Side.

Attributions

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10.2: Aggression in Relationships

Overview

Interpersonal relationships can provide security, belonging, and support, but they can also become contexts for aggression, abuse, and control. Harmful communication may take verbal, social, psychological, or physical forms and can have significant effects on individuals and relationships.

Understanding different forms of aggression can help identify harmful communication patterns, recognize warning signs of abuse, and understand how behaviors such as bullying, psychological abuse, and intimate partner violence affect well-being. It also highlights the importance of seeking appropriate support when aggression or abuse occurs.

Learning Objectives

- Examine different forms of verbal, social, psychological, and physical aggression.
- Identify patterns of verbal and emotional abuse, including DARVO and coercive control.
- Describe how social aggression, bullying, and cyberbullying can affect individuals and relationships.
- Explain the characteristics and consequences of intimate partner violence (IPV).
- Identify warning signs of abuse and appropriate sources of support.

Types of Verbal and Physical Aggression

Personal relationships with friends, family members, and romantic partners are generally expected to provide security, belonging, and support. However, close relationships can also become contexts in which harmful communication and aggressive behavior occur. Aggression may be verbal, physical, relational, or psychological, and it can range from isolated incidents to persistent patterns of abuse and control. This section examines several forms of aggression, including verbal aggression, verbal and emotional abuse, social aggression, bullying, physical aggression, psychological abuse, and intimate partner violence (IPV). It concludes with resources for individuals experiencing abuse or concerned about someone else.

Verbal Aggression and Abuse

Verbal aggression involves communication that attacks another person's self-concept rather than addressing a disagreement or conflict. Hocker and Wilmot (2018) describe verbal aggression as including insults, character attacks, harsh teasing, and profanity. **Verbal abuse** is more appropriately understood as a pattern of communication intended to demean, humiliate, blame, intimidate, or control another person. Although verbal and emotional abuse may not leave visible injuries, they can have substantial consequences for psychological well-being and self-esteem (Evans, 2010; National Coalition Against Domestic Violence [NCADV], 2015).

Verbal aggression can occur in many relational contexts, including families, friendships, workplaces, educational settings, and romantic relationships. Examples include persistent insults, humiliation, threats, excessive criticism, intimidation, and communication intended to make another person doubt their perceptions or worth. Current guidance from WomensLaw.org similarly identifies behaviors such as constant criticism, name-calling, humiliation, jealousy, threats, isolation, and controlling another person's activities as potential forms of emotional or psychological abuse (WomensLaw.org, 2025).

According to WomensLaw.org (2021), examples of verbal and emotional abuse may include:

- Acting jealous and repeatedly accusing a partner of cheating.
- Becoming angry in ways that cause fear.
- Calling a partner insulting names such as “stupid,” “worthless,” or “disgusting.”
- Threatening to involve authorities as a means of intimidation or control.
- Making decisions for another person about matters that person should decide independently, such as what to wear or eat.
- Humiliating a partner in front of other people.

- Pretending not to understand what another person is saying, making that person feel unintelligent, or repeatedly refusing to listen to their thoughts and opinions.

These behaviors become particularly concerning when they form a recurring pattern through which one person attempts to establish power or control over another.

Types of Verbal Abuse

Patricia Evans (2010), in *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, identified a range of patterns through which verbal abuse can occur. Common forms include the following:

- **Hostile withholding:** A person may deliberately refuse to acknowledge or engage with a partner for extended periods, using silence or withdrawal as a means of control. For example, a friend might ignore another person's messages and avoid speaking to them despite an ongoing responsibility to communicate.
- **Countering:** This occurs when one person's perceptions, opinions, or feelings are repeatedly challenged or dismissed in a hostile manner. Disagreement is a normal feature of relationships; countering becomes abusive when it is used systematically to undermine another person's confidence in their own perceptions.
- **Discounting or "joking":** A person's feelings or experiences are dismissed, minimized, or reframed as unreasonable, often followed by the assertion that a hurtful statement was "just a joke."
- **Blocking:** A person may repeatedly interrupt, silence, or prevent a partner from expressing thoughts and concerns.
- **Blaming:** Responsibility for problems or mistreatment is shifted onto the other person as a means of humiliation or degradation.
- **Judging and criticizing:** Persistent negative evaluation can undermine self-esteem and communicate that the other person's actions, personality, or abilities are inherently inadequate.
- **Trivializing:** Accomplishments, concerns, or experiences are minimized so that the other person's achievements or feelings appear insignificant.
- **Undermining:** A person may repeatedly question another person's competence, decisions, or accomplishments, creating uncertainty and diminishing confidence.
- **Name-calling:** Direct insults or indirect references may be used to characterize another person as unintelligent, incompetent, undesirable, or otherwise inferior.

These behaviors can be difficult to recognize when they occur gradually or are interspersed with periods of positive communication. Emotional and psychological abuse may develop incrementally and may not produce a single, easily identifiable incident. Current resources also identify coercive control, technological monitoring, isolation, financial control, and manipulation as related patterns of abuse (WomensLaw.org, 2025).

Be Aware of DARVO

Abusive communication may also involve attempts to avoid accountability by denying harmful behavior, attacking the person who raises concerns, and reversing the roles of victim and offender. This pattern is commonly referred to as **DARVO**, an acronym for "Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender" (Freyd, 1997).

DARVO describes a response in which a person accused of harmful behavior denies or minimizes the behavior, attacks the credibility or character of the person confronting them, and then *presents themselves as the victim*. Its this final part that makes DARVO different from other forms of abuse and can make it particularly insidious. Freyd (1997) proposed that this pattern can serve to silence victims and protect perpetrators from accountability. Subsequent research has examined how DARVO-related responses can influence perceptions of victims and perpetrators and contribute to victim self-blame (Harsey et al., 2017).

DARVO is important to recognize because repeated denial, blame shifting, and attacks on credibility can cause individuals to question their own perceptions and experiences. WomensLaw.org (2025) similarly identifies shifting blame and portraying the victim as the abusive party as a form of emotional abuse. This can be a "red-flag" to behaviors that can lead to gaslighting, a form of psychological abuse we will discuss in the next section.

Verbal and psychological abuse can be subtle and may leave no visible evidence. Nevertheless, persistent exposure can have serious consequences for self-esteem, emotional well-being, and perceptions of personal agency. Communication aggression can also extend beyond close relationships and become a social phenomenon when individuals or groups use communication to damage another person's reputation, social standing, or relationships.

Social Aggression and Bullying

Social aggression is “directed toward damaging another’s self-esteem, social status, or both, and may take direct forms such as verbal rejection, negative facial expressions or body movements, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumors or social exclusion” (Galen & Underwood, 1997, p. 589). Social aggression can therefore include malicious gossip, manipulation of friendships, exclusion, rejection, and behaviors designed to damage another person's social standing (Underwood et al., 2004).

Social aggression is particularly relevant to adolescent peer relationships, in which friendships and social status can be highly consequential. Research examining relational and physical aggression across nine countries found consistent gender differences in physical aggression, with boys reporting more physical aggression than girls, but did not find consistent gender differences in relational aggression (Lansford et al., 2012). This finding is important because broad claims that girls primarily use social aggression while boys primarily use physical aggression can oversimplify a more complex body of research.

Social aggression can contribute to social isolation, loneliness, anxiety, depression, and difficulties in school. At the same time, not every form of exclusion or negative social behavior constitutes abuse or bullying. Social behavior can also serve ordinary group-regulation functions, such as communicating boundaries or reinforcing group norms. The distinction becomes important when social behavior is intentionally harmful, disproportionate, repeated, or directed toward an individual who has limited ability to resist or escape it.

Bullying

Bullying is a form of peer aggression that may include physical, verbal, relational, and cyber aggression. Unlike a single aggressive interaction, bullying generally involves repeated or persistent aggressive behavior directed toward a targeted individual or group and is characterized by a real or perceived imbalance of power. Bullying may occur between individuals or involve multiple participants, sometimes described as mobbing (Hoover & Oliver, 2008).



Figure 10.2.1: A physical confrontation illustrates how bullying can involve repeated aggression and an imbalance of power between individuals. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Edith Castro Roldán, Oscar Manuel Luna Nieto via Wikimedia Commons)

Bullying can occur in schools, workplaces, social groups, athletic settings, and online environments. **Cyberbullying** extends aggressive behavior into digital spaces, where communication can be distributed rapidly, persist beyond the original interaction, and reach large audiences. These characteristics can intensify the consequences of humiliation, exclusion, and harassment.

Current national data demonstrate the continuing prevalence of school bullying. The 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 19% of U.S. high school students reported being bullied on school property during the previous year. LGBTQ+ students were more likely to report bullying than cisgender and heterosexual students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024).

More recent data also provide important information about transgender students. In the 2023 national Youth Risk Behavior Survey, approximately 40% of transgender and questioning students reported having been bullied at school during the previous

year, compared with substantially lower percentages among cisgender students (CDC, 2024).

Bullying may also intersect with racism and discrimination. During the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian harassment and racism received increased attention, including through the Stop AAPI Hate Youth Campaign. The campaign's 2020 national survey included 990 AAPI young adults and documented substantial concern about anti-Asian racism and harassment during the pandemic (Stop AAPI Hate, 2020).

The consequences of bullying extend beyond the immediate interaction. Repeated victimization can affect psychological well-being, school engagement, social relationships, and perceptions of safety. For this reason, bullying should be understood not simply as “kids being mean,” but as a form of aggression with potentially significant social and health consequences.

Physical Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence

Physical aggression represents another form of harmful relational communication and behavior. **Intimate partner violence (IPV)** encompasses physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner. IPV can occur in dating, cohabiting, marital, and other intimate relationships (Leemis et al., 2022).

Although abuse can occur in many types of close relationships—including relationships between parents and children, siblings, friends, and caregivers—IPV specifically concerns violence or abuse involving an intimate partner. IPV affects people across racial, ethnic, gender, sexual-orientation, socioeconomic, and religious groups, although the burden of violence is not distributed equally across populations. CDC data indicate that IPV is associated with substantial physical and psychological consequences, including injury, fear, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and other adverse health outcomes (Leemis et al., 2022).

Earlier national estimates have documented the substantial prevalence of IPV in the United States. The 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey estimated that more than one-third of women and more than one-quarter of men had experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetimes (Black et al., 2011). More recent NISVS reporting continues to demonstrate that IPV is a major public health problem affecting millions of people in the United States (Leemis et al., 2022).

IPV can include a wide range of physical behaviors, from pushing, grabbing, slapping, and throwing objects to more severe acts such as choking, striking with an object, or using or threatening to use a weapon. Physical aggression can occur alongside psychological aggression, sexual violence, stalking, and coercive control rather than functioning as an isolated form of abuse.

Research on dating relationships also demonstrates that physical and verbal aggression can occur during adolescence. Muñoz-Rivas et al. (2007), for example, examined aggressive behavior among adolescents and young adults and documented both verbal and physical aggression in dating relationships. The study also found differences in the severity and consequences of physical aggression.

Research has additionally identified relationships between violence, communication, and relationship satisfaction. Rada (2020) examined violence and communication among middle-aged and older adults and found that forms of violence such as insults, humiliation, physical aggression, threats, and financial control were relevant to relationship functioning. Ackerman and Field (2011) likewise found an association between IPV victimization and relationship satisfaction.

It is important to avoid oversimplifying IPV by assuming that it occurs only in one gender configuration or that every violent relationship has identical motivations or consequences. People of all genders can perpetrate or experience IPV, and patterns of violence vary in frequency, severity, reciprocity, coercive control, injury, and context. National data also demonstrate differences in victimization across sexual-identity groups (Chen et al., 2023).

The consequences of IPV and other forms of abuse can be both immediate and long term. Victimization has been associated with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, physical injury, chronic health problems, and other adverse health outcomes (Leemis et al., 2022). Emotional and psychological abuse can also have substantial effects even when physical violence is absent. Current resources emphasize that emotional abuse can undermine self-esteem, increase anxiety and isolation, and in some cases occur alongside or precede physical violence (WomensLaw.org, 2025).

Power, IPV, and the Cycle of Abuse

When discussing Intimate Partner Violence and other forms of abuse, a common refrain is to ask "why don't they just leave?" It is

a fair question, and one that has two critical answers: power, and the cycle of abuse.

Power is a very nuanced and complex phenomenon, but we can hone in on the elements that are significant to this particular context. One place that power comes from is access to necessary resources, and the access to these resources can give a person leverage over someone else who needs those resources. Consider all the resources needed to maintain a cohabitating family or financially intertwined relationship. There is housing (rent or mortgage) and also all the associated costs of insurance and upkeep of the home, transportation (again, with upkeep costs), utilities, food, medical coverage (which is often attached to employment and covers all members of a family). It gets even more complicated when pets and children are involved. Consider simply the financial cost to find a new place to live and then move all your belongings there, followed by the tremendous labor to decouple obligations from one another, and then take on a portion of those obligations alone. It takes a tremendous amount of resources to "leave and start over," and the victim of the abuse is in the lower power position and thus has limited resources to begin with.

Have you heard the fable of the frog in the boiling water? In a simplified form, its a story of a frog that is in a pot and just sitting comfortably in the cool, clean, fresh water. Little does the frog know, the pot is on a stove and the frog is intended to be dinner. But the water warms so slowly that by the time the frog realizes their fate, the water is boiling and it is too late. Intimate partner violence metaphors well with this fable. It often starts slowly and calmly, temperature rising so slowly over such a long period of time, that the victim may not fully understand the danger they are in until it is too late. Because intimate partner violence typically happens in a cycle.

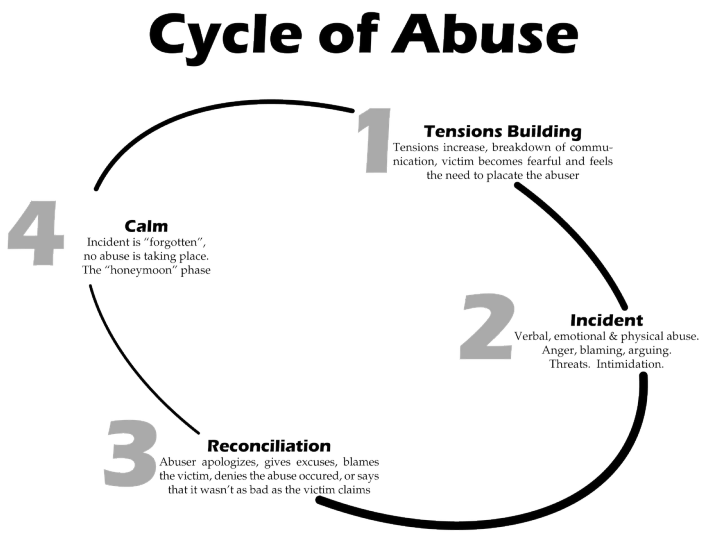


Figure 10.2.2: A four-stage diagram showing how tension building can lead to an abusive incident, followed by reconciliation and a period of calm before the cycle begins again. Alternative description of image. (CC0 1.0; Avanduyn via Wikimedia Commons)

- **Calm:** During the calm phase, the relationship feels content, unassuming, and normal. The relationship pleasantly assumes their routines and life goes on.
- **Tension:** Life is inherently complicated, and as two people move through the world together at some point there will be some challenge or friction. If this is not handled in an effective and appropriate way, this can lead to rising tension.
- **Incident:** There is some element of explosion where the abuser engages in serious, violent behavior, either verbal or physical.
- **Honeymoon:** The dust settles on the incident and the abuser will apologize and make promises, perhaps in lavish ways that rekindle the joy in the relationship.
- **Calm:** Abuser behaves as if abuse never happened, victim believes abuse is over or an isolated incident, and the relationship pleasantly assumed their routines and life goes on.

The cycle happens slowly and escalation is incremental, perhaps with long durations between incidents. However, the more times through the cycle a relationship moves, the harder it will be to disengage from the relationship.

Recognizing Warning Signs and Seeking Support

Recognizing patterns of aggression and abuse is an important first step. Warning signs can include persistent humiliation,

threats, intimidation, controlling behavior, isolation from friends or family, monitoring of communications or location, repeated accusations of infidelity, destruction of property, coercion, and attempts to make another person doubt their own perceptions. Such behaviors should be considered in context and as patterns rather than judged solely on the basis of a single disagreement (WomensLaw.org, 2025).

First and foremost, it cannot be overstated: the best way to end intimate partner violence is to never commit intimidate partner violence. The responsibility is on the abuser. Do not abuse people, and the problem will go away.

However, due to the complexity and invisibility of systems of power, it is unlikely that abusers will recognize themselves as abusers. So although it shouldn't be this way in a just society, we must understand how to protect ourselves from potential relationship abuse.

If you are victim of physical or emotional aggression or abuse, leave. If at all possible, as soon as possible, end the relationship and remove yourself to a safe place. Individuals experiencing abuse should not be expected to manage the situation alone. Depending on the circumstances, possible sources of support include a trusted friend or family member, counselor, instructor, campus health or counseling center, health-care professional, domestic violence advocate, or other qualified professional. Safety planning is particularly important when there is a risk of physical violence, stalking, threats, or escalating behavior. Setting boundaries can be appropriate in some situations, but safety should take priority when an abusive person has demonstrated a willingness to retaliate or cause harm.

Resources for Help

If an individual or someone they know is experiencing IPV, dating violence, verbal or psychological abuse, stalking, or another form of interpersonal violence, confidential support and information are available:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: Call 800-799-7233 (800-799-SAFE), text START to 88788, or use the online chat at TheHotline.org. The service provides crisis support, safety planning, information, and connections to local resources.
- Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: Call or text 800-422-4453 or use the online chat at ChildhelpHotline.org. Childhelp provides crisis intervention, support, safety planning, information, and referrals concerning child abuse and neglect.
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988, or use the online chat, for free and confidential crisis support. The service can also provide support for concerns involving relationships, intimate partner violence, depression, and other emotional or mental-health crises.
- California Partnership to End Domestic Violence: CPEDV.org provides information about California domestic violence organizations and services.
- Futures Without Violence: FuturesWithoutViolence.org provides educational materials, safety resources, and information concerning domestic and sexual violence, child abuse, stalking, harassment, and related issues.
- WomensLaw.org: WomensLaw.org provides state-specific legal information and resources concerning domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, emotional abuse, and related issues.
- Immediate danger: If someone is in immediate danger or requires emergency medical assistance, call 911.

Since abusive partners may monitor phones, browsers, messages, or online activity, help-seeking should also take technology safety into account. The National Domestic Violence Hotline provides information about digital safety and warns that internet activity may be monitored.

Abuse is not the responsibility of the person experiencing it. Seeking assistance can provide information, safety-planning options, emotional support, and connections to local services. The appropriate response will vary according to the circumstances, and safety should remain the primary consideration.

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10.3: Deception and Gaslighting

Overview

Deception is a common but complex aspect of interpersonal communication. People may withhold information, exaggerate, or deliberately communicate false information for a variety of reasons, including protecting themselves or others, avoiding undesirable consequences, or gaining resources. Whether deception is considered acceptable often depends on the context, perceived risks, and nature of the relationship.

Deception can occur through omission or commission, and its effects may vary depending on why it occurs and how it influences relationships. Gaslighting represents a particularly harmful form of deceptive communication that can cause individuals to question their perceptions, emotions, and self-concept, while effective communication strategies can help individuals recognize and respond to it.

Learning Objectives

- Define deception and distinguish between deception by omission and deception by commission.
- Identify common types and motivations for deceptive communication.
- Explain how deception can affect trust and other aspects of interpersonal relationships.
- Define gaslighting and identify common gaslighting behaviors and phrases.
- Identify communication strategies for responding to gaslighting and other manipulative communication.

Defining Deception

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you chose to tell a lie? Perhaps you were late to a meeting and blamed the traffic when you really did not get ready in time. Maybe you found yourself telling someone they looked nice in an outfit even though you thought the outfit was not suitable for them. Or perhaps you decided it was acceptable to disclose information about past relationships to a partner while leaving out key details. In what contexts do you feel it is acceptable to tell someone something other than the truth?

Whether or not you think it is acceptable to deceive someone probably includes consideration of what is at stake in terms of the risk to the relationship. This may determine whether you see any level of deception as acceptable to engage in within a particular relationship.

Interpersonal deception theory focuses on deception as an act, the process of detection, and our response to it (Buller & Burgoon, 2006). According to Buller and Burgoon, "deception occurs when communicators control the information contained in their messages to convey a meaning that departs from the truth as they know it" (2006, p. 205). Therefore, deception can function to strategically manipulate information while affecting the dynamic nature of a relationship.

What does this mean in a relationship when one relational partner decides to deceive someone? This theory focuses on how and why people engage in deception and try to get away with it, as well as how the other person tries to determine whether or not to believe it. Consider a time when someone questioned whether you were telling the truth. How did you respond? Or consider a time when you thought someone lied to you. How did you react, and how did the other person respond? Usually, when someone tries to deceive us and we are trying to determine what is happening, we monitor our responses to figure out what to do next.

Whether or not a relationship can overcome deception depends on the interplay between how someone responds when faced with deception and how the deceiver responds in an effort to repair the relationship. The following section provides an overview of the types of deception.

Types of Deception

Two types of deception that might occur in a relationship are **deception by omission** (concealment) and **deception by**

commission (lying). These two types of deception differ according to the level of distortion involved and the potential impact on a relationship based on how the deception is perceived.

Deception by Omission

Deception by omission, also called concealment, involves intentionally withholding some of the information another person has requested or that you are expected to share. For example, a relational partner might ask why you did not respond to their text the previous night, and you could say that you were busy while leaving out who you were busy with.

Do you think lies by omission are detrimental to a relationship? What might happen if your relational partner finds out that you have withheld some information? Omitting information can violate relational expectations and affect the trust and intimacy that have already been established in the relationship.

Building trust is an important aspect of relationships, and we engage in self-disclosure and communication behaviors that help to build such trust. If relational partners find out that we have violated their expectations of trust and undermined it through deception by omission, trust in the relationship will likely decline. Time may then be needed to determine how to repair the relationship.

Deception by Commission

Simply put, **deception by commission** is lying. When we engage in deception by commission, we deliberately communicate false information. This type of deception goes beyond the strategic withholding of information. With deception by commission, there is an intentional level of control over both the quantity and quality of information the relational partner receives.

This type of deception includes:

- **Lies of convenience**, commonly referred to as white lies: Information is presented as slightly false, and there may be minimal consequences to presenting the information as such. Oftentimes, these white lies are communicated to enable someone to feel less guilty or to ensure that someone's feelings are not hurt. For example, if someone asks whether they look OK in an outfit, a partner might say "yes" even if they do not particularly like the outfit. In another situation, a partner might respond to an orange maternity dress by saying, "You look like a pumpkin." Would it have been better in that case to tell a white lie and simply say "yes"? What purpose do white lies serve? They usually function as social lubrication for purposes of smoothing over a relationship and keeping a relationship friction-free.
- **Lies of exaggeration**: An exaggeration is a type of deception by commission that includes embellishing facts or stretching the truth, which can become more elaborate over time. When someone exaggerates or overstates by playing with the boundaries of what is considered factual or truthful, this type of misrepresentation can lead to mistrust in a relationship because of the blurring of boundaries between truth and fiction.
- **Bald-faced lies**: A bald-faced lie is a type of deception that involves an outright falsification of information. When you communicate a bald-faced lie, there is an intent to truly deceive someone. With a bald-faced lie, there may be a greater emotional impact or consequence to the relationship if the lie is discovered because the risk of destroying trust in the relationship is greater.

Why Do We Deceive?

If we know that deception in a relationship carries with it the risk of damaging the trust we have built, why would we decide to deceive someone in the first place? There are many reasons we might contemplate or use to determine and justify why it is acceptable to engage in an act of deception.

These reasons include:

- Altruistic motives, such as protecting someone or avoiding hurting their resources, self-image, or safety
- Self-serving motives and personal gain, including avoiding undesirable consequences
- Gaining resources such as time, money, affection, and status
- Avoiding harm or loss of resources
- Protecting one's self-image and saving face
- Entertainment

Reflect on past relationships and times you have engaged in any level of deception or felt you were deceived, and consider why. Do these reasons seem reasonable to you? We may find that we can justify reasons, big or small, for why we might need to deceive in a relationship. However, we also have to consider the short-term and long-term effects on a relationship if deception becomes commonplace.

Every communication act has a consequence, and we should be prepared to accept these consequences should we choose to engage in any form of deception in our relationships. First and foremost, if relational partners find out that we have withheld information and perceive us to be lying, there will necessarily be some kind of harm to the relationship and/or a loss of trust. We should expect the relational partner to be more guarded about whether to completely trust us in future interactions.

There may also be collateral damage or harm to others who are not directly involved simply because they are in our orbit and may peripherally experience an aftereffect of the deception. Finally, deception can bring other relational consequences, such as punishment, damage to one's reputation, or even a lingering guilty conscience that can interfere with future carefree and open conversations.

Given these reasons and effects, do you advocate that deception or lying is necessary to some extent in a relationship?

Gaslighting

In 2018, Oxford Dictionaries named **gaslighting** one of its most popular words, largely in response to the political climate surrounding the national election and office of the presidency in 2016. If we can consider our discussion on verbal communication and language and words, we must reflect on the power of language and its creation of perception. Gaslighting being a popular word in 2018 has a bit of a "double-edged sword" in terms of our perception. On the one hand, the popularization of the word can bring light and spread awareness to a phenomenon that needs much more attention. On the other hand, normalizing the use of the word normalizes a phenomenon that is quite extreme. We see similar effects around clinical language regularly, when people might say they are "depressed" because they are quite sad or say they are "OCD" because they are particular about how they like things, which diminished the impact of depression and obsessive compulsive disorders. Make no mistake: gaslighting is a severe form of psychological abuse. It is not very common, but it is very dangerous.

When gaslighting occurs, the abuser twists and exploits their victim's words, emotions, and experiences to make them feel as though they are imagining or exaggerating what happened. For gaslighting to take place, it involves two people: the **gaslighter** (the abuser) who creates doubt and confusion, and the gaslit (the receiver or victim), who questions their perceptions as a result. Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse that results in the victim questioning their own reality - their own knowledges, truths, perceptions, and memories. The term is coined in reference to a 1938 stage play by Patrick Hamilton called "Gaslight" in which a woman perceived the lights outside their home steadily dimming, and her husband systemically and perpetually denies it is happening, causing her to slowly lose her sanity. (Stern, 2018)

In order for gaslighting to occur, the abuser often begins by isolating the victim, usually through deception and lies about the victims relationships, convincing the victim that friends and family don't actually care for them. Once the victim is essentially isolated with the abuser, then the abuser can use withholding, trivializing, lies, and denial to make the victim continually questions what they are thinking and feeling.

The use of gaslighting can not only cause someone to doubt themselves, but it is often considered a form of abusive communication that can negatively affect an individual's mental health and well-being. Consider the story of Chanel Miller, who was inadvertently a victim of gaslighting from her family:

In the New York Times bestselling memoir *Know My Name*, Chanel Miller (2019) described the awful night when Brock Turner sexually assaulted her behind a dumpster on the campus of Stanford University. In a haunting passage, Miller recounted listening to friends and coworkers discuss the case without knowing that she was "Emily Doe," the name assigned to her in press coverage of the assault. These well-meaning friends and colleagues pondered why a non-student would attend a university party, what she wore that night, and whether she enjoyed it because, after all, the assailant was a sexy jock. Later, Miller recalls the case prosecutor's relief upon meeting her boyfriend: an older, employed, handsome, and athletic man. Miller's own testimony that she was unconscious and could not consent to sex seemed to mean less than her boyfriend's social desirability in a jury's assessment of whether she had really been assaulted. (Graves & Spencer, 2022)

You can see through this example, Miller may very well begin to question their own understanding of their own bodily knowledge due to the systematic denial and deception from those around her.

Gaslighting can be present in a variety of interpersonal relationships and for a variety of reasons. Gaslighting can occur in romantic partnerships, with family, friends, and even with coworkers or a boss. For gaslighting to occur, both parties must value the relationship, there is usually unequal power between the partners, and the target does not want to lose the relationship and needs approval. Stressful relationship topics such as money, sex, child-rearing, and other complex issues can trigger gaslighting as a way to avoid tension and conflict, attempt to control the situation (Stern, 2007).

Gaslighting and Power

Relational abuse usually comes back to systems of power and privilege and the related phenomenon of entitlement. Thinking back to our chapter on power and privilege, we learned that certain identities are laden with cultural capital that give them social leverage. For example, certain forms of bodies and beauty are looked so highly upon that it gives those attractive folks influence over others. Power and privilege also come from access to resources and the nonverbal images therein, for example wearing designer clothes or driving expensive cars will often Illicit an awe to those around.

Folks who grow accustomed to this form of power and privilege can develop what is known as **entitlement,** or the expectation of special treatment without the regard of others. Also, and finally, power and privilege are usually invisible to those who have it (unless they are consistently mindful of these systems).

When we put all that together, we can see that people who are in positions of power and privilege may come to expect that people around them fall in line and move to their whims, without even realizing what they are doing and what is happening to those in lower power positions around them. In this way, relationship abuse may be the result of a dramatic imbalance of power, and the behaviors of relational abuse can potentially be invisible in their early stages. For those in the lower power position, the behaviors may feel like manipulation and abuse, but to those in higher positions of power it is normalized to the extent it is invisible.

The simplest way to stop abuse from happening is to not abuse people. In this instance: don't gaslight people.

However, its more likely that the people reading this book are going to be in the lower power position, so it will be important to be aware of the forms of gaslighting as they happen.

Common Forms of Gaslighting

Common forms of gaslighting include:

- Blaming the other person for the problem
- Minimizing the seriousness of the event
- Diminishing the other person's self-concept
- Ridiculing the other person
- Verbal attacks
- Changing the subject
- Blatant lying
- Denying that something occurred

To illustrate, consider this scenario:

Rachel and her new boyfriend Daniel are out for the evening with some of his friends. During the evening, Daniel makes a sexually explicit and vulgar comment at Rachel's expense. Later that evening, on their way home, Rachel lets Daniel know she is unhappy with the comment. First, Daniel outright denies that he made such a comment (denial). Daniel then blames Rachel, telling her that the situation is her fault and that, because she is so uptight, his friends will never like her (scapegoating). He ends up saying, "we both know you are just too sensitive" (diminishing self-concept). Rachel is left questioning her perception of the evening and wondering if she is being too sensitive.

Stern (2019) identified several common phrases that can be used by gaslighters to manipulate the other person, including:

- You're so sensitive!
- You know that's just because you are so insecure.
- Stop acting crazy. Or: You sound crazy, you know that, don't you?
- You are just paranoid.
- I was just joking!

- You are making that up.
- It's no big deal.
- You're overreacting.
- You are always so dramatic.
- Don't get so worked up.
- That never happened.
- You're hysterical.
- There you go again, you are so ungrateful.
- Nobody believes you, why should I?

Do you suspect that someone has tried to gaslight you? If you or someone you know are a victim of gaslighting, you may:

- Constantly second-guess yourself
- Have difficulty making simple decisions
- Continually ask yourself, "Am I being too sensitive?"
- Feel confused or even "crazy"
- Always apologize to your abuser
- Not understand why you are not happier when you have so many good things in your life
- Feel as if you cannot do anything right
- Wonder if you are a "good enough" spouse, employee, friend, or person

Take some time to reflect on your answers to the questions. If you answer "yes" to one or more questions, you may be in a relationship where gaslighting is occurring. If you believe you are caught in the gaslight tango, developing your toolbox of communication skills can help you form healthy responses.

How to Respond to Gaslighting With Communication Competence

It is important to recognize that, over time, gaslighting can have damaging effects on an individual's self-concept, mental health, and overall well-being. If you find yourself using the gaslighting techniques described earlier, work on breaking the cycle by developing your assertiveness, emotional intelligence, and conflict management strategies to better address problems as they arise.

If you believe that someone in your life is gaslighting you, leave. If it is at all feasible or achievable, end the relationship. It bears repeating: make no mistake, gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse. The longer abuse is allowed to persist in a relationship, the more challenging it will become to change the nature of the relationship.

However, thinking back on our chapter regarding power and the resources it takes to have enough leverage to change the course of a relationship, it may not be entirely feasible to end an interdependent relationship. It gets further complicated when a relationship is interconnected with others, such as work networks of family care. So it is worthwhile to develop a communication response strategy:

- Learn to recognize gaslighting when it is happening. Stay vigilant and aware.
- Practice assertive communication to stand up for yourself without engaging in an argument over the issue.
- Maintain trusted connections with others, and check your perceptions with yourself and others. Maintain connections to a third party to get another view of the event.
- Set boundaries with simple communication statements such as "I am uncomfortable with the direction of this conversation. We can come back to it later," or "I know you see the situation one way, but I don't agree with you." Practice these so you have them available when needed during a heightened emotional state.
- Consider consulting a therapist or counselor. If the gaslighting occurs at work, contact Human Resources.

Deception is a common occurrence in all interpersonal relationships, and as such can have a range of possible outcomes (most of them negative). Deception alone, though, is not gaslighting. Gaslighting is a systemic and persistent form of psychological abuse that can have damaging effects on the victim. If you or someone you know is seeing signs of gaslighting, these behaviors must be corrected immediately. If they are not corrected, you must end the relationship and subsequently end the abuse.

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10.4: The Dark Side of Social Media

Overview

Social media and social networking sites have become deeply integrated into interpersonal relationships and everyday communication. These platforms provide opportunities for social connectivity, involvement, entertainment, networking, and information attainment, while also introducing risks such as psychological isolation, exposure to harmful material, social risk, loss of time, cyberbullying, stalking, sexting, and the spread of disinformation.

The benefits and darker aspects of social media communication include mental health concerns, cyberbullying, sexting and cyberstalking, self-disclosure, hyperpersonal communication, disinhibition, and catfishing. Understanding these dynamics can help individuals recognize potential risks and develop effective strategies for navigating social media interactions.

Learning Objectives

- Identify benefits and risks associated with social media and social networking.
- Explain how social media use may relate to mental health concerns and cyberbullying.
- Describe how sexting, cyberstalking, and other harmful communication behaviors can occur through social media.
- Define hyperpersonal communication and disinhibition and explain how they influence online interpersonal communication.
- Identify common characteristics of catfishing and strategies for responding to the dark side of social media.

Social Media and Social Networking

Do you belong to a social network? Do you recall the first social media site you joined? Or do you choose not to participate in social media? Since the introduction of the first social media sites in the late 1990s, social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat have integrated themselves into many aspects of life, particularly interpersonal relationships. Approximately 70% of adults report using social media sites daily, yet many of the same people report holding negative beliefs about the effects of social media (McKinnon & Dougherty, 2019). In this section, we first explore some of social media's benefits and then examine social media from the dark side of communication by considering how social media is linked to mental health concerns, cyberbullying, stalking and sexting, hyperpersonal communication, and the spread of disinformation.



Figure 10.4.1: Social media platforms have become central to interpersonal communication, offering opportunities for connection while also creating risks for relationships and well-being. (CC BY 2.0; Jason Howie via Wikimedia Commons)

Some of the earliest social networking sites, such as Classmates, were well received because they allowed people to connect with long-lost friends and family members. Since that time, several benefits of social media sites have been identified, including increased social connectivity, social involvement, entertainment, and information attainment (Khan et al., 2014). Through increased social connectivity, people can reach out to family and friends through platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Social media can also be used for networking purposes, such as LinkedIn, and for online dating through platforms such as Match.com, Bumble, and Tinder.

Due to targeted platforms, social media has also increased social involvement, particularly by allowing people to connect over common interests. People can commiserate over gaming through Twitch, find local restaurants through Yelp, or join an online hiking club. One of the most influential aspects of social media sites is that they have increased access to information. The Pew Research Center has found that over 40% of 18 to 29 year olds get their news from social media sites (Shearer, 2021). Access to digital media also allowed students to continue their education despite restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, social media sites provide a significant source of entertainment. Through subscribing to sites and channels for entertainment, users can also join communities of like-minded individuals.

Although social media has fulfilled many of its earliest promises for increased opportunities for connection, these opportunities have also been accompanied by risks, such as psychological isolation, exposure to harmful materials, social risk, and loss of time (Linvill, 2019). As anyone with a cell phone and social media account can recognize, the temptation to access social media accounts can be overwhelming, and this access is not without risks.

Time Risk

Social media provides a variety of entertaining and potentially addictive activities that can consume users' time. For example, research by Common Sense Media (2019) shows that the average person checks their cell phone more than 100 times a day, whether or not they receive a notification, and approximately two-thirds of teens report accessing on-screen media for up to 4 hours a day. Research also indicates that the average person spends 145 minutes a day monitoring and posting on social media accounts (Statista, 2021). These patterns represent a major shift in how people use their time throughout the day.

Mental Health Concerns

In the fall of 2021, a former Facebook employee turned whistleblower revealed company documents showing that the social media company was aware that Instagram could harm the mental health of children and teens (Romo, 2021). Although the revelation received considerable attention, research had already identified a link between mental health and social media use.

Researchers have found that over the past decade and a half, face-to-face interactions have declined as social media and

electronic communication have increased (Twenge & Uhls, 2017). During the same period, self-reported rates of depression, anxiety, isolation, and suicidal thoughts have increased, leading many scholars to suggest that there may be a relationship between these trends and social media use (Twenge et al., 2019; Vannucci et al., 2017; Primack et al., 2017; De Choudhury et al., 2013). However, research is mixed, showing that modest amounts of digital communication and social media use can also be linked to well-being and happiness (Davis, 2012). These mixed findings may indicate that it is not social media itself, but rather how people use social media, that affects mental health. The increase in cyberbullying is one way that social media may negatively affect mental health.

Cyberbullying

The world of social media has provided new opportunities for bullying, or cyberbullying. **Cyberbullying** is a form of bullying that takes place through cell phones, tablets, and computers. It can occur through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and TikTok, but it can also occur through text messages, online gaming communities, and message boards such as Reddit. This form of bullying "includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else" (StopBullying.gov, 2021).

A 2021 Pew Research survey found that 4 in 10 adults in the United States who use social media report being victimized by at least one type of bullying behavior online (Vogels, 2021). Online harassment is more common among younger adults, with 48% of adults aged 29 and younger reporting harassment. It is also significantly more common among LGBTQIA+ adults than their straight peers, with 51% reporting being targeted. Black and Hispanic adults are more likely than other groups to report being harassed because of their race. In addition, 20% of adults report being harassed because of their religion.

Typical forms of online bullying include offensive name-calling, spreading false rumors, receiving explicit messages, physical threats, stalking behaviors such as constant monitoring of a person's location and company by someone other than a guardian, and sharing personal explicit material without permission, sometimes referred to as revenge porn. One area that has witnessed disturbing growth is the proliferation of racial hostility.

Social media has created a space where messages of hate and prejudice have flourished. Racist, sexist, and other prejudicial messages may be presented using covert tactics that mask the underlying hostility in the message, such as memes, emojis, and GIFs used as weapons (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2018; Jackson, 2017; Lamerichs et al., 2018). For example, in November 2021, U.S. Congressman Paul Gosar of Arizona posted an edited anime video of himself killing Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and attacking President Joe Biden, leading to a rare censure in Congress and his removal from committee posts. After receiving widespread criticism for the posting, he attempted to defend himself by saying, "Relax, it is a cartoon." Most people who post messages of hate are not public figures like Gosar, which may give them a false sense of protection. Adding to the challenge, people often create fake identities to post racist messages, leaving victims with little recourse (Farkas et al., 2018).

Sexting and Cyberstalking

The popular Netflix series *You* tells the tale of a charming serial killer who uses social media to feed his toxic obsessions and stalk his victims. As the show illustrates, social media platforms have provided new avenues for outlier communication behaviors, such as sexting and cyberstalking (Linvill, 2019). **Sexting** is the practice of sending and/or exchanging sexually themed images, videos, or messages on cell phones and through social media applications such as Snapchat.

In some cases, these exchanges are mutual and welcome, but in other cases, sexting takes the form of sexual harassment, such as when an abuser sends unwanted images to someone or when someone has access to images that they then threaten to make public. One study of high school students found that 28% of high school sophomores and juniors had shared naked pictures of themselves through text or email, and 31% had requested naked pictures (Rosin, 2014).

Social media sites have also contributed to the growth of cyberstalking because these websites enable surveillance and voyeurism of often unwitting victims who provide a significant amount of personal information online. In cases involving both sexting and cyberstalking, laws have been slow to keep up with changes in technology, providing little protection for victims.

Relationships, Self-Disclosure, and Social Media

Self-disclosure is an important aspect of developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Social media use can influence the trajectory of self-disclosure that occurs in a relationship, which can veer into the dark side. In mediated contexts, such as text

messages, Snap, or Discord channels, people may sometimes disclose more information than they intended to share. Because communication occurs through a keyboard or screen, revealing personal information may seem easier and less risky.

In contrast to the types of self-disclosure that may occur face to face, mediated communication through social media may involve more **hyperpersonal communication** (Walther, 1997). With hyperpersonal communication, self-disclosure in online interactions can move from surface-level to intimate and in-depth very quickly without the benefit of mutual reciprocity or the establishment of trust. The lack of nonverbal cues, combined with the desire to promote self-presentation and receive online validation, can result in hyperpersonal communication (Walther, 2007). For some, this can be emotionally satisfying. For others, it can result in misperceptions and misunderstandings that lead to increased relational conflict and decreased trust and intimacy between relational partners.

Also affecting relationships and levels of self-disclosure is the concept of disinhibition, which can occur during social media interactions. **Disinhibition** refers to the freedom, without discretion, or lack of restraint a person might show when communicating online (Joinson, 2007). Joinson found that self-disclosure levels were much higher when communicating online than during face-to-face interactions, including an increase in more intimate levels of self-disclosure in online contexts.

The term “keyboard warriors” is sometimes used to describe people who make abusive or aggressive posts on social media platforms while concealing their real identities. These individuals may post comments they would never say in a face-to-face situation. The anonymity of online interactions and lack of accountability can create enough disinhibition that toxic communicative behavior becomes normalized.

Responding to the Dark Side of Social Media

As with other forms of communication, social media has both a light and a dark side. Because the dark side of social media is prevalent in everyday life, it is important to establish healthy boundaries and develop a response plan based on competent communication.

- Set time limits for how much of the day you are willing to spend on social media.
- Set limits on who you add to your social media accounts. You do not need to add everyone.
- Be thoughtful and respectful in communication exchanges, committing to positive exchanges.
- Check outgoing messages and ask yourself, “Would I want my employer, mother, future self, or future child, to see this message?” If not, do not post or share.
- Commit to refraining from posting, sharing, or liking racist, sexist, ageist, or other discriminatory messages.
- If necessary, use your voice to advocate for stopping the spread of hurtful messages.
- If you experience bullying or other problems, reach out to someone you trust for help.
- Block offensive content and people who send offensive messages. Consider reporting abuse to the platform, such as Twitter, Snapchat, or Instagram.

Attributions

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10.5: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

The dark side of communication focuses on negative or potentially harmful behaviors that can occur in interpersonal relationships. Whether a behavior is considered harmful depends on factors such as the situation, relationship, intentions, frequency, severity, power differences, and effects on psychological needs. Behaviors that may seem acceptable in one situation can become harmful in another, especially when they damage trust, self-esteem, belonging, control, or safety.

Deception involves intentionally controlling information in a way that differs from the truth. It can occur through omission, when important information is withheld, or commission, when false information is communicated. People may deceive others to protect someone, avoid consequences, gain resources, protect their self-image, or avoid hurting someone's feelings. However, deception can damage trust and create long-term problems. Gaslighting is a particularly harmful form of manipulation that causes people to question their memories, emotions, perceptions, or sense of self. Recognizing gaslighting and using assertiveness, perception checking, boundaries, and outside support can help individuals respond.

Jealousy, secret tests, and gossip can have both positive and negative effects. Jealousy can involve thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and may sometimes motivate people to invest more in a relationship, but it can also lead to dissatisfaction, deception, monitoring, and control. Secret tests use direct or indirect strategies to determine another person's feelings or commitment and may become manipulative when used instead of honest communication. Gossip can be positive, neutral, or negative. While harmful gossip can damage others, everyday gossip can also help people share information, connect with others, and learn social expectations.

Verbal aggression, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, social aggression, bullying, physical aggression, and intimate partner violence can cause serious harm. Verbal and emotional abuse may involve blaming, name-calling, criticism, blocking, humiliation, intimidation, and controlling behavior. DARVO can make abuse more difficult to recognize by allowing an abusive person to deny their behavior, attack the person confronting them, and portray themselves as the victim. Bullying and social aggression can damage a person's social relationships and well-being, while intimate partner violence can involve physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, psychological aggression, and coercive control.

Social media provides opportunities for connection, entertainment, networking, information, and self-disclosure, but it also creates risks. These risks include excessive use, mental health concerns, cyberbullying, sexting, cyberstalking, harmful self-disclosure, disinformation, and online aggression. Hyperpersonal communication can lead to quick and intense self-disclosure, while disinhibition can cause people to communicate more aggressively or openly than they would face-to-face. Healthy social media communication involves setting limits, protecting privacy, thinking carefully before posting, blocking or reporting harmful behavior, avoiding discriminatory content, and seeking help when needed.

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10.6: Keywords

Definitions

- Bald-faced lies
- Blaming
- Blocking
- Bullying
- Countering
- Cyberbullying
- Dark side of communication
- DARVO
- Deception by commission
- Deception by omission
- Discounting
- Disinhibition
- Entitlement
- Gaslighting
- Gossip
- Hostile withholding
- Hyperpersonal communication
- Interpersonal deception theory
- Intimate partner violence
- Jealousy
- Judging
- Lies of convenience
- Lies of exaggeration
- Name-calling
- Secret tests
- Self-reliance strategy
- Sexting
- Social aggression
- Trivializing
- Undermining
- Verbal abuse
- Verbal aggression

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10.7: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussions

1. How does context influence whether a communication behavior is viewed as acceptable or harmful? Choose one example from the chapter, such as deception or jealousy, and explain how the same behavior might be interpreted differently in two different relationships.
2. Is deception ever justified in an interpersonal relationship? Compare deception by omission, white lies, exaggerations, and bald-faced lies, and discuss whether the potential benefits of deception can outweigh its effects on trust.
3. How can someone distinguish between ordinary relationship conflict and emotionally abusive communication? Consider behaviors such as criticism, jealousy, blaming, gaslighting, controlling behavior, and DARVO, and explain what makes a pattern especially concerning.
4. Why can social media simultaneously strengthen and weaken interpersonal relationships? Discuss benefits such as connectivity and self-disclosure alongside risks such as cyberbullying, disinhibition, hyperpersonal communication, stalking, and excessive use.
5. What makes direct communication a healthier alternative to secret tests and other indirect strategies? Discuss how assertiveness, perception checking, clarifying questions, and boundary setting could be used to address uncertainty or conflict in a relationship.

Chapter Exercises

1. Communication Behavior Analysis
    1. Choose five behaviors discussed in the chapter: such as lying, jealousy, gossip, criticism, or social media monitoring. For each behavior, identify a situation in which it might have a relatively acceptable function and another situation in which it could become harmful. Explain what factors change the interpretation.
2. Deception Reflection
    1. Consider a hypothetical situation in which someone tells a white lie to protect another person's feelings. Then consider a situation in which someone deliberately withholds important relationship information. Compare the motivations, possible consequences, effects on trust, and most appropriate communication responses.
3. Direct Communication Practice
    1. Create three short scenarios involving secret tests or indirect communication. Rewrite each scenario using direct, assertive communication, incorporating at least one of the following: perception checking, a clarifying question, self-disclosure, or a boundary statement.
4. Warning-Sign Identification
    1. Review the chapter's descriptions of verbal, emotional, psychological, social, and physical aggression. Create a fictional relationship scenario containing several warning signs and identify which behaviors indicate manipulation, control, or abuse. Then describe appropriate sources of support and explain why safety should take priority over confrontation when violence or retaliation is possible.
5. Social Media Response Plan
    1. Develop a personal or hypothetical social media communication plan that addresses time limits, privacy, self-disclosure, cyberbullying, offensive content, disinhibition, and reporting or blocking harmful behavior. Explain how each strategy could reduce the likelihood of experiencing or contributing to the dark side of social media.

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10.8: Alternative Descriptions for Chapter 10

Figure 10.2.2: Cycle of Abuse

The image is a circular infographic illustrating a four-stage pattern of abuse in an intimate relationship. In the center is the title “Cycle of Abuse.” Four numbered stages surround the center and connect sequentially to show that the pattern can repeat.

Stage 1, “Tensions Building,” describes a period in which tension increases and communication breaks down. The person experiencing abuse becomes fearful and may feel a need to placate or appease the abusive partner.

Stage 2, “Incident,” represents the abusive episode. The diagram identifies verbal, emotional, and physical abuse and describes behaviors such as anger, blaming, arguing, threats, and intimidation.

Stage 3, “Reconciliation,” follows the abusive incident. The diagram describes the abusive partner apologizing, making excuses, blaming the person who was harmed, denying that the abuse occurred, or minimizing its seriousness by suggesting it was not as bad as claimed.

Stage 4, “Calm,” represents a temporary period in which the incident is “forgotten” and abuse is not occurring. This stage is also associated with the “honeymoon” phase. The circular layout indicates that the calm period can lead back to tension building, completing the repeating cycle.

The graphic is primarily a conceptual diagram rather than a depiction of specific people or events. Its purpose is to make the recurring progression of abusive behavior and temporary reconciliation visually understandable.

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10.9: References

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11: RELATIONSHIP STRUCTURES

Chapter Overview

Interpersonal relationships take many forms, with each type shaped by distinct expectations, communication patterns, levels of intimacy, and social contexts. Relationships develop and change through communication and interaction, influencing how people connect and function in both professional and personal settings. Relationship structures include professional relationships, friendships, romantic and sexual relationships, and families and chosen families, each presenting unique expectations, challenges, and opportunities for connection.

Relationships are also influenced by social expectations, power, culture, context, and individual choices. Friendships can provide companionship and support; professional relationships require attention to hierarchy, ethics, and boundaries; romantic and sexual relationships involve intimacy, communication, and negotiation; and families and chosen families reflect the many ways people create systems of belonging, care, and mutual support. No single model defines a successful interpersonal relationship. Instead, effective relationships depend on communication practices that respond appropriately to the unique expectations, structures, and needs of the people involved.



Figure 11.1: Friends talking and smiling together, highlighting a voluntary personal relationship built through shared interaction, trust, and emotional connection. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Jaume Ventura via Wikimedia Commons)

Chapter Objectives

- Define major types of interpersonal relationships and describe how relationships develop and change over time.
- Explain how communication, expectations, context, power, and social norms influence different relationship structures.
- Analyze communication patterns within professional, friendship, romantic/sexual, family, and chosen-family relationships.
- Apply theories of relational development and interpersonal communication to real-world relationship situations.
- Evaluate communication strategies that can contribute to healthy, ethical, supportive, and sustainable interpersonal relationships.

11.1: Types, Stages, and Theories of Relational Development

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11.1: Types, Stages, and Theories of Relational Development

Overview

Relationships are central to human communication and are defined by the expectations people develop for one another based on patterns of interaction over time. They range from brief and surface-level connections to deep, intimate bonds that involve trust, emotional closeness, and ongoing interdependence. Since relationships are not static, they continually shift based on communication, context, and the needs of the individuals involved.

To understand how relationships form, develop, are maintained, and eventually dissolve, scholars use communication theories and relational frameworks. These theories help explain why we are drawn to certain people, how intimacy builds over time, how relationships are sustained, and why they sometimes end.

Learning Objectives

- Examine how relationships are defined and how expectations shape relational meaning.
- Identify different types and categories of relationships, including personal, social, voluntary, involuntary, platonic, and romantic.
- Describe key relational characteristics such as duration, contact frequency, sharing, support, interaction variability, and goals.
- Analyze how communication theories explain relationship development, maintenance, and deterioration.
- Evaluate how relational stages and communication behaviors influence relationship change over time.

Defining "Relationship"

A relationship can be defined as the expectations that two people have for each other based on their previous pattern of interactions (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Throughout our lives, we will be involved in a variety of relationships ranging from superficial to intimate. Intimate relationships involve physical and/or emotional intimacy and are characterized by friendship, trust, and love (platonic or romantic). Intimate relationships can include friendships, romantic relationships, and/or familial relationships.



Figure 11.1.1: A Sailor embraces his wife and son during a reunion post deployment. This image illustrates emotional closeness and support within significant relationships, highlighting how physical affection and reunion moments reflect intimacy, connection, and relational bonding in personal relationships. (PDM 1.0; Ryan McGinley via Wikimedia Commons)

Definition: Relationship

A relationship can be defined as the expectations that two people have for each other based on their previous pattern of interactions (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008).

Types of Relationships

In addition to ranging from intimate to superficial, relationships can be characterized as impersonal or personal, voluntary or involuntary, and platonic or romantic (Verderber & Verderber, 2013).

To begin, let's consider all of the relationships you have in your life. You may be surprised by the number of relationships you have. Consider all your friends, acquaintances, family members, classmates, coworkers, teammates, and people with whom you are developing relationships. All of the relationships in our lives fall within two major categories: personal and social.

Personal vs. Social Relationships

Personal relationships are those that are very close and provide a deeper level of connection, whether that be emotional, physical, or spiritual. Best friends and close family members belong in the personal category. These are people we share deep levels of information with. If you experience distress about a fight you had with a romantic partner, who would you choose to talk with about it? The likelihood is that you would choose someone you have a personal relationship with, where there is a higher level of trust and history. Not all relationships are personal. In some cases, like with classmates or coworkers, we may have more surface relationships. We call these social relationships.

Social relationships meet specific needs, yet do not rise to the same level of intimacy as personal relationships. Perhaps you have an acquaintance that you exercise with on a weekly basis. You enjoy the time you share together when you go for your weekly hike, however, you do not feel comfortable talking about problems that come up in your romantic relationship.

It is important to note that relationships can change over time. While we may start out in a social relationship with our exercise partner, we may find that we trust this person more, every time we meet. Let's say you are feeling sad about the recent death of a family member, yet choose to go on your weekly hike with your exercise partner. On this particular hike, they notice you seem different and asks you what's going on. When you disclose to them that you are grieving a family member, they listen and support you. Perhaps they also tell you about someone they lost recently. In this scenario, the relationship you previously considered social with your exercise partner is quickly developing into a personal relationship.

Beyond whether relationships are personal or social, relationships can also be voluntary or involuntary. In other words, we have relationships we choose to be apart of and we have other relationships that exist not by our explicit choice to form said relationship.

Voluntary vs. Involuntary Relationships

There are many types of relationships, including titles you are likely familiar with like family, friend, or romantic partner. However, before we unpack some of the nuances between those types of relationships, let's consider another lens that can help us distinguish how these bonds differ more broadly. How did you meet your caregivers, siblings, or other members of your family? Was it the same process you went through when meeting your friends? Probably not. In the traditional sense, we don't choose our family, but we do get some say in who we call a friend. However, there are such a thing as friends that are family, better known as found families, which we will discuss in greater detail in section 11.3: Friends, Families, and Friends that are Families.

We call a relationship **voluntary** when the person has freely chosen, of their own will, to form a connection with another individual. For example, when you are in elementary school, you may bond with another child on the playground because you both like to use the swings. No one forced you to play together or talk. There was a genuine desire to spend time together doing something you both enjoyed.

Involuntary relationships occur when an interpersonal connection is formed not by choice, but by a situational occurrence. Some examples of involuntary relationships include random seating in school, placement into a work team or committee, or jury selection. Think about the forced relationship between a prisoner and a warden. These two individuals need to interact

interpersonally, however, neither person chose the relationship.

Now that we understand the distinction between personal and social relationships and voluntary and involuntary relationships, let's discuss the remaining category that concludes the primary types of relationships: platonic and romantic relationships.

Platonic vs. Romantic Relationships

A **platonic relationship** is a friendly relationship where there is an absence of romance and/or sex. A **romantic relationship** occurs when people act on said sexual attraction and/or form a mutual emotional romantic attachment. However, not all romantic relationships involve sex and/or physical intimacy. We will explore the various types of romantic relationships in section 11.4: Romantic Relationships.

Example 11.1.1 Types of Relationships in Action

Personal Voluntary Relationship

- Jordan and Avery met in a campus photography club and quickly bonded over their shared interest in nature photography. Over time, they began spending time together outside of meetings, confiding in one another about personal challenges and celebrating important milestones together. Since they freely chose to build a close emotional connection, their relationship is both personal and voluntary.

Social Voluntary Relationship

- Taylor attends a weekly community yoga class and regularly chats with another participant before class begins. They enjoy discussing workout routines and local events, but they do not typically share deeply personal information. Their connection is voluntary because they choose to interact, yet social because the relationship remains relatively surface-level.

Personal Involuntary Relationship

- Casey and their sibling grew up in the same household and continue to support one another emotionally as adults. Although they did not choose to become siblings, they share a close emotional bond and rely on each other during difficult times. This relationship is personal because of its emotional depth and involuntary because it was formed through family circumstance rather than choice.

Social Involuntary Relationship

- Lee and Parker are assigned to work together on a committee at work. They communicate regularly to complete tasks and coordinate schedules, but their conversations rarely extend beyond workplace responsibilities. Since they did not choose the partnership and maintain limited emotional closeness, the relationship is social and involuntary.

Although these categories can help us better understand how and why communication looks different in relationships, don't get too caught up in the labels. Think of the names of these relationships as tools to help us better understand potential contexts and dynamics. Also note, that a relationship can start off by taking one form, but over time, shift to another. For example, perhaps on your first day at a new job, you find out you are sharing an office with a peer, and from there you establish an involuntary social relationship. But one day you and this person decide to grab lunch together, and soon you are hanging out on weekends. Now that you are enjoying each other's company outside of professional settings or tasks, your relationship has become more voluntary and personal.

Relationship Characteristics

We all know that not all relationships are the same. We have people in our lives that we enjoy spending time with, like to support us, and/or assist us when needed. We will typically distance ourselves from people who do not provide positive feelings or outcomes for us. Thus, there are many characteristics in relationships that we have with others. These characteristics are: duration, contact frequency, sharing, support, interaction variability, and goals (Gamble & Gamble, 2014).

Duration

Duration refers to the length of time a relationship exists between individuals. Relationships can vary greatly in duration, with some lasting only a brief period and others continuing across many years or even a lifetime. For example, people who grow up in small communities may spend many years attending school with the same classmates, resulting in long relationship duration. In contrast, some relationships formed in temporary situations, such as a college course or short-term job, may last only a few months. Since relationships develop under different circumstances, the duration of each relationship is unique and can influence the level of familiarity and connection between individuals.

Contact Frequency

Contact frequency refers to how often individuals communicate or interact with one another within a relationship. Relationships vary not only in how long people have known each other, but also in the consistency and regularity of their communication. Some individuals may have relationships that span many years yet involve only occasional interaction, while others may communicate daily and develop a stronger sense of closeness in a shorter period of time. Frequent communication often contributes to greater familiarity, emotional connection, and relational development. For this reason, the strength of a relationship is influenced not only by its duration, but also by the frequency of contact between the individuals involved.

Sharing

Sharing in relationships refers to the process of disclosing personal information, thoughts, feelings, and experiences with another person. As individuals spend more time together and build trust, they are often more willing to share deeper and more private aspects of themselves. This type of sharing, sometimes called self-disclosure, helps strengthen emotional connection and intimacy within a relationship. People typically reserve highly personal information for relationships where they feel supported, understood, and emotionally safe rather than sharing it with strangers. As trust and support increase, the level and depth of sharing often increases as well.

Support

Support in relationships refers to the assistance, encouragement, care, and resources people provide to one another during everyday interactions and challenging situations. Support can take many forms, including emotional comfort, practical help, advice, financial assistance, or simply being available during times of need. People often recognize varying levels of support across their relationships and may turn to specific individuals depending on the situation. For example, someone seeking relationship advice may choose to confide in a person they trust to be understanding, knowledgeable, and encouraging. Support is an important component of relationship maintenance because it helps strengthen trust, connection, and relational satisfaction. Research has shown that married couples are more likely to engage in supportive communication behaviors than dating couples (Punyanunt-Carter, 2004), suggesting that support often increases as relational commitment deepens.

Interaction Variability

Interaction variability refers to the range of different interactions and conversations that occur within a relationship. Relationships are not defined by a single interaction, but rather by the variety of ways people communicate with one another across different situations and contexts. For example, as a child, you may have recognized that one caregiver responded differently than another, meaning your interactions varied depending on the person. Similarly, classmates may discuss course assignments in one moment and campus events or personal interests in another. The greater the variety of interactions shared between two people, the more developed and dynamic the relationship becomes.

Goals

Goals in relationships refer to the expectations, intentions, and desired outcomes individuals have for how a relationship should function and develop. These goals shape how people communicate and what they hope to receive from one another. For example, if a person's goal is to develop a closer connection through communication, they may openly share their thoughts and feelings with the expectation that the other person will reciprocate. If that expectation is not met, the individual may feel dissatisfied because the relationship is not functioning in the way they hoped. Similarly, in romantic relationships, people often expect honesty, support, and faithfulness. When these expectations are violated, conflict may arise and the relationship may weaken

or end. In this way, goals and expectations influence how relationships operate and how individuals evaluate their relational satisfaction.

Relationship Boundaries

Boundaries are expectations and limitations we define in order to suit our needs and ensure that relationships stay within the appropriate category of personal or social. The main goal in setting boundaries is to create a healthy relationship, where every role and norm within the relationship is agreed upon by all parties. Boundaries don't inherently exist in relationships but need to be mindfully defined through communication, otherwise, relationships can take a shape not everyone consents to. Therefore, it is helpful to clarify boundaries and communicate about them in our relationships, not just at the beginning but in an ongoing way.

Defining relationship boundaries may seem less necessary in some relationships because social roles and expectations are already well established. For example, in the relationship between a parent and a young child, the parent typically assumes caregiving responsibilities and decision-making authority. This creates an inherent power difference in which one person has greater control and responsibility within the relationship. Power in relationships can be either **symmetrical**, meaning both individuals hold relatively equal influence, or **asymmetrical**, meaning one person has more power than the other. In relationships with more symmetrical power dynamics, boundaries often require clearer discussion because expectations and roles may be less defined. However, even in asymmetrical relationships where roles appear more obvious, openly communicating about boundaries can still strengthen understanding and respect between individuals.

A relationship between siblings of a similar age who share responsibilities and make decisions together is an example of a **symmetrical power relationship** because both individuals hold relatively equal influence. In contrast, a parent-child relationship is generally considered an **asymmetrical power relationship** because the parent typically has greater authority and responsibility. Cultural values may also shape these dynamics. For example, many collectivistic cultures emphasize respect for elders and establish expectations regarding authority within family relationships. It is also important to recognize that power dynamics can change over time. A relationship that begins as symmetrical may become more asymmetrical if one person begins to take greater control in conversations or decision making. Similarly, relationships that were once asymmetrical may become more balanced as individuals grow older and their roles shift.

Another important change that can occur in relationships is a shift in power within an already asymmetrical relationship. For example, when Quinn was a child, their caregiver made most household decisions, provided guidance, and met Quinn's daily needs. As the caregiver grew older and began experiencing health challenges, Quinn gradually took on more responsibility by helping with transportation, managing appointments, and assisting with daily tasks. Although the relationship remained asymmetrical, the direction of dependence and authority shifted over time. In this situation, Quinn assumed a greater caregiving role while the older family member became more reliant on support.

When shifts in power occur, relationships often change as individuals adjust to new roles, expectations, and responsibilities. Effective interpersonal communication can help people navigate these transitions by allowing them to clarify boundaries, discuss changing needs, and renegotiate relationship norms.

Significant Relationships

Significant relationships are the connections in our lives that hold the most meaning and influence for us. These may include relationships with parents or guardians, teachers, close friends, family members, or romantic partners. We often identify these relationships as important because they strongly shape our communication patterns, influence how we interpret interactions, and contribute to our personal growth and sense of identity. In many cases, significant relationships play multiple roles in our lives and can affect both our development and everyday experiences.

Purposes of Relationships

Relationships can serve different purposes, including work-related, task-related, and social functions. **Work-related relationships** support professional growth and may provide opportunities for advancement, resources, or financial stability. **Task-related relationships** are formed to accomplish a specific goal or objective, such as completing a project or participating in a mentorship; once the task is finished, the relationship may naturally end or become less central. For example, a high school coach may be a significant task-related relationship, supporting an athlete in preparing for competition, but the relationship may change once the season or shared goal concludes. Social relationships, on the other hand, are formed for personal enjoyment and

connection, including needs such as affection, inclusion, control, or companionship. For instance, one friendship may be valued for shared conversation and emotional support, while another may be important for helping someone become more involved in activities or social groups.

Relationships are defined as the expectations individuals develop for one another based on patterns of interaction over time. These connections range from superficial to intimate and may include personal relationships characterized by trust, emotional closeness, and self-disclosure, as well as social relationships that remain more surface-level and serve specific situational needs. Relationships also vary in how they are formed, with some being voluntary and chosen freely, while others are involuntary and created through circumstance. In addition, relationships can be platonic or romantic, and they are dynamic, often shifting between categories as communication, trust, and context change. Beyond these classifications, relationships can be understood through key characteristics such as duration, contact frequency, sharing, support, interaction variability, and goals, all of which shape how relationships develop and function. Since relationships are not static, they also involve evolving boundaries and shifting power dynamics, requiring ongoing communication and adjustment. These concepts highlight that relationships are complex, changing systems that influence communication and identity development, leading into how relationships form, develop, and transform over time through stages and theories of relational development, which is what we will explore next.

Stages of Relationships and Relational Theories

In intimate relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, communication is key, as it is through communication that we begin, develop, maintain, and dissolve relationships. We will describe four stages of intimate relationships and present communication theories that help us better understand our communicative interactions during these stages.

Beginning Stage

In order for a relationship to develop, individuals must first come into contact with one another, either through face-to-face interaction or through mediated platforms such as social media or dating applications. In the **beginning stage** of a relationship, people begin interacting to gather information about one another and determine whether they want to continue developing the connection. Two communication theories that help explain this stage are Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Attraction Theory, which highlight how people reduce uncertainty and identify factors that influence initial attraction.

The process of initial interaction (**beginning stage)** among strangers can itself also be understood through three stages. The **entry stage** involves following basic social norms and engaging in polite, surface-level conversation to establish initial comfort. The **personal stage** involves gradually sharing more meaningful information and exploring one another's beliefs, values, attitudes, and personality. The **exit stage** occurs when individuals evaluate the interaction and determine whether to continue developing the relationship, maintain limited contact, or discontinue the interaction altogether.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Uncertainty Reduction Theory, also known as Initial Interaction Theory, explains that during first interactions people seek information about others in order to reduce uncertainty and better understand how to communicate with them. **Uncertainty** is a sense of "not knowing" that people typically find to be unpleasant and seek to reduce through interpersonal communication. The theory identifies two types of uncertainty: cognitive and behavioral. **Cognitive uncertainty** pertains to the level of uncertainty associated with our thoughts (beliefs and attitudes) of each other in the situation. **Behavioral uncertainty** is related to people's actions and whether or not they fit our expectations for what we consider to be "normal" or not. Behavior that is outside of acceptable norms may increase uncertainty and reduce the chances for future interaction.

There are three strategies people commonly use to gather information about others during initial interactions. A **passive strategy** involves observing another person from a distance without directly engaging with them, such as noticing how they behave in social settings or how they interact with others. An **active strategy** involves seeking information indirectly, such as asking mutual acquaintances about the person or learning about them through external sources without direct contact. An **interactive strategy** involves directly communicating with the other person in order to ask questions, exchange information, and build understanding through conversation. By using these approaches, individuals are able to reduce uncertainty and better anticipate how the other person may think, feel, or behave, which supports the development of relationships.

Attraction Theory

Building on Uncertainty Reduction Theory, **Attraction Theory** explains that once individuals begin gathering information about others, certain factors influence whether a relationship is likely to develop further. Attraction Theory proposes that attraction is shaped by similarity, proximity, and interpersonal attractiveness (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016).

Similarity plays an important role in attraction and refers to the extent to which individuals share characteristics such as beliefs, attitudes, physical appearance, and cultural or social identities. People are often more drawn to others who resemble them in meaningful ways, following the idea that shared traits and experiences can create comfort and understanding. In contrast, noticeable differences in values or identities can sometimes lead to discomfort, reduced interest, or avoidance of interaction (Berkowitz, 1974; Singh & Ho, 2000; Bryne, London, & Reeves, 1968).

Proximity refers to the physical or geographical closeness between individuals, which increases the likelihood of interaction and relationship formation (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016). People are more likely to form relationships with those they regularly encounter in shared environments, such as classrooms, workplaces, or community spaces. Although technology has expanded opportunities for connection by removing many geographic barriers, allowing individuals to meet and interact through various digital means, face-to-face proximity continues to strongly influence the formation of many friendships and everyday relationships. Even in mediated contexts, people often seek others with shared interests or compatible relational goals, which can support the development of both romantic and platonic connections.

Interpersonal attractiveness refers to the qualities that influence how appealing one person finds another and helps explain why people communicate more frequently with certain individuals (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). This form of attraction includes **physical attractiveness**, which involves perceptions of another person's appearance; **social attractiveness**, which relates to personality traits such as warmth, friendliness, and charisma; and **task attractiveness**, which is based on perceived skills, abilities, or competence in specific areas (MrCroskey, McCrowskey, & Richmond, 2006; Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016).

Developing Stage

As relationships progress, they enter a **development stage** characterized by increased communication, interaction, and emotional connection. Several theories help explain how and why relationships deepen during this phase, including Interpersonal Needs Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Social Penetration Theory, and Hyperpersonal Communication Theory. Together, these theories address the motivations for relationship development, the exchange of rewards and costs, the gradual increase in self-disclosure, and the unique dynamics of mediated communication in shaping relational closeness.

Interpersonal Needs Theory

Interpersonal Needs Theory explains that people are more likely to form and maintain relationships when those relationships fulfill basic interpersonal needs, which vary in intensity across individuals and situations (Schutz, 1966). These needs operate along a continuum and are shaped by both personal preferences and the social context in which relationships occur.

Affection refers to the need for warmth, appreciation, and emotional connection from others. This need is often met through relationships with family members, friends, and romantic partners, where individuals experience care, validation, and emotional closeness. While some individuals seek frequent and deeply intimate connections, others may prefer fewer or more limited expressions of affection depending on their comfort level and relational preferences.

Control refers to the need to influence others, make decisions, and have an impact on events and outcomes within relationships and social environments. This need varies widely, as some individuals prefer to take charge in decision-making situations, while others are more comfortable allowing others to lead. The importance of control also shifts depending on context, as individuals may place less emphasis on control in casual friendships but seek greater influence in structured environments such as the workplace or group projects.

Belonging refers to the need to feel included, connected, and part of social groups. Individuals differ in how strongly they desire social interaction, with some preferring smaller, more selective circles and others seeking frequent engagement with larger groups. Like the other interpersonal needs, belonging exists on a continuum and is influenced by both personality and situational factors, shaping how people choose to engage in relationships and social environments.

Social Penetration Theory

Social Penetration Theory explains how relationships develop through gradual increases in self-disclosure, moving from superficial communication to deeper levels of personal exchange over time (Altman & Taylor, 1973). A central concept in Social Penetration Theory is **self-disclosure**, which refers to the process of sharing personal information about oneself that is not readily known by others and plays a key role in the development of relationships. As relationships progress, individuals gradually learn more about one another through ongoing and reciprocal exchanges of self-disclosure. This process involves changes in both breadth and depth, where breadth refers to the range of topics discussed and depth refers to how personal or intimate the information becomes. Early self-disclosure often involves relatively low-risk information such as hobbies or preferences, while deeper levels may include more personal thoughts, fears, goals, or emotional experiences. As trust and relational closeness increase, self-disclosure typically expands in both breadth and depth, often progressing from factual information to opinions and eventually to more vulnerable emotional expressions.

A key principle within this process is the **principle of reciprocity**, which suggests that effective self-disclosure is typically balanced through mutual exchange between individuals. When one person shares personal information, there is often an expectation that the other will respond with a similar level of openness. When self-disclosure is uneven, it can create imbalance in the relationship, as the individual who shares more may feel more vulnerable or exposed than the other person.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory explains relationships as a process in which individuals evaluate the balance between costs and rewards within their interactions (Harvey & Wenzel, 2006). **Rewards** refer to the positive outcomes individuals receive from a relationship, such as companionship, emotional support, validation, or shared enjoyment. **Costs** include the negative or effortful aspects of a relationship, such as time investment, emotional labor, or providing support to another person. When individuals perceive that they are not receiving sufficient rewards in relation to their costs, they may evaluate the relationship negatively, feel under-benefited, and consider reducing involvement or ending the relationship altogether. In contrast, equitable relationships, where costs and rewards are relatively balanced, tend to produce higher levels of satisfaction and positive evaluation. Overall, relationships are more likely to be sustained when individuals experience both satisfaction and commitment, meaning they feel that the relationship is rewarding and worth maintaining.

Hyperpersonal Communication Theory

Hyperpersonal Communication Theory explains how mediated communication can sometimes create relationships that become unusually intense, highly intimate, and idealized compared to face-to-face interactions (Walther, 1996). In online or technology-mediated settings, individuals often have greater control over self-presentation, allowing them to carefully select what information they share and emphasize positive traits while limiting less favorable ones (O'Sullivan, 2002). This selective self-presentation can lead to overly favorable impressions, as individuals are able to manage how they are perceived in strategic and intentional ways. In addition, the asynchronous nature of mediated communication, such as emailing, texting, or posting on social media, allows people time to carefully construct, revise, and refine their messages before sending them, which can enhance clarity and increase the perceived quality of communication.

Since mediated communication often reduces access to nonverbal and contextual cues, it can also limit the availability of contradictory information that would normally be present in face-to-face interaction. In in-person communication, individuals interpret not only spoken messages but also behaviors and situational cues, such as how someone treats others in real time. Without these additional cues, online interactions may lead to idealized perceptions of the other person that do not fully reflect their offline behavior or personality. Over time, this combination of selective self-presentation and reduced contextual information can contribute to the development of hyperpersonal relationships that feel more intimate or idealized than those formed in traditional face-to-face settings.

Maintaining Stage

The **maintaining stage** occurs when a relationship reaches a relatively stable and mutually satisfying state for both individuals. During this phase, communication focuses on sustaining the connection and balancing ongoing relational needs. Relational Dialectics Theory helps explain how individuals manage competing tensions within the relationship to preserve satisfaction and stability over time.

Relational Dialectics

Relational Dialectics Theory explains that interpersonal relationships are shaped by ongoing tensions between opposing needs that must be continually negotiated by the individuals involved (Baxter, 1988). Rather than being fixed or static, relationships involve dynamic balancing between competing desires that exist along continuums.

The first dialectic is **autonomy and connection**, which reflects the tension between the desire for closeness with others and the need for independence and personal space. Individuals may deeply value emotional intimacy and shared time with a partner or close friend while also needing periods of solitude to maintain their own identity. In many relationships, especially at the beginning, individuals often prioritize connection and want frequent interaction, but over time they may increasingly seek autonomy and alone time. Healthy relationships involve ongoing negotiation of how much time is spent together versus apart in order to meet both needs.

The second dialectic is **novelty and predictability**, which involves balancing stability with change in relationships. Predictability provides comfort, trust, and a sense of security because individuals know what to expect from one another. At the same time, too much routine can lead to boredom or stagnation, making novelty an important part of keeping relationships engaging and dynamic. For example, friends may maintain a consistent weekly tradition while also intentionally introducing new activities or experiences to keep the relationship fresh and interesting.

The third dialectic is **openness and closedness**, which refers to the tension between the desire to be transparent and the need for privacy. Individuals often want to share personal thoughts and emotions to build closeness, yet they also maintain boundaries around certain experiences or information. It is normal for people to selectively disclose information, even in close relationships, meaning that no relationship involves complete openness. People typically share more deeply with those they trust most, but even in intimate relationships, some level of privacy is maintained.

These dialectical tensions are not static and may shift over time as relationships develop and circumstances change. At times, individuals may experience imbalance when their needs differ significantly from those of their relational partner, which can lead to misunderstandings or dissatisfaction. For instance, if one person strongly values autonomy while the other prioritizes connection, one may feel overwhelmed or “smothered,” while the other may feel neglected or unimportant. Since these tensions are a normal part of relational life, effective communication and ongoing negotiation are essential for maintaining relational satisfaction and stability.

Deteriorating Stage

In the **deteriorating stage**, relationships begin to weaken and may eventually end. Communication during this phase often includes reduced interaction, avoidance, and increased conflict between partners (Verderber & Verderber, 2013). Knapp’s Stages of Relational Interaction provides a framework for understanding how relationships move toward termination, particularly through the stages of differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating.

Differentiating

Differentiating refers to a stage in which relationship partners begin to disengage from one another as a unified pair and increasingly emphasize their differences. During this process, qualities that once felt shared or compatible may begin to feel less aligned, and individuals start to reassert their separate identities rather than functioning as a coordinated unit. As this shift occurs, communication often becomes more individually focused, with each person prioritizing their own perspectives, needs, and goals. Conflict frequently emerges during this stage and may serve as a way for individuals to test boundaries and gauge how much difference or tension the relationship can withstand before further strain occurs.

Circumscribing

Circumscribing refers to the process of setting limits or boundaries around communication within a relationship. As individuals begin to circumscribe, interaction typically decreases in both frequency and depth, and certain topics become off-limits or avoided altogether. Communication becomes more restricted as people verbally or nonverbally shut down discussion about sensitive or conflictual areas. For example, a person might explicitly state that they do not want to discuss certain issues or may signal that each individual should focus only on their own concerns.

Stagnating

Stagnation occurs when a relationship reaches a point of apparent standstill, where meaningful interaction has significantly decreased and individuals may feel as though the relationship is no longer progressing. Outward communication often becomes minimal or avoided altogether, while internal thoughts and assumptions about the other person may continue to develop without being expressed. During this stage, individuals may engage in mindreading, assuming they already know how the other person will respond, which further reduces the likelihood of open communication. For example, someone might think, "There is no point in bringing this up because I already know how they will react." This stage can persist for extended periods, as individuals may remain in the relationship due to uncertainty about how to end it, a desire to avoid emotional discomfort, or lingering hope that the relationship can return to a more positive state.

Avoiding

Avoiding is a stage in which individuals actively reduce or eliminate contact with one another as the relationship continues to decline. This avoidance may involve deliberately staying away from situations where the other person is expected to be present, such as skipping events or changing routines to prevent interaction. When physical separation is not possible, individuals may still disengage by ignoring each other, limiting conversation to the bare minimum, or acting as though the other person is not present. At this point, communication often becomes strained, distant, or openly negative, reflecting a clear desire to withdraw from the relationship. As avoiding continues, individuals become increasingly disconnected on emotional, physical, and psychological levels, shifting their attention away from the relationship and toward their own needs and priorities.

Terminating

Termination is the stage in which a relationship comes to an end, which may occur shortly after a relationship begins or after many years of connection. Relationships may terminate due to external circumstances such as geographic distance or life transitions, or because of internal changes such as shifts in values, goals, or compatibility that weaken the relational bond. According to Knapp and Vangelisti (2009), termination often involves a sequence of communicative patterns that help individuals disengage from the relationship. This process may begin with a summary message in which one or both individuals reflect on the relationship and provide a rationale for ending it. It is often followed by a distancing message that emphasizes emotional or relational separation that has already occurred. A disassociation message may also appear, in which individuals begin to mentally and emotionally prepare for life after the relationship and acknowledge reduced connection moving forward. Finally, termination may include communication about the possibility of future contact, ranging from limited interaction to complete separation. In some cases, termination is handled through more negative communication strategies, such as hostility, blame, or abrupt withdrawal. One example of this is **ghosting**, which refers to suddenly ending all communication with another person without explanation.

Understanding Relationships

Relationships are dynamic systems shaped by communication, expectations, and ongoing interaction. They can be understood in terms of how they form, how they function, and how they change over time. Some relationships are close and emotionally intimate, while others remain limited and task-focused, yet all are influenced by patterns of interaction that create meaning between individuals.

To make sense of this complexity, communication scholars examine relationships through categories, characteristics, and developmental processes. These include how relationships are classified (such as personal or social), how they differ in structure and experience (such as voluntary or involuntary connections), and how they vary in emotional depth and purpose (such as platonic or romantic bonds). Relationships are also shaped by ongoing characteristics like how long they last, how often people interact, how much they share, the support they provide, and the goals they hold for one another.

Together, these ideas show that relationships are not fixed or simple. Instead, they are evolving processes influenced by communication choices and relational contexts. Understanding these foundations prepares us to explore how relationships move through stages of development, maintenance, and decline, and how communication theories help explain each phase of that process.

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11.2: Professional Relationships

Overview

Workplace relationships are a central part of organizational life. They range from casual interactions to deeply personal connections. Most work environments are structured around proximity, shared tasks, and hierarchy. Due to this, relationships naturally form across multiple levels, including supervisors, peers, and subordinates. These relationships influence communication, job satisfaction, productivity, and overall organizational climate.

Workplace relationships develop in different contexts. These include authority-based relationships, peer friendships, romantic relationships, and more difficult or problematic interactions. Communication patterns shape how these various relationships function. Power dynamics and organizational expectations further influence the quality and outcomes of workplace relationships.

Learning Objectives

- Examine how workplace relationships develop across hierarchical and peer-based contexts.
- Identify the characteristics of supervisor-subordinate, peer, and romantic workplace relationships.
- Analyze the benefits and challenges associated with different types of workplace relationships.
- Describe how communication, similarity, and power influence workplace relational dynamics.
- Evaluate how problematic workplace relationships affect individuals and organizational functioning.

Defining Professionalism

A **profession** refers to an occupation that requires specialized knowledge and skills developed through education, training, and sustained practice. Fields such as healthcare, education, law, skilled trades, and business all involve professional roles in which individuals are expected to apply expertise while adhering to established standards of conduct. Although most people can recognize what counts as a profession, “professionalism” is more difficult to define because expectations vary across workplaces and industries.

Professionalism is generally understood as the set of behaviors, attitudes, and competencies that demonstrate reliability, ethical conduct, and effective performance in a work environment. Historically, the concept of professionalism has been rooted in the priviliging of certain identities; specifically professionalism has been linked with educated, English speaking, able bodied, uppoer-middle class, White men. However, its critical to take a more nuanced and dynamic view of what professionalism means. It is not limited to appearance or formality, but instead reflects how individuals communicate, take responsibility, and contribute to shared goals. Modern workforce frameworks emphasize that professionalism includes soft skills such as dependability, teamwork, problem-solving, and communication, all of which are essential for workplace success (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2024).

More specifically, professionalism involves both the goals individuals pursue in a workplace and the behaviors used to achieve them. These goals often include meeting deadlines, contributing to organizational objectives, and maintaining consistent performance standards. The behaviors that support these goals include accountability, respectful communication, collaboration, adaptability, and ethical decision-making. Together, these elements reflect how individuals present themselves and function within professional environments (NACE, 2024).

Ethics

Ethics refers to principles that guide judgments about what is considered right or wrong behavior within a society or organization. It involves moral reasoning that shapes decisions and helps individuals evaluate the consequences of their actions on others. Ethical standards are often informed by cultural values, professional codes of conduct, and organizational expectations.

In workplace settings, ethics includes honesty in communication, fairness in decision-making, respect for others, and adherence to laws and policies. Ethical behavior also involves recognizing and addressing misconduct when it occurs, rather than ignoring it.

Professional ethics is especially important because violations can impact not only individuals but also organizations, clients, and broader communities.

Personal Responsibility

Personal responsibility refers to an individual's willingness to take ownership of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors while recognizing the boundaries of their control. It involves distinguishing between external circumstances and personal choices, and responding to situations in a constructive and accountable manner.

In professional environments, personal responsibility includes showing up prepared, managing one's time effectively, following through on commitments, and responding to challenges with professionalism. While individuals may face external barriers or constraints, personal responsibility emphasizes focusing on the actions and decisions one can control in order to maintain effectiveness and integrity in the workplace.

Professional environments are typically organized around formal structures of authority, meaning that not all workplace interactions occur on equal footing. Within these systems, supervisors are responsible for directing work, evaluating performance, and providing feedback, while employees are expected to carry out assigned responsibilities and respond to guidance. This built-in hierarchy shapes how communication unfolds, influencing everything from information sharing to decision-making. Understanding this structure is essential for examining how relationships function in the workplace, since power differences inevitably affect interaction patterns, expectations, and relational outcomes.

Types of Workplace Relationships

Beyond formal job roles and organizational charts, workplaces are also social environments where relationships naturally develop through repeated interaction, shared tasks, and proximity. Some of these relationships remain strictly professional and task-focused, while others evolve into peer connections, friendships, or even romantic relationships. At the same time, not all workplace interactions are positive, and some relationships become strained or disruptive due to conflict, imbalance, or poor communication. To better understand the complexity of workplace communication, it is useful to examine these relationships as a range of interconnected types rather than isolated categories.

Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships

Given that most workplaces are structured around hierarchy, it is expected that relationships naturally form between supervisors and their subordinates (Sias, 2009). These supervisor–subordinate relationships can take different forms, including mentorships, friendships, or even romantic connections, but they always involve an inherent imbalance in formal authority, where one individual has evaluative and decision-making power over the other. Due to this structural difference, these relationships tend to include communication dynamics that are distinct from more equal workplace or social relationships, along with both unique benefits and challenges.



Figure 11.2.1: A job interview illustrates the early stage of a supervisor–subordinate relationship, where communication is structured by formal authority, evaluation, and information asymmetry. The interviewer typically holds decision-making power, while the applicant manages impression formation and responds to organizational expectations. (CC BY-SA 2.0; Amtec Photos via Wikimedia Commons)

Information exchange plays a central role in all workplace relationships, including the sharing of personal disclosures and job-related knowledge. Supervisors are especially important sources of information for new employees, who must navigate uncertainty during onboarding and organizational socialization. However, unlike more reciprocal relationships where individuals typically exchange information at similar rates, supervisor–subordinate communication is shaped by informational asymmetry. Supervisors often hold "information power," meaning they possess critical knowledge employees need to perform their roles effectively. This imbalance is also evident in evaluative communication, since supervisors are responsible for providing both formal and informal performance feedback. While positive feedback can reinforce motivation and performance, negative feedback is often more difficult to deliver. When performance issues go unaddressed, this avoidance can create relational strain and may negatively impact both employee effectiveness and organizational outcomes.

Employee perceptions of supervisors are influenced by a range of relational and demographic factors. Research suggests that employees often evaluate supervisors more positively when they share similarities such as gender or race, which aligns with broader findings on similarity and attraction in interpersonal relationships (Sias, 2009). In contrast, employees tend to prefer supervisors who are older than themselves, likely due to assumptions about experience, expertise, and professional wisdom. In addition, employees often respond favorably to supervisors who demonstrate strong control and decisiveness, as this can create a sense of structure and reliability in the workplace. However, when supervisory control becomes excessive or manifests as micromanagement or coercion, it can damage trust and reduce job satisfaction. Overall, high-quality supervisor–subordinate relationships are associated with lower employee turnover and a more positive organizational climate (Sias, 2005). These relationships may also create opportunities for professional mentoring and career development.

Mentoring relationships involve one individual guiding another in the development of career goals, skills, and professional identity (Sias, 2009). In organizational settings, supervisors often serve as mentors, although mentoring can also occur informally among coworkers. Formal mentoring relationships are typically structured through workplace programs or professional organizations, while informal mentoring develops organically through shared interests, trust, or mutual professional goals. Unlike task-focused supervisory interactions, mentoring relationships tend to be broader in scope and more developmental in nature, often extending beyond immediate job responsibilities. In some cases, successful mentoring relationships may naturally lead to separation, particularly when the mentee advances within the organization or transitions to new opportunities. Despite changes in job roles or geographic distance, mentoring relationships can continue through ongoing communication, including digital interaction and professional gatherings such as conferences.

Workplace Friendships

Relationships in the workplace exist along a wide continuum, ranging from brief, routine interactions with coworkers whose names we may not know, to casual acquaintances in other departments, to close friendships that extend beyond the workplace. As with other types of relationships, proximity plays an important role in shaping who we interact with at work, since coworkers often

share physical spaces, schedules, and collaborative tasks. However, proximity alone does not guarantee relationship development, and individuals do not necessarily form close connections with everyone they work alongside.

Similarity and self-disclosure are also key factors in the formation of workplace relationships. Although many coworkers share the same general work environment, they often form smaller relational clusters based on shared characteristics such as department, age, or family status (Sias, 2005). As workplace relationships move beyond simple acquaintance-level interaction, they may develop into peer coworker relationships, which involve individuals who do not hold formal authority over one another but are interdependent in accomplishing work-related goals. This type of relationship is the most common in organizational settings because most employees interact with multiple peers while reporting to a single supervisor (Sias, 2005).

Peer coworker relationships can be understood in terms of increasing levels of depth and connection, often categorized as information peers, collegial peers, and special peers (Sias, 2005). **Information peers** maintain primarily task-focused communication, with limited self-disclosure and minimal relational closeness. While these relationships are relatively surface-level, they play an important role in everyday workplace functioning by facilitating coordination and information exchange, often based on specific roles within the organization, such as interacting with HR representatives or other role-based contacts. **Collegial peers** extend beyond task communication by engaging in moderate self-disclosure, offering emotional support, and providing informal feedback that contributes to professional development and identity formation (Sias, 2009). **Special peers** represent the deepest form of coworker relationship, characterized by high levels of trust, extensive self-disclosure, and strong emotional and professional interdependence, resembling close personal relationships outside of work (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Workplace friendships develop through similar processes of relational progression, often beginning with shared work-related communication and gradually expanding into personal disclosure and increased closeness. As perceived similarity and repeated interaction increase, coworkers may begin sharing non-work-related information, which deepens relational bonds and transforms acquaintances into friends. These friendships often strengthen further through shared experiences, including discussing personal challenges or spending time together outside of work, which increases relational intimacy (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Interestingly, research suggests that workplace friendships are more likely to develop when employees perceive supervisory relationships as unfair or unsupportive, indicating that coworkers may turn to one another for relational and emotional support when organizational leadership does not fulfill those needs (Sias & Cahill, 1998; Sias, 2005).

Workplace friendships can provide several important benefits, including increased job satisfaction, reduced stress, and lower employee turnover. They may also serve as informal support systems that supplement or replace formal mentoring structures (Sias & Cahill, 1998). In addition, these friendships can facilitate communication across departments by creating informal information networks that help employees share knowledge, identify opportunities, and navigate organizational dynamics. However, workplace friendships can also present challenges, such as the spread of gossip or difficulty maintaining professional boundaries. In some cases, strong friendships may even influence employees to remain in unsatisfying jobs due to relational attachment (Nielsen, Jex, & Adams, 2000; Mitchell et al., 2001). Although most workplace friendships remain platonic, some have the potential to develop into romantic relationships, adding another layer of complexity to workplace dynamics.

Romantic Workplace Relationships

Workplace romances involve interpersonal relationships between two individuals who experience emotional and physical attraction toward one another (Sias, 2009). Among workplace relationship types, they are often the most controversial due to their potential to blur professional boundaries and create organizational complications. High-profile cases, such as the 2007 dismissal of the American Red Cross president and the resignation of the World Bank president following relationship controversies, illustrate how seriously organizations may respond to these situations (Boyd, 2010). More recently, a 2024 incident involving the CEO of a technology company (Astronomer) drew significant public attention after he was seen on a “kiss cam” at a Coldplay concert with a senior HR executive from the same organization; the resulting scrutiny led to internal investigations and executive resignations, reinforcing how workplace relationships can rapidly escalate into organizational crises in the age of social media. These examples raise ongoing questions about why workplace romances generate such strong reactions and organizational concern.

Research on workplace romances presents mixed findings, with some studies suggesting potential benefits such as increased job satisfaction and productivity, while others emphasize risks to professionalism and organizational climate (Powell & Foley, 1998; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). Despite this debate, workplace romances remain common, with recent surveys indicating that while roughly one-fifth of employees report personal involvement, a much larger proportion report observing romantic relationships in the workplace (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2021). Critics of workplace romance often argue that it introduces heightened emotional intensity into environments that are expected to remain professional and task-focused. Concerns also arise when romantic attraction overlaps with **power** dynamics, creating ambiguity between consensual

relationships and potential perceptions of sexual harassment (Sias, 2009). Supporters, however, argue that employees should retain autonomy over their personal lives and point to research suggesting that romantic relationships at work can enhance motivation and engagement (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). Rather than resolving this debate, it is more useful to examine the communication patterns and dynamics that shape these relationships.

Workplace romances may emerge for different reasons, including job-related motives, ego-related motives, and love-related motives (Sias, 2009). **Job motives** involve pursuing advantages such as advancement, financial gain, or job security. **Ego motives** are driven by excitement, validation, or the appeal of romantic pursuit. **Love motives** reflect genuine emotional attachment and a desire for companionship. Regardless of motivation, workplace romances influence not only the individuals involved but also coworkers and organizational culture. These relationships may generate gossip, particularly when efforts are made to conceal them, which can undermine trust and contribute to tension within teams. Coworkers may also perceive romantic involvement as favoritism, especially if they believe the relationship is motivated by workplace advantage. For the individuals involved, outcomes can vary: some experience increased satisfaction and motivation from spending time together, while others may face reduced productivity or increased stress, particularly in supervisor–subordinate relationships (Powell & Foley, 1998; Dillard et al., 1994; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). If the relationship deteriorates, continued daily interaction in the workplace can intensify emotional strain compared to relationships outside of work.

Organizations have responded to workplace romances in a variety of ways, leading to ongoing debate about appropriate policy approaches. Workplace policies range from strict prohibition of romantic relationships, to rules that specifically restrict supervisor–subordinate relationships, to more permissive approaches that discourage but do not formally ban workplace romance (Sias, 2009). One compromise strategy is the use of "love contracts" or "dating waivers," which require employees to disclose consensual romantic relationships and formally acknowledge that they will avoid favoritism or conflicts of interest (Boyd, 2010). Other organizations adopt more open approaches and allow workplace relationships without restriction. For example, companies such as Southwest Airlines, AT&T, and Ben & Jerry's have implemented policies that permit employee dating under broad or flexible guidelines, reflecting the diversity of organizational responses to workplace romance (Boyd, 2010).

Many contemporary organizations now take a permissive-but-managed approach to workplace relationships through disclosure policies, anti-conflict-of-interest rules, or "consensual relationship agreements." Large employers such as Google, Microsoft, and Meta permit workplace relationships but require disclosure when power differences exist or when reporting lines could create conflicts of interest (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2023). Similarly, companies like IBM and Amazon maintain policies that do not ban workplace dating outright but restrict supervisor–subordinate relationships and require reporting to HR to prevent favoritism and legal risk (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2022).

Problematic Workplace Relationships

As discussed, relationships in a workplace can range from someone you say hello to almost daily without knowing their name, to an acquaintance in another department, to your best friend that you go on vacations with. We've already learned that proximity plays an important role in determining our relationships, and most of us will spend much of our time at work in proximity to and sharing tasks with particular people. However, we do not become friends with all our coworkers.

Eventually, most people encounter difficult interpersonal dynamics at work. These "problem people" can range from mildly irritating to seriously disruptive, and are sometimes described as "emotional vampires" because they require disproportionate emotional energy to manage. In organizational communication, this is often discussed as **deviant workplace behavior**, or voluntary actions that violate organizational norms or threaten the wellbeing of the organization and its members. Research shows these issues can occur at every level of an organization, including supervisors, peers, and subordinates (Fritz, 2002/2009).

Problem bosses, as identified in Harden Fritz's typology, can take several forms. Some are perceived as "different" due to cultural, social, or personal distinctions that become exaggerated through bias or misunderstanding. Others fit the "good old boy or good old girl" category, relying on outdated norms and sometimes minimizing issues like harassment or ethical concerns. The "okay" boss tends to be average and non-confrontational, avoiding both upward and downward advocacy, which can frustrate high performers. In contrast, the "toxic" boss is broadly disruptive, fostering hostile environments and enabling dysfunction, even if not always engaging directly in harassment. The "self-centered taskmaster" is highly focused on productivity and personal advancement, often at the expense of employee wellbeing, while still being competent and results-driven. Finally, the "intrusive harasser" crosses boundaries by becoming overly involved in employees' personal and professional lives, sometimes engaging in harassment or other forms of misconduct (Fritz, 2002/2009).

Problem coworkers also appear in a variety of recognizable patterns. The "adolescent" coworker seeks attention, resists maturity in workplace expectations, and may become defensive when challenged. The "bully" engages in persistent negative behavior over

time, targeting less powerful coworkers and sometimes operating in groups, a pattern also described in research on workplace bullying or mobbing, which includes repeated harm and power imbalance (Rayner & Keashly, 2005); large-scale studies suggest this is a widespread issue across organizations (Hodson, Roscigno, & Lopez, 2006). The “mild annoyance” is less severe but persistently distracting in everyday interactions. The “independent self-promoter” prioritizes personal recognition and visibility over collaboration, while the “pushy playboy or playgirl” pressures coworkers into unnecessary or inappropriate favors while managing impressions upward. The “independent other” is defined less by behavior and more by perceived difference, often tied to demographic or identity factors. The “soap opera star” thrives on workplace drama, gossip, and interpersonal intrigue, often at the expense of productivity. The “abrasive, incompetent harasser” combines poor interpersonal conduct with unprofessional or harassing behavior, creating significant strain within the workplace environment.

Problem subordinates similarly present challenges in organizational relationships. The “okay subordinate” performs at an average level but may still create minor frustration through inconsistency or lack of initiative. The “abrasive harasser” requires repeated correction regarding inappropriate behavior, including potential violations such as sexual harassment, and may require formal intervention. The “bully” subordinate attempts to dominate peers or even supervisors, undermining authority and workplace cohesion if left unchecked. The “different other” is perceived as significantly distinct from the supervisor, which can unintentionally affect mentoring opportunities or lead to biased treatment. Finally, the “incompetent renegade” disregards organizational norms and authority structures, may engage in unethical behavior such as taking credit for others’ work, and can create serious performance and ethical risks if not addressed (Fritz, 2002/2009).

Across workplaces, relationships are not simply shaped by proximity and routine interaction, they are also continuously evaluated through expectations of professionalism, respect, and ethical conduct. While many workplace connections function smoothly as sources of support, coordination, and even friendship, the section also highlights how easily those interactions can become strained when individuals violate relational or organizational norms. “Problem people” at any level of the hierarchy illustrate that workplace communication is not value-neutral; it is deeply tied to how individuals exercise power, interpret difference, and respond to responsibility within shared professional environments.

These negative patterns underscore that the workplace, and workplace relationships, are fundamentally required to be ethical spaces, but unfortunately, they can fail at being so. Issues such as harassment, favoritism, bullying, exclusion, and misuse of authority are not only interpersonal problems but also ethical ones because they affect fairness, dignity, and the wellbeing of others in the organization. Even less extreme behaviors, such as chronic self-promotion, avoidance of responsibility, or passive leadership, can create ethical concerns when they undermine trust or distort accountability. Understanding these dynamics emphasizes the importance of ethical awareness in everyday workplace communication, since maintaining healthy professional relationships requires not only interpersonal skill but also consistent attention to fairness, respect, and responsibility.

Becoming Mindful of Relationships in the Workplace

Workplace relationships operate as an interconnected system shaped by hierarchy, communication patterns, and interpersonal dynamics. Supervisor–subordinate relationships are defined by authority and evaluation, peer relationships develop through shared work and increasing levels of trust, and workplace friendships and romances add emotional depth and complexity to organizational life. At the same time, problematic relationships can emerge at any level of an organization, disrupting communication, reducing trust, and negatively impacting both individual wellbeing and overall workplace culture.

These relationship types demonstrate that workplace communication is never purely task-based or purely social. Instead, it is a continuous negotiation of roles, expectations, boundaries, and interpersonal needs. Recognizing this complexity allows individuals to navigate professional environments more effectively, respond adaptively to different relational situations, and contribute to healthier, more ethical, and more productive workplaces.

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11.3: Friends

Overview

Friendships are an important form of interpersonal relationship because they are generally voluntary relationships built and sustained through ongoing communication and mutual choice. Unlike relationships that may be established through family, legal, or professional structures, friendships often depend on individuals' continued willingness to invest in one another. Communication allows friends to develop trust, express support, negotiate expectations, manage conflict, and establish the level of intimacy that characterizes their relationship.

Friendships can take many forms and can change as people's circumstances, identities, interests, and social environments change. Understanding friendship requires attention to both the benefits and challenges of these relationships, including companionship, emotional support, reciprocity, boundaries, conflict, and relationship maintenance. Studying friendship communication helps us understand how individuals create meaningful connections and how interpersonal behaviors influence whether those connections are maintained, transformed, or discontinued.

Learning Objectives

- Define friendship as a form of interpersonal relationship.
- Identify communication characteristics associated with different types of friendships.
- Explain how communication contributes to friendship development and maintenance.
- Analyze how expectations, boundaries, reciprocity, and conflict influence friendships.
- Apply interpersonal communication strategies to strengthen and maintain friendships.

Friendship Characteristics

William K. Rawlins, a communication scholar and one of the most influential figures in the study of friendship, argues that friendships have five essential characteristics that make them unique from other forms of interpersonal relationships: voluntary, personal, equality, involvement, and affect (Rawlins, 1992).

All Friendships are Essentially Voluntary

Friendships are based out of an individual’s free will to choose whom they want to initiate a friendship relationship with. We go through our lives constantly making decisions to engage in a friendship with one person and not engage in a friendship with another person. Each and every one of us has our reasons for friendships. Take a second and think about your friendships. Why did you decide to engage in those friendships? Of course, the opposite is also true. We meet some people and never end up in friendship with them. Sometimes it’s because you’re not interested or the other person isn’t interested (voluntariness works both ways). We also choose to end some friendships when they are unhealthy or no longer serve a specific purpose within our lives.

Friendships are Personal Yet Negotiate

The second quality of friendships is that they are personal relationships negotiated between two individuals. In other words, we create our friendships with individuals and we negotiate what those relationships look like with that other individual. Recall that every person has complex intersectional identities. Individually we exist with an array of group memberships and individual idiosyncrasies. However, even if the characteristics of every person can be connect back to a group, we go not enter into friendships with the entire group, but rather a unique individual we decide we want to be friends with. For those that are sports fans, we may see images of people sitting next to each other communicating closely but wearing attire that promotes opposing teams on either side of a rivalry. Just because they are friends with one another doesn't mean they are friends with every person who roots for their rival. Hence, these are not group relationships; these are individualized, personal relationships that we establish with another person.

Friendships Have a Spirit of Equality

The next characteristic of friendships is a spirit of equality. Rawlins notes, “Although friendship may develop between individuals of different status, ability, attractiveness, or age, some facet of the relationship functions as a leveler. Friends tend to emphasize the personal attributes and styles of interaction that make them appear more or less equal to each other.” (Rawlins, 1992). It’s important to note that we’re not saying a 50/50 split in everything is what makes a friendship equal. Friendships ebb and flow over time as friends’’ desires, needs, and interests change. For example, it’s perfectly possible for two people from very different social classes to be friends. In this case, the different social classes may put people at an imbalance when it comes to financial means, but this doesn’t mean that the two cannot still have a sense of equality within the relationship. Here are some ways to ensure that friendships maintain a spirit of equality:

- Both friend’s needs and desires are important, not just one person’s.
- Both friends are curious about their friend’s personal life away from the friendship.
- Both friends show affection in their own ways.
- Both friends demonstrate effort and work in the relationship.
- Both friends encourage the other’s goals and dreams.
- Both friends are responsible for mutual happiness.
- Both friends decide what activities to pursue and how to have fun.
- Both friends are mutually engaged in conversations.
- Both friends carry the other’s burdens.
- Both friends desire for the relationship to continue and grow.

Friendships Have Mutual Involvement

The fourth characteristic of friendships is that they require mutual involvement. For friendships to work, both parties have to be mutually engaged in the relationship. This does not mean that friends have to talk on a daily, weekly, or even monthly basis for them to be effective. Many people establish long-term friendships with individuals they don’t get to see more than once a year or even once a decade.

The concept of “mutual involvement” can differ from one friendship pair to another. Different friendship pairs collaborate to create their sense of what it means to be a friend, their shared social reality of friendship. Rawlins states, “This interpersonal reality evolves out of and furthers mutual acceptance and support, trust and confidence, dependability and assistance, and discussion of thoughts and feelings.” (Rawlins, 1992). One of the reasons why defining the term “friendship” is so difficult is because there are as many friendship realities as there are pairs of friends. Although we see common characteristics among them, it’s important to understand that these characteristics have many ways of being exhibited.

Friendships Have Affective Aspects

The final characteristic of friendships is the notion of affect. **Affect** refers to “any experience of feeling or emotion, ranging from suffering to elation, from the simplest to the most complex sensations of feeling, and from the most normal to the most pathological emotional reactions. Often described in terms of positive affect or negative affect, both mood and emotion are considered affective states.” (Affect, 2018). Built into the voluntariness, personal, equal, and mutually involved nature of friendships is the inherent caring and concern that we establish within those friendships, the affective aspects. Some friends will go so far as to say that they love each other. Not in the *eros* or romantic sense of the term, but instead in the *philia* or affectionate sense of the term. People often use the term “platonic” love to describe the love that exists without physical attraction based on the writings of Plato. However, Aristotle, Plato’s student, believed that *philia* was an even more profound form of dispassionate, virtuous love that existed in the loyalty of friends void of any sexual connotations.

All friendships are going to have affective components, but not all friendships will exhibit or express affect in the same ways. Some friendships may exhibit no physical interaction at all, but this doesn’t mean they are not intimate emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually. Other friendships could be very physically affective, but have little depth to them in other ways. Every pair of friends determines what the affect will be like within that friendship pairing. However, both parties within the relationship must have their affect needs met. Hence, people often need to have conversations with friends about their needs for affection.

Dialectical Approaches to Friendships

Earlier in this book, we introduced you to the dialectical perspective for understanding interpersonal relationships. William K. Rawlins proposed a dialectical approach to friendships.[23] The dialectics can be broken down into two distinct categories: contextual and interactional.

Contextual Dialectics

The first category of dialectics is contextual dialectics, which are dialectics that stem out of the cultural order where the friendship exists. If the friends in question live in the United States, then the prevailing social order in the United States will impact the friendship. However, if the friends are in Malaysia, then the Malaysian culture will be the prevailing social order that impacts the friendship. There are two different dialectics that Rawlins labeled as contextual: private/public and ideal/real.

Private/Public

The first friendship dialectic is the private/public dialectic. Let's start by examining the public side of friendships in the United States. Sadly, these relationships aren't given much credence in the public space. For example, there are no laws protecting friendships. Your friends can't get health benefits from your job. Religious bodies don't recognize your friendships. As you can see, we're comparing friendships here to marriages, which do have religious and legal protections. In fact, in the legal system, the family often trumps friends unless there is a power of attorney or will.

As a significant historical side note, one of the biggest problems many gay and lesbian couples faced before marriage legalization was that their intimate partners were perceived as "friends" in the legal system. Family members could swoop in when Partner A died and evict and confiscate all of Partner A's money and property unless there was an iron-clad will leaving the money and property to Partner B. From a legal perspective, marriage equality was very important in ensuring the rights of LGBTQIA individuals and their spouses.

On the opposite end of this dialectic, many friendship bonds are as strong if not stronger than familial or marital bonds. We voluntarily enter into friendships and create our sense of purpose and behaviors outside of any religious or legal context. In essence, these friendships are autonomous and outside of social strictures that define the lines of marital bonds. Instead of having a religious organization dictate the morality of a relationship, friendships ultimately develop a sense of morality that is based within the relationship itself.

Ideal/Real

From the moment we are born, we start being socialized into a wide range of relationships. Friendship is one of those relationships. We learn about friendships from our family, schools, media, peers, etc.... With each of these different sources of information, we develop an ideal of what friendship should be. However, friendships are not ideals; they are real, functioning relationships with plusses and minuses. This dialectic also impacts how we communicate and interact within the friendship itself. If our culture tells us that people must be reserved and respectful in private, then a simple act of laughing with another person could be an outward sign of friendship.

Interactional Dialectics

It's important to understand that friendships change over time; along with how we interact within those friendships. For communication scholars, Rawlins **interactional dialectics** help us understand how communicative behavior happens within friendships. (Rawlins, 1989). Rawlins noted four primary communicative dialectics for friendships: independence/dependence, affection/instrumentality, judgment/acceptance, and expressiveness/protectiveness.

Independence/Dependence

First and foremost, friendships are voluntary relationships that we choose. However, there is a constant pull between the desire to be an independent person and the willingness to depend on one's friend. Let's look at a quick example. A few weeks ago, you and one of your friends both mentioned that you wanted to see a new film getting released. A few weeks later, it's a Friday afternoon and you're done with class or work. The movie was released that day, so you go and watch a matinee. You decided to engage

in behavior without thought of your friend. You acted independently. It's also possible that you know your friend hates going to the movies, so engaging independent movie watching behavior is very much in line with the norms you've established within your friendship.

On the other side, we do depend on our friendships. You could have a friend that you do almost everything with, and it gets to the point that people see you as a duo and are shocked when both of you aren't together. In these highly dependent friendships, individual behavior is probably very infrequent and more likely to be resented. Now, if you went to the movie alone in a highly dependent friendship, your friend may be upset or jealous because you didn't wait to see it with them. You may have had the right to engage as an independent person, but a friend in a highly dependent friendship would see this as a violation. This story would cause even more friction within the friendship if you had promised your friend to see the movie with them. You would still be acting independently, but your friend would have a stronger foundation for being upset.

Ultimately, all friendships have to negotiate independence and dependence. As with the establishment of any friendship norm, the pair involved in the relationship needs to decide when it's appropriate to be independent and when it is appropriate to be dependent. Maybe you need to check-in via text 20 times a day (pretty dependent) or talk on the phone once a year; in both cases, friendships are different and are in constant negotiation. It's also important to note that a friendship that was once highly dependent can become highly independent and vice versa.

Affection/Instrumentality

The second interactional dialectic examines the intersection of affection as a reason for friendship versus instrumentality (the agency or means by which a person accomplishes her/his/their goals or objectives). As Rawlins noted, "This principle formulates the interpenetrated nature of caring for a friend as an end-in-itself and/or as a means to an end." (Rawlins, 1989). We already discussed the importance of affection in a friendship, but haven't examined the issue of friendships and instrumentality. In friendships, the issue of instrumentality helps us understand the following question, "How do we use friendships to benefit ourselves?" Some people are uncomfortable with this question and find the idea of instrumentality very anti-friendship. Have you ever had a really bad day and all you needed was a hug from your best friend? Well, was that hug a sign of affection? Or did you use that friendship to get something you wanted or needed (instrumentality)? We all do this to varying degrees within friendships. When it comes time to move out of an apartment, everyone will be grateful to have a friend with a truck.

The problem of instrumentality arises when one party feels that they are being used and taken for granted within the friendship itself or if one friend stops seeing these acts as voluntary and starts seeing them as obligatory. First, there are times when there is an imbalance in friendships, and one friend feels that they are being taken advantage of. Maybe the friend with the truck starts realizing that the only time their friend really reaches out to see if they're available to haul something large. Second, sometimes acts that were initially voluntary become seen as obligatory. In our example, maybe the friend who needs the truck starts to see what was once a nice, voluntary gesture as an obligation. If this happens, then the use of the truck becomes part of the rules of the friendship, which can change the dynamic of the relationship if the person with the truck isn't happy about being used in this way.

Judgment/Acceptance

In our friendships, we expect that these relationships are going to enhance our self-esteem and make us feel accepted, cared for, and wanted. On the other hand, interpersonal relationships of all kinds are marked by judgmental messages. So, how do we navigate the need to be accepted and the reality of being judged? A lot of this is involved in the negotiation of the friendship itself. Although we may not appreciate receiving criticism from others, criticism may demonstrate to another person that we value them enough to judge. Now, can criticism become toxic? Yes. Maybe you've experienced a friend who criticized everything about you. Perhaps it got to the point where it felt that you needed to change pretty much everything about how you look, act, think, feel, and behave just to be "good enough" for your friend. If that's the case, then that friend is clearly not criticizing you for your betterment but for their own desires.

Expressiveness/Protectiveness

The final interactional dialectic is expressiveness/protectiveness. This dialectic questions the degree to which we want to express ourselves in our friendships while determining how much not to express to protect ourselves. As we discussed earlier in this book, social penetration theory starts with the basic idea that in our initial interactions with others we disclose a wide breadth about ourselves. Still, these are primarily surface level topics (e.g., what's your major, what are your hobbies, where are you from). As time goes on, the number of topics we express decreases, but they become more personal (depth). In a friendship relationship,

we have to navigate this breadth and depth in deciding what we express and what we protect.

Ultimately, this is an issue of vulnerability. When we open ourselves up to people and express those deeper parts of ourselves, there is an excellent likelihood that disclosure of these areas could cause greater harm to the individual self-disclosing if the information got out. For example, one of our coauthors had a friendship sour after our coauthor's friend started talking to our coauthor's parents about our coauthor's sexual orientation. Our coauthor saw this as a massive violation of the confidentiality of what was self-disclosed in their friendship. This friend still speaks to our coauthor's parents 20 years later, but our coauthor hasn't spoken to this former friend since the trust was violated. All friendships are an exploration of what can be expressed and what needs to be protected. We all have some friends that we keep at arm's length because we know we need to protect ourselves, since they tend towards being overly chatty or gossipy. At the same time, we have other friends who get to see the real us as we protect less and less of ourselves in those friendships. No one will ever completely know what's going on in our heads, but deep friendships probably come the closest and also make us the most vulnerable.

Stages of Friendships

As we've already discussed, friendships are not static relationships we're born with. Instead, these relationships are dynamic, and we grow with them. To help us understand how we ultimately form friendships, William Rawlins broke this process into seven stages of friendships (Rawlins, 1981).

Role Delimited Interaction

The first stage of friendship is called **role delimited** interaction. The basic idea behind this stage is that we all exist in a wide range of roles within our lives: shopper, salesperson, patient, driver, student, parent, spouse, etc. In each of these different roles, we end up interacting with a wide range of different people. For example, imagine you're just sitting down in a new class in college, and you talk to the stranger sitting next to you. In this case, you are both interacting within your roles as students. Or perhaps you get your hair cut and styled by the same person 6 times a year and in these meetings you chat and enjoy each other's company. The interactions are facilitated by the roles and context. Outside of those roles and that context, you may never meet and never have the opportunity even to develop a social relationship with this other person. This does not discount the possibility of random, chance encounters with other people. Still, most of our interpersonal relationships (outside of our family) stem from these roles and the communicative contexts they present.

Friendly Relations

From role delimited interaction, we may decide to move to the second stage of friendship, friendly relations. These relations are generally positive interactions, but they still exist within those same roles. In our example, we start chatting with our classmate or our hair stylist. At this point, though, most of our interactions are still going to be within those roles, so we end up talking about the class, fellow students, the teacher, homework assignments, or general chit chat about life and the community. Notice that there is not a lot of actual self-disclosure happening within friendly relations. Some people can maintain friendly relations with others for years. For example, you may interact with coworkers, religious association members, and neighbors within this type of relationship without them ever progressing to the next stage of friendship. According to Rawlins, friendly relationships move towards friendships because they start to exhibit four specific communication behaviors:

- Moves away from what is required in the specific role relationship;
- Fewer stereotyped lines of interaction;
- Individual violations of public propriety; and
- Greater spontaneity.

First, we start interacting in a manner that doesn't resemble the original roles we had. In our example, we start interacting in a manner that doesn't resemble the roles of students when they first meet. Second, we move away from lines of communication that are stereotypes for our roles. For example, some possible stereotyped lines for two students could include, "what did you think of the homework;" "did you bring your book with you today;" "see you next class;" etc. In each of these lines, we enact dialogue that is expected (or stereotyped) within the context of the class itself. Third, more of our normal selves will start to seep into our interactions, which are called violations of public propriety. Maybe one day your classmate turns to you before class, saying, "That reading for homework was such a waste of time." In this case, they are giving you a bit more insight into who they are as a person "These violations of public propriety single an individual out as having an essential side which is not so easily circumscribed by the protocol of a situation." (Rawlins, 1981). Lastly, we see increased spontaneity in our interactions with the other person. Over time, these interactions, although still interacting within their formal roles, take on more social and less formalized tones. Maybe

one day you disclose a story to your barber about some juicy family gossip. Being spontaneous outside of the role script is a move toward friendly relations.

Moves-Toward-Friendship

At some point, people decide to interact with one another outside of the roles they originally embodied when they initially met. This change in roles is a voluntary change. In our example, maybe one day your classmate invites you to get coffee after class, and then another day, you ask them to get lunch before class. Although it's possible that a single step outside of those roles could be enough that a friendly relation is moving towards a friendship, there is generally a sequence of these occurrences. In our example here, the first move was inviting us to coffee, but we then reciprocated later by asking them to lunch. In both of these cases, we are starting to step outside of the original friendly relation and changing the nature of our original interactions.

Nascent Friendship

When one enters into the **nascent stage of friendship**, the friends are no longer interacting within their original roles, and their interactions do not follow the stereotypes associated with those roles. Eventually, we start to develop norms for how we communicate with this other person that are beyond those original roles and stereotypes. Ultimately, this stage is all about developing those norms. We develop norms for what we talk about, when we talk, and how we talk. Maybe our classmate makes it very clear that she doesn't want to talk about politics or religion, and we're perfectly OK with that. Maybe we keep the bulk of our interaction before and after class, or we start having lunch together before class or coffee after class. The norms will differ from friendship to friendship, but these norms allow us to set parameters on the relationship in this early stage. These norms are also important because keeping them demonstrates that we can be trusted. And when we show we can be trusted over time, the level of intimacy we can develop within our relationship also increases.

It's also during this period that others start to see you more and more as a pair of friends, and external forces may begin to impact the development of your friendship as well. To bring in another example, this may be common among parents who become friends with one another through the friendship of their children. They may begin to talk about school, nutrition, behavior, development and other elements of parenting same-aged kids, and then eventually expand from there. They may meet for child play-dates outside of school hours, and one friend may bring the other a coffee while they are attending their children. However, they may be limited by the amount of time they can spend together due to the constraints of children's schedules. The nascent stage is characterized by experimentation and development, negotiating the nature of their relationship.

Stabilized Friendship

Ultimately nascent friendships evolve into **stabilized friendships** through time and refinement. It's not like one day you wake up and go, "My friendship has stabilized!" It's much more gradual than that. We get to the point where our developed norms and interaction patterns for the friendship are functioning optimally for both parties, and the friendship is working smoothly. In nascent friendships, the focus is on the duo and developing the friendship. In stabilization, we often bring in new friends. For example, if we had found out that our classmate had coffee with another person from our class during the nascent stage of friendship, we may have felt a bit hurt or jealous of this outsider intruding on our growing friendship. As stabilized friends, we realize that the classmate having coffee with someone else isn't going to impact the strength of the relationship we already have. If anything, maybe you'll find other friends to grow the friendship circle. However, like any relationship, both parties still must make an effort to make the friendship work. We need to reaffirm our friendships, spend time with our friends, and maintain that balance of equity we discussed earlier in this chapter.

Rawlins also notes that friendships in the stabilized stage can represent three different basic patterns: active, dormant, and commemorative. (Rawlins, 1994). **Active friendships** are ones where there is a negotiated sense of mutual accessibility and availability for both parties in the friendship. **Dormant friendships** "share either a valued history or a sufficient amount of sustained contact to anticipate or remain eligible for a resumption of the friendship at any time." (LaBell & Mayers, 2016). These friends may not be ones we interact with every day, but they are still very much alive and could take on new meaning and grow back into an active friendship if the time arises. **Commemorative friendships** are ones that reflect a specific space and time in our lives, but current interaction is minimal and primarily reflects a time when the two friends were highly involved in each other's lives. With commemorative friendships, we still see ourselves as friends even though we don't have the consistent interaction that active friendships have.

In a study conducted by Sara LaBelle and Scott Myers, the researchers set out to determine what types of relational maintenance strategies people use to keep their friendships going across the three different types of friendship patterns (active, dormant, &

commemorative) The researchers recruited participants over the age of 30 to examine the intersection of relational maintenance and friendship types. All three friendship types use positivity, relational talks, and networks related to relational maintenance to some degree. However, active friendships were more likely than commemorative friendships to use understanding, self-disclosure, assurances, and tasks to maintain their friendships. No differences were seen in relational maintenance strategies between active and dormant friendships nor dormant friendships and commemorative friendships.

Waning Friendship

Unfortunately, some friendships will not last; they will become **waning friendships.** There are many reasons why friendships may start to wane or decrease in importance in our lives. There are three primary reasons Rawlins discusses as causes: "an overall decline in affect, an individual or mutual decision to let it wane based on identifiable dissatisfaction with the relationship, or a significant, negative, relational event which precipitates an abrupt termination of the friendship." (Rawlins, 1993). First, some relationships wane because there is a decrease in emotional attachment. Some friends stop putting in the time and effort to keep the friendship going, so it's not surprising that there is a decrease in emotional attachments. Second, both parties may become dissatisfied with the relationship and decide to take a hiatus or spend more time with other friends. Lastly, some relationship-destroying event could happen.

A wide range of different events could end a friendship. In a study conducted by a team of researchers led by Amy Janan Johnson, the researchers interviewed college students about why their friendships had terminated (Johnson et al., 2004). The most common reasons listed for why relationships fell apart were 1) romantic partner of self or friend, 2) increase in geographic distance, 3) conflict, 4) not many common interests, 5) hanging out with different groups or different friends, and 6) other. It's important to note, that while this set of findings is interesting, it was conducted among college students, so it may not apply to older adults.

Post-Friendship

The final stage of the friendship is what happens after the friendship is over. Even if a friendship ended on a horrible note, there are still parts of that friendship that will remain with us forever, impacting how we interact with friends and perceive friendships. You may even have symbolic links to your friends: the nightclubs you went to, the courses you took together, the coffee shops you frequented, the movies you watched, etc. all are links back to that friendship. It's also possible that the friendship ended on a positive note and you still periodically say hello on Facebook or during the holidays through card exchanges. Just as all friendships are unique, so are their experiences of post-friendship reality.

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11.4: Romantic and Sexual Relationships

Overview

Romantic and sexual relationships are significant forms of interpersonal connection that can involve attraction, intimacy, affection, commitment, and varying degrees of emotional and physical closeness. Communication is central to these relationships because partners must continually negotiate expectations, express needs, establish boundaries, manage differences, and determine what their relationship means to them. Romantic relationships can develop and change over time, making communication particularly important as partners encounter new circumstances and relational expectations.

Romantic and sexual relationships are also shaped by cultural norms and individual values. People may have different expectations regarding commitment, intimacy, exclusivity, communication, and sexual relationships, making explicit communication especially important. Examining these relationships through an interpersonal communication perspective emphasizes consent, respect, boundary negotiation, emotional communication, conflict management, and the importance of recognizing diverse relationship structures and experiences.

Learning Objectives

- Define romantic and sexual relationships as forms of interpersonal relationships.
- Explain the role of communication in developing intimacy, trust, commitment, and relational expectations.
- Identify communication practices related to boundaries, consent, affection, and sexual relationships.
- Analyze how cultural and interpersonal expectations influence romantic and sexual relationships.
- Apply effective communication strategies to situations involving intimacy, conflict, boundaries, and relationship decisions.

Sexuality

Sexuality is viewed as a person's capacity for sexual feelings. Studying sexual attitudes and practices is a particularly interesting field of study, because sexual behavior is a cultural universal. Throughout time and place, the vast majority of human beings have participated in sexual relationships (Broude 2003). Each society, however, interprets sexuality and sexual activity in different ways. Many societies around the world have different attitudes about premarital sex, the age of sexual consent, homosexuality, masturbation, and other sexual behaviors that are not consistent with stated cultural norms (Widmer, Treas and Newcomb 1998). At the same time, sociologists have learned that certain norms (like disapproval of incest) are shared among most societies. Likewise, societies generally have norms that reinforce their accepted social system of sexuality.

What is considered "normal" in terms of sexual behavior is based on the mores and values of the society. Societies that value monogamy, for example, would likely oppose extramarital sex. Individuals are socialized to sexual attitudes by their family, education system, peers, media, and religion. Sexuality is not static, and cultural influences shape all parts of human sexuality. The culture shapes how sex acts are performed and perceived as normal or deviant, as well as what we find sexually appealing. Historically, religion has been the greatest influence on sexual behavior in most societies, but in more recent years, peers and the media have emerged as two of the strongest influences, particularly with American teens (Potard, Courtois, and Rusch 2008).

This definition of the parameters of heterosexuality is an expression of power that constructs what types of sexuality are considered "normal" and which types of sexuality are considered "deviant." Situated, cultural norms define what is considered "natural." Defining sexual desire and relations between women and men as acceptable and normal means defining all sexual desire and expression outside that parameter as deviant. However, even within sexual relations between men and women, gendered cultural norms associated with heterosexuality dictate what is "normal" or "deviant." As a quick thought exercise, think of some words for women who have many sexual partners and then, do the same for men who have many sexual partners; the results will be quite different. So, within the field of sexuality we can see power in relations along lines of gender and sexual orientation (and race, class, age, and ability as well).

Adrienne Rich (1980) called heterosexuality "compulsory," meaning that in our culture all people are assumed to be heterosexual and society is full of both formal and informal enforcements that encourage heterosexuality and penalize sexual variation.

Compulsory heterosexuality plays an important role in reproducing inequality in the lives of sexual minorities. Just look at laws; in a few states, such as Indiana, joint adoptions are illegal for gay men and lesbians (Lambda Legal). Gay men and lesbians have lost custody battles over children due to **homophobia**—the fear, hatred, or prejudice against gay people (Pershing, 1994). Media depictions of gay men and lesbians are few and often negatively stereotyped. There are few "out" gay athletes in the top three men's professional sports—basketball, baseball, and football—despite the fact that, statistically, there are very likely to be many (Zirin, 2010). Many religious groups openly exclude and discriminate against gay men and lesbians. Additionally, **heteronormativity** structures the everyday, taken-for-granted ways in which heterosexuality is privileged and normalized. For instance, sociologist Karen Martin studied what parents say to their children about sexuality and reproduction, and found that with children as young as three and five years old, parents routinely assumed their children were heterosexual, told them they would get (heterosexually) married, and interpreted cross-gender interactions between children as "signs" of heterosexuality (Martin 2009). In this kind of socialization is an additional element of normative sexuality—the idea of **compulsory monogamy**, where exclusive romantic and sexual relationships and marriage are expected and valued over other kinds of relationships (Willey 2016). Therefore, heteronormativity surrounds us at a very young age, teaching us that there are only two genders and that we are or should desire and partner with one person of the opposite gender, who we will marry.

Just like gender, sexuality is neither binary nor fixed. There are straight people and gay people, but people are also bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual, queer, and heteroflexible, to name a few additional sexual identities. Also, sexual attraction, sexual relations and relationships, and sexual identity can shift over a person's lifetime. As there are more than two genders,,there are more than two kinds of people to be attracted to and individuals can be attracted to and can relate sexually to multiple people of different genders at once!

Another common misconception is that not all transgender people are sexually queer. This belief may stem from the "LGBT" acronym that lists transgender people along with lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. A trans man who previously identified as a lesbian may still be attracted to women and may identify as straight, or may identify as queer. Another trans man may be attracted to other men and identify as gay or queer. This multiplicity suggests that the culturally dominant binary model fails to accurately encapsulate the wide variety of sexual and gender lived experiences.

Who Do You Love?

Early sociologists viewed same-gender sexual attraction and behavior as deviancy from "normal" or "natural" sexual attraction and behavior. But is sexual attraction between people of different genders the only normal or natural form of sexual attraction? Sexual attraction and intimacy between people of the same gender have always existed in human societies, with varying degrees of social acceptance. In non-human animals, more than 1500 species of animals, including many primates, have been documented engaging in same-gender sexual activity and forming even long-lasting same-gender pair bonds (Gómez et al. 2023). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that same-gender sexual behavior is natural (it is common in the natural world) but that human societies tend to regulate sexual behavior by socially constructing categories of sexual behavior that are acceptable or "normal" and unacceptable, or "deviant."

Heteronormativity is the social enforcement of heterosexuality, in which there are only two genders, that these genders are opposites, and that any sexual activity between people of the same gender is deviant or unnatural. So then, heteronormativity helps regulate sexual behavior within patriarchal societies. Sexuality is more than sexual behavior, however. Sexuality also includes sexual orientation. **Sexual orientation** refers to emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people; it is often used to signify the relationship between a person's gender identity and the gender identities to which a person is most attracted (Southern Poverty Law, 2018). In other words, sexual orientation describes who we are sexually attracted to.

This section will engage our sociological imagination to understand the social struggle of people who have resisted heteronormativity and demanded full inclusion in society, including the right to fully embody their sexual orientation. The chart in figure 3.4 identifies many possible sexual orientations and includes words that may have been introduced quite recently. As you read through this section, keep in mind that aspects of the struggle for full inclusion are expressed in the evolving language we use to communicate ideas of sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and identity.

Figure 3.4. An incomplete list of possible sexual orientations. For a complete list of acronyms and definitions of sexual orientations and other gender-related terms, along with guidance on best practices for serving LGBTQIA+ Students, check out A Glossary Of Terms from the Southern Poverty Law Center [Website].

Sexual Orientation	Definition
Asexual	People who do not experience sexual attraction or do not have a desire for sex. Many experience romantic or emotional attractions across the entire spectrum of sexual orientations. Asexuality differs from celibacy, which refers to abstaining from sex. Also, Ace, or Ace Community.
Bisexual	A person emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one sex or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way, or to the same degree.
Demisexual	Someone who feels sexual attraction only to people with whom they have an emotional bond—often considered to be on the asexual spectrum.
Gay	People (often, but not exclusively, men) whose enduring physical, romantic, or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex or gender identity
Heterosexual	A term that describes an enduring physical, romantic, or emotional attraction to people of the opposite sex or gender identity. Also straight.
Lesbian	Used to describe a woman whose enduring physical, romantic, or emotional attraction is to other women.
Pansexual	Used to describe people who have the potential for emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to people of any sex or gender identity, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way, or to the same degree. The term panromantic may refer to a person who feels these emotional and romantic attractions but identifies as asexual.
Queer	Once a pejorative term, now reclaimed and used by some within academic circles and the LGBTQIA+ community to describe sexual orientations and gender identities that are not exclusively heterosexual or cisgender.

The inclusion of **asexual** and **demisexual** on the list of sexual orientations opens a new understanding of our intimate relationships. We often think of romantic relationships and sexual orientations as an expression or who we would prefer to be in a physically intimate relationship with. However, asexuality and demisexuality (among others) offer the understanding of a deeply intimate relationship that is not predicated or defined by the physical intimacy but rather the romantic intimacy. This offers an understanding that the internal mechanism and orientations that govern sexual relationships can and do operate separately from those that orient affection and intimacy. Someone's **romantic identity** describes or labels an one's romantic attractions and dating preferences (e.g., *heteroromantic*, *biromantic*, *panromantic*, *aromantic*). Unlike sexual orientation, which refers to physical or sexual attraction, romantic identity focuses specifically on emotional intimacy, affectionate bonding, and romantic desire.

Gender Identity & Sexual Orientation

As you have worked through this section about sexual orientation, have you noticed themes that overlap with gender identity and gender expression? The labels we use to understand our sexual and romantic identity are often inextricably tied to our understandings of gender identity; of ourselves and those we wish to be in relationships with. This can be even more complex for people with trans and nonbinary gender identities and queer sexual orientation, to say nothing of sex (the designation of physiology assigned at birth). Our own gender identity, our gender expression in our lives, the sex we are assigned at birth, who (if anyone) we are physically attracted to, and who (if anyone) we are emotionally attracted to all combine in complex ways.

These identities are independent of one another, but our perception and understanding of them are interconnected. It may be helpful to visualize a sort of Rubik's Cube type puzzle, where each edge spins. If you are looking at the top of this cube, and you hold the piece on the edge of the cube in your right hand, and you turn that right edge piece 90 degrees, it will change the way the top of the cube looks. Similarly, for example, our gender identity is fully independent from our sexual and romantic identities, but by changing our gender identity we will inherently change our understanding of our sexual or romantic identities. They are interconnected, but don't get them twisted.

Love Styles

An individual's love style is considered to be an attitude and describes how love is perceived. (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1988). Attitudes toward love and perceptions of love may change throughout an individual's life. College students may perceive love very

differently from their parents or guardians because college students are in a very different stage of life. College students are living among people their age who are more than likely single or unmarried. These two factors mean that there are more prospects for dating, and this may lead the college student to conclude that dating any number of these prospects is necessary or even perceive that "hooking up" with multiple prospects is acceptable. In contrast, individuals with children who are financially tied may view romantic relationships as partnerships in which goal achievement (pay off the house, send kids to college, pay off debt, etc.) is as important as romance. These differences in perceptions of love can be explored through John Lee's love typology in which he discusses six love styles: eros, storge, ludus, agape, pragma, and mania (Lee, 1977).

Five Love Styles

Eros is romance and emphasizes love and physical beauty, immediate attraction, emotional intensity, and strong commitment. Eros love involves the early initiation of sexual intimacy and consecutive monogamous relationships.

Storge love develops slowly out of friendship where stability and psychological closeness are valued along with commitment, which leads to enduring love. Passion and intense emotions are not valued as they are in the eros love style. One of the author's uncles was in his 60s and had never been married. However, he employed a woman who cooked and cleaned for him for over 20 years. His family was very surprised to receive an announcement that he was marrying the individual who took care of him for so long. The formation of their love is a great example of love that arises slowly out of friendship.

Ludic lovers view love as a game, and playing this game with multiple partners is perceived to be acceptable by individuals with this love style. As such, this type of lover believes that deception and manipulation are acceptable. Individuals with this love style have a low tolerance for commitment, jealousy, and strong emotional attachment.

In contrast, **agape** love involves altruism, giving, and other-centered love. This love style approaches relationships in a non-demanding style with gentle caring and tolerance for others.

Pragma love is known as practical love involving logic and reason. Arranged marriages were often arranged for functional purposes. Kings and Queens of different countries often married to form alliances. This love style may seek out a romantic partner for financial stability, ability to parent, or simple companionship.

Mania is the final love style characterized by dependence, uncertainty, jealousy, and emotional upheaval. This type of love is insecure and needs constant reassurance.

Understanding Love Styles

These love styles should not be considered to be mutually independent. An individual may approach love from a pragmatic stance and have found love that provides financial stability. However, they still feel insecure (representative of mania) about whether their romantic partner will remain with them, thus ensuring continued financial stability. It is important to remember that individuals engage in each of these love styles, and it is simply a matter of how much of each love style a person possesses.

We talk of dating as a single construct a lot of the time without really thinking through how dating has changed over time. In the 20th Century alone, we saw dating go from a highly formalized structure involving calling cards and sitting rooms; to drive-in movies in the back seat of a car; to cyberdating with people we've never met (Bailey, 1989). The 21st Century has already changed how people date through social networking sites and geolocation dating apps on smartphones. Dating is not a single thing, and dating has definitely changed with the times.

So, with all of this change, how does one even begin to know if someone's on a date in the first place? Thankfully Paul Mongeau, Janet Jacobsen, and Carolyn Donnerstein have attempted to answer this question for us (Mongeau et al., 2007). The researchers found that there are five of what they called "supracategories" that help define the term "date": communication expectations, date goals, date elements, dyadic, and feelings. First, dating involves specific communication expectations. For example, people expect that there will be a certain level of self-disclosure on a date. Furthermore, people expect that their dating partner will be polite, relaxed, and social. Second, dating involves specific date goals, or people on dates have specific goals (e.g., future romantic relationships, reduce uncertainty, have fun). Third, there are specific date elements. For example, someone has to initiate the date; we get ready for a date, we know when the date has started and stopped, there are activities that constitute the date, etc. Fourth, dates are dyadic, or dating is a couple-based activity. Now, this doesn't necessarily take into account the idea of "group dates," but even on a group date traditionally there are dyadic couples that are involved in the date itself. Lastly, dates involve feelings. "These feelings range from affection (nonromantic feelings or behaviors), attraction (physical and/or emotional attraction

toward the partner), to romantic (dates have romantic overtones)."

Dating Scripts

All of us are going to spend a portion of our lives in some kind of dating relationship. Whether we are initiating dates, dating, or terminating relationships, we spend a great deal of time dating. Match.com publishes an annual study examining singles in the United States (https://www.singlesinamerica.com/). According to data from 2018, here are some of the realities of modern single life:

- 55.8% did not go on any first dates, while only 12.6% went on one first date.
- Of those who went on a first date, 20.3% met the person on an online dating site/app while 15.6% met the person through a friend.
- When it comes to being passionately in love, 19.4% have never been in love, 27.3% have been in love once, and 27.7% have been in love twice.
- 25.1% have a "checklist" when it comes to finding a long-term romantic partner.
- 66.7% believe that loving someone is hard work.
- 75.2% believe that love is a possibility for them.
- 83.5% believe that love is hard to find in today's world.
- 32.4% of dating partners have disagreed on how to label their relationship, and 23.0% have left a relationship over this disagreement.
- When it comes to first dates, participants preferred either quick and easy (36.0%, e.g., coffee, drinks) or more formal (21%, e.g., dinner, brunch).
- 38.1% had been in a "friends with benefits" relationship.
- 28.3% had a friendship that turned into a significant romantic relationship.
- 41.1% have dated someone they met online.
- 48.9% had created at least one profile on a dating website or app.

Admittedly, this study is probably pretty heterosexist because the data were not broken down by sexual orientation. Furthermore, we don't have similar data for bisexual, gay, and lesbian couples. Dating is one of those things we will spend a lot of time doing before we ever settle down and get married (assuming you ever do or have a desire to do so). So, one must imagine that with so much dating going on in the world, we'd have a pretty good grasp of how dating works.

Robert Abelson originally proposed the idea of script theory back in the late 1970s (Abelson, 1976). He defined a script as a "coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him as either a participant or an observer." According to script theory, people tend to pattern their responses and behaviors during different social interactions to take control of that situation. This does require an individual to be able to imagine their past, present, and future behavior to create this script (Ableson, 1981). In 1993, Suzanna Rose and Irene Frieze (1993) applied Abelson's notions of script theory to dating. They had college students keep records of what they did on a date. Ultimately, two different scripts were derived: one for men and one for women. The male script consisted of 15 different behavioral actions (all initiated by the male):

1. Picked up date
2. Met parents/roommates
3. Left
4. Picked up friends
5. Confirmed plans
6. Talked, joked, laughed
7. Went to movies, show, party
8. Ate
9. Drank alcohol
10. Initiated sexual contact
11. Made out
12. Took date home
13. Asked for another date
14. Kissed goodnight
15. Went home

Women's scripts, on the other hand, contained both behavioral actions for themselves and behavioral actions they expected of the man during the date:

1. Groomed and dressed
2. Was nervous
3. Picked up date (male)
4. Introduced to parents, etc.
5. Courtly behavior (open doors–male)
6. Left
7. Confirmed plans
8. Got to know & evaluate date
9. Talked, joked, laughed
10. Enjoyed date
11. Went to movies, show, party
12. Ate
13. Drank alcohol
14. Talked to friends
15. Had something go wrong
16. Took date home (male)
17. Asked for another date (male)
18. Told date will call her (male)
19. Kissed date goodnight (male)

Take a second and go through these two lists. Do you think they still apply today? How do you think these scripts differ? Once again, these dating scripts were created only using heterosexual college students. Do you think these scripts change if you have people dating in their late 20s or 30s? What about people who date in their 70s, 80s, or 90s?

There has been subsequent research in the area of dating scripts. Research by Gilbert et al. (2012), Klinkenberg and Rose (1994), and Morr Serewicz and Gale (2008) collectively highlights how dating scripts operate across diverse demographic contexts. Table 1 demonstrates some of the other dating scripts that researchers have found (this is not an exhaustive list).

Table 1: Dating Scripts

First Date	Gay Men	Lesbians	Deaf College Students
• Get ready • Pick up date (M) • Feel nervous • Go to movie • Pay (M) • Talk • Hold hands • Go to café/ party • Nonverbal closeness • Talk • Drink alcohol • Touch/hug • Deep conversation • Mingle with others • Talk • Leave party • Invite the other in • Walk/drive home (M) • Polite leave-taking • Kiss • Future Plans • Part for the night (M)	• Discussed plans • Was nervous • Groomed/dressed • Went to date's house/picked up date • Met at a pre-arranged location • Left on location for another • Got to know/evaluate date • Talked/laughed/joked • Talked to friends while on date • Went to a movie, show, etc. • Ate/drank non-alcohol • Drank alcohol/used drugs • Initiated physical contact • Made out • Had sex • Stayed over • Made plans for another date • Went home	• Discussed plans • Was nervous • Groomed/dressed • Prepared (cleaned apt., bought flowers, etc.) • Went to date's house/picked up date • Left • Got to know/evaluated date • Talked/laughed/joked • Went to a movie, show, etc. • Ate/drank non-alcohol • Positive affect • Drank alcohol/used drugs • Initiated physical contact • Kissed/hugged goodnight • Took date home • Went home • Evaluated feelings post-date	• Initiation/meeting ◦ Talk ◦ Shared interest ◦ Family and friends ◦ Meet in public • Date activities ◦ Group activities ◦ Dinner ◦ Movie • Outcomes/conclusions ◦ Good night kiss ◦ Take date home ◦ Hug ◦ Relationship development

We often think of dating as something that occurs purely among young people before they get married, but we know people in all age groups date and are looking for romantic relationships of all shapes and sizes.

One other facet of script theory that is very important to consider is how we learn these scripts in the first place. As you read through both the male and female dating script, did you consciously think about how you learned to date? Of course not! However, we've been conditioned since we were very young to date. We've listened to adults tell stories of dating. We've watched dating as it is fictionalized on television and in movies. Dating narratives surround us, and all of these narratives help create the dating scripts that we have. Although dating may feel like you're making it up as you go along, you already possess a treasure trove of information about how dating works. Thankfully, because we have these cultural images of dating presented to us, we also know that our dating partner (as long as they are from a similar culture) will have similar dating scripts.

The United States prides itself on being the "land of the free," but it is rather restrictive when it comes to its citizens' general attitudes about sex compared to other industrialized nations. In an international survey, 29 percent of Americans stated that premarital sex is always wrong, while the average among the 24 countries surveyed was 17 percent. Similar discrepancies were found in questions about the condemnation of sex before the age of 16, extramarital sex, and homosexuality, with American total disapproval of these each acts being 12, 13, and 11 percent higher, respectively, than the study's average (Widmer, Treas and Newcomb 1998).

American culture is particularly restrictive in its attitudes about sex when it comes to female bodied individuals. Perceived expectations and rules around sexuality fall along gender lines, and while the U.S. often fails to consider gender beyond the binary, when it comes to values and normative practices, the binary model always disadvantages female gendered people when

it comes to sexual freedom. It is widely believed that male gendered people are more sexual than are female gendered ones. In fact, there is a popular notion that male gendered people think about sex every seven seconds. Research, however, suggests that male gendered people think about sex an average of 19 times per day, compared to 10 times per day for female gendered people (Fisher, Moore, and Pittenger 2011).

Belief that male gendered people have—or have the right to—more sexual urges than female gendered people creates a double standard. Ira Reiss, a pioneer researcher in the field of sexual studies, defined the *double standard* as prohibiting premarital sexual intercourse for female gendered people but allowing it for male gendered people (Reiss 1960). This standard has evolved into allowing female gendered people to engage in premarital sex only within committed love relationships, but allowing male gendered people to engage in sexual relationships with as many partners as they wish without condition (Milhausen and Herold 1999). Due to this double standard, a female gendered person is likely to have fewer sexual partners in their life time than a male gendered person. According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey, the average 35-year-old female gendered person has had three opposite-sex sexual partners, while the average 35-year-old male gendered person has had twice as many (Centers for Disease Control 2011).

The future of a society's sexual attitudes may be somewhat predicted by the values and beliefs that a country's youth expresses about sex and sexuality. Data from the 2008 National Survey of Family Growth reveals that 64 percent of boys and 71 percent of girls ages 15–19 said they "agree" or "strongly agree" that "it's okay for an unmarried female to have a child." In a separate survey, 65 percent of teens stated that they "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that although waiting until marriage for sex is a nice idea, it's not realistic (NBC News 2005). This does not mean that today's youth have given up traditional sexual values such as monogamy. Nearly all college students (99%), regardless of gender who participated in a 2002 study on sexual attitudes stated they wished to settle down with one mutually exclusive sexual partner at some point in their lives, ideally within the next five years (Pedersen et al. 2002).

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11.5: Families and Chosen Families

Overview

Families are among the most significant interpersonal systems, but defining family is more complicated than traditional definitions suggest. Earlier definitions often emphasized heterosexual marriage, biological relationships, shared residence, and children, excluding many families that exist in contemporary society. A broader definition recognizes families formed through marriage, blood, adoption, or choice and acknowledges that family members may live together or apart, have children or not have children, and develop their own shared practices and boundaries. Concepts such as kinship, voluntary kin, and chosen family further demonstrate that people may define family through meaningful relationships and mutual commitment rather than solely through biology or legal status.

Communication is central to how families are formed, maintained, and changed. Family communication patterns can emphasize conformity and harmony, open discussion and self-expression, or varying combinations of these orientations. Family systems theory emphasizes interdependence, wholeness, patterns, openness, complex relationships, and equifinality, showing how the behavior of one family member can affect the larger system. The section also examines contemporary U.S. family structures and sibling relationships, demonstrating that family relationships are diverse, dynamic, and continually shaped through communication.

Learning Objectives

- Define family, kinship, voluntary kin, and chosen family.
- Explain how communication contributes to the creation and maintenance of diverse family structures.
- Analyze family communication patterns using socio-orientation and concept-orientation.
- Apply family systems theory to explain interdependence, boundaries, patterns, and relationship dynamics.
- Evaluate how communication contributes to sibling relationships and the development of supportive family systems.

Defining Family

One of the biggest challenges for family researchers has been to define the term “family.” The ambiguity of the term has often been seen in the academic literature. The definition of the family developed by Ernest W. Burgess was the first widely used definition by academics (Burgess, 1926). The term “family” was described as “two or more persons joined by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption; constituting a single household; interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister; and creating and maintaining a common culture." (Burgess, 1963). According to Burgess, a family must be legally tied together, live together, interact together, and maintain a common culture together. The first three aspects of Burgess’ definition are pretty easy to conceptualize, but the concept of common culture deserves further explanation. Common culture consists of those communication interactions (day-to-day communication) and cultural tools (communication acts learned from one’s culture previous to the marriage) that each person brings into the marriage or family. The various tools and interactions form a unique and individual subculture that exists within the context of the new family. A couple can pick and choose from their various backgrounds which communicative acts are most important to them and integrate those into the family unit. If a couple has communicative acts that are polarized, then a couple will need to negotiate and form new ways of communicating. Burgess’ definition of the family was useful because he was the first to examine the family structure’s attempt to maintain a common culture, but it also has many serious problems that cannot be ignored. Burgess’ definition of the word “family” excludes single parent families, commuter families, bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender families, and families who do not choose to, or are unable to, have children.

After examining the flaws of Burgess’ definition of the word “family,” an anthropologist, George Peter Murdock, attempted to define the family, “Social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults.” (Murdock, 1949). Once again, this definition only allows for heterosexual couples who have children to be considered a family because of the “socially approved” sexual relationship clause.

Another problem with this definition deals with the required inclusion of children for a couple to be labeled as a family. Many couples are unable to have children. Yet other couples opt not to have children. Does this really mean that they are not families? Couples, with or without children, should be considered as family units. All in all, this definition gave more direction than the Burgess one, but it is still extremely ambiguous and exclusive.

Another anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, was looking at tribal familial structures all over the world at the turn of the century and defined the family as having 1) boundaries, 2) common residence, and 3) mutual affection for one another. (Malinowski, 1927). Malinowski's definition deals primarily with the fact that in different cultures around the world, a family member may include anyone from the immediate family of origin who gave birth to a person, to any member of the society into which one is born. Many African tribes see the tribe as being the family unit, and the tribe takes it upon itself to raise the children.

The United States' societal concept of the term "family" became very rigid during the 1950s when the family was depicted by social norms and the media as a mother, father, 2-3 offspring, and the family dog living together behind a white picket fence in the suburbs. (Bailey, 1988). Many popular media and policy initiatives of this era highlighted and privileged this form a family. This concept of a family, often referred to as the "nuclear family," contributed to an oppressive cultural phenomenon known as **heteropatriarchy.** Heteropatriarchy is the simultaneous and reinforcing privileging of both heterosexual relationships as well as strict gender role expectations, in which the masculine partner works outside the home and is the primary breadwinner (and praised and valued for being so) and the feminine partner is the caretaker and homemaker (and devalued for being so). Though this is currently what many Americans picture as the typical 1950s' family, the reality was considerably different. According to Steven Mintz and Susan Kellog the family structure was very weak in the 1950s. (Mintz & Kellog, 1988). Women started using tranquilizers as a method for dealing with normal household duties, and the divorce rate skyrocketed when compared with the 1940s. Currently, only around seven percent of U.S. families participate in the so-called "traditional" 1950s-style family with Ozzie, the breadwinning father, and Harriet, the happy homemaking mother, enjoying their first marriage, which has produced two or more school-aged children (Otto, 1988). Our cultural imagination of the ideal family never matched the reality of family lives.

During the 1970s, a variety of psychologists attempted to define the term "family." Arthur P. Bochner defined the family as "an organized, naturally occurring relational interaction system, usually occupying a common living space over an extended time, and possessing a confluence of interpersonal images which evolve through the exchange of messages over time." (Bochner, 1988). Though this definition is broad enough to allow for a variety of relationships to be considered families, the definition is also quite vague. It has allowed almost anything to be considered a family. Take, for example, individuals who live in a dormitory setting either at a college or in the military. The first part of Bochner's definition of family is that it has an organized, naturally occurring relational interaction system. In essence, this means that any group that has organization and interacts through various relationships accomplishes part of what it means to be a family. People who live in dormitories interact through various relationships on a regular basis. Whether it be relating with one's roommate or with the other people who live in the rooms next to you, people in dorms do interact. Dormitories are generally highly organized. People are required to listen to complex directors and Resident Assistants (on a collegiate level). Also, with the myriad of dormitory softball teams and other activities, interaction occurs regularly. Would people in dormitories consider each other family? Perhaps, but also perhaps not.

Family as Haven, Fulfillment, and Encumbrance

Sociologist Maxine Baca Zinn examines the ways that ideas and images of families influence family expectations and interactions. Specifically, she describes family as haven, family as fulfillment, and family as encumbrance (Zinn et al., 2011).

The family as haven describes the historical contrast between home spaces and workspaces in the United States. The idea that we live in a "heartless world" where individuals cannot expect to be treated with compassion isolates those caring characteristics from the home and family. The family became the place of warmth, tenderness, and morality in contrast to a world of commerce and competition, especially as society became more industrialized. It became a place where protection was offered.

The idea of family as fulfillment emerged in the later part of the 20th century as expectations increased for individual family roles as well as the home and family environment. For example, more intensive parenting to raise well-developed children became more idealized and was seen as fulfilling for parents. In addition, the family as a whole was not seen just as an escape from the harsh world but also as a place for enjoyment, creating meaning, and rejuvenation.

The family as encumbrance recognizes the ways in which the family ideals encompass responsibilities, effort, and stagnation. Monogamous marriage and parenting can be monotonous. This can get in the way of self-actualization and freedom to have the fullest experience of self. While both the family as fulfillment and as encumbrance incorporate the societal ideals of reaching one's full potential, they represent two differing ways that the family can be viewed and experienced.

While we are studying families, it is important to note the concept of **kinship**, the social structure that ties people together (whether by blood, marriage, legal processes, or other agreements) and includes family relationships. While definitions vary, it is widely agreed that the term kinship is broader than the term family. Kinship acknowledges that individuals have a role in defining who is a member of their own family and how familial relationships extend across society. The benefit of a broad inclusionary definition such as Bochner's is that it envelopes the concept of **voluntary kin** (Braithwaite et al., 2010). Voluntary kin refers to individuals who are considered family, whose relational identity is discursively constructed, co-created, and maintained through interaction and mutual selection. This concept is born from the concept of **chosen family,** which has its conceptual roots in LGBTQ+ spaces wherein many queer people experience rejection and harm at the hands of their biological or nuclear families, and seek out and create a family unit of supportive and caring community members. This phenomenon of mutually seeking out a family structure relationship outside of legal or biological ties is a pathway and pattern for many marginalized communities whose families are fractured through circumstance or violent action. Braithewaite et al. establish that family is a social construct. Families are formed, maintained, changed, and repaired through communication. There is nothing natural about family; what counts as family is what we say counts as family.

Towards a Definition of Family

To understand the concept of a family, the definitions should be combined in such a way that all types of family structures (e.g., single parent, LGBTQIA+, non-married parents) are included. For our purposes a **family** is defined as two or more people tied by marriage, blood, adoption, or choice; living together or apart by choice or circumstance; having interaction within family roles; creating and maintaining a common practice; being characterized by economic cooperation; deciding to have or not to have children, either own or adopted; having boundaries; and claiming mutual affection. This does not necessarily say that all types of families are healthy or legal, but that all cohabiting groups that consider themselves to be families should be understood as such. Though one may disagree with a specific family group, understanding the group through a family filter can lend itself to a better understanding than could be reached by analyzing the group through an organizational filter. To understand this definition of family, an analysis of the various aspects of this study's definition shall be done to help clarify this definition.

Marriage, Blood, Adoption, or Choice

The first part of the definition says that a family is "two or more people tied by marriage, blood, adoption, or choice." This part of the definition allows for a variety of family options that would not be accepted otherwise. This definition also allows for children who become part of a foster family to have a family that they can consider their own, even if they are switched from family to family. Nonmarried couples who consider themselves a family should also be understood as such. This aspect of the definition does open itself to some family types that are seen as illegal (e.g., family members marrying each other). This definition does not attempt to create a legal definition of family as much as it attempts to create a definition under which the family can be studied. As mentioned earlier, not all forms of family are necessarily healthy or legal. This part of the definition broadens the field of family study while the remaining criteria narrows the focus so that not just any group can call itself a family.

Cohabitation

The second part of the definition of family indicates that the cohabitants may live together or apart by choice or circumstance. There are a variety of married couples who are not able to live in the same place because of occupation, and this may be especially true in areas of the world where cost of living is a major family stressor, such as the San Francisco Bay Area. According to Naomi Gerstel and Harriet Engel Goss (1982), a commuter family is such a family:

> The existence of marriages in which spouses separate in the service of divergent career demands at least suggests a need to question both the presupposition that coresidence is necessary for marital viability and its corollary that husbands and wives necessarily share economic fates. Dubbed "commuter," "longdistance" or "two location" families, these marriages entail the maintenance of two separate residences by spouses who are apart from one another for periods ranging from several days per week to months at a time.

These marriages, seen as nontraditional by many, are becoming an increasingly common occurrence within the United States. Any member of the military who is stationed in the United States and sent to other parts of the world without their family experiences the stressors caused by commuter marriages. Just because these families are not able to live under the same roof does not mean that they are not a family.

Family Roles

The third criterion of the definition of “family” suggests that the persons interact within family roles. These roles include such terms as mom, dad, son, daughter, wife, husband, spouse, and offspring. When an adult decides to be the guardian either by birth, adoption, or choice, the adult has taken on the role of a parent. When a group takes on the roles of parental figures and child figures, they have created a family system within which they can operate. Some of these roles can be related to the understanding of extended family as well, such as grandmother, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, and the like. Also, the roles are socially and culturally constructed and can vary or blend depending on the family structure. These roles and the rules that cultures associate with them have a definite impact on how a family will function.

Common Practice

The fourth aspect, creating a common practice, stems directly from Burgess’ definition. People joining together in mutually understood families bring other aspects (communicative acts, history, cultural differences, etc.) of their lives into the new family to create the new unique practices that exists in the new family. This can be done regardless of the particular combination of individuals who come together to create the family. When people join together to create a family unit, they are bringing their cultural backgrounds and idiosyncratic behaviors to the union, thus creating a unique third family practice that combines all of the initial family cultures.

Economic Cooperation

The fifth trait of a family deals with economic cooperation, or the general pooling of family resources for the benefit of the entire family. Economic cooperation is typically thought of in the context of nuclear families, but in most families individuals typically pool their resources in order to keep the entire family sustained. In many instances, overseas military men and women will send their paychecks to their families back in the States because they will not need the money while they are out at sea or abroad, and their families still have bills that must get paid. Economic cooperation allows families who have dual earners to establish a more egalitarian relationship between the spouses since no one person is seen as the worker and the other as the non-worker.

Children

The sixth component of the definition of a family deals with children as a part of a family. Many researchers (Burgess, 1926; Murdock, 1949; Bailey, 1988) have said that for a family to exist, it must have offspring. This would mean that a couple who is infertile and only wants to raise children if they are biologically related would not be considered a family. This also prevents couples who do not desire to have children from achieving a family status. There are many unions of people who are not able to have children or do not desire to have children who are clearly families. Children should be understood as being part of a family unit, but are not necessary to the unit becoming a family.

Established Boundaries

The seventh characteristic of a family deals with the need for the family to establish boundaries. Family boundaries is a concept that stems from family systems theory. According to Janet Beavin Bavelas and Lynn Segal (1982), boundaries are those aspects of a family that prevent the family from venturing beyond the family unit. Boundaries function as a means for a family to determine the size and the scope of family interactions with the greater system or society. The family can let information into the family or exclude it from the family.

An example of this can be seen in religious parents/guardians who are coming to terms with the fact that their son is gay. These parents/guardians often reject information from the family system that would indicate that homosexuality is natural. In this example, the parents/guardians draw an informational boundary and refuse to let information that could contradict their position into the family system. Also, families do not function entirely in conjunction with the system of which they are a part. Families must filter information or risk information overload. Families have naturally occurring and created boundaries that decide how a family should and should not operate. Many families create boundaries that deal with religious discussion, or they do not allow for any rejection of the family’s religious beliefs on any level. This is an example of a boundary that a family can create. Conversely, there are boundaries that a family must respect because of societal laws. Understanding these boundaries is necessary because it allows the researcher a greater understanding of the context in which the family lives.

Love and Trust

The eighth, and final, trait of a family, mutual affection, deals with the concept of love and trust that a family tends to possess to help them journey through conflict situations. Mutual affection also means that an individual must have a desire to be within the family or possess the freedom to leave the family system when they are of age. Families are not coercive entities but entities in which all participants can freely make personal decisions to belong, and it is not uncommon for young adults to go "no-contact" with parents if their come to understand there is not a mutual affect, love, trust, and care in the family relationship. Leaving the family system does not guarantee that a member of a family will be able to lose all connections to the family itself. Besides, the family will have had an impact on members that will affect them even if they leave the family of origin and cut all ties.

Understanding the definitions presented about the family and their obvious limitations will help in understanding of the usefulness of this new definition. Too often, definitions of the word “family” have been so narrow in scope that only some families were studied, and thus the research into the family came from only a very narrow and rigid perspective. Defining what constitutes a family is a difficult task, but without a clear definition, the study of family communication cannot be done effectively.

Modern U.S. American Families

What are families in the United States like today? Because we are constrained by both our personal experiences and the societal representations of “typical families,” it is important to talk about what kinds of kinship structures and changes are actually occurring. At times, the study of families has been referred to as the study of “the family.” This text avoids that terminology because we are studying many types of families.

In order to describe current American families and kinship structures, it is probably easiest to compare them with families of the past and families in other countries. **Demographics**—statistics related to populations and designated social characteristics—help us to understand how identities and family structures are related. Let’s see what some of the biggest trends are in terms of family structure. The following graphs and descriptions give a snapshot of demographic changes over time and current kinship patterns:

Changes in Children’s Living Arrangements

Increases in children living with a single parent and with cohabiting parents between 1960 and 2014 are shown in figure 1.5. This chart illustrates the changes in partnering and parenting arrangements that adults have made and the ways they affect where children live. Right away, you can see that there is no longer a “typical” kind of parenting arrangement but rather a range of ways that people parent and create families.

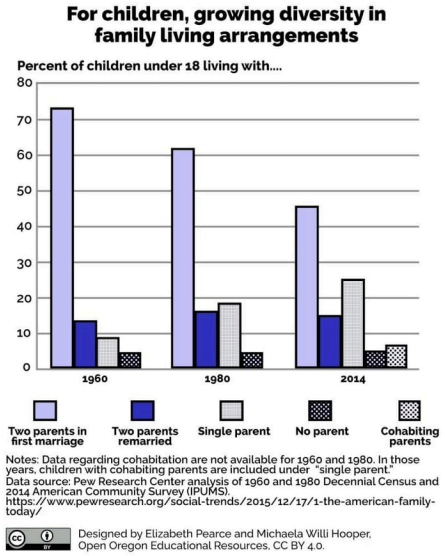


Figure 11.5.1: Family structures in the U.S. have become increasingly diverse, with fewer children living with parents in a first marriage and more living with single or cohabiting parents. Alternative description of image. (CC BY 4.0; Elizabeth Pearce and Michaela Willi Hooper via Open Oregon Educational Resources)

Data for cohabitation was not available in 1960 and 1980 but was added in the 2014 data; children living with cohabiting parents in 1960 and 1980 were included in the group “single parents.” Can you think of any other parenting arrangements that could be added to data collected in the 2020s?

Declining Marriage

People in the United States are marrying later in life, and the number of people who never marry is also increasing. This leads to a trend called “declining marriage.” The share of adults 18 and older who have never married has increased from 17% in 1970 to 31% in 2021 (Mandapat et al., 2023). Figure 1.6 shows the increase for both men (blue) and women (red) in the median age of first marriage between 1890 and 2022. Consider family and friends that you know who are married. How similar or different are they from the trends shown?

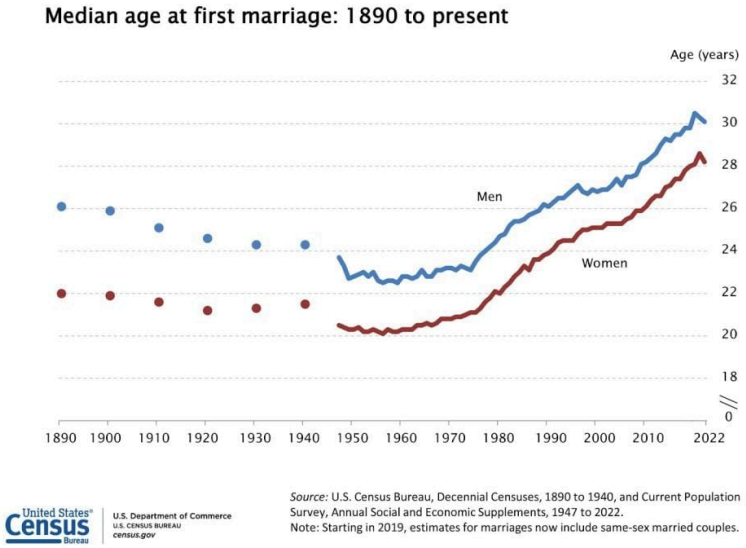


Figure 11.5.2: The median age at first marriage in the U.S. has steadily increased since the mid-20th century. Today, people are marrying later than previous generations, reflecting changing patterns in family formation. Alternative description of image. (CC0 1.0; U.S. Census Bureau via Census.gov)

At the same time, some kinds of marriage are increasing. For example, between 1970 and 2022, the percentage of people who marry interracially and interethnically (together called “intermarried”) has increased from 4% to 16% (Mandapat et al., 2023). And since same-sex marriage became legal in 2015, these marriages have increased from 0.7% to 1.1% in 2022.

Declining Divorce

Although you may often hear that the divorce rate is increasing, which it had since 1970 coinciding with second wave feminism and the rise of women gaining financial independence and greater bodily autonomy, but divorce rate has actually been declining since 1990. But remember, that marriage is declining as well! In the chart in figure 1.7, you can see that the marriage rate (red) is declining a bit faster than the divorce rate (white), which is one of the factors that makes it appear as if divorce is increasing. It’s actually declining, just at a slower rate than marriage itself is declining.

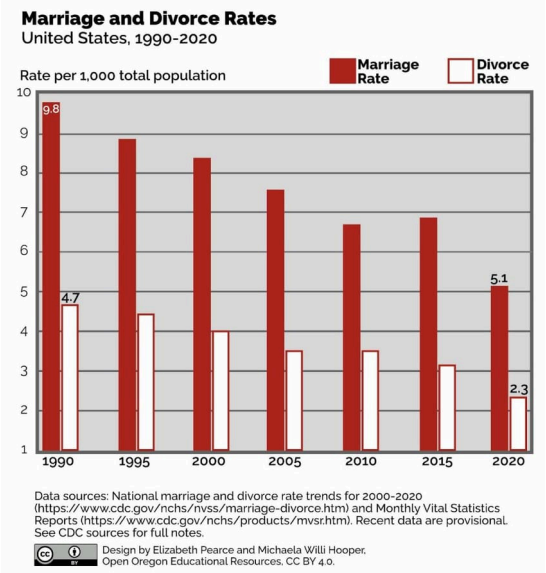


Figure 11.5.3: Marriage and divorce rates in the U.S. have both declined since 1990, with marriage rates declining more rapidly than divorce rates. Alternative Description of image. (CC BY 4.0; Elizabeth Pearce and Michaela Willi Hooper via Open Oregon Educational Resources)

Declining Fertility Rates and Birth Rates

There are fewer babies being born in the United States. The decline is measured following the "Baby Boom" years post World War II, between approximately 1946 and 1964, according to data compiled by childtrends.org. There are several factors that contribute to these declining rates, including social and cultural systems beginning to normalize a family without children, financial and other constraints complicating choices for adults, and the fact that people who want to have children may not be able to have children.

Multigenerational Households

Multigenerational living includes families with two or more adult generations living together, as well as families that have grandchildren under age 25 and grandparents living together. According to data from Pew Research Center (2022), this style of living hit a low of 12% of all families in the United States in 1980. Since then, multigenerational living has increased in most racial and ethnic groups, age groups, and genders. What factors do you think may have contributed to this increase?

Family Communication Patterns

Two communication researchers, Jack M. McLeod and Steven H. Chaffee, found that most models of families relied on dichotomous ideas (e.g., autocratic/democratic, controlling/permissive, modern/ traditional). (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972). Instead of relying on these perspectives, McLeod and Chaffee realized that family communication happens along two different continuums: socio-orientation and concept-orientation. In a series of further studies, David Ritchie and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick identified two family communication patterns: conformity orientation and conversation orientation. (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990).

Socio-Orientation

To McLeod and Chaffee (1972), **socio-oriented** (conformity oriented) families are indicated by "the frequency of (or emphasis on) communication that is designed to produce deference, and to foster harmony and pleasant social relationships in the family." Families high in socio-orientation tend to communicate a similarity of attitudes, beliefs, and values. Similarity and harmony are valued while conflict s avoided. Family members maintain interdependence within a hierarchical structure. Similarity and harmony may be valued to the extent that any amount of disagreement was frowned upon. The parents may never (literally) argued or disagreed in front of the children. Despite the desires of the parents, the personalities of the children may emerge and reveal that the children could go along with total similarity and harmony. Friction may result from a situation in which a family is highly socio-oriented but growing and changing members of the family find it challenging to stay on board with the status quo. You may have similar experiences if your communication style is different from your family's communication orientation.

Concept-Orientation

To McLeod and Chaffee (1972), **concept-oriented** (conversation oriented) families use “positive constraints to stimulate the child to develop his own views about the world. and to consider more than one side of an issue." High concept-orientation families engage in open and frequent communication. Family life and interactions are perceived to be pleasurable. Self-expression is encouraged when attempting to make family decisions. Parents/guardians and children communicate in such a way that parents/ guardians socialize and educate their children. Understanding the communication pattern within a family can lead to the ability to adapt to the family communication pattern rather than consistently communicating in a manner that is uncomfortable within the family structure.

Four Combinations

To further explain the concepts of socio- and concept-orientations, Jack M. McLeod and Steven H. Chaffee broke the combinations into four specific categories.

Consensual

The first family communication pattern is the consensual family, which is marked by both high levels of socio- and concept-orientation. The term “consensual” is used here because there is a tendency in these families to strive for or have pressure for agreement between parents/guardian and children. Children are encouraged to think outside the box as long as it doesn’t impact the parents/guardians’ power or the family hierarchy. However, “These conflicting pressures may induce the child to retreat from the parent/ guardian-child interaction. There is some evidence of ‘escape’ by consensual children, such as strikingly heavy viewing of television fantasy programs.” (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972)

Protective

The second type of family communication pattern is the protective family, which is marked by high levels of socio-orientation and low levels of concept-orientation. In these families, there tends to be a strong emphasis on child obedience and family harmony. As such, children are taught that they should not disagree with their parents/guardians openly or engage in conversations where differences of opinion may be found. McLeod and Chaffee noted that parents/guardians strive to protect their children from any kind of controversy, which may actually make them more vulnerable to outside pressures and persuasion because they have not been taught how to be critical thinkers.

Pluralistic

The third type of family communication pattern is pluralistic, which is the opposite of the protective family and marked by high levels of concept-orientation and low levels of socio-orientation. In these families, “The emphasis in this communication structure seems to be on mutuality of respect and interests: the combination of an absence of social constraint plus a positive impetus to self-expression should foster both communication and competence.” (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972). Some parents/guardians worry that this type of openness of thought actually creates problems in their children, but McLeod and Chaffee noted that these families have children who are more likely to say they want to grow up and be like their parents/ guardians than the other three types.

Laissez-faire

The final family communication pattern, laissez-faire, is marked by both low concept- and socioorientations. In these families, there tends to be a lack of parent-child interaction or co-orientation. Instead, these children are more likely to be influenced by external factors like the media, peers, and other forces outside of the family unit. McLeod and Chaffee said that these children are more like a control group in an experiment because of the hands-off nature of their communicative relationships with their patterns. As such, it’s somewhat difficult to discuss the effectiveness of this study of family communication.

Family Systems Theory

At the turn of the 20th Century, philosophers started questioning how humans organize things and our understanding of

organizing. One critical theorist was Belarusian-born Alexander Aleksandrovich Bogdanov, who wrote a philosophical treaty on the nature of organization in 1922. Bogdanov's ideas ultimately influenced Ludwig von Bertalanffy's general systems theory. In a series of works, Bertalanffy conceptualized what has become known as general systems theory. Bertalanffy defined a system as "sets of elements standing in interrelation."

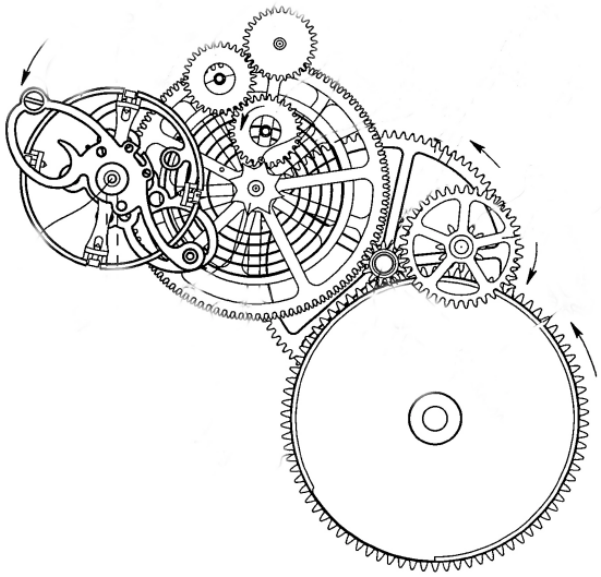


Figure 11.5.4: An analog watch illustrates how interconnected parts work together as a system. Similarly, families function as systems in which each member's behavior can influence the others and the family as a whole. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Roseusa via Wikimedia Commons)

You may not be familiar (few people are), but imagine the inner workings of an analog watch. In order for the watch to work, several small gears all work together and in a cyclical fashion. The balance wheel causes the fork pin to move, which turns the escapement wheel. The escapement wheel turns the third wheel (seconds), which turns the second wheel, which turns the first wheel (minutes), which turns the reduction gear, which turns the hour wheel. All of these different parts must work together to tell time. If a problem arises at any part of this process, then it will effect the entire system and our ability to tell time accurately.

So, how does this ultimately help us understand family communication? A psychiatrist named Murray Bowen developed **family systems theory** in the 1950s while working at the National Institute of Mental Health (Bowen, 1978). His theory stemmed from the work of general systems theory discussed by Bertalanffy. Like Bertalanffy, Bowen's theory started by examining how everything exists within nature and is governed by natural processes. Two of these processes, individuality and togetherness, became central to these ideas. (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). **Individuality** is a "universal, biological life force that propels organisms toward separateness, uniqueness, and distinctiveness." (Regina, 2011) **Togetherness**, on the other hand, is "the complementary, universal, biological life force that propels organisms toward relationship, attachment, and connectedness." (Regina, 2011). This essential dialectical tension creates an organism's differentiation, or its drive to be both individualistic while maintaining intimate connections with others in the larger environment. In essence, when we stop to think about a family as a system, it's much easier to understand the manifestations of behaviors of family members.

Characteristics of Family Systems

Over the years, numerous researchers have furthered the basic ideas of Murray Bowen to further our understanding of family systems. Part of this process has been identifying different characteristics of family systems. According to Kathleen Galvin, Fran Dickson, and Sherilyn Marrow (2006), there are seven essential characteristics of family systems: interdependence, wholeness, patterns/regularities, interactive complexity, openness, complex relationships, and equifinality.

Interdependence

The term interdependence means that changes in one part of the system will have ramifications for other parts of the system. For example, if one of the gears in your watch gets bent, the gear will affect the rest of the watch's ability to tell time. In this idea, the behaviors of one family member will impact the behaviors of other family members. To combine this idea with family communication patterns described earlier, parents/guardians that are high in socio-orientation and low in concept-orientation

will impact those children's willingness and openness to communicate about issues of disagreement.

On the larger issue of pathology, numerous diseases and addictions can impact how people behave and interact. If you have a family who has a child diagnosed with cancer, the focus of the entire family may shift to the care of that one child. If the parents/guardians rally the family in support, this diagnosis could bring everyone together. On the other hand, it's also possible that the complete focus of the parents/guardians turns to the ill child and the other children could feel unattended to or unloved, which could lead to feelings of isolation, jealousy, and resentment.

Wholeness

The idea of wholeness is to be able to see behaviors and outcomes within the context of the system. To understand how a watch tells time, you cannot just look at the fork pin's activity and understand the concept of time. In the same way, examining a single fight between two siblings cannot completely let you know everything you need to know about how that family interacts or how that fight came to happen. How siblings interact with one another can be manifestations of how they have observed their parents/guardians handle conflict among themselves or even extended family members like aunts/ uncles, grandparents, and cousins.

Wholeness is often discussed in opposite to reductionism. Reductionists believe that the best way to understand someone's communicative behavior is to break it down into the simplest parts that make up the system. For example, if a teenager exhibits verbal aggression, a reductionist would explain the verbally aggressive behavior in terms of hormones (specifically testosterone and serotonin). Holistic systems thinkers don't negate the different parts of the system, but rather like to take a larger view of everything that led to the verbally aggressive behavior. For example, does the teenager mirror their family's verbally aggressive tendencies? Basically, what other parts of the system are at play when examining a single behavioral outcome.

Patterns/Regularities

Families, like any natural organism, like balance and predictability. To help with this balance and predictability, systems (including family systems) create a complex series of both rules and norms. Rules are dictates that are spelled out. Many children grow up hearing, "children are to be seen and not heard." This rule dictates that in social situations, children are not supposed to make noise or actively communicate with others. Norms, on the other hand, are patterns of behavior that are arrived at through the system. For example, maybe your mother has a home office, and everyone knows that when she is in her office, she should not be disturbed.

Of course, one of the problems with patterns and regularities is that they become deeply entrenched and are not able to be changed or corrected quickly or easily. When a family is suddenly faced with a crisis event, these patterns and regularities may prevent the family from actively correcting the course. For example, imagine you live in a family where everyone is taught not to talk about the family's problems with anyone outside the family. If one of the family members starts having problems, the family may try to circle the wagons and ultimately not get the help it needs. Unfortunately, dealing with a crisis by closing ranks is not the best way to find solutions and resolutions; the family themselves may not have the skills or resources necessary.

Interactive Complexity

The notion of interactive complexity stems back to the original work conducted by Murray Bowen on family systems theory. In his initial research looking at schizophrenics, a lot of families labeled the schizophrenic as "the problem" or "the patient," which allowed them to put the blame for family problems and interactions on the schizophrenic. Instead, Bowen realized that schizophrenia was one person's diagnosis in a family system where there were usually multiple issues going on. Trying to reduce everything down to the one label, essentially letting everyone else "off the hook" for any blame for family problems, was not an accurate portrayal of the family.

Instead, it's important to think about interactions as complex and stemming from the system itself. For example, all married couples will have disagreements. Some married couples take these disagreements, and they become highly contentious fights. These fights are often repetitious and seen over and over again. Mary asks Anne to take out the trash. The next day Mary sees that the trash hasn't been taken out yet. Mary turns to Anne at breakfast and says, "Are you ever going to take out the trash?" Anne quickly replies, "Stop nagging me already. I'll get it done when I get it done." Before too long, this becomes a fight about Anne not listening to Mary from Mary's point-of-view, while the conversation becomes about Mary's constant nagging from Anne's point-of-view. Before long, the argument devolves into an argument about who started the conflict in the first place. Galvin, Dickson, and Marrow (2006) argue that trying to determine who started the conflict is not appropriate from a systems perspective, instead, researchers should focus on "current patterns serve to uncover ongoing complex issues."

Openness

The next major characteristic of systems is openness. The term openness refers to how permissive system boundaries are to their external environment. Some families have fairly open boundaries. In essence, these families allow for a constant inflow of information from the external environment and outflow of information to the external environment. Other families are considerably more rigid about system boundaries. For example, maybe a family is deeply religious and does not allow television in the home. Furthermore, this family only allows reading materials that come from their religious sect and actively prevents any ideas that may threaten their religious ideology. In this case, the family has a very rigid and closed boundary. When families close themselves off from the external environment, they essentially isolate themselves. Children who are reared in highly isolated family systems often have problems interacting with other children when they come into contact with them in the external environment (e.g., school). Some families will choose to homeschool their children as another tool to close the family system to foreign ideas and influences.

Complex Relationships

It's important to remember that all family systems also have multiple subsystems. One of the areas that Murray Bowen became very interested in was how family subsystems develop and function during times of crisis. In Bowen's view, a couple may be the basic unit within an emotional relationship. Still, any tension between the couple will usually result in one or both parties turning to others. If there are not others within the family itself, partners will bring external people into the instability. For example, if Sage and Tatum are in a romantic relationship and they are in a point of tension with one another, they may each turn to their best friend outside the romantic relationship for guidance. So now the relationship between Sage and Tatum is two triangles: the first is Sage and Tatum and Sage's best friend, and the second is Sage and Tatum and Tatum's best friend. From this perspective, we can understand families as being a complex layer of triad relationships.

Families are filled with relationship triangles. We could describe Sage and Tatum as parents and Noel and Angel as their children. So we now have triangles made up of the combinations of the parents and friends, the parents and children, the two children and one parent, one parent one child and a child's friend, etc. These triangles are always being created and defined within a family unit when there is instability between two people. During times of crisis, these triangles take on a solution to the instability in the two-person relationship. Unfortunately, this "solution" is either two-helping-one or a two-against-one. (Kerr, 2019) Basically, in a triangle, there are now two people on one side and one on the other, so it gives a sense of balance. The more family members we start to include, the more complicated these triangle structures become.

Equifinality

The final characteristic of family systems is equifinality. Equifinality is defined as the ability to get to the same end result using multiple starting points and paths. Going back to the basic definition of "family" discussed earlier in this chapter, there are many different ways for people to form relationships that are called families. Within family systems theory, the goal is to see how different family systems achieve the same outcomes (whether positive or negative).

Sibling Relationships

After examining the literature related to siblings, Shirley McGuire, Susan M. McHale, and Kimberly Updegraff (1996) realized that two main concepts were commonly discussed in the literature: hostility and warmth. Sibling hostility was characterized by such sibling behaviors as causing trouble, getting into fights, teasing/name-calling, taking things without permission, etc. Sibling warmth, on the other hand, was characterized by sibling behaviors such as sharing secrets, helping each other, teaching each other, showing physical affection, sharing possessions, etc. Research has shown us that warmth and hostility have an impact on sibling relationships. For example, individuals who have higher levels of sibling warmth are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior. Individuals who have sibling relationships that are high in hostility are more likely to report higher levels of aggression, anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

McGuire, McHale, and Updegraff knew that these two dimensions were distinct from one another, so they set out to create a typology of sibling relationships based on hostility (high vs. low) and warmth (high vs. low).

Harmonious

The first type of sibling relationship is the harmonious relationship. Harmonious sibling relationships are characterized by low levels of hostility and high levels of warmth. In these relationships, the siblings get along very well and have very low levels

of problematic conflict. Often siblings in this category get along so well that they are very close friends in addition to being siblings. When it comes to long-term outcomes, harmonious siblings were found to have lower feelings of loneliness and higher self-esteems. (Sherman, Lansford, & Volling, 2006). Research has also found gender effects. When sibling pairs are both female, they are more likely to report harmonious relationships than the other three sibling relationship types. At the same time, the combination of gender and birth-order also makes a difference. Males who are the firstborn are less likely to report harmonious sibling relationships. (Derkman, 2011).

Hostile

The opposite type of the harmonious sibling relationship is the hostile sibling relationship, which is characterized by high levels of hostility and low levels of warmth. These relationships are marked by high levels of conflict between the siblings, which can often be highly physically and verbally aggressive. Furthermore, individuals in hostile sibling relationships are more likely to internalize problems as well as experience lower academic success, social competence, and feelings of self-worth. These people often perceive their siblings as rivals within the family unit, so there is an inherent competition for scarce resources. Often these resources are related to parental attention, respect, and love. (Buist & Vermande, 2014)

Affect-Intense

The third sibling type is the affect-intense relationship. Affect-intense sibling relationships are marked by both high levels of hostility and warmth. These sibling relationships are as nurturing as harmonious relationships and as dominating as hostile relationships. These relationships are also perceived as more satisfying than hostile sibling relationships. (Derkman, 2011). In one study examining affect-intense sibling relationships, researchers found that 38% of siblings from divorced families reported their sibling relationships as affect-intense as compared to only 22% of siblings from intact families.

Uninvolved

The last type of sibling relationship is called the uninvolved, which is characterized by low levels of both hostility and warmth. Uninvolved sibling relationships typically don't have any of the problems associated with affect-intense or hostile sibling relationships. They also do not report any of the benefits that have been found with harmonious sibling relationships. Uninvolved sibling relationships also appear to develop later in life. "Perhaps the separation processes and increased focus on peers that begin during adolescence stimulate the development of an uninvolved sibling relationship." (Buise & Vermande, 2014)

Sibling Relationship Maintenance

One area where communication scholars have been instrumental in the field of sibling relationships has been in relationship maintenance, or the communicative behaviors that one engages in to preserve a relationship with another person. In one of the earliest studies to examine sibling relationships in the field, Scott Myers and a group of students explored the connection between relationship communication and sibling communication satisfaction, liking, and loving. (Myers et al, 1999). Equality, receptivity, immediacy, similarity, and composure were all positively related to communication satisfaction. Composure, equality, similarity, and receptivity were all positively related to sibling liking. Equality, similarity, and receptivity were positively related to loving one's sibling. The researchers also noted that individuals who perceived their relationships as more formal reported lower levels of loving their siblings. This first study helped pave the way for future research in examining how relationship communication impacts sibling relationships.

In a follow-up study, Scott Myers and Keith Weber (2004) set out to construct a measure for analyzing how individuals use communication to maintain their sibling relationships. In their research, Myers and Weber found six distinct ways that siblings maintain their relationships through communication: confirmation, humor, social support, family visits, escape, and verbal aggression

Confirmation

The first way that siblings engage in relational maintenances is through confirmation. Confirmation messages help a sibling communicate how much they value the sibling. Sometimes it's as simple as telling a sibling, "I'm pretty lucky to have a brother/sister like you." This sentence can be an easy way to demonstrate how much someone means to you. These types of messages help validate the other sibling and the relationship.

Humor

A second relational maintenance tool that siblings can use is humor. Being able to laugh with one's sibling is a great way to enjoy each other's company. Often siblings find things completely hilarious that outsiders may not understand because of the unique nature of sibling relationships. Siblings also can lovingly make fun of each other. Now, we're not talking about making fun of someone in a demeaning or mean-spirited manner. For example, one of our coauthors has an older brother who loves to give him a hard time. Recently, our coauthor misspelled something on Facebook, and his brother was right there to point it out and give him a hard time. In some relationships, this could be viewed as criticism, but because of the nature of their relationship, our coauthor knew the incident should be taken in jest.

Social Support

The third way siblings engage in relational maintenances is through social support. Social support is an individual's perception and the actuality that an individual is loved and cared for and has people he/she/ they can turn to when assistance or help is needed. Between siblings, this could involve conversations about one's romantic life or even about parental concerns. Another way that siblings often provide social support is by giving and seeking advice from her/his/their sibling(s).

Family Events

The fourth way that families engage in social support is through family events. Not all families are big on family events, but some families participate in close-knit gatherings regularly. Some siblings will avoid these events to avoid seeing their other siblings, but many siblings see these opportunities as a way to keep their sibling relationships going. One of our coauthor's family has problems getting together each year during the holidays because of how busy their schedules are in December. Instead, our coauthor and family go on family trips. Over the years, they've gone to Australia, Alaska, Hawaii, The Bahamas, San Francisco, New York City, New Zealand, and many other places. Currently, they're planning trips to Belize and back to Hawaii. The family looks forward to these vacations together. In addition to these trips, our coauthor's father also arranges periodic family reunions for his side of the family. Our coauthor and their sibling often end up rooming together because both are single. Ultimately, both look forward to these reunions because it gives them a chance to catch up.

Escape

It's often great to attend family events, but we usually only like to attend when we know our sibling will be there. In these cases, we often use our siblings as a form of escape. In fact, some siblings will only attend family get-togethers when they know their sibling(s) will be there. We often have a range of reasons for why we need to escape when we're interacting with our family, but we are sure glad our sibling(s) are there when we need that escape.

Verbal Aggression

The final relational maintenance strategy that siblings have been found to use is verbal aggression. Verbal aggression is generally not viewed as a positive tool for communication. However, some sibling pairs have realized over time that verbally aggressive behavior allows them to get their way or vent their frustrations. However, in the original study by Weber and Myers, the researchers did find that all of the other relational maintenance strategies were positively related to sibling liking, commitment, and trust, but verbal aggression was not.

Ultimately, families are a social and cultural construct with complex systems with complex subsystems. There is no definitive predetermination of what defines a family, and what makes a family and good family from a bad family. But hopefully this discussion of family systems and communication patterns can give you some insight in to how your family operates, perhaps where you family struggles, and some skills to improve the affectual care and harmony in your family system.

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11.6: Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Relationships are a central part of interpersonal communication, but they vary considerably in structure, purpose, intimacy, and expectations. Relationships develop through interaction and communication, and they can change as individuals' needs, circumstances, and levels of commitment change. Understanding relational development allows us to examine how relationships begin, evolve, become more intimate or distant, and sometimes end. Different theories of relational development provide frameworks for understanding these changes and the communication behaviors associated with them.

Professional relationships represent another important form of interpersonal connection. Relationships in workplaces are shaped by organizational roles, power differences, professional expectations, and ethical considerations. Supervisory and peer relationships can influence communication, performance, satisfaction, and organizational culture, while workplace romantic relationships and problematic relationships introduce additional challenges involving boundaries, professionalism, power, and potential consequences for individuals and organizations.

Friendships are voluntary relationships that can provide companionship, emotional support, enjoyment, belonging, and opportunities for self-expression. Unlike many relationships that are established through family, legal, or institutional structures, friendships are maintained largely through ongoing communication and mutual choice. Friendship expectations can vary based on factors such as intimacy, similarity, proximity, social context, and life stage, demonstrating the importance of communication in creating and sustaining meaningful friendships.

Romantic and sexual relationships involve additional dimensions of intimacy, attraction, commitment, communication, and personal boundaries. These relationships can take many forms and are influenced by cultural expectations and individual preferences. Effective communication is particularly important when partners negotiate expectations, express affection, manage conflict, discuss sexual and emotional needs, establish boundaries, and make decisions about commitment and the future of the relationship.

Families and chosen families demonstrate perhaps the greatest diversity of relationship structures. Traditional definitions of family have often excluded many people and relationship arrangements, while contemporary approaches recognize families formed through marriage, blood, adoption, and choice. Family systems theory emphasizes that family members are interconnected and that communication patterns, boundaries, roles, and relationship dynamics affect the larger system. Across all of these relationship structures, the chapter demonstrates that relationships are created and maintained through communication and that understanding relational diversity is essential to understanding interpersonal communication.

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11.7: Key Terms and Conceptual Tools

Terms and Concepts to Know

- Active friendships
- Active strategy
- Affect
- Agape
- Asexual
- Asymmetrical power relationship
- Attraction theory
- Behavioral uncertainty
- Boundaries
- Chosen Family
- Cohabitation
- Cognitive uncertainty
- Collegial peers
- Commemorative friendships
- Compulsory monogamy
- Concept-Oriented Communication
- Contact frequency
- Demographics
- Demisexual
- Deviant workplace behavior
- Dormant friendships
- Eros
- Family
- Family Systems Theory
- Heteronormativity
- Heteropatriarchy
- Homophobia
- Hyperpersonal communication theory
- Individuality
- Information peers
- Interaction variability
- Interactional dialectics
- Interactive strategy
- Interpersonal needs theory
- Involuntary relationship
- Kinship
- Ludic
- Mania
- Nascent stage friendship
- Passive strategy
- Personal relationship
- Physical attractiveness
- Platonic relationship
- Pragma
- Principle of reciprocity
- Relational dialectics theory
- Role-delimited interaction
- Romantic identity
- Romantic relationship
- Self-disclosure
- Sexuality

- Social attractiveness
- Social exchange theory
- Social penetration theory
- Social relationship
- Socio-Oriented Communication
- Special peers
- Stabilized friendships
- Storge
- Symmetrical power relationship
- Task attractiveness
- Togetherness
- Uncertainty reduction theory
- Voluntary Kin
- Waning friendships

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11.8: Discussions and Exercises

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. How do relationships change over time, and what role does communication play in those changes? Use concepts from relational development to explain how communication can strengthen, transform, or weaken a relationship.
2. How does the context of a relationship affect the way people communicate? Compare communication in a professional relationship with communication in a friendship, romantic relationship, or family relationship.
3. What makes friendships different from relationships that are based on family, law, or organizational roles? Discuss the role of voluntary choice, communication, reciprocity, and relationship maintenance.
4. How can interpersonal communication help people negotiate intimacy, boundaries, expectations, and conflict in romantic and sexual relationships? Consider how differences in expectations can affect relational outcomes.
5. What can the concept of chosen family teach us about the nature of interpersonal relationships? Discuss how communication, mutual support, choice, and shared practices can create meaningful relationships outside traditional definitions of family.

Chapter Exercises

1. Relationship Development Map
    1. Choose an interpersonal relationship from your own experience or create a fictional relationship.
    2. Create a timeline showing how the relationship developed and changed. Identify important communication events that contributed to increased closeness, conflict, change, or distance.
2. Relationship Context Comparison
    1. Choose two different relationship types from the chapter; for example, a friendship and a professional relationship.
    2. Create a comparison chart identifying differences in communication expectations, power, intimacy, boundaries, conflict, and relationship maintenance.
3. Friendship Maintenance Plan
    1. Develop a communication plan for maintaining an important friendship over time.
    2. Identify at least five specific communication behaviors that could support trust, reciprocity, emotional support, connection, and conflict management.
4. Relationship Communication Scenario
    1. Create a fictional scenario involving a difficult conversation in a romantic, professional, friendship, or family relationship.
    2. Write the ineffective version of the conversation first, then rewrite it using effective interpersonal communication strategies. Explain what you changed and why.
5. Relationship Structures Reflection
    1. Create a relationship map showing the different interpersonal relationships in a fictional person's life. Include friends, family or chosen family, romantic or sexual partners, and professional relationships.
    2. Identify how communication expectations differ across these relationships and explain how communication in one relationship might affect another.

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11.9: Alternative Descriptions for Chapter 11

Figure 11.5.1: For Children, Growing Diversity in Family Living Arrangements

The chart, titled “For children, growing diversity in family living arrangements,” compares the living arrangements of children under 18 in the United States in 1960, 1980, and 2014. The largest change is a decline in children living with two parents in their first marriage, from 73% in 1960 to 46% in 2014. During the same period, the percentage living with a single parent increased from 9% to 26%. The share living with two remarried parents remained relatively stable at 14% in 1960, 16% in 1980, and 15% in 2014. Children living with no parent accounted for 4% in 1960 and 1980 and 5% in 2014. In 2014, an additional 7% of children lived with cohabiting parents. Overall, the chart illustrates that there is no longer one dominant family living arrangement for U.S. children.

Figure 11.5.2: Median Age at First Marriage

The graph compares the median age at first marriage for men and women in the United States from 1890 through the early 2020s. Men have consistently married at older ages than women. For both groups, the median age declined from 1890 through the middle of the 20th century, reaching its lowest point around the 1950s and 1960s. Since then, the trend has reversed: the median age at first marriage has risen substantially, reaching approximately 30 years for men and 28 years for women in the most recent data. The graph illustrates the long-term shift toward later marriage in the United States. The data come from U.S. Census Bureau decennial censuses and the Current Population Survey.

Figure 11.5.2: Marriage and Divorce Rates

The bar chart compares marriage and divorce rates in the United States from 1990 through 2020, measured as rates per 1,000 people. Both rates declined over the period. The marriage rate fell from 9.8 in 1990 to 8.2 in 2000, 6.8 in 2010, and 5.1 in 2020. The divorce rate declined more gradually, from 4.7 in 1990 to 4.0 in 2000, 3.6 in 2005 and 2010, 3.1 in 2015, and 2.3 in 2020. Overall, the figure shows that divorce is not increasing; rather, both marriage and divorce have declined, with marriage declining at a faster rate. Data are from the CDC's National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends and Monthly Vital Statistics Reports.

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