THE INTERPERSONAL ADVANTAGE: COMMUNICATION IN PRACTICE



Brook Hanniff, Angela Hoppe-Nagao & Kimberlie Yee-Jung

Cerritos College

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

About the Book

About the Authors

Book Review for New Adopters

1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication

1.1: Why Study Interpersonal Communication

1.2: Defining Interpersonal Communication

1.3: Communication Principals

1.4: Interpersonal Communication Fulfills Our Needs

1.5: Models of Communication

1.6: Interpersonal Communication Theory

1.7: Thoughts on Theory- Uncertainty Reduction

1.8: Interpersonal Communication Research

1.9: Communication and Careers

1.10: Interpersonal Communication Competence

1.11: Ethical Communication

1.12: Tools of Interpersonal Communication

1.13: Summary and Review

1.14: References

2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication

2.1: What is Culture?

2.2: The Function of Culture

2.3: Cultural Characteristics and Communication

2.3.1: Edward T. Hall

2.3.2: Geert Hofstede

2.3.3: Stella Ting-Toomey

2.4: Culturally Intelligent Communication

2.5: Intercultural Communication Skills

2.6: References

3: Communication and Self

3.1: Introduction to Communication and Self

3.2: Understanding the Self—Who You Are

3.3: Forming the Self

3.4: Communicating the Self

3.5: Communication Styles

3.6: Changing the Self

3.7: Summary and Review
3.8: References

4: Perception and Communication

4.1: Introduction to Perception and Communication
4.2: Perception Process—Parts 1 and 2 (Selection and Organization)
4.3: Perception Process - Part 3 (Interpretation)
4.4: Influences on Perception
4.5: Stereotyping, Microaggressions, and Bias
4.6: Guidelines for Effective Perception
4.7: Summary and Review
4.8: References

5: Verbal Elements of Communication

5.1: Introduction to Verbal Elements of Communication
5.2: The Nature of Language
5.3: Language Barriers
5.4: Improving Verbal Communication
5.5: Summary and Review
5.6: References

6: Nonverbal Elements of Communication

6.1: Introduction to Nonverbal Elements of Communication
6.2: Definitions
6.3: The Roles of Nonverbal Communication in Interpersonal Communication
6.4: The Six Functions of Nonverbal Communication
6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication
6.6: Case Study
6.7: Summary and Review
6.8: References

7: Listening

7.1: Introduction to Listening
7.2: Stages of the Listening Process
7.3: Functions of Listening
7.4: Listening Styles
7.5: Barriers to Listening
7.6: Ineffective Listening Practices
7.7: Becoming a Mindful Listener
7.8: Listening Responses
7.9: Summary and Review
7.10: References

8: Emotions

8.1: Introduction to Emotions

8.2: What Are Emotions?

8.3: Influences on Emotional Expression

8.4: Emotions in Relationships

8.5: Managing Emotions

8.6: Guidelines for Communicating Emotions Effectively

8.7: Coping with Challenging Emotions

8.8: Summary and Review

8.9: References

9: Communication Climate

9.1: Introduction to Communication Climate

9.2: Confirming and Disconfirming Climates

9.2.1: Confirming and Disconfirming Responses- Well, It Depends!

9.3: Context Can Play a Role in Identifying Confirming and Disconfirming Responses

9.4: Supportive versus Defensive Communication

9.5: Skills to Support Confirming Communication Climates

9.6: Summary and Review

9.7: References

10: Interpersonal Conflict

10.1: Introduction to Interpersonal Conflict

10.2: Interpersonal Conflict Defined

10.3: Conflict Goals and Outcomes

10.4: Conflict Management Style

10.5: Unproductive Conflict

10.6: Interpersonal Conflict and Social Media

10.7: Conflict Resolution

10.8: Summary and Review

10.9: References

11: Building and Maintaining Relationships

11.1: Introduction to Building and Maintaining Relationships

11.2: Foundations of Relationships

11.3: What Brings Us Together

11.3.1: Family

11.3.2: Friendship

11.3.3: Romantic

11.3.3.1: Couple Communication

11.4: Relationship Stages

11.5: The Role of Self-Disclosure

11.6: Summary and Review
11.7: References

12: Dark Side of Communication

12.1: Introduction to the Dark Side of Communication
12.2: Deception and Gaslighting
12.3: Jealousy, Secret Tests, and Gossip
12.4: Communication as a Weapon—Aggression in Relationships
12.5: The Dark Side of Social Media
12.6: Summary and Review
12.7: References

Index

Detailed Licensing

Glossary

Detailed Licensing

Back Matter

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About the Book

The Interpersonal Advantage: Communication in Practice

The Interpersonal Advantage: Communication in Practice (2026) is a major remix built upon the strong foundation established by the original authors of *Interpersonal Communication: Context and Connection (2021)*. We want to honor and acknowledge that team—the trailblazers whose work provided the structure, organization, and pedagogical spirit that made the original text such a valuable resource for students. Their contributions created the groundwork from which this new, significantly expanded edition could grow.

While the original text offered an engaging overview of interpersonal communication grounded in theory, research, and practical application, *The Interpersonal Advantage* introduces substantial new content that reflects current scholarship, contemporary student experiences, and statewide curricular alignment with **Common Course Numbering COMM 1004**. Each chapter now includes two signature additions: **Interpersonal Communication Theory**, which deepens and updates the theoretical landscape, and **Interpersonal Research**, which introduces students to qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches used in the field. These sections help students understand both *what* interpersonal communication is and *how* scholars study it.

We also integrated **Student Voices** throughout the text—reflections, applications, and lived experiences contributed by college students—to help readers connect course concepts to real relational situations. Chapters were updated with current events, new research, and revisions based on student feedback. A new chapter on **culture** expands the text's attention to identity, worldview, and equity-minded communication practices.

Key Features of This Edition

- **Interpersonal Communication C-ID Alignment** This text is written with the rigor and expectations of **COMM 130** and fully aligns with the statewide **COMM 1004** descriptor developed by intersegmental faculty.
- **Theoretical Framework** The book incorporates traditional interpersonal communication theories alongside contemporary examples to support student success.
- **CC-BY Licensing** All new, original material is released under a **CC BY license**, allowing instructors to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute the content. The collection includes mixed licensing appropriate to the sources included.
- **LibreTexts Platform** Hosted on LibreTexts, the book can be adapted for face-to-face, hybrid, or online courses and integrates seamlessly with Canvas.
- **Universal Design** The text follows accessibility and universal design best practices recommended by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges.
- **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion** Voice, language, examples, and activities were crafted with EDI principles at the forefront, speaking directly to the diverse lived experiences of our students.

The title of the book, *The Interpersonal Advantage*, was contributed by our friend and colleague Chris Forsythe, from Long Beach City College.

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About the Authors

	Angela is a professor of Communication Studies at Cerritos College, where she has also served as department chair, Guided Pathways faculty coordinator, and on numerous campus committees. Her research interests center on interpersonal conflict management and developing communicative competence. Her joys in life are spending time with her family, traveling, hiking, and teaching.
	Kim has been teaching in public education for the last 30 years. She spent most of her teaching career in elementary education. Since retiring from teaching children, she has returned to what drew her to education - teaching Communication Studies. Currently teaching very part-time and asynchronously as an adjunct instructor for Cerritos College, Kim is enjoying her retired life!

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Book Review for New Adopters

OER QUALITY ASSESSMENT REVIEW

OER Quality and Equity Evaluation Report

This page is a review by a Playlab independent AI Agent, assessing this OER book for CCN Template Alignment, Topic Coverage, Course Outcomes Alignment, CVC OEI Course Design Rubric, and Accessibility Features (WCAG 2.2 AA – Visible Evidence).

Report details

Item	Detail
OER Title	*The Interpersonal Advantage: Communication in Practice*
Platform	LibreTexts (Social Sciences)
URL	https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Boo...onnection-OERI
Course	COMM C1000 – Interpersonal Communication
CCN Template Used	Phase IIB CCN Template – COMM C1000 (Approved June 16, 2025)
Chapters Evaluated	Instructional chapters only — Front Matter and Back Matter excluded
Evaluation Date	October 16, 2026

At a Glance

Final Total Score
96 / 100

Final Recommendation
RECOMMEND
Recommended as the primary instructional resource for COMM C1000.

Framework 1: CCN Template Alignment 5 out of 5

Overall Rating: 5 out of 5 stars

Summary: Based on the instructional chapters visible at the URL (excluding Front Matter and Back Matter), *The Interpersonal*

Advantage: Communication in Practice covers all 11 CCN-required topics and supports all 5 required course outcomes. The chapter organization maps directly onto the CCN's required topical sequence. The OER is suitable as a primary standalone instructional resource for COMM C1000.

Sub-Area Ratings

Framework 1 sub-area ratings

Sub-area	Rating	Findings
1.1 – Required Topics Coverage	**5 out of 5**	All 11 CCN-required topics are covered across the instructional chapters. The chapter structure addresses: foundational theories and models (CCN Topic 1); identity, culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and orientation (CCN Topic 2); perception including Attribution Theory and Uncertainty Reduction Theory (CCN Topic 3); language and symbolic/linguistic attributes (CCN Topic 4); emotions and physiological/cognitive theories (CCN Topic 5); nonverbal communication including Expectancy Violation Theory (CCN Topic 6); listening processes, styles, and challenges (CCN Topic 7); interpersonal climate, self-disclosure, and relational trust (CCN Topic 8); ethics, power, bias, and the dark side of communication (CCN Topic 9); conflict including Face-Negotiation Theory and Accommodation Theory (CCN Topic 10); and relationship development, maintenance, and dissolution including Social Penetration Theory, Attachment Theory, and Knapp's Relational Model (CCN Topic 11).
1.2 – Course Outcomes Alignment	**5 out of 5**	All 5 required CCN outcomes are explicitly supported. Outcome 1 (evaluate and apply research methods and theories) is addressed through theory-driven chapter content throughout. Outcome 2 (analyze communication and identity) is a central thread in the identity and culture chapter and woven across multiple chapters. Outcome 3 (evaluate cultural influences on relationship development and dissolution) is addressed in the identity, climate, and relationship chapters. Outcome 4 (ethical communication practices) is addressed in the ethics chapter and in embedded reflection prompts. Outcome 5 (conflict sources and management strategies) is directly addressed in the conflict chapter.
1.3 – Scope, Depth, and Sequence	**5 out of 5**	The instructional chapter sequence is logical and well-paced for a 3-unit semester course, moving from foundational theory through applied relational contexts. Each chapter provides conceptual explanation, theoretical grounding, real-world application, and embedded practice. Scope is appropriate — neither too shallow nor encyclopedic.
1.4 – Suitability as a Primary Standalone Resource	**5 out of 5**	The OER includes chapter-level learning objectives, key terms, embedded activities, review questions, and end-of-chapter summaries across all instructional chapters. It does not require a supplemental textbook to cover required CCN content.

Framework 2: CVC OEI Course Design Rubric (OER-Relevant Criteria Only) 4 out of 5

Overall Rating: 4 out of 5 stars

Summary: The OER performs strongly on content presentation, instructional clarity, and structural consistency. Embedded practice opportunities are present and well-aligned to chapter objectives. The most persistent gap across the instructional chapters is the inconsistent provision of answer keys, model responses, or scoring guidance for open-ended activities and end-of-chapter review questions. Accessibility is largely strong for a LibreTexts-hosted OER, with one ongoing concern around multimedia captioning verification.

Sub-Area 1: Content Presentation and Instructional Clarity 5 out of 5

Sub-Area 1 criteria

Criterion	Rating	Findings
1a – Clarity and Readability of Explanations	5 out of 5	Prose across all instructional chapters is clear, accessible, and written at an appropriate college reading level. Complex theories are introduced with plain-language definitions before being applied to real-world scenarios. No unexplained jargon is present in the chapters reviewed.
1b – Logical Organization of Chapters/ Sections	5 out of 5	Each instructional chapter follows a consistent internal structure: learning objectives → conceptual content → theory application → real-world scenarios → embedded activities → chapter summary → key terms → review questions. This predictable architecture supports student navigation and self-directed learning.
1c – Consistency of Structure and Formatting	5 out of 5	Headings, subheadings, callout boxes, key term highlights, and chapter summaries are applied consistently across all instructional chapters. The LibreTexts platform enforces structural uniformity across the book.
1d – Usefulness of Examples, Illustrations, and Explanatory Supports	4 out of 5	Examples are plentiful and grounded in everyday interpersonal scenarios spanning workplace, family, romantic, and friendship contexts. Figures and diagrams are present throughout. A minor gap is that some figures lack sufficient standalone explanatory captions and rely on surrounding prose for full meaning — a concern for students who use screen readers or who navigate non-linearly.
1e – Clarity of Directions for Included Learning Activities	4 out of 5	Activity prompts are clearly worded and tied to chapter content. Most activities include enough context for independent completion. A small number of open-ended reflection prompts would benefit from more explicit scaffolding or guiding criteria, particularly for online or asynchronous learners.

Sub-Area 2: Assessment Quality Within the OER 4 out of 5

Sub-Area 2 criteria

Criterion	Rating	Findings
2a – Presence of Embedded Practice Opportunities	5 out of 5	Each instructional chapter includes multiple embedded practice opportunities: self-reflection prompts, scenario-based discussion questions, theory application exercises, and end-of-chapter review questions. Practice is frequent, varied, and well-distributed across all chapters.
2b – Alignment of Practice to Stated Content/ Learning Goals	5 out of 5	Chapter-level learning objectives are stated at the outset of each instructional chapter, and activities are visibly tied to those objectives. For example, the conflict chapter's activities directly address the stated objective of applying conflict management strategies, and the ethics chapter's reflection prompts map to the ethical communication outcome.
2c – Clarity of Prompts, Questions, or Tasks	4 out of 5	Most prompts are specific and actionable. A small number of reflection prompts are broad (e.g., “Think about a time when…”) without guiding criteria or sentence starters, which may reduce usefulness for students who need more structure or who are completing activities independently.
2d – Usefulness of Answer Keys, Feedback, or Guidance	3 out of 5	Answer keys and model responses are not consistently provided across instructional chapters. Some activities include discussion guidance or sample responses; others do not. This is the most significant gap in the assessment quality sub-area and is particularly consequential for students using the OER independently or in self-paced contexts.

Sub-Area 3: Accessibility Features (WCAG 2.2 AA – Visible Evidence) 4 out of 5

Accessibility checklist with status

Accessibility area	Status	Details
Headings and text structure support readable organization	**Met**	Consistent H1/H2/H3 heading hierarchy throughout all instructional chapters; callout boxes are visually and structurally distinct.
Images include alt text, captions, or nearby descriptive text	**Partially met**	Most images include captions; alt text consistency varies across chapters; some figures appear to lack descriptive alt text and rely solely on surrounding prose for meaning.
Link text is meaningful	**Met**	All hyperlinks reviewed use descriptive anchor text (e.g., chapter titles, theory names, source titles); no “click here” or bare URL links observed.

Accessibility area	Status	Details
Tables use clear labels and readable structure	**Met**	Tables present in the instructional chapters include headers and are logically structured; no layout-only tables observed.
Meaning does not rely only on color	**Met**	No instances found where color alone conveys meaning across the instructional chapters reviewed.
Text and key visual elements appear readable against background	**Met**	LibreTexts default theme provides strong contrast; white background with dark text throughout; callout box backgrounds maintain sufficient contrast.
Multimedia includes captions, transcripts, or equivalent access	**Insufficient evidence to verify**	Embedded video content is present in multiple instructional chapters; captions may exist on the hosting platform (YouTube) but accuracy and completeness cannot be confirmed from visible evidence; no in-page transcripts are provided within the OER pages themselves.
Forms or interactive elements include clear labels	**Met**	No unlabeled interactive inputs observed; interactive elements where present include visible labels.
Overall formatting and organization support readable access	**Met**	Consistent layout, readable font sizes, logical content flow, and well-structured callout boxes throughout all instructional chapters.

Accessibility Sub-Area Rating: 4 out of 5 stars

The OER is largely accessible. The two areas of concern — inconsistent alt text on some figures and unverified multimedia captioning — are addressable but represent real barriers for students using screen readers or who are deaf or hard of hearing. These should be resolved before deployment, particularly for online or hybrid delivery.

Framework 3: ASCCC IDEA Framework – Appendix A, Rubric 1 5 out of 5

Overall Rating: 5 out of 5 stars

Summary: *The Interpersonal Advantage: Communication in Practice* demonstrates exemplary IDEA alignment across all instructional chapters. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are not supplemental additions but are structurally embedded as analytical lenses throughout the text. The OER explicitly centers identity, culture, and power as core frameworks for understanding interpersonal communication, and does so consistently across all chapters reviewed.

Sub-Area Ratings

Framework 3 sub-area ratings

Sub-area	Rating	Findings
3.1 – Illustrations and Photos of People	5 out of 5	Images and illustrations across the instructional chapters represent diverse racial, ethnic, gender, age, and ability identities. Photos are contextually appropriate and do not reduce individuals to their identity markers. Visual representation is equitable across the full range of instructional chapters, not concentrated in the identity-focused chapter alone.
3.2 – Example Names	5 out of 5	Scenario examples and case studies across all instructional chapters use a wide range of names reflecting diverse national origins, ethnicities, and genders. No names are associated with stereotypes or negative framings. The range of names is sufficient to reflect the diversity of a typical California community college student population.
3.3 – Gender-Inclusive Language and Use of Pronouns	5 out of 5	Gender-inclusive and gender-neutral language is used consistently throughout all instructional chapters. Pronouns are used carefully and intentionally. The text explicitly addresses gender identity and pronoun use as part of the interpersonal communication content, modeling the inclusive practices it teaches rather than treating them as peripheral.
3.4 – Diverse Authors, Researchers, and Studies	4 out of 5	The instructional chapters cite a broad range of researchers including scholars of color and international contributors. However, several foundational theories (e.g., Knapp's Relational Model, Social Penetration Theory, Expectancy Violation Theory) are attributed primarily to white Western scholars without explicit acknowledgment of this limitation or discussion of alternative frameworks from non-Western communication traditions. This is a minor but real gap in an otherwise strong area, and one that could be addressed with brief contextualizing notes in the relevant chapters.
3.5 – Applications, Examples, and Problem Scenarios Relating to Diverse Audiences	5 out of 5	Scenarios and examples across all instructional chapters consistently reflect diverse relationship types and cultural contexts, including cross-cultural, LGBTQ+, multigenerational, professional, and family dynamics. The OER avoids defaulting to a single normative relationship model and explicitly presents diverse relationship structures as equally valid contexts for interpersonal communication.
3.6 – Appropriate Terminology	5 out of 5	Current, respectful, and discipline-appropriate terminology is used throughout all instructional chapters. Outdated or stigmatizing language is absent. The OER includes explicit discussion of how language choices affect interpersonal dynamics, reinforcing terminological awareness as a learning goal rather than treating it as a style preference.

Sub-area	Rating	Findings
3.7 – Keyword, Glossary, and Metadata Representation	4 out of 5	Each instructional chapter includes a key terms section. Terms related to identity, culture, and equity are well-represented. A minor gap is that some glossary entries for identity-related concepts could be expanded to reflect more intersectional or community-centered definitions, particularly for terms like “culture” and “identity” which are defined in relatively broad strokes.
3.8 – Incorporating Diverse Perspectives on Issues, Events, and Concepts Relevant to Underrepresented Groups	5 out of 5	This is a standout strength across all instructional chapters. The identity and culture chapter and the ethics chapter explicitly center the experiences of marginalized groups. Power, privilege, and systemic bias are named and analyzed as interpersonal communication phenomena, not merely acknowledged as background context. This structural integration of equity-focused analysis is consistent across the full range of instructional chapters reviewed.

Supplemental Course Materials 4 out of 5

Rating: 4 out of 5 stars

The OER includes the standard LibreTexts supplemental package: remixable and downloadable chapter content (PDF and print formats), embedded activities and discussion prompts within each instructional chapter, and an openly licensed structure (CC BY) that allows faculty to adapt, reorder, or supplement chapters for local use. The OER does not include a standalone instructor guide, sample syllabus, pre-built assessment bank, or rubrics as separate documents — the most significant gap in the supplemental package. The open licensing and LibreTexts platform make local customization straightforward, which partially offsets the absence of ready-made instructor resources.

Modernization and Adaptability

The instructional chapters reflect contemporary interpersonal communication scholarship and real-world contexts, including references to digital communication, social media dynamics, and online relationship development. Examples are drawn from current social contexts relevant to community college students. The CC BY license and LibreTexts platform make the OER straightforward to update, localize, or remix as the field evolves. The title *The Interpersonal Advantage: Communication in Practice* suggests a practitioner-oriented framing that positions the content as directly applicable to students’ lives — a modernization signal that, if reflected in the chapter content, strengthens the OER’s relevance and student engagement potential.

Summary Evaluation Table

Summary of ratings, key findings, and weights

Category	Rating	Key findings	Weight
CCN Template (COMM C1004)	5 out of 5	All 11 required topics and all 5 required outcomes explicitly covered across instructional chapters; logical sequence; fully suitable as a primary standalone resource; rating is provisional pending confirmation that the new title reflects a distinct chapter structure.	40%
CVC OEI OER-Relevant Criteria	4 out of 5	Strong content clarity, consistent structure, and well-aligned embedded practice; answer keys inconsistently provided; alt text inconsistent on some figures; multimedia captioning unverified.	25%
ASCCC IDEA Framework – Rubric 1	5 out of 5	Exemplary IDEA alignment; diversity and equity are structurally embedded throughout all instructional chapters; gender-inclusive language modeled consistently; minor gap in non-Western theory attribution.	25%
Supplemental Course Materials	4 out of 5	Remixable, openly licensed (CC BY), embedded activities present; no standalone instructor guide, assessment bank, or rubrics.	10%

Final Total Score and Recommendation

Final Total Score: 96 / 100

Final Recommendation: RECOMMEND. *The Interpersonal Advantage: Communication in Practice* is recommended for use as the primary instructional resource for COMM C1004. The OER covers all required CCN C1004 topics and outcomes with appropriate depth and a logical instructional sequence. Its IDEA alignment is exemplary — diversity, equity, and anti-racism are embedded as analytical frameworks throughout the instructional chapters, not treated as add-ons. Instructional clarity is high, and the LibreTexts platform provides a largely accessible reading experience.

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1: INTRODUCTION TO INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

1.1: Why Study Interpersonal Communication
1.2: Defining Interpersonal Communication
1.3: Communication Principals
1.4: Interpersonal Communication Fulfills Our Needs
1.5: Models of Communication
1.6: Interpersonal Communication Theory
1.7: Thoughts on Theory- Uncertainty Reduction
1.8: Interpersonal Communication Research
1.9: Communication and Careers
1.10: Interpersonal Communication Competence
1.11: Ethical Communication
1.12: Tools of Interpersonal Communication
1.13: Summary and Review
1.14: References

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1.1: Why Study Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal Communication: Introduction



Figure 1.1.1: Believe. (CCBYSA Created by Google Gemini)

Learning Objectives

- Define and identify the main functions of interpersonal communication.
- Discuss human needs and how interpersonal communication fulfills those needs.
- Examine the principles of communication.
- Explain the different parts of the model of communication.

At first glance, the hit Apple TV series *Ted Lasso* looks like a lighthearted sports comedy about an American football coach hired to rescue a struggling British soccer team. But as fans quickly realized, the show isn't really about sports at all. Creators Bill Lawrence and Jason Sudeikis built a story about the power of human connection, how friendships, families, romantic partners, coworkers, and even entire communities are shaped by the way we communicate. Through humor and heart, *Ted Lasso* highlights how everyday tools like listening, empathy, emotional expression, and conflict management can transform relationships and, ultimately, change the direction of our lives. One of the show's most memorable symbols is the simple yellow sign above Ted's office door that reads **"Believe."** While it may look like a motivational slogan, the sign becomes a reminder that trust, empathy, and honest communication are what allow relationships to grow and groups to thrive.

We experience life through our relationships: the families who raise us, the friends we choose, the partners who support us, and the coworkers who become part of our daily world. These relationships can be sources of joy, comfort, and belonging, but they can also be confusing, frustrating, or painful when communication breaks down. Whether we're navigating a misunderstanding, trying to express our feelings, or figuring out how to repair a relationship, one thing remains constant: interpersonal communication is the foundation of every relationship we build. Just like the characters in *Ted Lasso*, the quality of our connections depends on the choices we make in how we communicate with the people around us.

Benefits of Studying Interpersonal Communication

Your communication style, how you speak, listen, use body language, solve problems, and interpret the world around you, didn't appear out of nowhere. It was shaped over time by the people and environments that raised you: your family, your friends, your schools, your culture, and even the media you consume. Because these patterns are learned, they are not fixed. They can grow, change, and improve with intentional practice and with the help of **theories, concepts, and research** that explain how communication works.

Studying interpersonal communication gives you the foundation to understand *why* people behave the way they do in relationships

and *how* communication patterns develop. Theories help you see the hidden patterns behind everyday interactions, and research gives you evidence-based strategies for improving them. As a student in this course, you may experience several meaningful benefits:

1. **A clearer understanding of your own communication style:** A clearer understanding of your own communication style, including your habits, strengths, and areas for growth, helps you recognize why you communicate the way you do and how your choices shape your relationships, your confidence, and your everyday interactions.
2. **A deeper awareness of how others communicate:** Increasing your awareness of communication patterns, such as why people express emotions differently, how nonverbal communication is related to our verbal messages, how individuals handle conflict, and why some people shut down while others vent, can help you better understand the patterns that shape connection, change, and breakdowns.
3. **Improved quality of your relationships:** Research across decades consistently shows that positive communication with friends, family, romantic partners, and coworkers—such as offering support, showing validation, and engaging in constructive problem-solving—is strongly linked to higher relationship satisfaction. (Jurban et al., 2026). Furthermore, studies show that hurtful communication behaviors, such as giving the silent treatment, refusing to talk through issues, yelling, or insulting a partner, are strongly linked to lower relationship satisfaction and greater strain (Johnson et al., 2022).
4. **Transferable communication skills:** As you will learn later in this chapter, the US job market is moving towards transferable skills hiring, meaning that employers want to hire individuals with strong communication skills that support career success, leadership, teamwork, and conflict management in professional settings.
5. **Better physical health:** Researchers have documented that how we speak, listen, and relate is as significant to our health as diet, exercise, and smoking (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010) and that even specific forms of communication, such as self-disclosure, can have an impact on our health, such as our sleep quality (Kane et al., 2014). So open up a little, and you may get a better night's sleep!
6. **Improved mental health**: Researchers have identified a strong connection between relationship problems, poor communication skills, and adverse mental health outcomes. Difficulties navigating interpersonal conflict are associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, negative emotions, and overall psychological distress (Iovoli, Rubel, Steinbrenner, & Lauterbach, 2025). In contrast, students who complete interpersonal communication skills training during college report reduced loneliness and a greater sense of belonging, underscoring the protective role of communication competence in their personal well-being (Zaied & Broeckelman-Post, 2025).

Ultimately, the study of interpersonal communication helps you understand not only *what* you do in relationships, but *why* you do it—and how you can communicate in ways that build trust, connection, and resilience. Just as *Ted Lasso* reminds us to “Believe,” this course invites you to believe in your ability to grow, adapt, and strengthen the relationships that shape your life.

Being an Effective Communicator

As you begin your journey as a student of interpersonal communication, we ask you to pause, reflect, and BELIEVE in your own ability to become an effective communicator. To start, before you continue reading chapter 1, reflect on the amount of communication you have engaged in today. Did you text a friend? Did you like someone's social media post? Did you talk to a classmate about class? Did you smile at a stranger? Did you order a coffee on your way into school or work? Did you talk to your family? We have many communication exchanges every day, in fact, maybe more than we are consciously aware of. Despite being born with an aptitude to communicate, to do so well requires knowledge, motivation, and commitment to developing our potential.

This text is designed to help you gain this knowledge and become more effective communicators, specifically in interpersonal encounters. In this first chapter, we will:

- define interpersonal communication
- examine why communication is fundamental to our existence
- review various models of communication
- explore fundamental communication principles
- overview theory and research on interpersonal communication
- discuss careers related to the field
- highlight ethical communication



Figure 1.2: The Forensics Room. Google Gemini-generated image (2026)

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1.2: Defining Interpersonal Communication

Defining Communication

As we begin our exploration of interpersonal communication together, we need to start with a basic understanding of what we mean when we say "communication." The examples provided in our introduction demonstrate that when we communicate, we understand that it is happening but, if we step back and try to define what is happening in each of those interactions it can be more difficult. Take a minute and define communication in a sentence or two. It is more difficult than it seems! Communication, as defined by theorists and researchers in the field, is the sending and receiving of messages. While that definition may seem simple, it is highly complex and involves the process of both senders and receivers.

When we communicate, we are trying to get the thoughts in our heads out into the world in a way that will allow others to understand them. To do so we must use symbols to represent our thoughts, and then share them to generate meaning. In other words, communication is sharing symbols to generate meaning.

Words as Symbols

To better understand this definition and what it helps us understand about the communication process, we need to examine the distinct parts. First, what are symbols? **Symbols** are objects or images that denote or are understood to have a specific meaning. We use symbols to express thoughts and ideas in physical form. Words are symbols. We create and reinforce their meaning. Symbols are used to express our thoughts, the perceptions of things we have seen before, and the images of what those symbols mean in our mind. For example, when you text your friend, “hey, you want to grab a bite?” you are using words to convey the thought that you are hungry and want to get food together. Those words are the symbols. If you text your friend a picture of a burger, then you are using the burger emoji as the symbol for those same thoughts. In Figure 1.2.1 are three symbols commonly associated with the United States.



Figure 1.2.1: American Symbols created by Google Gemini CC BY 4.0

Most symbols can mean different things at once and can mean different things to different people depending on a number of controllable and uncontrollable factors, like context, subtext, and the past experiences of those communicating. For example, if your friend is not familiar with the phrasing “want to grab a bite?” to reference getting food together, they may not visualize and have reference for the same symbolic meaning of that phrase as you do. Another example could be using the word "significant other," which can conjure up various semantic and symbolic people and relationships for each individual, yet has a standard "literal" or dictionary definition in the English language. In both cases, you are hoping that your friend will interpret these symbols in the same way that you do, so that the meaning generated using those symbols is shared. If that happens, then we have

successfully communicated. If your friend doesn't think the word "bite" means getting something to eat or doesn't know why you sent them a picture of a hamburger, then you lack shared meaning, and you have miscommunication. As you can see, the definition of communication may be relatively simple, but communication is not.

English borrows from other languages, making it a rich collection of symbols that has sustained itself as the predominant language of trade and information worldwide. Multilingual speakers know that there are certain words that do not translate or have a misunderstood translation in English. For example, "Mamihlapinatapai" (Yaghan language of Tierra del Fuego): this word captures that special look shared between two people when both are wishing that the other would do something that they both want, but neither want to do. The term "zhaghzhagh" (Persian) translates as the chattering of teeth from the cold or from rage.

Interpersonal Communication Defined

There are many kinds of communication, but this textbook is focused on interpersonal communication. **Interpersonal communication** is the ongoing, transactional process through which people create meaning and build relationships within specific cultural and relational systems. Interpersonal communication includes how we send and receive messages with others, how we perceive and interpret information, and and how these processes shape the building and maintenance of relationships. Although we might not have realized the many different ways we use communication in our everyday lives, it is important to understand these categories. In "Types of Communication," we can see there are crossovers between intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, group communication, and public speaking, but there are also distinct differences within the different interactions as well.

Types of Communication

While the focus of this text is on interpersonal communication there are several other types of communication that humans engage. Understanding the various ways we communicate helps us better understand the unique differences between communication types and styles.

Intrapersonal Communication

Intrapersonal communication is communication with one's self. When we engage in "self-talk," imagine, or remember we are engaging in intrapersonal communication. (McLean, 2005). In order to be considered intrapersonal communication all of the basic components of the communication model occur within the individual (Shedletsky, 2017). We engage in a wide variety of intrapersonal communication from evaluating ourselves and others to resolving internal conflicts to planning and problem solving. While this communication may take place in our minds without being shared externally, it is still communication.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is communication between two people and it is the focus of this book. Some scholars refer to interpersonal communication as dyadic because it takes place in a pair, or dyad. We engage in all kinds of interpersonal communication every day. Just think back to the start of this chapter when we explored how much communication you have already done today: much of that communication was dyadic between parent and child, coworkers, customer and employee, teacher and student, etc.

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is communication between people with differing cultural identities. One reason we should study intercultural communication is to foster greater self-awareness (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Intercultural communication can allow us to step outside of our comfortable, usual frame of reference and see our culture through a different lens. In our modern world we have increasing opportunities to engage with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds so it is important that we understand how culture influences our communication.

Group Communication

Group communication is communication between three or more people, usually in a formal setting where this group membership is assigned or voluntary— such as a team of work colleagues tasked with presenting the company's growth data at a board meeting, or a church community setting up a fundraiser. While there is some discrepancy over the range, most scholars agree that when a group reaches 15 to 20 members, it is no longer a small group and we begin to move into the

next category, public communication. There is significant overlap between interpersonal and small-group communication, because in small groups you have an interpersonal relationship with the other members of the group (Linabary). There are many types of small groups, but the most common distinction made between types of small groups is that of task-oriented and relational-oriented groups (Hargie, 2011). You are probably in a few different groups: for example, your family network functions as a small group, or maybe you are in a study group for one of your classes, or a social group that meets around a shared interest.

Public Communication

Public communication occurs when an individual or a group presents to an audience. When a group is too large to sustain interpersonal or small-group interactions, we generally consider it to be public communication, because the larger the number of people increases the range in which the sender is less likely to receive direct communication back in return. Many of you may be familiar with public speaking, which is one of the most common forms of audience-centered communication in our Western perspective. If you have ever given a presentation in class or at your workplace you have engaged in this manner of public communication (Wrench, et al., 2020).

There are many ways in which different cultures and communities view public communication differently and engage in discourse among large groups through discourse, including judicial review (council meetings, oaths, ministries, etc), spoken word (poetry, theater, storytelling, music, etc.), and epideictic rhetoric (prayers, performance, chants, etc). There are many ways in which we engage in public communication. While some might bring about more fear than others, many of us engage in public communication more frequently than we think.

Discussion Questions

1. Which form of communication do you use the most in your everyday life? How do you think this form of communication impacts your everyday experiences?
2. Think about the different identities you hold (student, friend, caregiver, etc.). How does your communication differ in these roles?
3. Interpersonal communication can encompass elements of other forms of communication. What examples do you have that showcase this overlap?

A great deal of our communication is interpersonal communication. Friendships, romantic relationships, families, relationships at work, etc., are all areas where we engage in interpersonal communication. In fact, interpersonal communication is how we develop, maintain, and end relationships. These relationships are the cornerstones of much of our communication interactions, as well as the relationships we invest the most time, energy, and personal resources into. Because of the prominence and impact that interpersonal relationships hold for many of us, this has become an area of interest and curiosity for many researchers within the discipline of communication studies as well as other social sciences. There are many ways in which theories and research within the communication discipline impact and help support theories and research within other disciplines; therefore learning about and continuing to investigate the intricacies of interpersonal communication not only benefits research, but it also benefits our personal lives as well.

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1.3: Communication Principals

The Nature of Communication

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

Communication Is Learned

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

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

Communication Is Continuous

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

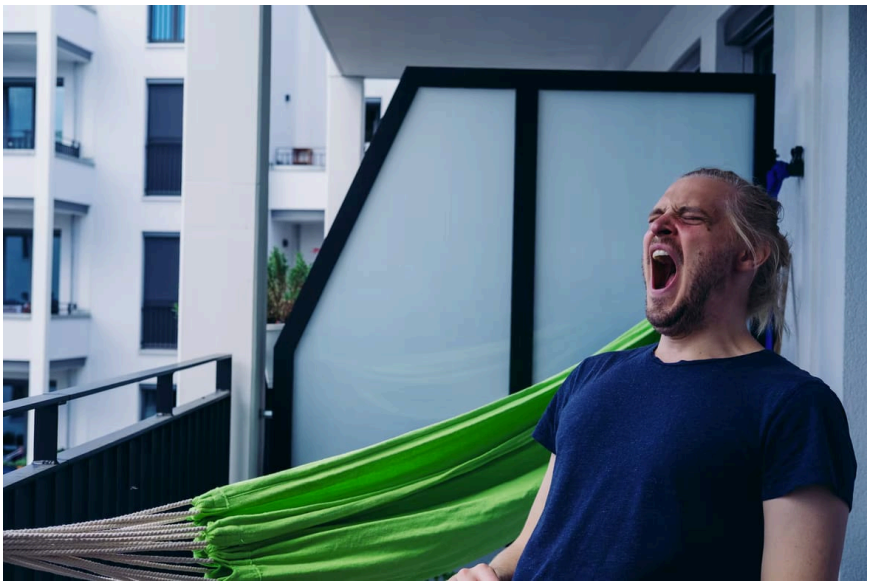


Figure 1.3.1: Yawn, Miikka Luotio, Unsplash

Communication Is Unrepeatable

Communication is also unrepeatable. When we say that communication is unrepeatable, what we mean is that we can never reproduce the same exact communication twice. Even if we deliver the same message, other aspects—such as our tone, the environment we are in, or the context in which we are speaking—will be different, so the communication will be different. Heraclitus, an ancient Greek philosopher, said that no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man. Communication is the same way, because we are always communicating—and the context, our emotional state, even internal factors like hunger or fatigue are contending with our words. These various aspects of communication are constantly flowing like the river, so even if we wanted to repeat a communication event we could not, just like we could not step in the same river twice. There will always be variation in our communication.

Communication Is Irreversible

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

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1.4: Interpersonal Communication Fulfills Our Needs

Why Study Interpersonal Communication?

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

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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

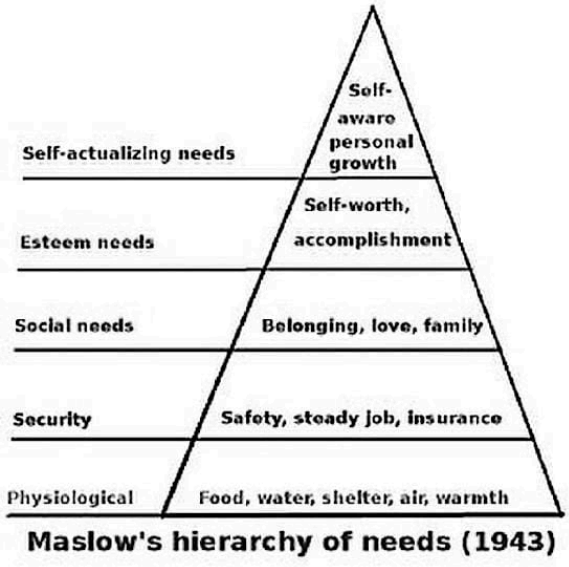


Figure 1.4.1: Maslow hierarchy of needs by Tomwsulcer on Wikipedia Commons is in the Public Domain

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

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

individual lived experience and culture. These components of our self-concept drive how we interpret and fulfill our needs.

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

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

Needs Fulfilled by Communication

Physical Needs

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

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

Practial Needs

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

Social Needs

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

Solitary Confinement

The importance of social interaction cannot not be understated. The ability to engage with other people is fundamental to our physical and mental health. One area where we can see this reality play out is in the use of solitary confinement as a form of punishment. Former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy argued in a 2015 opinion that "years on end of near-total isolation exact a terrible price … common side-effects of solitary confinement include anxiety, panic, withdrawal, hallucinations, self-mutilation, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The effects of social isolation are lethal. Even though people in solitary confinement comprise only 6% to 8% of the total prison population, they account for approximately half of those who die by suicide" (Herring, 2020). It is because of these effects that recent years have seen a renewed call to ban or severely restrict the use of solitary confinement in US prisons. The American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina along with the North Carolina Prisoner Legal Services is currently suing on behalf of several prisoners held in cells described as no bigger than a parking space for 22 to 24 hours a day (Waggoner, 2019). Another lawsuit was filed by Dennis Hope, who has spent 27 years in solitary confinement in a Texas prison. "His only human contact is with the guards who strip-search and handcuff him before taking him to another enclosure to exercise, alone. He has had one personal phone call since 1994, when his mother died in 2013. He suffers from depression and paranoia and fears he is going insane." His petition asks the Supreme Court to rule that such prolonged isolation is a violation of the Eighth Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment (Liptak, 2022). Some states have already restricted the use of such extreme measures with positive outcomes. For example, "assaults on employees at Colorado prisons dropped when the state reduced the use of solitary confinement and expanded access to mental health treatment" (Waggoner, 2019).

Discussion Questions

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

Identity Needs

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



Figure 1.4.2: Physics Teacher, Tra Nguyen, Unsplash

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

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

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1.5: Models of Communication

Linear Model

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

One of the earliest models of communication in the Western world was the **linear model of communication**, which shows that a communication event took place. It contains one sender of the message and the message itself being sent to one receiver, as shown in Figure 1.5.1. The message is encoded (created) by the sender and sent out via the channel, then received by the receiver. This model does not include the concept of feedback as an integral component. One of the criticisms of the linear model is that it lacks the component feedback and the idea that meaning is created amongst communicators.

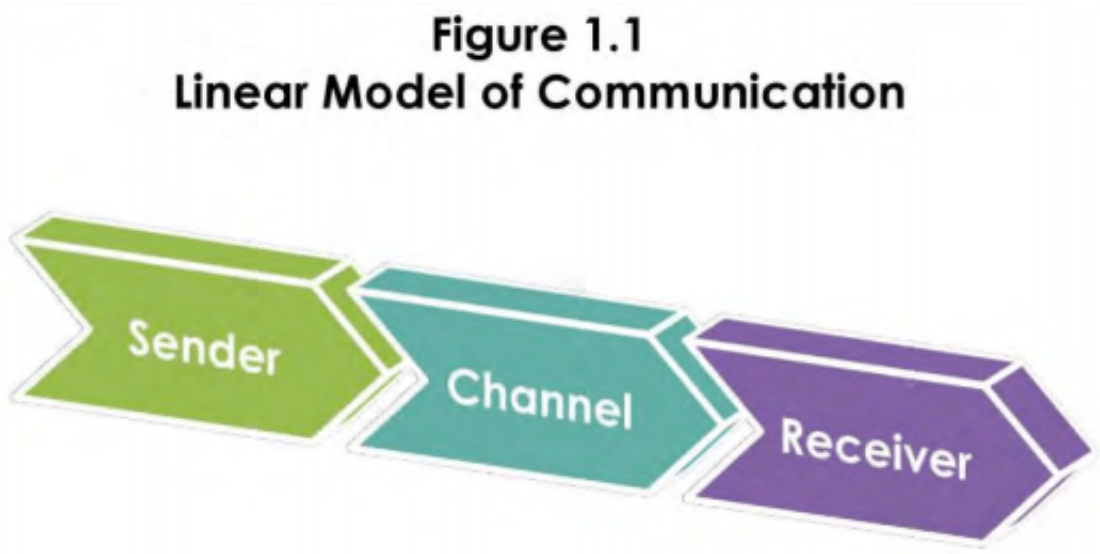


Figure 1.5.1: Linear Model of Communication on Public Speaking Project is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

Interactional Model

Over time the linear model has evolved into the **interactional model of communication**. This newer model takes into account that for there to be a sender of communication, there needs to be a receiver who takes an active role in the communication event. The interactional model of communication, as shown in Figure 1.5.2, has both the sender and receiver actively using feedback so that communication is no longer seen as simply linear. However, this model lacks the co-creation of meaning that takes place in true communication interactions.

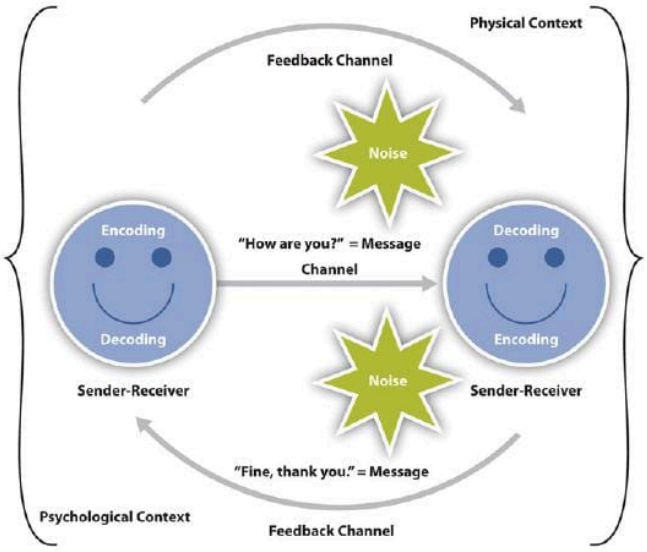


Figure 1.5.2: Interactional Model of Communication on Survey of Human Communication is licensed under CC BY 3.0

When a pilot is getting ready to take off, they must listen to Air Traffic Control (ATC) on their radio to hear what is happening on the runway. When they are ready to take off, they will press a button inside the cockpit to send a request to ATC for clearance. When they are done, they have to release the button so they can hear the response from ATC. If they continue to hold down the button, they won't be able to receive a message and ATC won't be able to hear any other messages. The communication between pilots and ATC is linear; it can only go one way. You can either send or receive a message; you cannot do both. For a long time this is how we thought about human communication. There is a **sender** (the pilot), who encodes a **message** ("request takeoff") and sends it via a **channel** (radio) to the **receiver** (ATC), who then decodes the message. While this might be an accurate way to describe a two-way radio conversation, it is not an accurate reflection of human communication in general. When the pilot is sending a message to ATC, the pilot is also receiving messages simultaneously from a co-pilot or other crew. Likewise, the ATC contact is managing a number of different aircraft as well as coworkers in the tower. Communication is not linear. We are simultaneously sending and receiving, encoding and decoding, and managing several channels across contexts, all while we try to block out noise. Today, we have moved past this linear model of communication to embrace a transactional model.

Transactional Model

The current **transactional model of communication** was created to showcase the entirety of what humans experience when we communicate with one another, as shown in Figure 1.5.3.

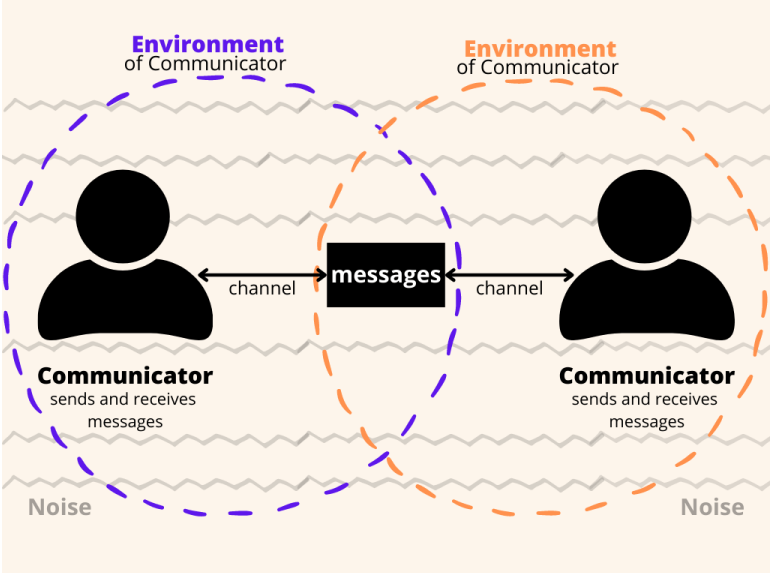


Figure 1.5.3: Transactional Model of Communication by Elizabeth Encarnacion is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

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

Communicators

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

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

Message

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

Channel

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

Feedback

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

Context

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

Relational Context

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

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

While the relationship influences communication, the relational context will also be different for each communicator. Again, this will influence not only the content of the message, but also how the message is delivered. For example, one of the authors, as a teenager often used curse words at home when talking to their mother, because it was seen as acceptable in their relationship and within their family. However, a lot of their peers were shocked when they found this out. They would never dare use curse words with their parents. While the relational communication with the author's mother was different than other peers had with their parental relationships, it doesn't mean one version of the communication was "wrong" and one was "right." They were different given the different and varying relational contexts involved.

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

Environmental Context

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

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

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

Cultural Context

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

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

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

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

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

Noise



Figure 1.5.4: Loud by Elyas Pasban, Unsplash

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

Physical Noise

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

Psychological Noise

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

Physiological Noise

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

Cultural Noise

Lastly, we have cultural noise. **Cultural noise** includes the barriers that exist among people from different cultural groups. This can range from speaking different languages, differences in meaning of nonverbal cues, or differences in cultural dimensions that create misunderstanding within relationships. Cultural noise creates obstacles in meaning that can become problematic in receiving messages accurately and appropriately. One of the most difficult aspects of cultural noise is when we are unaware that it is impacting our ability to be competent in our communication, or when we are unaware that the cultural noise is present within the environment. For example, an American individual is interviewing for a company where the boss conducting the interview is Filipino. While the company resides in the United States, the boss identifies as collectivistic and finds value in creating a team that focuses on collaboration and group goal setting. The American interviewing for the company identifies as individualistic, and sees their greatest strengths as their self-reliance, free thinking, and having strong initiative. The individualistic person interviewing with the collectivistic boss may not understand the cultural noise that is being created within this situation by highlighting aspects of their work ethic and ability to do the job in ways that are not culturally valued by the person they are speaking to. This cultural noise creates miscommunication between the interviewer and interviewee in a way that would have negative outcomes of them not feeling this job was the right fit, while the interviewee doesn't get a chance to explain their ability and eagerness for teamwork.

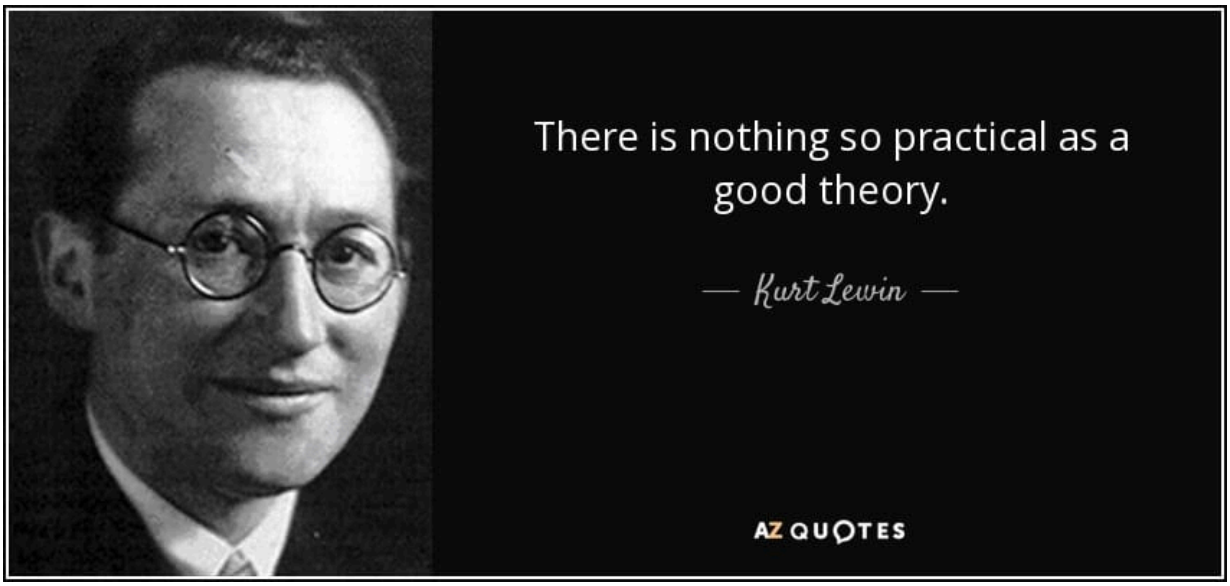
Noise is always present in communication, but different types of noise interact with various channels and messages differently. No matter what noise is present, we must learn to manage it if we are going to communicate effectively. Now that you have a better understanding of the individual components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

Contributions and Attributions:

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1.6: Interpersonal Communication Theory



Interpersonal Communication Theory

Why is the sky blue? Why do dogs bark? Why do we eat vegetables? Why, why, why? Anyone who has spent time with a child between the ages of two and five knows that this stage of life is filled with endless "why" questions. Our colleagues in Child Development and Psychology remind us that this is an important developmental milestone, one driven by curiosity and a desire to make sense of the world. But this stage also reflects a fundamental human need: the need to predict, explain, and understand our surroundings. Our need to make sense of the world around us is captured by scientific theory. You are likely familiar with scientific theories such as the Theory of Relativity and the Theory of Evolution are well-known examples of attempts to explain the universe and life itself.

What Is a Theory?

A **theory** is an attempt to predict and explain the world, grounded in hypotheses that have withstood the test of time. Theories are generally well-supported by evidence and offer robust explanations. In addition to the theories mentioned above, you may be familiar with Germ Theory, the Theory of Gravity, and Atomic Theory. In Communication Studies, theories function the same way: they help us understand patterns in human communication, our behaviors, beliefs, and actions.

What Is a Hypothesis?

Theories are built from collections of hypotheses and evidence. Chances are you form hypotheses all the time.

Consider this interaction between Anastasia and her friend Maddie. Anastasia shares that her boyfriend has been distant and slow to return her text messages. Maddie, based on past observations of their relationship, suggests, "It's final exam time. Maybe he's just overwhelmed with school." This attempt to explain someone's behavior represents a basic hypothesis.

A **hypothesis** is an educated guess or tentative explanation that can be tested. When many hypotheses are repeatedly supported over time, they can develop into a theory.

Why Do We Use Theories in Interpersonal Communication?

Communication in our personal relationships can be complex, messy, and confusing. Interpersonal communication theories help us:

- Explain why people behave the way they do in relationships
- Predict how communication choices might affect outcomes
- Understand patterns across different contexts
- Improve our communication by giving us tools and frameworks
- Reflect on our own assumptions and habits

Theories act like a guidebook, helping us better understand and prepare for our interactions with others.

Popular Interpersonal Communication Theories

Students don't need to memorize every theory, but they should recognize a few foundational ones. Here are three that will be explored in this text:

Attribution Theory (Kelley, 1967)

- Suggests that humans are "naive scientists" trying to predict and explain others' behavior
- Helps us understand how and why we interpret the causes of people's actions
- Our interpretations ("They ignored me on purpose" vs. "They didn't hear me") shape how we respond

Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1993)

- Suggests that people communicate to present, confirm, and protect their identities
- Helps explain how misunderstandings arise when people feel their identity is threatened or not recognized
- Effective communication involves mutual respect, validation, and flexibility as identities are negotiated in interaction

Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958)

- Suggests that people weigh costs and benefits in relationships
- We tend to maintain relationships that feel rewarding and reduce or leave those that feel costly

How can these theories help you understand your own communication? You may find that you already use communication theories, even if you don't realize it.

You Already Use Theories—Even If You Don't Realize It

All people use their own **implicit theories**. These are the personal, often unspoken beliefs you've developed over time to make sense of how people communicate and behave. Implicit theories include beliefs about what counts as respectful or rude communication, how to handle conflict, what makes a relationship "good," and what is considered effective or appropriate behavior. These beliefs are shaped by culture, gender norms, and family dynamics.

For example, when my husband and I got married, we brought very different implicit theories about conflict and bad moods. He grew up learning to avoid conflict and give people space when they were having a hard day. I grew up learning to reach out, check in, and address conflict openly. Over time, we had to adjust our assumptions and communication habits to create a shared approach that worked for us as a couple and as a family.

These personal theories guide everyday decisions, often without our conscious awareness. Studying interpersonal communication helps us surface, question, and refine these assumptions.

Thoughts on Theory

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Think about the feeling of walking into a crowded room or a brand-new class—you're surrounded by people, yet you know nothing about them. That mix of closeness and uncertainty is exactly what **Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT)** explains. Developed by Berger and Calabrese, URT argues that when we meet someone new, our first goal is to reduce uncertainty so we can better predict how they'll think, feel, and behave. Uncertainty refers to the level of unpredictability we experience when we attempt to predict and explain the communication behavior of others. A job interview is a perfect example: both you and the interviewer are quietly sizing each other up, trying to figure out expectations, norms, and whether the interaction feels comfortable or strained. As people observe one another (passive strategies) and begin asking questions or sharing personal information (interactive strategies), uncertainty decreases—and communication becomes warmer, more open, and more natural. URT reminds us that uncertainty isn't just uncomfortable; it shapes how quickly relationships form and how willing people are to take social risks. The more information we gather, the easier it becomes to move from guarded interactions to genuine connections.

Discussion Questions

1. When there's someone you're genuinely interested in getting to know, how do you gather information about them — do you observe from a distance, ask mutual friends, scroll their social media, or take a more direct approach?
2. When you enter a new group, what's your go-to "information-gathering move"? Do you quietly observe, ask direct questions, test the waters with humor, or something else entirely?
3. Describe a moment when someone shared something personal with you, and it changed the whole tone of the relationship. Why do you think that one disclosure mattered so much?

Why Theories Matter for You

Understanding interpersonal communication theory helps students:

- Communicate more intentionally to achieve effective outcomes
- Navigate conflict with less stress and better results
- Build stronger relationships with family, friends, coworkers, and romantic partners
- Recognize cultural and personal differences that shape how communication is perceived
- Make sense of confusing or emotionally charged interactions and respond more effectively

A Final Thought

Although the Theory of Gravity belongs to physics, that hasn't stopped musicians from borrowing the metaphor to explain the emotional forces that pull people together—or keep them stuck. John Mayer sings, "Gravity is working against me," while Sara Bareilles pleads, "I don't wanna fall another moment into your gravity." Both artists use gravity to describe the powerful, sometimes unwanted pull of relationships.

In many ways, interpersonal communication theories do the same thing. They help us name, understand, and navigate the invisible forces that shape our connections with others. As you move through this course, I hope you find these theories not only informative but personally meaningful—tools that help you communicate with greater clarity, compassion, and confidence.

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1.7: Thoughts on Theory- Uncertainty Reduction



Figure 1.1.81: FIFA WORLD CUP Los Angeles 2026

If you've ever stood in a place like a crowded stadium in Los Angeles (see Figure 1.1.8.1 above), surrounded by thousands of people moving in every direction, you know the strange mix of connection and distance that comes from being physically close to strangers while knowing nothing about them. In moments like that, we become hyper-aware of how little we can predict about the people around us—what they're thinking, how they'll behave, or whether they're paying attention to us at all. That feeling of being immersed in a crowd yet uncertain about everyone in it mirrors the everyday interpersonal uncertainty we experience when we meet new people, start new relationships, or enter unfamiliar social spaces. Even if you've never attended a large sporting event like the World Cup, you've likely felt this same uncertainty on the first day of class, at a new job, or in any situation where you're surrounded by unfamiliar faces and unsure of the social rules.

How Uncertainty Reduction Theory Helps Us Navigate New Relationships

Imagine your first day at a new job. You don't know who to trust, who actually makes decisions, or whether it's safe to crack a joke in the break room. Now imagine that discomfort multiplied: you've been hired to coach a professional sports team in a sport you've never played, in a country that isn't your own. This is exactly where *Ted Lasso* begins. An American college football coach with zero soccer experience, Ted is hired to lead AFC Richmond, an English Premier League club. The players don't know what to make of him, the press is openly hostile, and even his boss, Rebecca Welton, is secretly hoping he fails. Everyone in the room is operating with almost total uncertainty about everyone else.

This shared discomfort—and our very human need to resolve it—is the heart of Uncertainty Reduction Theory. Developed by Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese, it proposes that when people interact, their main goal is to reduce uncertainty about each other so they can better predict and explain one another's behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

For reference, watch this clip from *Ted Lasso*

Passive Observation vs. Active Engagement

We use a variety of strategies to manage our uncertainty that range from quietly watching to directly asking. Two of the most important are passive and interactive strategies:

- **Passive Strategies (Observation):** This is unobtrusively watching someone, often in their natural environment, to gather information without ever speaking to them. When Ted first arrives at training, the players size him up from a distance —

watching how he runs a drill, how he reacts to a missed pass — before deciding whether he deserves their trust. Likewise, Ted spends his early days quietly observing the team's dynamics, figuring out who the locker-room leaders are before he ever says a word about it.
- **Active and Interactive Strategies (Direct Engagement):** This involves actually asking questions, seeking out third parties for information, or disclosing something about yourself to invite the other person to do the same. Ted is famous for this approach — he keeps index cards with personal facts about each player, asks Rebecca about her favorite music during "Biscuits with the Boss," and tells Roy Kent about his own father in order to build a real connection. He doesn't wait for uncertainty to resolve itself; he actively works to close the gap.

The Impact of Uncertainty Reduction Theory on Interpersonal Communication

Uncertainty Reduction Theory stresses that as uncertainty about another person decreases, several things tend to happen at once: verbal communication increases, nonverbal warmth (smiling, eye contact, open posture) increases, the intimacy of what people are willing to talk about increases, and liking generally increases as well (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; West & Turner, 2010). We can see this play out across AFC Richmond's season. In the earliest episodes, conversations with Ted are short, guarded, and purely functional — players answer in clipped sentences and avoid eye contact. As Ted persists in self-disclosing and asking sincere questions, the team's communication with him becomes longer, warmer, and far more personal.

One especially important piece of the theory is the *reciprocity of self-disclosure*: when one person shares something personal, the other person tends to feel obligated, or at least invited, to share something personal in return. This is exactly what happens between Ted and Rebecca. His daily ritual of bringing her biscuits and chatting about ordinary things — first concerts, childhood memories — eventually prompts her to open up about her divorce and her plan to sabotage the club. The uncertainty that once kept their relationship purely transactional dissolves into a genuine friendship.

Discussion Questions

- In the Ted Lasso example, why were the players and Rebecca initially so resistant to Ted, even though he was warm and friendly? Why does high uncertainty cause people to assume the worst about someone new?
- Think about a time you joined a new class, job, or social group. Which passive strategies (quiet observation) and which active strategies (asking questions, seeking out a mutual friend) did you personally use to reduce your uncertainty about the people around you?
- The theory points to a "reciprocity norm," where one person's self-disclosure invites a similar response from the other. Describe a relationship in your own life where this back-and-forth sharing helped build trust.
- How might a new employee or a sport's team leader use Uncertainty Reduction Theory's interactive strategies — asking sincere questions, sharing appropriate personal information — to build trust with a team faster than someone who simply waits to be approached?

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1.8: Interpersonal Communication Research



Figure 1.1.5.1: Interpersonal Observation. Generated by Gemini (April 2026) based on user prompt.

Why Research Matters in Interpersonal Communication

Every day—whether we're at school, at work, or just hanging out with friends—we're constantly observing communication. We notice things like "Kensie talks really fast," "my mom seems overwhelmed today," or "my boyfriend never texts back during Dodger games." These small observations become the raw material for our own *implicit theories* about how people communicate. In a way, we're all amateur researchers, collecting data points and trying to make sense of patterns in our relationships.

One purpose of this book is to help you move from informal guesses to concepts and theories that are backed by solid research. Effective communication skills depend on information that is credible, evidence-based, and grounded in well-developed theory.

Research begins with a question and uses careful observation or controlled tests to answer it. Theory building goes a step further: it involves creating statements about what you're interested in, identifying the key factors involved, and explaining how those factors relate to one another (McCornack, 2010; Chaffee & Berger, 1987).

In the field of Interpersonal Communication, research helps us:

- **Explain communication behaviors** by identifying patterns in how people interact.
- **Predict outcomes** such as relationship satisfaction, conflict escalation, or impact of self-disclosure.
- **Improve communication practices** in interpersonal, organizational, intercultural, and small group settings.

In most social science fields, there are three primary methods for conducting research, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Having an understanding of these three different approaches will help you decipher the research of others, and may help you design your own research study in the future.

Quantitative Research

Quantitative research uses numerical data to measure communication behaviors, test hypotheses, and identify relationships between variables.

Common Quantitative Methods

- **Surveys** — measure attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors across large groups.
- **Experiments** — test cause-and-effect relationships in controlled settings.
- **Content Analysis** — systematically count and categorize messages or media content.
- **Longitudinal Studies** — track communication behaviors or attitudes over time.
- **Statistical Modeling** — examine complex relationships among variables.

Example Study (Quantitative)

- A study in *Communication Monographs* examined how **self-disclosure on social media predicts relational closeness in families**, using surveys and statistical analysis to measure patterns across hundreds of participants.
- Schrodt, P., & Phillips, K. E. (2016). Self-disclosure and relational uncertainty as mediators of family communication patterns and relational outcomes in sibling relationships. Communication Monographs, 83(4), 486–504.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research explores how people make meaning of communication experiences. It focuses on depth, context, and interpretation rather than numerical measurement.

Common Qualitative Methods

- **Interviews** — in-depth conversations exploring personal experiences.
- **Focus Groups** — group discussions that reveal shared meanings or tensions.
- **Ethnography** — observing communication in natural settings.
- **Case Studies** — detailed examination of a single group, event, or phenomenon.
- **Participant Observation** — researcher participates in the setting being studied.

Example Study (Qualitative)

- A qualitative study in *Transactions on Professional Communication* **used qualitative message mapping** to explore what motivates people to self-disclose on social media, offering rich insight into lived communication experiences.
- Zani, A. A. A., Norman, A. A., & Ghani, N. A. (2022). Motivating factors to self-disclosure on social media: A systematic mapping. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, *65*(3), 370-391.

Mixed Methods Research

Mixed methods research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a fuller understanding of communication phenomena.

Common Mixed Methods Designs

- **Convergent Parallel Design** — collect quantitative and qualitative data at the same time and compare results.
- **Explanatory Sequential Design** — start with quantitative data, then use qualitative data to explain the findings.
- **Exploratory Sequential Design** — begin with qualitative insights, then test them quantitatively.
- **Embedded Design** — one method supports or supplements the other within a larger study.
- **Multiphase Design** — multiple studies conducted in stages using different methods.

Example Study (Mixed Methods)

- A mixed-methods study in communication research examined **why and how mothers encourage their daughters to eat healthy**, using focus-groups and web surveys to measure what motivated mothers to talk to their daughters about eating habit, using an emotion-based model for analysis.
- Hamel, L. M. (2015). Determining the action tendency emotions associated with mothers' intentions to encourage their preadolescent daughters to eat healthfully: A mixed methods study. *Western Journal of Communication*, *79*(2), 239-256.

Reflections on Research

In each chapter, you'll find *Reflections on Research* boxes that highlight current studies in the field of Interpersonal Communication. To begin, let's connect research to your own communication experiences.

1. **Identify a communication problem.**
   What is a challenge you face when communicating with others?
2. **Notice the contributing factors.**
   What patterns seem to show up when this problem occurs? Consider emotional states, communication styles, or environmental factors.
3. **Describe the situations where it happens.**
   Does this challenge arise online or face-to-face? With certain people? Around specific topics? At particular times of day?
4. **Consider possible changes.**
   What adjustments could you make to the factors that contribute to this problem? Possibilities include:
   - changing your timing
   - using a different communication strategy
   - preparing what you want to say
   - choosing a calmer environment
   - asking clarifying questions
5. **Test your idea.**
   Try out your solution and observe whether it improves the interaction.

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1.9: Communication and Careers



As you reflect on what you have learned so far in this chapter, take a moment to consider how interpersonal communication may influence you in your major and professional life. Choosing and committing to a major and career can be difficult. As you think about your future career, it helps to remember that communication isn't just something you practice for a grade or need in a personal relationship—it's one of the most valuable skills you'll take with you into any job. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) *Job Outlook 2025* report, employers are shifting toward **skills-based hiring**, meaning they care less about things like GPA and more about whether you can show real-world abilities (NACE, 2025). In a workplace that's constantly changing, the people who stand out are those who can work well with others, solve problems together, and communicate clearly in different situations.

Top Skills Employers Want in 2025

Based on the NACE *Job Outlook 2025* survey of 237 employers, these are the skills they most want to see in new hires:

Top Skills Employers Want in 2025

Skill / Attribute	Employer Demand (%)
Problem-solving skills	88.3%
Ability to work in a team	81.0%
Communication skills (written)	77.1%
Initiative	73.7%
Strong work ethic	73.2%
Technical skills	73.2%
Communication skills (verbal)	69.3%
Flexibility/adaptability	67.0%
Analytical/quantitative skills	67.0%
Detail-oriented	65.9%

Skill / Attribute	Employer Demand (%)
Interpersonal skills (relates well to others)	63.1%
Computer skills	55.9%
Leadership	52.5%
Organizational ability	45.3%
Strategic planning skills	33.0%

Think about your intended career path. Which of the NACE skills do you already possess? Which ones do you need to strengthen? How might improving your interpersonal competence—such as your ability to handle difficult conversations or provide constructive feedback—help you develop "Leadership" or "Problem-solving" skills in a professional setting?

Interpersonal competence isn't just about "getting along" with others—it's about becoming a strategic, thoughtful, and effective professional. Whether you are entering healthcare, business, education, or technology, your ability to **listen actively, adapt to different social contexts, and build collaborative relationships** will be your greatest competitive advantage. As you move forward in your academic and professional journey, remember: communication is not just a "soft skill"—it is the **foundational skill** upon which all other professional success is built.

Take for a moment the top industries in Southern California-- it is essential to understand where the regional job growth is concentrated. Southern California's economy is defined by several powerhouse industries that collectively employ millions: **Healthcare and Social Assistance**, which is the region's largest "future-proof" sector; **Leisure and Hospitality**, fueled by the world-famous entertainment and tourism hubs of Los Angeles and Orange County; **Trade, Transportation, and Logistics**, anchored by the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and the massive distribution centers in the Inland Empire; and the **Creative and Cultural Industries**, including the $177 billion Hollywood film and digital media economy. Each of these sectors is increasingly prioritizing "human-centric" skills that can withstand the rise of automation.



Looking across these industries, one can see many career opportunities for students who major in Communication Studies:

- **Healthcare and Social Assistance:** As the region's largest employer, this sector includes giants like **Kaiser Permanente, Cedars-Sinai, and UCLA Health**. Entry-level roles for communication majors include **Patient Relations Coordinator**, **Health Communications Assistant**, or **Provider Relations Specialist**, where the focus is on bridging the gap between complex medical information and patient understanding.
- **Education:** This sector is home to everything from bustling local school districts to world-renowned campuses like USC and UCLA. For communication majors, this industry is all about the power of connection, whether you're guiding next-generation talent as an **Admissions Counselor**, shaping campus culture as a **Student Affairs Specialist**, or telling the institution's story as a **Public Information Assistant**. In these roles, you aren't just passing on information; you're the vital bridge helping

students and families navigate their futures. Of course, there is the very rewarding career of being a community college instructor or university professor.

- **Entertainment and Creative Economy:** Centered in Hollywood and Burbank, this sector features world leaders like **The Walt Disney Company, Netflix, and NBC Universal**. Recent graduates often start in **Talent Assistant** roles, **Public Relations Trainee** programs, or as **Social Media Content Coordinators**, managing the flow of information between creators, studios, and global audiences.
- **Leisure and Hospitality:** Driven by tourism hubs, major employers include **Disney Experiences (Disneyland Resort)** and **Six Flags Magic Mountain**. Communication majors excel here as **Guest Experience Leads** or **Special Events Coordinators**, using interpersonal agility to manage high-volume, diverse social interactions and crisis communication.
- **Trade, Transportation, and Logistics:** Anchored by the **Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach**, this sector includes companies like **Total Quality Logistics (TQL)** and **Amazon Logistics**. Entry-level roles such as **Logistics Coordinator** or **Internal Communications Specialist** rely heavily on clear verbal and written communication to manage the complex "human chain" behind global trade.

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1.10: Interpersonal Communication Competence

Communication Competence

As we learned in the previous section, *Communication and Careers*, effective communication skills are essential for professional success. One way to understand our own communication strengths and weaknesses is communication competence. **Communication competence** refers to our ability to communicate both effectively and appropriately across different contexts (Kiessling & Fabry, 2021). Appropriate communication means adapting to the needs of the situation, the topic, and the people involved; for example, in the United States, it is generally considered appropriate for adults to shake hands when they are first introduced, while in Japan, the standard is to bow. Effective communication, on the other hand, is measured by how well we carry out those appropriate behaviors to help us achieve our goals. Imagine meeting your significant other's parents for the first time: you would first consider what is appropriate—how to greet them, what names to use, and how to dress for the occasion. But knowing what is appropriate is only half the task; you must also perform it well, for example, by offering a confident, well-timed handshake rather than an awkward or hesitant one.

Components of Communication Competence

In order to be a competent communicator, it is necessary to actively develop your knowledge, motivation, and skills.

- **Knowledge**: This element involves gaining information and understanding of communication processes, self-awareness, and insights regarding other people. Developing communication competence requires us to ask what specific information we must acquire to enhance our effectiveness.
- **Motivation**: This refers to the internal drive and commitment to improve one's communicative abilities. To boost motivation, you might reflect on the tangible rewards of growth, such as stronger relationships, professional advancement, earning others' respect, and improved problem-solving skills.
- **Skills**: These are the actionable behaviors, such as mindful listening, perception checking, empathy, and conflict management, that allow us to interact both appropriately and effectively. Identifying which of these behavioral tools we wish to cultivate is a vital step in our learning journey

Skill Builder: Mindful Communication

Skill Builder: Practicing Communication Mindfulness

Mindfulness, which has roots in traditions such as Buddhist meditation, Hindu yoga philosophy, and Taoist practices, has been adapted into modern psychology as a way to stay fully present and aware in the moment. In communication, **mindfulness means paying attention to what you're saying, how you're saying it, and how others are responding**. In short, effective communication begins with awareness of your own communication choices.

Aware: Notice your communication in the moment—your tone, posture, facial expressions, and the impact they may have.

Check-In: Observe your internal state (hungry, tired, stressed, calm) and take a moment to notice the other person's general mood. Consider environmental factors—noise, lighting, interruptions—that may influence the interaction.

Think: Recognize your thoughts, assumptions, or emotional reactions, and commit to staying respectful, curious, and open-minded.

Integrate: Make small but meaningful adjustments—maintaining eye contact, nodding, or softening your tone—to show engagement and support understanding.

Open Space: Use brief pauses to reflect before responding; this creates space between what you feel and how you choose to communicate.

Notice and Adjust: Reflect on what went well, what you might improve next time, and how you can care for yourself if the interaction brought up strong emotions.

Apply It: Three Questions for Practice

1. During your last meaningful conversation, which step of the mindfulness process (Notice, Observe, Acknowledge, Adapt, Pause, Afterward) would have improved the interaction the most?
2. How does your internal state—such as being stressed, tired, or distracted—shape the way you communicate with others?
3. Think of a relationship that matters to you. What is one mindful communication habit you could practice this week to strengthen that connection?

Communication competence serves as the foundation for this text, guiding you as you learn new concepts and theories, build motivation to communicate effectively, and develop skills for stronger interpersonal interactions. As you move through each chapter, take time to reflect on your own communication patterns: Which aspects of your communication feel most confident and natural? Which areas might benefit from more intentional practice? And as you observe communicators around you—whether in your personal relationships or through media—consider what traits shape your perceptions of them and why those traits matter.

- How does your understanding of “appropriate” communication shift across different cultural, relational, or situational contexts?
- In what ways do power dynamics influence who is perceived as a “competent” communicator?
- How might your personal identity (e.g., gender, culture, age, language background) shape both how you communicate and how others evaluate your competence?
- What role does motivation play in your willingness to adapt your communication, and how does this relate to theories of interpersonal effectiveness?
- How do your expectations of others’ communication behaviors influence your judgments of their competence?

Reflections on Research

Social Media & Teen Communication Skills

What happens to real-life communication skills when an entire generation grows up talking more with their thumbs than their voices? This mixed-methods study, "*The impact of social media on interpersonal communication skills in adolescents: A comparative study*" explored that question by surveying, digitally tracking, and observing adolescents ages 13–18 to understand how social media use shapes their face-to-face communication abilities. Researchers found a clear negative correlation between heavy social media use and skills like reading nonverbal cues, resolving conflict, and showing empathy. Interviews revealed that many teens feel more confident communicating online—where they can edit, pause, and control their image—but often struggle with spontaneous, in-person conversations. Still, the study also highlighted positive effects: when used for community-building or self-expression, social media can support connection and confidence. Overall, the findings suggest that digital communication can both strengthen and weaken interpersonal skills, depending on how—and how much—teens use it.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think many teens feel more confident communicating online than face-to-face?
2. Can you think of a time when social media improved your communication with someone, and a time when it made things harder?
3. What strategies could help adolescents balance online interaction with real-world communication practice?

Source: Nazar, S., Chaudhry, J., Yaqoob, S., Majid, M., & Sabir, M. (2025). *The impact of social media on interpersonal communication skills in adolescents: A comparative study.* International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin, 3(8), 946–957.

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1.11: Ethical Communication

1.11: Ethical Communication

Every day you make dozens of communication choices, what to say, what not to say, and how to say it, and many of those choices have ethical consequences. You've probably already faced situations that force you to think about what's "right" in your interactions: Do I keep someone's secret even if it might hurt another person? Do I tell the truth, knowing it could sting? Do I step in when someone is being bullied, or stay silent to protect myself? Communication is full of ethical crossroads, and understanding how ethics shape our day-to-day exchanges is a key part of becoming a competent communicator.

Ethics, in the broadest sense, asks questions about what we believe to be right and wrong. **Communication ethics** asks these questions when reflecting on our communication. Every day we have to make communicative choices; some of these choices will be more or less ethical than other options. It is because we have these different options that our ethics are tested. We can never really say that something is completely ethical or unethical, especially when it comes to communication. "Murdering someone is generally thought of as unethical and illegal, but many instances of hurtful speech, or even what some would consider hate speech, have been protected as free speech. This shows the complicated relationship between protected speech, ethical speech, and the law" (Communication in the Real World). When we make communication choices the question of whether they are ethical or not depends on a variety of situational, personal, and/or contextual variables that can be difficult to navigate. As such, many professional organizations have created ethical codes to help guide this decision-making, and communication is no different. In 1999, the National Communication Association officially adopted the Credo for Ethical Communication. The NCA Credo for Ethical Communication is a set of beliefs communication scholars have about the ethics of human communication (approved by the NCA Legislative Council, November 1999).

Inspired by NCA's Credo for Ethical Communication, we created our own list of ethical communication guidelines for interpersonal relationships. Take a moment and review the list. Are there ethical standards below that are not consistent with your own? Is there something missing from the list that you think should be added?

Interpersonal Communication Ethics

1. Communicate with honesty and accuracy so others can trust what you say.
Example: If you misunderstood an assignment, you clarify rather than pretending you know what's going on.

2. Respect others' right to express different viewpoints, even when you disagree.
Example: In a class discussion, you let a classmate finish their thought before offering your own perspective.

3. Try to understand someone's meaning before reacting to their message.
Example: When a friend sends a short text that sounds irritated, you ask for clarification instead of assuming they're mad at you.

4. Support equal access to communication so everyone has a chance to participate.
Example: In group work, you invite quieter members to share their ideas so all voices are heard.

5. Create a climate of respect and care in your interactions by protecting the well-being and dignity of others.
Example: You listen without interrupting when a roommate talks about a stressful day.

6. Avoid communication that harms others through insults, threats, or hateful language.
Example: You choose not to repost a meme that stereotypes a cultural group, even if others think it's "just a joke."

7. Speak up respectfully when you witness unfairness or exclusion.
Example: If someone is being talked over in a group, you redirect the conversation back to them.

8. Share information thoughtfully and protect others' privacy and confidences.
Example: You don't post screenshots of private messages or share a friend's personal story without permission.

9. Take responsibility for the impact of your communication, both now and in the future.

Example: If a comment or action you made hurt someone, you acknowledge it, apologize, and work to repair the relationship.

10. Use digital communication ethically by avoiding posts that could harm, embarrass, or misrepresent others.
Example: You choose not to upload a video of a friend at a party because it could damage their reputation.

We should always strive for ethical communication, but it is particularly important in interpersonal interactions. We will talk more about climate, trust, and honesty, and specific relationships in the coming chapters, but at its most basic, you should strive to make ethical choices in your communication because communication is impactful. Our communication choices have lasting impacts on those with whom we engage. While ethics is a focus on what is right and wrong, it is not easy to navigate. What is right in one circumstance may not be in another. To help us make our way through difficult ethical choices, we must be competent.

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1.12: Tools of Interpersonal Communication

Complexities of Communication

While communication studies discipline experts will highlight throughout this text the many ways communication can benefit relational satisfaction, self awareness, and personal and professional growth, there are also dark sides to communication as well as misconceptions that can thwart our communication goals. Although the dark side of communication and communication misconceptions may sound negative, when we understand the related reasons why they occur and our role in those reasons, we are better able to adapt our skills and respond in a way that is communication competent. Throughout our course of study, we will explore facets of interpersonal communication, in order to set our goals of communicating effectively and appropriately throughout our learning journey.

Common Questions in Interpersonal Communication

Any time we begin learning something new, we may find ourselves curious about the subject and want to explore those curiosities in more depth. While the following listed questions and responses are some of the common questions we typically receive when introducing interpersonal communication, there may be more questions you discover as we continue our learning process. Throughout this text we will be working to answer some of these questions, but there are also some quick responses given in the following table to help frame our learning as we continue on.

Frequently Asked Questions

Question	Response
Will communication solve all problems?	Not always. Some problems are bigger than simply “talking it out” and more communication is not always better.
Is being a competent communicator a “natural” talent?	Skill, dedication, and hard work towards creating positive habits is how someone strives towards communication competence.
Does “communication” just mean talking?	Communication involves the intentional and unintentional, conscious and unconscious sending, receiving, and responding of verbal and nonverbal messages.
Should people adapt to my way of communicating to understand me?	In order to prevent miscommunication, we must work at presenting our message in a way that best fits the needs of the listener.
Is interpersonal communication simple?	Interpersonal communication is complex! There is a large matrix of aspects that we explore through interpersonal communication research and theories that help explain why and how we function within societies through a communicative lens.

It is important to remember that communication is not “one size fits all.” As we discuss throughout this chapter, there are a wide variety of ways in which the complexities of communication can appear. By understanding these complexities in more depth, we are better able to overcome these misconceptions of communication and help prevent miscommunication from

occurring in our relationships. Creating a deeper understanding of the various ways our relational satisfaction is impacted by our communication allows us to adjust and adapt the context, message, and perceptions surrounding our communication interaction. In understanding the interpersonal skills this text will help us learn, and maintaining our ethical standards at the forefront of our relationships, we are learning the tools within interpersonal communication to set us up for success in becoming the competent communicators we strive to be.

Interpersonal Skills

As we stated at the beginning of this chapter, communication seems easy because we are constantly doing it. Understanding the complexities that make up the act of communication helps us realize the conscious and unconscious effort that it takes. In addition, communicating effectively and appropriately—being a competent communicator—takes dedication, mindfulness, and action. Being a competent communicator is not a natural state of being for most people (even Communication Studies scholars are not perfect!) and in order to develop these skills we must first understand each unique part of communication.

Throughout our study of interpersonal communication we will be exploring specific elements that make up competent communication, including understanding self concept, our ability to be an active listener, monitoring our verbal and nonverbal communication, fostering emotional intelligence, building and maintaining relationships, managing conflict, and perhaps most importantly, understanding how culture impacts every interaction we have.

Understanding the Self Concept

In order to actively engage in interpersonal communication, we must start at the base of understanding ourselves as communicators. The **self concept** is a foundation within communication, because at every interaction we are presented with, we are communicating from our worldview, our perspective, and from our unique lens of reality. The self concept is a stable sense of who we are in this world. It forms from a young age, developing to answers to the question “Who am I?” By answering these foundational questions, we begin to understand how our experiences and perceptions impact our behaviors and interactions with others around us in complex ways.

Practicing Mindful Listening

One of the hardest aspects of becoming a competent communicator is using intentionality within our communicative behaviors. **Mindful listening** requires that we are present and aware in the moment, focused on the listening needs of the situation, and cognitively in-tune with the messages being sent so that we may demonstrate understanding. Listening helps us fulfill relational needs, such as being emotionally present for a friend who’s had a rough day, informational needs such as attending lectures and gaining knowledge through education, and critical needs to form opinions and generate ideas. While active listening may be one of the hardest goals to accomplish, it can also be one of the most rewarding.

Monitoring Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Verbal and nonverbal communication is how we send our messages through our words, voice, body language, gestures, appearance, and beyond. There is usually much more meaning created in how we say something than by just what is said, and how we interpret these messages helps us to create and respond to complex messages. Think of the different ways one can interpret a text message such as, “OK”, where there is so much meaning left out. With the addition of punctuation or emojis, the meaning changes completely. If the message contained the emoji with a winking face, that would be interpreted differently than a red angry emoji. Understanding these complexities helps us in the exploration of how we create unique understanding through the verbal and nonverbal elements and how this impacts all forms of our communication.

Fostering Emotional Intelligence

Being able to see another person’s perspective, understanding how they may see a particular situation or scenario, is a foundational aspect of building communication competence. In order to know what will be an effective and appropriate method for them to receive information requires us to be emotionally aware and empathetic. **Emotional intelligence** relates to our ability to interpret and understand our emotions and our communication partners’ emotions in a way that helps us to be successful in communicating our own needs while also working to meet the needs of our relational partners. Understanding how we build middle ground between our own emotional needs while also being present for the needs of others requires us to be self aware

and able to communicate through them.

Building and Maintaining Relationships

Building relationships is a core part of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication helps us to build and maintain relationships. In the absence of communication, a relationship does not receive the maintenance it requires to proliferate. From the initiation of relationships, the good times and the bad, all relationships have ebbs and flows in communication. Building our understanding around why we form relationships, why relationships end, and how to create satisfaction and growth within our relationships allows us to see we are not alone in our experiences.

Managing Conflict

Managing conflict is not easy but necessary. Conflict is inevitable and understanding conflict can help us avoid unnecessary conflict, learn conflict management strategies, and what we can do to be effective and appropriate in a conflict. Learning how to assess ourselves and how to use interpersonal communication strategies can help us achieve our relational and individual goals by allowing us to see that while conflict may always exist in our lives, conflict can have positive and successful outcomes through behavioral flexibility.

Intercultural Communication Competence

Culture influences all aspects of communication. We cannot communicate outside of our cultural context (Culture and Communication, 2012). Because of this innate and intertwined aspect of culture and communication, our study of interpersonal communication approaches discussions around culture the same way—consistently and throughout the learning process. **Intercultural communication competence** is the process of gaining knowledge and awareness of other cultures while we practice our communication competence skills alongside people from other cultural groups. Intercultural communication competence includes the aspects of being open-minded as well in knowing that we might not always "get it right" when communicating across cultural identities, but that we are willing to learn from our mistakes and try again.

Our interpersonal communication leans on our understanding of how the cultural context impacts and is impacted by the cultural lens of the individuals we are building relationships with. There are times when these aspects of culture are obvious, such as when we may be traveling abroad to a new country and experiencing a different culture for the first time, or when we interact with someone who speaks a different language than us and we are working towards building mutual understanding. There are other times when the aspects of culture are not so obvious. As competent communicators, we must remain culturally aware and responsive towards how culture is impacting our communication.



Figure 1.12.1: Young Women Leadership Program by Paula Bronstein on Images of Empowerment is licensed under CC BY NC 4.0.

For example, consider a disagreement between two friends: It may be difficult for Morgan to understand why Carlo cannot hang

out all the time, and why Carlo needs to bring his younger sibling with them when they do. It might frustrate Carlo that Morgan does not try to plan hangouts ahead of time so that Carlo can better accommodate his family's needs and priorities in order to make time for his friends.

This scenario highlights specific relational elements that these friends need to work on understanding, it also highlights the cultural elements as well. Both of them are communicating from very different cultural contexts and perspectives, impacting their interpersonal relationship. Morgan may have grown up in a more individualistic culture, one where individual needs are put above group or family needs, and does not see the big deal in leaving the house on a moment's notice to go meet up with friends. Carlo may have grown up in a collectivistic culture, one where the group and family needs and goals are valued over the individuals, and a "we" mentality is established. The collectivistic culture that Carlo grew up in may make him feel uncomfortable not asking permission to leave the house, making sure the family chores are done and his siblings are taken care of before he does.

While this scenario describes the interpersonal communication conflict these friends are experiencing, it also highlights some of the intercultural communication occurring between these two cultures as well. In gaining awareness of each other's culture through communicating openly within the relationship, the friends will be better able to manage their relationship and increase their relational satisfaction.

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1.13: Summary and Review

Summary

We hope this chapter has sparked your curiosity about the field of interpersonal communication. In this chapter, we provided the foundation for the study of interpersonal communication. We learned the benefits of studying interpersonal communication (including our health, career, and improved relationships), while at the same time exploring how communication helps us fulfill important needs, including our instrumental, physical, and social needs. We introduced the role of communication theory and research in the study of interpersonal communication. Then we explored communication models and the various parts of communication. Having this shared language will allow us to discuss the various aspects of interpersonal communication from a common starting point. We also looked at some key principles of communication that will be referenced again in the coming chapters, as these concepts are at play in various aspects we have to explore. Finally, we ended this chapter with an examination of the role of ethics in interpersonal communication and communication competence. Now that you have a basic understanding of communication, we hope you are as excited to explore interpersonal communication as we are.

Discussion Questions

1. We've talked about the benefits of studying interpersonal communication. Think about one relationship in your life (friend, partner, coworker, family member). What is one communication skill you wish you had learned earlier, and how might it have changed that relationship?
2. Maslow argues that humans need belonging, esteem, and connection. How do you see these needs playing out in your daily communication — especially in moments when you feel misunderstood, excluded, or deeply connected?
3. We often apply different ethical standards online than we do face-to-face. Why do you think people feel more comfortable being rude, sarcastic, or dismissive on social media? What ethical responsibilities do we have when communicating digitally?
4. Think about a time when you made a "hypothesis" about someone's behavior (e.g., "They're ignoring me," "They're upset," "They're busy"). How accurate was your guess, and what does that reveal about how interpersonal theories help — or mislead — us?
5. Communication competence involves being effective, appropriate, and adaptable. Describe a situation where you communicated effectively but not appropriately, or appropriately but not effectively. What would competence have looked like in that moment?
6. Models of communication (linear, interactive, transactional) help us understand how messages flow. Which model best represents how you communicate with people you're closest to, and why?
7. Every major — from nursing to business to engineering — relies on interpersonal communication. Identify one way this course will directly support your academic or career goals, even if you're not a Communication Studies major.

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2: CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

2.1: What is Culture?

2.2: The Function of Culture

2.3: Cultural Characteristics and Communication

2.3.1: Edward T. Hall

2.3.2: Geert Hofstede

2.3.3: Stella Ting-Toomey

2.4: Culturally Intelligent Communication

2.5: Intercultural Communication Skills

2.6: References

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2.1: What is Culture?



Image 2.1: FIFA Fan Festival 2026 by Alex Koester, used with permission.

What is culture?

Learning Objectives

1. Define the term culture as used in communication studies.
2. Describe how culture influences beliefs, values, norms, rules, and behaviors.
3. Differentiate between dominant cultures, co-cultures, and microcultures.
4. Identify examples of co-cultural and microcultural groups in everyday life.
5. Explain how cultural learning shapes individuals' worldviews and practices.

In the summer of 2026, the United States, Canada, and Mexico jointly hosted the FIFA World Cup. Games were played across 16 cities, 11 states and provinces, in 3 countries. Teams from 48 nations competed, with Spain ultimately taking home the title. In the picture above, you see fans celebrating in Los Angeles, California at SoFi Stadium, which hosted eight matches including the U.S. Men's National Team opener. The World Cup is an excellent metaphor for understanding the relationship between culture and communication. The global event brought diverse cultures into one shared space, allowing us to see how language, values, and behaviors intersect and shape the way people interact.

When people hear the word "culture," many images often come to mind. Perhaps you immediately think of attending the ballet, an opera, or an art museum. Other people think of traditional dress like that seen from Mexico in the picture at the top of the chapter. However, the word "culture" has a wide range of meanings for many people. For example, when you travel to a new country (or even a state within your own country), you expect to encounter different clothing, languages, foods, rituals, etc. The term "culture" is a highly debated concept among academics. In 1952, A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn compiled a list of 164 definitions for the word "culture." Culture is often described as "the way we do things" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). In their book, the authors noted, "Considering that concept [of culture] has had a name for less than 80 years, it is not surprising that full agreement and precision has not yet been attained" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 223). Kroeber and Kluckhohn predicted that eventually, science would land on a singular definition of culture as it was refined through the scientific process. Unfortunately, the idea of a single definition of culture is no closer to becoming a reality today than it was in 1952 (Baldwin et al., 2006)

For our purposes, we are going to talk about **culture** as "a group of people who through a process of learning are able to share

perceptions of the world which influences their beliefs, values, norms, and rules, which eventually affect behavior" (Wrench et al., 2020). Let's break down this definition. First, when we talk about "culture," we are starting off with a group of people. One of the biggest misunderstandings that newcomers to cultural studies have is that an individual can have their own personalized culture. Culture is something that is formed by the groups with which we grow up and are involved throughout our lives.

Second, we learn about our culture. In fact, culture becomes so ingrained in who we are that we often fail to recognize our own culture and its daily impact on us. Just like language, everyone is hardwired to learn culture. The culture we pick up is ultimately a matter of the group(s) we are born into and raised in. Just like a baby born to an English-speaking family isn't going to magically start speaking French out of nowhere, neither will a person from one culture accidentally adopt another culture.

Third, what we learn ultimately leads to a shared perception of the world. All cultures have stories that are taught to children that impact how they view the world. If you are raised by Jewish or Christian parents/guardians, you will learn the creation story in the Bible. However, this is only one of many creation myths that have abounded over time in different cultures:

- The Akamba in Kenya say that the first two people were lowered to earth by God on a cloud.
- In ancient Babylon and Sumeria, the gods slaughtered another god named We-ila, and out of his blood and clay, they formed humans.
- One myth among the Tibetan people is that they owe their existence to the union of an ogress, not of this world, and a monkey on Gangpo Ri Mountain at Tsetang.
- The Aboriginal tribes in Australia believe that humans are the descendants of gods (Leeming & Lemming, 2009).

Ultimately, which creation story we grew up with was a matter of the culture in which we were raised. These different myths lead to very different views of the individual's relationship with both the world and with their God, gods, or goddesses.

Fourth, the culture in which we are raised teaches us our beliefs, values, norms, and rules. **Beliefs** are assumptions and convictions held by an individual, group, or culture about the truth or existence of something. For example, in all of the creation myths discussed in the previous paragraph, these are beliefs that were held by many people at various times in human history. Next, we have **values**, which are essential and lasting principles or standards held by a culture regarding desirable and appropriate courses of action or outcomes. This definition is a bit complex, so let's break it down. When looking at this definition, it's important first to highlight that different cultures have different perceptions related to both courses of action or outcomes. For example, in many cultures throughout history, martyrdom (dying for one's cause) has been something deeply valued. As such, in those cultures, putting oneself self in harm's way (course of action) or dying (outcome) would be seen as both desirable and appropriate. Within a given culture, there are guiding principles and standards that help determine what is desirable and appropriate. In fact, many religious texts describe martyrdom as a holy calling. Within these cultures, martyrdom is highly valued. Next, within the definition of culture are the concepts of norms and rules. **Norms** are informal guidelines about what is acceptable or proper social behavior within a specific culture. **Rules** are the explicit guidelines (generally written) that govern acceptable or proper social behavior within a specific culture. With rules, we have clearly concrete and explicitly communicated ways of behaving, whereas norms are not concrete, nor are they explicitly communicated. We rarely know a norm exists within a given culture unless we violate the norm or watch someone else violating the norm. The final part of the definition of culture, and probably the most important for our purposes, particularly in the context of interpersonal communication, is that these beliefs, values, norms, and rules govern how people behave.

Co-cultures

Besides a dominant culture, most societies have various **co-cultures**—regional, economic, social, religious, ethnic, and other cultural groups that exert influence in society. Other co-cultures develop among people who share specific beliefs, ideologies, or life experiences. For example, within the United States we commonly refer to a wide variety of different cultures: Amish culture, African American culture, Buddhist Culture, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexed, asexual, and two-spirited LGBTQIA2S+) culture. With all these different cultural groups, we realize that just because individuals belong to a cultural group, that does not mean that they are all identical. For example, African Americans in New York City are culturally distinct from those living in Birmingham, Alabama, because they also belong to different geographical co-cultures. Within the LGBTQIA2S+ culture, the members who comprise the different letters can have a wide range of diverse cultural experiences within the larger community itself. As such, we must always be careful to avoid generalizing about individuals because of the co-cultures they belong to.

Co-cultures bring their unique sense of history and purpose within a larger culture. Co-cultures will also have their holidays and traditions. For example, one popular co-cultural holiday celebrated in the United States is Cinco de Mayo. Many U.S. citizens think that Cinco de Mayo is a Mexican holiday. However, this is not a Mexican holiday. Outside of Puebla, Mexico, it's considered a relatively minor holiday even though children do get the day off from school. One big mistake many U.S. citizens make is assuming Cinco de Mayo is Mexican Independence Day, which it is not. Instead, El Grito de la Indepedencia (The Cry of Independence) is

held annually on September 16 in honor of Mexican Independence from Spain in 1810. Sadly, Cinco de Mayo has become more of an American holiday than it is a Mexican one. Just as an FYI, Cinco de Mayo is the date (May 5, 1862) observed to commemorate the Mexican Army's victory over the French Empire at the Battle of Puebla that conclude the Franco-Mexican War (also referred to as the Battle of Puebla Day). We raise this example because the larger culture often co-opts parts of a co-culture and attempts to adapt it into the mainstream. During this process, the meaning associated with the co-culture is often twisted or forgotten. If you need another example, think of St. Patrick's Day, which evolved from a religious celebration marking the death of St. Patrick on March 17, 461 CE, to a day when "everyone's Irish" and drinks green beer.

Microcultures

The last major term we need to explain regarding culture is microculture. A microculture, sometimes called a local culture, refers to cultural patterns of behavior influenced by cultural beliefs, values, norms, and rules based on a specific locality or within an organization. "Members of a microculture will usually share much of what they know with everyone in the greater society but will possess a special cultural knowledge that is unique to the subgroup" (Spradley & McCurdy, 2008). If you're a college student and you've ever lived in a dorm, you may have experienced what we mean by a microculture. It's not uncommon for different dorms on campus to develop their own unique cultures that are distinct from other dorms. They may have their own exclusive stories, histories, mascots, and specializations. Perhaps you live in a dorm that caters to honors students or pairs U.S. students with international students. Perhaps you live in a dorm that is allegedly haunted. Maybe you live in a dorm that values competition against other dorms on campus, or one that doesn't care about the competition at all. All these examples help individual dorms develop unique cultural identities.

We often refer to microcultures as "local cultures" because they do tend to exist among a small segment of people within a specific geographical location. There's considerable research on the topic of classrooms as microcultures. Depending on the students and the teacher, you could end up with radically different classroom environments, even if the content is the same. The importance of microcultures stems from Abraham Maslow's concept of the need for belonging. We all feel the need to belong, and these microcultures give us that sense of belonging on a more localized level.

For this reason, we also often examine microcultures that can exist within organizational settings. One common microculture that has been discussed and researched is the Disney microculture. Employees (oops! We mean cast members) who work for the Disney company quickly realize that there is more to working at Disney than a uniform and a name badge. Disney cast members do not wear uniforms; everyone is in costume. When a Disney cast member is interacting with the public, then they are "on stage;" when a cast member is on a break away from the public eye, then they are "backstage." From the moment a Disney cast member is hired, they are required to take Traditions One and probably Traditions Two at Disney University, which is run by the Disney Institute. Here is how Disney explains the purpose of Traditions: "Disney Traditions is your first day of work filled with the History & Heritage of The Walt Disney Company, and a sprinkle of pixie dust!"7 As you can tell from the very beginning of the Disney cast member experience, Disney attempts to create a very specific microculture that is based on all things Disney.

Key Takeaways

- Culture is defined as a group of people who, through learning, share perceptions of the world that shape their beliefs, values, norms, and rules—and ultimately, their behaviors.
- Cultural knowledge is learned rather than innate, and the culture a person adopts depends on the groups into which they are born or raised.
- Cultural worldviews are shaped by shared narratives—such as origin myths, religious teachings, and social customs—that guide how individuals interact with the world and one another.
- Within any society, there is a dominant culture, which includes the shared language, values, and traditions of the majority or most powerful group.
- Societies also contain co-cultures, which are regional, ethnic, social, or ideological groups that share distinct traditions and perspectives—e.g., LGBTQIA+ culture or African American culture.
- Microcultures, also known as local cultures, are smaller cultural groups that form within organizations, dorms, or classrooms. These groups share distinct behaviors, stories, and identities that may differ from the broader culture, such as those found among Disney cast members or residence hall communities.

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2.2: The Function of Culture

The Function of Culture

Learning Objectives

1. Define collective self-esteem and describe its four components.
2. Explain how collective self-esteem influences intercultural communication.
3. Define stereotype and distinguish between cultural and personal stereotypes.
4. Summarize the problems stereotypes cause in interpersonal communication.
5. Explain the concept of ethnocentrism and describe its effects on intercultural interaction.

Culture serves multiple important functions in shaping how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world around us. One of culture's most significant roles is providing us with a sense of identity and belonging through our membership in various cultural groups, which directly affects our self-worth and confidence in intercultural interactions. Culture also supplies us with cognitive shortcuts, such as stereotypes—generalized beliefs about social groups that can be both helpful and harmful in our communication with others. Culture establishes norms and standards that we often assume are universal, leading to ethnocentric viewpoints that judge other cultures against our own cultural framework. Understanding these cultural functions is crucial for effective intercultural communication, as they shape our perceptions, expectations, and behaviors when interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Collective Self-Esteem

The concept of the **collective self** was first introduced by Henri Tajfel. He definied it as the part of a person's self-concept that comes from their membership in social groups and the value and emotional meaning they attach to those groups. In other words, people partly define who they are based on the groups they belong to and how they feel about those groups.

Building on Tajfel's work, Jennifer Crocker and Riis Luhtanen developed the concept of **collective self-esteem**. Collective self-esteem refers to the portion of a person's self-worth that comes from their group memberships and their evaluation of those groups. This includes how people see their groups, how they see themselves as members, and how they believe others view their groups. Essentially, CSE is how people feel about the groups they belong to. Instead of focusing only on personal achievements, CSE is about the pride and value people feel from being part of a cultural, social, or identity group. These groups may include nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other shared identities.

Crocker and Luhtanen identified four main components of collective self-esteem:

- **Private collective self-esteem** refers to how positively or negatively individual personally evaluate their group. People belong to many groups, and they may feel proud of some groups and less proud of others. For example, Tuan has been brought up in a community where gang membership is a very common practice. He may have been forced into gang life at a very early age. Over time, he may see an array of problems with gangs, so he may start to devalue the group. Here, Tuan would have low private collective esteem.
- **Membership esteem** is an individual's self-evaluation of their worth within a group. It centers on whether they perceive themselves as valuable, competent, or "fitting" members. For instance, Lena, a volunteer firefighter, demonstrates **high membership esteem** when she views herself as a respected asset who pulls her weight during drills. Conversely, if Lena feels her skills are lacking or that she is a burden to the team, she is experiencing **low membership esteem.**
- **Public collective self-esteem** is an individual's perception of their group's social reputation. It is not about personal pride, but rather the belief that outsiders respect and value their group. For example, a professional athlete experiences **high public collective self-esteem** when their team is celebrated by fans and the media. On the other hand, they may experience **low public collective self-esteem** if the team is frequently mocked or criticized by the public, regardless of their own personal loyalty to the players. Shohei Ohtani's career transition is a perfect real-world example of how public collective self-esteem can shift based on an organization's reputation, even when the individual's talent remain the same. Although Ohtani was personally elite, the Los Angeles Angels team reputation was marred by a narrative of "wasted talent" and frequently losing. Because the public viewed the organization as struggling or dysfunctional, Ohtani's public collective self-esteem was lower

as he was perceptively aware that outsiders viewed the Angels with pity or criticism. Moving to the Dodgers placed Ohtani in a group viewed as the "Gold Standard" of baseball. Because the public respects and values the Dodgers as a winning "super-team," his public collective self-esteem is significantly higher as he knows he belongs to a group held in high social regard.

- **Importance to identity** is the last component and refers to how important group membership is to a person's overall sense of self. Some group memberships are central to identity, while others are less significant. Applying this to Shohei Ohtani, we see how different group memberships vary in their importance to identity. While being a professional baseball player is likely an extreme, central pillar of his sense of self, other memberships - such as being a "Resident of California" - may not mean as much to him. In this context, being an elite athlete is a core part of who he is, whereas his geographic residency is a factual group membership that does not fundamentally define his identity.



Image 2.2: Shohei Ohtani in Angels and Dodgers uniforms

Collective self-esteem also affects interpersonal and intercultural communication. Individuals who feel that their cultural group is respected are more likely to have positive and meaningful interactions with others. They are more comfortable sharing personal information, feel more accepted, and enjoy their interactions more. In contrast, individuals who believe their group is viewed negatively may feel less comfortable, may share less, and may have fewer close intercultural interactions.

Overall, collective self-esteem plays an important role in communication. How individuals view their cultural groups—and how they believe others view those groups—can influence their confidence, openness, and willingness to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Understanding collective self-esteem can help individuals better understand their own communication experiences and improve intercultural relationships.

Stereotypes and Their Impact on Communication

A **stereotype** is defined as a set of beliefs about the characteristics or attributes of a social group (American Psychological Association [APA], 2024). Many people associate stereotypes with negative assumptions, but stereotypes can include both accurate and inaccurate generalizations. Even when stereotypes reflect statistical trends, they do not apply to every individual and can still lead to misunderstanding.

One common stereotype is that flight attendants are mostly women. Current labor data shows that women continue to make up the majority of flight attendants. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 79% of flight attendants in the United States are female, while about 21% are male (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2024). Although this reflects a real pattern, it does not mean that all flight attendants are women. Occupations like this are often called **sex-segregated occupations**, meaning one gender is more strongly represented even though people of any gender can perform the job effectively.

Another stereotype is that flight attendants are young. However, current data shows this stereotype is inaccurate. The median age of flight attendants in the United States is about 45 years old, and a large proportion are age 35 or older (BLS, 2024). Many flight attendants remain in their careers for long periods, which contributes to an older workforce. This example shows how stereotypes can become outdated and fail to reflect current reality.

Cultural and Personal Stereotypes

There are two main types of stereotypes: **cultural stereotypes** and **personal stereotypes**.

Cultural stereotypes are beliefs shared by members of a larger cultural group about another group. These stereotypes are often learned through socialization, media, education, or family influences. Because they are widely shared, cultural stereotypes can strongly influence how groups are viewed in society.

Personal stereotypes, on the other hand, are beliefs held by an individual based on their own personal experiences. For example, if someone has a negative experience with one member of a group, they may incorrectly assume that all members of that group behave the same way. Unlike cultural stereotypes, personal stereotypes may not be shared by others.

Both types of stereotypes can influence how people think about and interact with others, even if the assumptions are inaccurate.

Problems Caused by Stereotypes

Stereotypes can create serious problems in interpersonal and intercultural communication. One major issue is that stereotypes encourage people to make **quick judgments without sufficient information**. Instead of evaluating individuals based on their personal qualities, people may rely on group-based assumptions.

Stereotypes also lead people to overlook individual differences. Every person has unique experiences, beliefs, and behaviors, but stereotypes treat group members as if they are all the same. This can result in unfair treatment, bias, and discrimination.

In addition, stereotypes are often based on incomplete or inaccurate information. Research shows that media representations can reinforce stereotypes by presenting limited or biased portrayals of certain groups. For example, studies examining social media and news coverage have found that Muslim women are often portrayed in Western media as passive or oppressed, while Muslim women's self-representations on social media more often show independence, professional achievement, and personal choice (Al Jazeera Media Institute, 2023; Greenwood et al., 2022).

Stereotypes can also influence how people form mental images of others. For example, when people hear certain names, they may automatically imagine a specific gender, ethnicity, or personality. These automatic associations occur because stereotypes are deeply embedded in social learning and cultural experience.

Although some stereotypes may reflect general patterns, they are often incomplete, outdated, or inaccurate. More importantly, stereotypes can harm communication by encouraging unfair assumptions, reducing understanding, and preventing meaningful interpersonal connections. Effective communication requires recognizing individuals as unique rather than relying on generalized beliefs about their social groups.

Culture as Normative

Another function of culture is that it helps us establish norms. Essentially, one's culture is normative (Crosby & Heider, 2004),or we assume that our culture's rules, regulations, and norms are correct and those of other cultures are deviant, which is highly ethnocentric. The term ethnocentrism can be defined as the degree to which an individual views the world from their own culture's perspective while evaluating other cultures according to their own culture's preconceptions, often accompanied by feelings of dislike, mistrust, or hate for cultures deemed inferior. We all live in a world where we are raised in a dominant culture. Because we are raised in a specific dominant culture, we judge other cultures based on what we've been taught within our own culture. We also believe our own culture is right, moral, ethical, and legal. When a culture appears to waiver from what our culture has taught is right, moral, ethical, legal, etc., we judge those cultures as inferior.

One problem many American tourists face when traveling abroad is not knowing the laws of other nations and assuming their "normal" behavior will be tolerated in other countries the following table is a list of some crimes you may have committed today if you were visiting somewhere outside the United States.

Table 6.1 Cultural Law Violations

Cultural Law Violations

Country	Violated Law or Custom	Example Incident(s)	Penalty
Japan	Wearing shoes into homes/temples	Waling into a temple with shoes on	Fines, warnings
Thailand	Disrespecting royal family, head contact	Unknowingly criticizing the monarchy	Imprisonment
Italy	Vandalizing heritage, stealing artifacts	Removing artifacts from Pompeii, carving into the Collosseum	Arrest, fines
Cambodia	Nudity at sacred sites	Posing nude at Angkor Wat	Arrest, deported
India/Middle East	Public Display of Affection	Kissing in public	Jail/fines
Singapore	Importing controlled substances	Bringing e-cigarettes, chewing gum into the country	Jail, fines
UK/Italy	Offensive gestures	"Peace" sign in UK, "hook 'em horns" at Vatican	Arrest, fines

One that may surprise you is the use of the “peace” sign in the UK. The simple gesture of pointing your index finger and middle finger in the shape of the letter “V” carries a dual meaning, contingent upon the orientation of your hands. When the palm faces outward, away from the body, it signifies “V for Victory” or peace, a universally recognized gesture popularized by figures such as Winston Churchill. Conversely, when the palm faces inwards, toward the body, with the back of the hand visible, it transforms into a highly offensive insult akin to the middle finger in other cultures. This “two-fingered salute” conveys contempt or derision, with its origins as a vulgar gesture in the British
Isles dating back to at least the early 20th century. Although not typically resulting in severe legal consequences for a casual, isolated instance, its use in public can be viewed as a form of disorderly conduct. Suppose you flash the “V” sign while committing another act of aggression (such as during a road rage altercation). In that case, the sign can be deemed threatening or abusive, which may constitute a public order offense leading to fines or, in more serious confrontational scenarios, further legal charges. The ‘Hook ’em Horns’ gesture is a distinctive hand sign used by University of Texas supporters to celebrate the Longhorns and pay tribute to their mascot, Bevo. The sign was also used
as a sign of alleged Satanic worshippers during the 1980s, and several U.S. citizens were arrested for using the sign outside Vatican City. In other parts of Italy, the gesture also explains that someone’s wife is engaging in an extramarital affair with another man (but in a much cruder fashion) (Crosby & Heider, 2004).

At the same time, ethnocentrism isn’t 100% a horrible thing either. Shortly after 9-11, a flag shortage occurred in the United States because people wanted to display their unity and pride during those awful days after the atrocities that occurred on U.S. soil. Patriotism is a milder form of ethnocentrism. The fact that we view ourselves as “American” is even somewhat ethnocentric because technically, there are three rather large countries that are all in North America and 13 in South America. By definition, we’re all Americans. However, U.S. citizens have clung to the title “American” without ever giving thought to the other countries that exist on these two continents. Here’s another interesting fact. I was recently surfing the Internet looking for uses of the word “American” for this chapter. Here is one I found from a protester in Alabama: “We live in America. We speak American.” I’ll give the speaker the benefit of the doubt and believe she meant U.S. citizens speak English, which is true for most citizens in the United States (78.3% according to U.S. Census data from 2021) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). However, more people in North and South America do not speak English when compared to those who do.

Why "America"

The term “America” is believed to have been coined by a cartographer named Martin Waldseemüller, a cleric from the cathedral village of St.-Dié, France. Martin created what is considered to be the “birth certificate of America” by creating a map charting what was the known world at the time. You can view this map on the U.S. Library of Congress’ website.

When looking at this map, look to the bottom left-hand side of the map; you will see the inscription “America.” This label assigned credit for discovering South America to Amerigo Vespucci instead of Christopher Columbus.

Key Takeaways

- Collective self-esteem is the aspect of an individual's self-worth that comes from how they evaluate their membership in cultural or social groups. It includes four parts:
  - Private collective esteem—how positively or negatively someone evaluates their group
  - Membership esteem—how positively someone views themselves as a member of that group
  - Public collective esteem—how nonmembers evaluate the group
  - Importance to identity—how central group membership is to the individual's self-concept
- Individuals with higher collective self-esteem have more positive intercultural interactions, whereas those with lower collective self-esteem often experience less satisfying cross-cultural communication.
- Stereotypes are beliefs about social groups based on generalized perceptions.
  - Cultural stereotypes are shared by a broader group or society.
  - Personal stereotypes are held individually and may not reflect cultural consensus.
- Even accurate stereotypes can be harmful when used to make snap judgments about individuals. Stereotyping leads to overgeneralization and prevents us from seeing people as unique individuals.

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2.3: CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS AND COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

1. Define and differentiate between Edward T. Hall's concepts of low-context and high-context cultures.
2. Explain the significance of Geert Hofstede's six cultural dimensions and how they affect interpersonal and organizational communication.
3. Describe Stella Ting-Toomey's face-negotiation theory, including the concepts of self-face, other-face, and mutual-face.
4. Understand the concept of face functions across cultures and its relevance in managing intercultural conflict.

In any major area of academic study, there are luminaries one should understand. A luminary is an expert who sheds light on a subject and inspires and influences others' work in that area. Within the field of intercultural communication, these figures do not merely study human behavior, they provide the frameworks, vocabulary, and theories that allow us to decode the complex and often invisible patterns of culture.

In this section, we're going to examine three foundational luminaries who have fundamentally shaped our modern understanding of culture and intercultural communication:

- **Edward T. Hall**: Often recognized as the founder of the academic field of intercultural communication, Hall's work revolutionized how we view nonverbal communication. He challenged us to look beyond words, introducing the concepts of high- and low-context cultures and mapping out how our perceptions of time and personal space are deeply rooted in cultural conditioning.
- **Geert Hofstede**: A pioneer in cross-cultural psychology, Hofstede transformed the study of organizational culture by treating culture as the "collective programming of the mind." Through his groundbreaking empirical research, he developed a multi-dimensional framework that allows us to compare cultural values, such as individualism versus collectivism, across nations.
- **Stella Ting-Toomey**: A contemporary powerhouse in the field, Ting-Toomey's research bridges the gap between cultural identity and conflict management. Her widely celebrated *Face-Negotiation Theory* provides a vital roadmap for understanding how individuals from different cultural backgrounds manage their reputations, dignity, and interpersonal conflicts.

Each of these theorists offers a unique lens through which to view human interaction. On the following pages, we will dive deeper into their work and the lasting impact they have left on how we navigate a globalized world.



Figure 2.3: Human connection. Image used under open license.

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2.3.1: Edward T. Hall
2.3.2: Geert Hofstede
2.3.3: Stella Ting-Toomey

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2.3.1: Edward T. Hall

Edward T. Hall

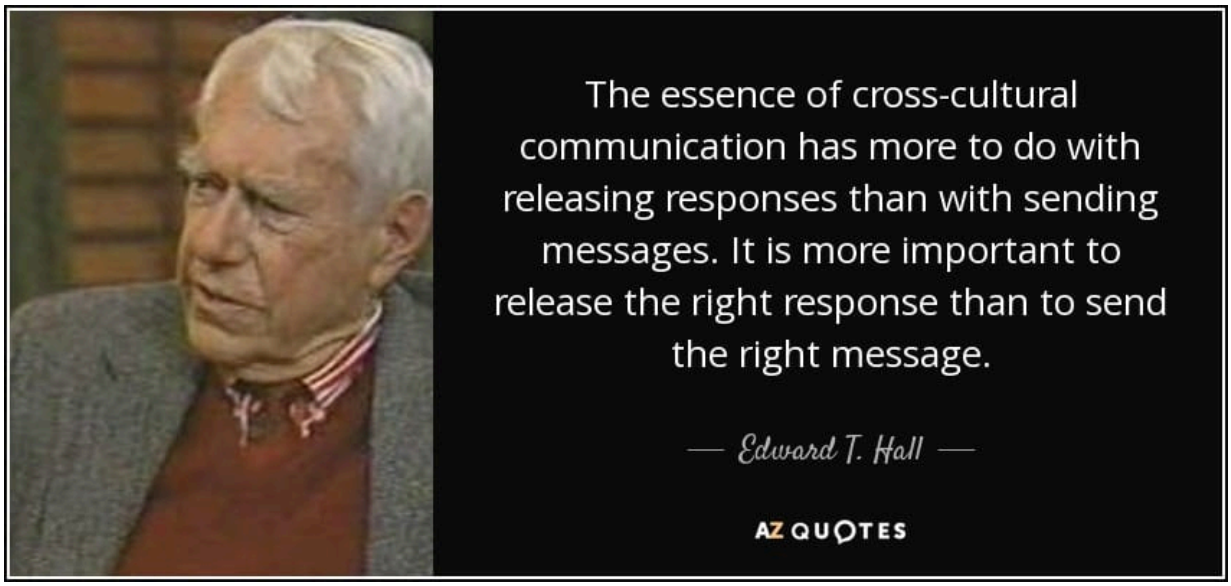


Figure 2.3.1a: Quote by Edward T. Hall on cultural self-discovery by AZ Quotes(opens in new window), used under fair use.

One of the earliest researchers in the field of cultural differences and their significance to communication was Edward T. Hall. His book, Beyond Culture, is still considered one of the most influential books in the field of intercultural communication.20 21 According to Hall, all cultures incorporate both verbal and nonverbal elements into communication. In his 1959 book, The Silent Language, Hall states, "culture is communication and communication is culture."22 In the previous chapter, we talked about the importance of nonverbal communication. We also mentioned that nonverbal communication isn't exactly universal. Some gestures can mean wildly different things in
different parts of the world. President George H. Bush once held up his hand in a "V" for Victory salute to an Australian audience, only to find out later that this was the equivalent of the middle finger in the United States. President Nixon did the same thing, exiting an airplane in Brazil, flashing his famous "OK" sign with his thumb and forefinger forming a circle, but this is actually the "middle finger" in that culture. Obviously, these two incidents have gone down in the annals of presidential history as cultural faux pas. Still, they illustrate the importance of knowing and understanding gestures in differing cultures because we do not all interpret nonverbal behavior the same way.

One of Hall's most essential contributions to the field of intercultural communication is the idea of low-context and high-context cultures. The terms "low-context culture" (LCC) and "high-context culture" (HCC) were coined by Hall to describe the differences in communication styles across cultures. In essence, "in LCC, meaning is expressed through explicit verbal messages, both written and oral. In HCC, on the other hand, intention or meaning can best be conveyed through implicit contexts, including gestures, social customs, silence, nuance, or tone of voice."23 Table 2.2 further explores the differences between low-context and high-context cultures. In Table 6.2, we broke down issues of context into three general categories: communication, cultural orientation, and business.

		Low-Context	High-Context
Communication	Type of Communication	Explicit Communication	Implicit Communication
	Communication Focus	Focus on Verbal Communication	Focus on Nonverbal Communication
	Context of Message	Less Meaningful	Very Meaningful
	Politeness	Not Important	Very Important
	Approach to People	Direct and Confrontational	Indirect and Polite
Cultural Orientation	Emotions	No Room for Emotions	Emotions Have Importance
	Approach to Time	Monochromatic	Polychromatic
	Time Orientation	Present-Future	Past
	In/Out-Groups	Flexible and Transient Grouping Patterns	Strong Distinctions Between In and Out-Groups
	Identity	Based on Individual	Based on Social System
	Values	Independence and Freedom	Tradition and Social Rules/Norms
Business	Work Style	Individualistic	Team-Oriented
	Work Approach	Task-Oriented	Relationship-Oriented
	Business Approach	Competitive	Cooperative
	Learning	Knowledge is Transferable	Knowledge is Situational
	Sales Orientation	Hard Sell	Soft Sell
	View of Change	Change over Tradition	Tradition over Change

Table 2.3.1: Low-Context vs. High-Context Cultures

You may wonder, by this point, how low-context and high-context cultures differ across different countries. Figure 6.1 illustrates some patterns of context that exist in today's world (Hall, 1976).

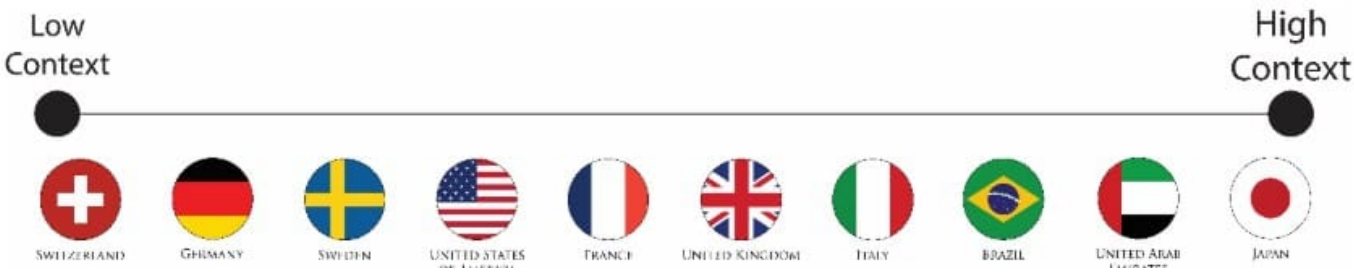


Figure 2.3.1b: Low- and High-Context Nations

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2.3.2: Geert Hofstede

Geert Hofstede

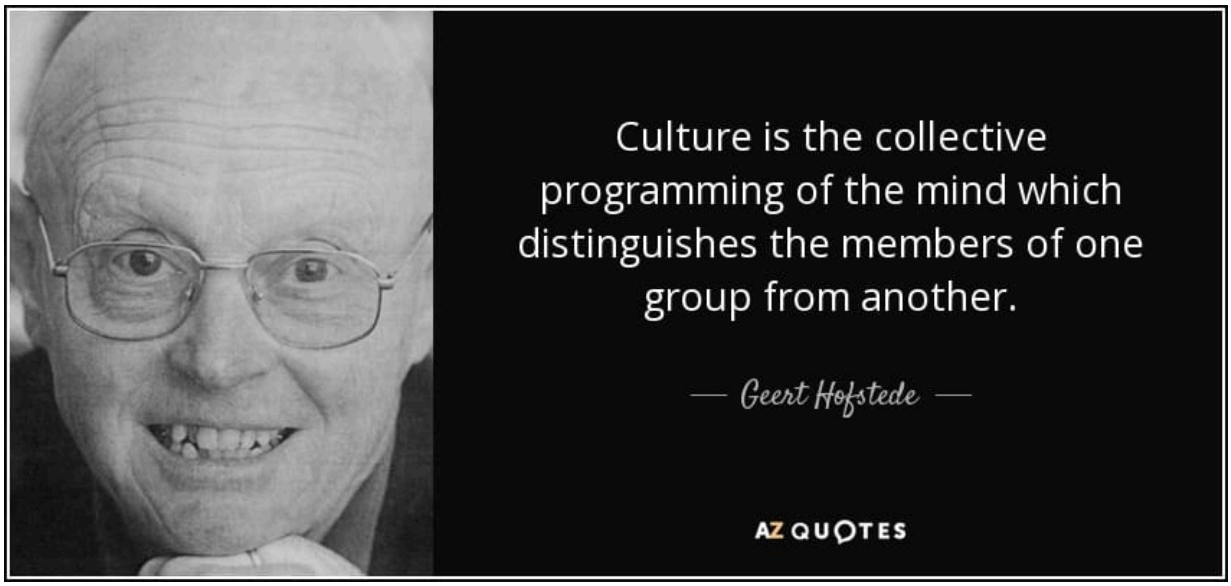


Figure 2.3.2: Quote by Geert Hofstede on culture as collective programming by AZ Quotes(opens in new window), used under fair use.

Another very important researcher in culture is Geert Hofstede, a man by that name. Starting in the 1970s, Geert became interested in how people from different cultures approach work. His interests ultimately culminated in his 1980 publication *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* where he explained some basic cultural differences (Hofstede, 1980). Over the years, Geert has fine-tuned his theory of culture, and the most recent update to his theory occurred in 2010 (Hofstede et al., 2010). In Geert's research examining thousands of workers from around the globe, he has noticed a series of six cultural differences: low vs. high power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, low vs. high uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint. Let's look briefly at each of these.

Low vs. High Power Distance

The first of Geert Hofstede's original dimensions of national cultures was power distance, or the degree to which those people and organizations with less power within a culture accept and expect that power is unequally distributed within their culture. To determine power differences within a culture, Hofstede originally could examine cultural value survey data that had been collected by IBM. Over the years, Hofstede and his fellow researchers have regularly collected additional data from around the world to make his conceptualization of six cultural differences one of the most widely studied concepts of culture. With power distances, these differences often manifest themselves within a single culture, such as class, education, occupations, and healthcare. With class, many cultures have three clear segments: low, middle, and upper. However, the concepts of what is low, middle, and upper can have enormous differences. For example, the median income for the average U.S. household is $51,100 (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2013) When discussing household incomes, we use the median (middlemost number) because it's the most accurate representation of income. According to a 2013 report from the U.S. Census Bureau (using income data from 2012), here is how income inequality in the United States looks:

> Households in the lowest quintile had incomes of $20,599 or less in 2012. Households in the second quintile had incomes between $20,600 and $39,764, those in the third quintile had incomes between $39,765 and $64,582, and those in the fourth quintile had incomes between $64,583 and $104,096. Households in the highest quintile had incomes of $104,097 or more. The top 5 percent had incomes of $191,157 or more (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2013).

However, income is just one indicator of power distance within a culture. Another aspect of power distance is the ability or the

right to access education within a society. Other indicators of power distances can include: health care (who gets it and what type), occupations (what kinds of jobs are available to different segments of society), governmental influence (who can and who can't create political outcomes), etc. According to Hofstede's most recent data, the five countries with the highest power distances are: Malaysia, Slovakia, Guatemala, Panama, and the Philippines (Hofstede et al,. 2010).The five countries with the lowest power distances are Austria, Israel, Denmark, New Zealand, and Switzerland (German-speaking part). Notice that the United States does not make it into the top five or the bottom five. According to Hofstede's data, the United States ranks 16th from the bottom in terms of power distance, placing us in the bottom third. When it comes down to it, despite the issues we have in our country, the power disparity is not nearly as significant as it is in many other parts of our world.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

The United States is number one on individualism, according to Hofstede's data (Hofstede et al., 2010). Americans are individualistic. We think of ourselves as individuals rather than as a collective group. Most Asian countries are considered collectivistic cultures because these cultures are group-focused. Collectivistic cultures tend to consider actions that might impact the entire group rather than specific group members.

In an individualistic culture, there is a prevailing belief that one can do as they please and follow their dreams or passions. In an individualistic culture, if someone asked what you do for a living, they would answer by saying their profession or occupation. However, in collectivistic cultures, a person would answer in terms of the group, organization, and/or corporation they serve. Moreover, in a collectivistic culture, there is a prevailing belief that one should prioritize the group's interests. Collectivistic cultures emphasize the group's potential for growth and productivity. Collectivists are more likely to focus their attention on others than themselves as an individual.

Masculinity vs. Femininity

The notions of masculinity and femininity are often misconstrued to be tied to their biological sex counterparts, female and male. For understanding culture, Hofstede acknowledges that this distinction ultimately has a lot to do with work goals (Hofstede et al., 2010). On the masculine end of the spectrum, individuals are focused on items like earnings, recognition, advancement, and challenge. Hofstede also refers to these tendencies as being more assertive. Femininity involves characteristics such as maintaining a good working relationship with one's manager and coworkers, cooperating with others at work, and achieving security (both in one's job and family). Hofstede refers to this as being more relationally oriented. Admittedly, in Hofstede's research, there is a difference between females and males on these characteristics (females are more relationally oriented and males are more assertive), which is why Hofstede went with the terms masculinity and femininity. Ultimately, we can define these types of cultures in the following way:

> *A society is called masculine when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with quality of life.*
>
> *A society is called feminine when emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with quality of life* [emphasis in original] (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 138).

The top five most masculine countries are Slovakia, Japan, Hungary, Austria, and Venezuela (the United States ranks 19th out of 76); whereas, Sweden, Norway, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Denmark represent the most feminine countries. As you can imagine, depending on the type of culture you live in, you will have wildly different social interactions with other people. There's also a massive difference in the approach to marriage. In masculine cultures, women are the caretakers of the home, while men are expected to be healthy and wealthy. As such, women are often placed in a subservient position to their husbands and are socially identified by them. For example, an invitation to a party would be addressed to "Mr. and Mrs. John Smith." In feminine cultures, men and women are held to the same standards, and their relationships should be based on mutual friendship.

Low vs. High Uncertainty Avoidance

The next category identified by Hofstede involves the concept of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010). Life is full of uncertainty. We cannot escape it; however, some people are more prone to becoming fearful in situations that are ambiguous or unknown. Uncertainty avoidance then involves the extent to which cultures are afraid of ambiguous and unknown situations. People in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance can view this ambiguity and lack of knowledge as threatening, which is one

reason people in these cultures have higher levels of anxiety and neuroticism. In fact, within the latest edition of the book examining these characteristics, Hofstede and his colleagues title the chapter on uncertainty avoidance as "What is Different is Dangerous," highlighting the threat factor that people in high uncertainty avoidance cultures feel(Hofstede et al., 2010). Cultures at the high end of uncertainty avoidance include Greece, Portugal, Guatemala, Uruguay, and Belgium Flemish; whereas, cultures at the low end of uncertainty avoidance include Singapore, Jamaica, Denmark, Sweden, and Hong Kong. The United States ranks 64th out of 76 countries analyzed (Singapore was number 76). From an interpersonal perspective, people from high uncertainty avoidant cultures are going to have a lot more anxiety associated with interactions involving people from other cultures. There tend to be higher levels of prejudice and higher levels of ideological, political, and religious fundamentalism, which does not allow for any debate.

Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation

Besides the previous characteristics, Hofstede identified a fifth characteristic of cultures, which he termed long-term and short-term orientation. Long-term orientation focuses on the future, rather than the present or the past. As such, there is a focus on both persistence and thrift. The emphasis on endurance is vital because being persistent today will help you in the future. The goal is to work hard now so you can reap the benefits later. The same is true of thrift. We want to conserve our resources and underspend to build a financial cushion for the future. Short-term oriented cultures, on the other hand, tend to focus on both the past and the present. In these cultures, there is a high respect for the past and the various traditions that have contributed to the greatness of that culture. Additionally, there is a strong emphasis on "saving face," which we will discuss more in the next section, fulfilling one's obligations today, and enjoying one's leisure time. At the long-term end of the spectrum are countries like China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan; whereas, countries like Pakistan, Czech Republic, Nigeria, Spain, and the Philippines are examples of short-term. The United States ranked 31 out of 39, with Pakistan being number 39. Interpersonally, long-term oriented countries were more satisfied with their contributions to "Being attentive to daily human relations, deepening human bonds in family, neighborhood and friends or acquaintances" when compared to their short-term counterparts (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Indulgence vs. Restraint

The final characteristic of cultures is a new one first reported on in the 2010 edition of *Cultures and Organizations* (Hofstede et al., 2010). The sixth cultural characteristic is called indulgence vs. restraint, which examines issues of happiness and well-being. According to Hofstede and his coauthors, "*Indulgence stands for a tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun. Its opposite pole, restraint, reflects a conviction that such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict social norms* [emphasis in original]" (Hofstede et al., 2010). The top five on the indulgence end are Venezuela, Mexico, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, and Nigeria, whereas those on the restraint end are Pakistan, Egypt, Latvia, Ukraine, and Albania. The United States is positioned toward the indulgence end of the spectrum and ranks #15, alongside Canada and the Netherlands. Some interesting findings associated with indulgence include experiencing higher levels of positive emotions and recalling those emotions for longer periods. Individuals from more indulgent cultures are more optimistic, while their restrained counterparts are more likely to be cynical. People in more indulgent countries are happier than their restrained counterparts, and individuals within indulgent cultures exhibit lower rates of cardiovascular problems commonly associated with stress. Ultimately, individuals from indulgent cultures are more extroverted and outgoing overall, whereas those from restrained cultures are more neurotic. From years of research examining both extraversion and neuroticism, we know that extroverted individuals have more successful interpersonal relationships than those who are highly neurotic. Ultimately, research examining these differences has shown that people from indulgent countries are more open to other cultures, more satisfied with their lives, and are more likely to communicate with friends and family members via the Internet while interacting with more people from other cultures via the Internet as well.

Reflections on Research

Affection Across Culture

How do people show affection in different parts of the world? A 2017 study by Daniel H. Mansson and Aldís G. Sigurðardóttir explored how **trait affection** - a person's natural tendency to give and receive affection - relates to **Hofstede's cultural dimensions** (Mansson & Sigurðardóttir, 2017). Affectionate communication includes verbal statements, nonverbal behaviors, and supportive actions that express closeness and care.

The researchers survey 606 participants from Denmark, Iceland, Poland, and the United States. They found that people in the United States reported giving more affection than participants in the other three countries, which did not differ from one another. When it came to **affection received**, all four groups differed: Americans reported receiving the most affection, followed by Denmark, Poland, and Iceland.

The study also connected these patterns to Hofstede's framework. Trait affection given was linked to cultural values such as **individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininty,** and **undertainty avoidance**. Trait affection "received" was associated with **individualism-collectivism** and **uncertainty avoidance**. These findings suggest that cultural values shape how comfortable people feel expressing affection - and how much affection they expect from others.

Discussion Questions

1. How might cultural values influence how openly someone expresses affection?
2. Can you think of a time when cultural differences affected how you interpreted someone's warmth or friendliness?
3. How can understanding cultural norms help people avoid misreading affectionate or non-affectionate behavior?

Source: Mansson, D. H., & Sigurðardóttir, A. G. (2017). Trait affection and culture: An exploratory study. *Communication Research Reports, 34*(3), 232–241.

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2.3.3: Stella Ting-Toomey

Stella Ting-Toomey



Figure 2.3.3: Dr. Stella Ting-Toomey, Professor Emeritus of Human Communication Studies at California State University, Fullerton. Photo courtesy of California State University, Fullerton. Used under fair use.

In 1988, intercultural communication researcher Stella Ting-Toomey developed face-negotiation theory to help explain the importance of face within interpersonal interactions (Ting-Toomey, 1988). The basic idea behind face-negotiation theory is that face-saving, conflict, and culture are all intertwined. In the most recent version of her theory, Stella Ting-Toomey outlines seven basic factors of face-negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018):

1. People in all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in all communication situations.
2. The concept of face is especially problematic in emotionally vulnerable situations (such as embarrassment, requests, or conflict situations) when the communicators' identities are called into question.
3. The cultural variability dimensions of individualism-collectivism and small/large power distance shape the orientations, movements, contents, and styles of facework.
4. Individualism-collectivism shapes members' preferences for self-oriented facework versus other-oriented facework.
5. Small/large power distance shapes members' preferences for horizontal-based facework versus vertical-based facework.
6. The cultural variability dimensions, encompassing individual, relational, and situational factors, influence the use of specific facework behaviors in particular cultural contexts.
7. Intercultural facework competence refers to the optimal integration of knowledge, mindfulness, and communication skills in managing vulnerable identity-based conflict situations appropriately, effectively, and adaptively (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018).

Foremost, communication and face are highly intertwined concepts; therefore, when approaching an intercultural encounter, it is essential to remember the interrelationship between the two. As far as Ting-Toomey's theory goes, she takes this idea one step further to understanding how face and communication ultimately enable successful intercultural conflict management. Face-negotiation theory is ultimately concerned with three different faces: self-face (concern for our face), other-face (concern for another person's face), and mutual-face (concern for both interactants and the relationship) (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018).As you can see from Ting-Toomey's last assumption in her theory above, individuals who are competent in facework can recognize when facework is necessary and then handle those situations appropriately, effectively, and adaptively. As such, facework should be viewed as a necessary component for understanding any form of interpersonal interaction but is especially important when examining interpersonal interactions that occur between people from differing cultural backgrounds.

What is FACE?

The concept of **face** is one that is not the easiest to define nor completely understand. Originally, the concept of face is not a Western concept, even though the idea of "saving face" is pretty common in everyday talk today. According to Hsien Chin Hu, the concept of face stems from two distinct Chinese words, *lien* and *mien-tzu* (Hu, 1944). Lien "represents the confidence of society in the integrity of ego's moral character, losing which makes it impossible for him to function properly within the community. Lien is both a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalized sanction" (Hu, 1944, p. 45). On the other hand, *mien-tzu* "stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in this country [America]: a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation" (Hu, 1944, p. 45) However, David Yau-fai Ho argues face is more complicated than just lien and mien-tzu, so he provided the following definition:

> Face is the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct; the face extended to a person by others is a function of congruence between judgments of his total condition in life, including his actions and those of people closely associated with him, and the social expectations that others have placed upon him. In terms of two interacting parties, face is the reciprocated compliance, respect, and/or deference that each party expects from, and extends to, the other party *(Ho, 1976, p. 883)*.

More simply, face is essentially "a person's reputation and feelings of prestige within multiple spheres, including the workplace, the family, personal friends, and society at large" (Wrench et al., 2020). For our purposes, we can generally break face down into general categories: face gaining and face losing. Face gaining refers to the strategies a person might use to build their reputation and feelings of prestige (e.g., talking about accomplishments, active social media presence, etc.). In contrast, face losing refers to those behaviors someone engages in that can harm their reputation or feelings of prestige (e.g., getting caught in a lie, failing, etc.).

Key Takeaways from 2.3: Cultural Characteristics and Communication

- Edward T. Hall introduced the concepts of:
  - Low-context cultures, where communication is explicit, direct, and relies heavily on words.
  - High-context cultures, where communication is implicit, relational, and meaning is derived from nonverbal cues and social context.
- Geert Hofstede identified six cultural dimensions that vary across societies and shape communication:
  - Power Distance—Acceptance of unequal power distribution.
  - Individualism vs. Collectivism—Focus on individual goals vs. group harmony.
  - Masculinity vs. Femininity—Preference for assertiveness vs. relationship and quality of life.
  - Uncertainty Avoidance—Comfort with ambiguity and risk.
  - Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation—Emphasis on future planning vs. tradition and present.
  - Indulgence vs. Restraint—Degree of freedom in fulfilling human desires and enjoying life.
- Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory highlights:
  - All people negotiate face (public self-image) during communication, especially in emotionally sensitive or conflict situations.
  - Cultural dimensions (like individualism/collectivism and power distance) influence facework styles.
  - Facework can be self-oriented, other-oriented, or mutual, and intercultural competence requires adapting face strategies appropriately.
- The concept of face involves how others perceive your social standing, reputation, and moral integrity. It includes:
  - Face-gaining behavior enhances prestige and status.
  - Face-losing behavior damages one's social image and reputation.

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2.4: Culturally Intelligent Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Define cultural intelligence (CQ) and describe its four key components: cognitive, motivational, metacognitive, and behavioral.
2. Explain how metacognitive CQ supports intercultural understanding through awareness and adaptability during intercultural interactions.
3. Identify specific strategies to increase cultural intelligence and foster more effective intercultural communication.
4. Describe the role of mindfulness—through attention, intention, and attitude—in building successful intercultural relationships.
5. Apply mindful techniques to recognize and address personal and cultural stereotypes during intercultural encounters.

Effective intercultural communication is not an innate ability but a set of skills that can be developed and refined through intentional practice and self-awareness. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to navigate cultural differences successfully has become essential for personal and professional success. Two key approaches can significantly enhance our intercultural communication competence: developing cultural intelligence through systematic learning and behavioral adaptation, and engaging in culturally mindful interactions that emphasize present-moment awareness and non-judgmental openness. By cultivating these skills, we can transcend surface-level cultural encounters to foster meaningful relationships across cultural boundaries, mitigate misunderstandings, and cultivate more inclusive environments where diverse perspectives are valued and respected.

Become Culturally Intelligent

One of the latest buzzwords in the business world is “cultural intelligence,” which was initially introduced to the scholarly community in 2003 by P. Christopher Earley and Soon Ang (2003). In the past decade, a wealth of research has been conducted examining the importance of cultural intelligence during interpersonal interactions with people from other cultures. Cultural Intelligence is a Communication Competence model that extends the original framework to add components of culture and awareness to the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures. Cultural intelligence (CQ) is defined as an “individual’s capability to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity” (Ang et al., 2007, p.3).

Four Factors of Cultural Intelligence

In their original study on the topic, Earley and Ang proposed that cultural intelligence is comprised of four distinct factors: cognitive, motivational, metacognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Before continuing, take a minute and complete the Cultural Intelligence Questionnaire.

Cultural Intelligence Questionnaire

Instructions: Read the following questions and select the answer that corresponds with your perception. Do not be concerned if some of the items appear similar. Please use the scale below to rate the degree to which each statement applies to you.

Cultural Intelligence Questionnaire

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

____1. When I’m interacting with someone from a differing culture, I know when I use my knowledge of that person’s culture during my interactions.

____2. When I interact with someone from a culture I know nothing about, I have no problem adjusting my perspective of their culture while we talk.

____3. During intercultural interactions, I am well aware of the cultural knowledge I utilize.

____4. I always check my knowledge of someone from another culture to ensure that my understanding of their culture is accurate.

____5. During my intercultural interactions, I try to be mindful of how my perceptions of someone's culture are either consistent with or differ from reality.

____6. I pride myself on knowing a lot about other people's cultures.

____7. I understand the social, economic, and political systems of other cultures.

____8. I know about other cultures' religious beliefs and values.

____9. I understand how daily life is enacted in other cultures.

____10. I know the importance of paintings, literature, and other forms of art in other cultures.

____11. I enjoy reaching out and engaging in an intercultural encounter.

____12. I would have no problem socializing with people from a new culture.

____13. Although intercultural encounters often involve stress, I don't mind the stress because meeting people from new cultures makes it worth it.

____14. I would have no problems accustoming myself to the routines of another culture.

____15. I enjoy being with people from other cultures and getting to know them.

____16. I know how to interact verbally with people from different cultures.

____17. I know how to interact nonverbally with people from different cultures.

____18. I can vary my rate of speech if an intercultural encounter requires it.

____19. I can easily alter my behaviors to suit the needs of an intercultural encounter.

____20. I can alter my facial expressions if an intercultural encounter requires it.

Scoring

Directions: For each section, add up the scores:				
Intercultural Knowledge		Add scores for items 6 to 10	=	
Intercultural Motivation		Add scores for items 11 to 15	=	
Intercultural Behavior		Add scores for items 16 to 20	=	
Intercultural Understanding		Add scores for items 1 to 5	=	

Interpretation:

Scores for each of the four factors (intercultural understanding, intercultural knowledge, intercultural motivation, and intercultural behavior) can be added together to get a composite score. Each of the four factors exists on a continuum from 5 (not culturally intelligent) to 25 (highly culturally intelligent). An average person would score between 12–18.

Based On:

Van Dyne, L., Ang, S., & Koh, C. (2008). Development and validation of the CQS: The Cultural Intelligence Scale. In S. Ang & L. Van Dyne (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural intelligence: Theory, measurement, and application* (pp. 16–38). M. E. Sharpe.

Cognitive CQ

Cognitive CQ involves knowing different cultures (intercultural knowledge). Many types of knowledge about a culture can be relevant during an intercultural interaction: rules and norms, economic and legal systems, cultural values and beliefs, the importance of art within a society, etc. All of these different areas of knowledge involve facts that can help you understand people from different cultures. For example, in most of the United States, maintaining eye contact is very important when talking to someone. You may have even been told by someone to "look at me when I'm talking to you" if you've ever gotten in trouble. However, this isn't consistent across different cultures at all. Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native American cultures often view direct eye contact when talking to someone superior as a sign of disrespect. Understanding how eye contact is perceived across cultures can help you better interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Probably one of the best books to read for insight into how to communicate effectively in another culture is Terri Morrison and Wayne A. Conaway's (2006) book, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More than 60 Countries*.

Motivational CQ

We have motivational CQ, which refers to the degree to which an individual desires to engage in intercultural interactions and can easily adapt to different cultural environments. Motivation is the key to effective intercultural interaction. You can have all the knowledge in the world, but if you are not motivated to have successful intercultural interactions, you will not have them.

Metacognitive CQ

Metacognitive CQ involves being consciously aware of your intercultural interactions in a manner that enables you to have more effective interpersonal experiences with people from diverse cultures (intercultural understanding). All of the knowledge about cultural differences in the world will not be beneficial if you cannot use that information to understand and adapt your behavior during an interpersonal interaction with someone from a different culture. As such, we must continually learn about cultures, but also be prepared to adjust our understanding of people and their cultures through our interactions with them.

Behavioral CQ

Behavioral CQ is the next step following metacognitive CQ, which involves behaving in a manner consistent with what you know about other cultures (Ang et al., 2007). We should never expect others to adjust to us culturally. Instead, culturally intelligent people realize that it's best to adapt our behaviors (verbally and nonverbally) to bridge the cultural gap between people. When we go out of our way to be culturally intelligent, we encourage others to do the same.

As you can see, becoming a truly culturally intelligent person requires considerable effort. As such, it's essential to invest time in developing your cultural intelligence if you are to be an effective communicator in today's world.

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2.5: Intercultural Communication Skills

Reflections on Research

Culture -Smart Communication

How do people communicate effectively when they interact with visitors from all over the world? A 2021 study of 125 tour guides at Iran's Imam Reza Shrine - a site that welcomes nearly 20 million international visitors each year - explored how **cultural intelligence (CQ)** and spiritual intellignece (SQ) relate to strong interpersonal communication skills (Bostan et al., 2021). The researchers measured three key skills: listening, emotional regulation, and the ability to understand verbal and nonverbal messages.

Using structural equation modeling, the study found that **cultural intelligence had a strong positive effect** on all three communication skills. In other words, tour guides who were better at understanding and adapting to different cultural norms were also better listeners, managed, their emotions more effectively, and interpreted communication cues more accurately. For example, a guide with high cultural intelligence might recognize3 when a visitor expects more personal space, uses indirect language, or relies heavily on gestures.

Overall, the findings suggest that people who can adjust to diverse cultural expectations are more successful at building respectful, effective interactions - especially in environments where many cultures meet.

Discussion Questions

1. How might cultural intelligence help someone avoid misunderstandings when communicating with people from different backgrounds?
2. Can you think of a time when understanding someone's cultural norms improved a conversation?
3. What strategies could help people strengthen their cultural intelligence in everyday life?

Source: Bostan, Z., Gholipour, A., & Zarei, M. (2021). *The relationship between cultural intelligence, spiritual intelligence, and interpersonal communication skills among tour guides*. **Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, 19**(6), 745–761.

Engaging Culturally Mindful Interactions

Admittedly, being culturally competent requires a significant amount of work and practice. Even if you're not completely culturally competent, you can engage with people from other cultures mindfully. Shauna Shapiro and Linda Carlson (2009) introduced us to the three-component model of mindfulness: attention, intention, and attitude.

First, when engaging with people from other cultures, we need to be fully present in the moment and not dwell on previous interactions with individuals from that culture or potential future interactions. Instead, it's essential to focus on the person you are interacting with. You also need to be aware of any stereotypes and prejudices you may hold about people from a different culture. Don't try to find evidence to support or negate these stereotypes or prejudices. If you focus on evidence-finding, you're just trying to satisfy your thoughts and feelings and not mindfully engaging with this other person. Also, if you find that your mind is shifting, recognize the shift and allow yourself to re-center on your interaction with the other person.

Second, enter an intercultural interaction with a clear intention. If your goal is to learn more about that person's culture, that's a great intention. However, that may not be the only intention we have when interacting with someone from another culture. For example, you may interact with someone from another culture because you're trying to sell them a product you represent. If your primary intention is sales, then be aware of your intention and don't deceive yourself into thinking it's something more altruistic.

Lastly, approach all intercultural interactions with the right attitude. Remember, the goal of being mindful is to be open, kind, and curious. Although we often discuss mindfulness in terms of how we can be open, kind, and curious with ourselves, it's also important to extend that same framework when we are interacting with people from other cultures. Much of a mindful relationship is about embodying the right attitude during our interactions with others.

Overall, the goal of mindful intercultural interactions is to be present in the moment in a non-judgmental way. When you face

judgments, recognize them, and ask yourself where they have come from. Interrogate those judgments. Don't judge yourself for having these ideas. If we have stereotypes about a specific culture, it's essential to acknowledge those stereotypes, challenge them, understand their origins, and evaluate their factual accuracy.

For example, imagine you're talking to someone from the Republic of Kiribati. Chances are, you've probably never heard of the Republic of Kiribati, but it's a real country in Oceania. But let's say all you know about the people from the Republic of Kiribati is that they like European-style football. During your interaction, you say, "So, what's your favorite football team?" In this moment, you've taken the one stereotype you had and used it to help engage in an interaction. However, if the person comes back and says, "I really don't care. Sports aren't my thing." How do you respond? First, recognize that you attempted to use a stereotype that you had and call it out for what it was. That doesn't make you a bad person, but we must learn from these encounters and broaden our worldviews. Second, call out the stereotype in your mind. Before that moment, you may not have even realized that you had a stereotype of people from the Republic of Kiribati. Labeling our stereotypes of other people is important because it helps us recognize them faster, the more we engage in this type of mindful behavior. Third, figure out where that stereotype came from. Maybe you had been in New Zealand and saw a match on the television and saw the Kiribati national football team. In that one moment, you learned a tiny bit about an entire country and pocketed it away for future use. Sometimes it's easy to figure out where our stereotypes originated. Still, sometimes these stereotypes are so ingrained in us through our own culture that it's hard to really determine their origin. Last, it's time to realize that your stereotype may not be that factual. At the same time, you may have found the one resident of the Republic of Kiribati who doesn't like football. We can often make these determinations by talking to the other person.

It's also important to be mindfully open to the other person's stereotypes of people within your own culture. For example, someone from the Republic of Kiribati may have a stereotype that Americans know nothing about football (other than American football). If you're a fan of what we in the United States call soccer, then you correct that stereotype or at least provide that person a more nuanced understanding of your own culture. Sure, American football is still the king of sports in the United States, but media trends for watching football (soccer) are growing, and more and more Americans are becoming fans.

Skill Builder: Cultural Perspective-Taking

Cultural perspective-taking is the practice of slowing down and considering how someone's cultural background might shape the way they speak, listen, and interpret messages. This skill helps communicators avoid misunderstandings, show respect, and adapt more effectively in diverse settings.

- **Notice**: Pay attention to communication behaviors that may be influenced by culture like tone, eyecontact, personal space, gestures, or how directly someone speaks.
- **Check-In**: Observe your own reactions. Are you assuming your way of communicating is "normal" or "correct"? Notice any quick judgements or confusion.
- **Think**: Ask yourself what cultural values might be shaping the interaction. For example, is the person being indirect because they value harmony? Are they avoiding eye contact because it's a sign of respect in their culture?
- **Adapt**: Make small adjustments to communicate more effectively - slowing your pace, giving more space, using clearer language, or softening directness when needed.
- **Open Space**: Pause before responding. Give the other person room to express themselves in a way that feels natural to them.
- **Reflect and Adjust**: After the interaction, think about what worked and what didn't. Consider how cultural awareness could improve future conversations.



Infographic adapted from Microsoft Copilot Educational Media (2026). Used under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Apply It: Three Questions for Practice

1. During your last cross-cultural interaction, which step - Notice, Check-In, Think, Adapt, Open Space, or Reflect - would have helped the most?
2. How do your own cultural values shape the way you communicate with others?
3. What is one cultural perspective-taking habit you can practice this week to strengthen a relationship in your life?

Key Takeaways

- Cultural intelligence (CQ) is a person's ability to communicate and function effectively across different cultural contexts. It includes:
  - Cognitive CQ—Knowing facts about different cultures (e.g., values, behaviors, history).
  - Motivational CQ—Having the desire and persistence to engage across cultures.
  - Metacognitive CQ—Being aware of and adjusting your cultural assumptions in real-time.
  - Behavioral CQ—Adapting your verbal and nonverbal behavior appropriately in intercultural situations.
  - Metacognitive CQ—Enabling individuals to pause, reflect, and adapt during intercultural communication. It involves consciously checking assumptions and remaining flexible when encountering new cultural information.
- Strategies to improve intercultural communication include:
  - Learning more about your own and others' cultures
  - Practicing cultural humility and curiosity
  - Becoming comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty
  - Challenging your own ethnocentrism
  - Modeling respectful behavior across cultures
- Mindfulness in intercultural communication involves three elements:
  - Attention—Staying present and focused on the current interaction.
  - Intention—Being aware of your goals in the interaction.
  - Attitude—Approaching others with openness, kindness, and curiosity.
- Mindful communicators recognize and investigate stereotypes they hold about other cultures and themselves. They question where these beliefs come from, evaluate their accuracy, and seek a more nuanced understanding through ongoing dialogue.

Chapter Wrap-Up

In this chapter, we began by discussing the meaning of the word "culture," while also considering the concepts of co-culture and

microcultures. We then examined the critical functions that culture plays in our daily lives. Next, we discussed the intersection of culture and communication. Last, we concluded this chapter by discussing how you can enhance your intercultural communication skills.

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3: COMMUNICATION AND SELF

Learning Objectives

- Define and explain the components of self.
- Identify how the self is impacted through communication with others.
- Explain how impressions are created and maintained through face-to-face communication and mediated communication.
- Examine and identify ways to improve your sense of self.

By studying the different concepts in this chapter, you will learn that your background, upbringing, family, friends, and teachers have been an integral part of the journey informing who you are. You will also see that mass media, advertising, and social media platforms greatly influence our sense of self. As we progress through this chapter we will gain a better understanding of who we are through our communication with self and others.

3.1: Introduction to Communication and Self

3.2: Understanding the Self—Who You Are

3.3: Forming the Self

3.4: Communicating the Self

3.5: Communication Styles

3.6: Changing the Self

3.7: Summary and Review

3.8: References

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3.1: Introduction to Communication and Self

The Search for "Self"

A simple Google search for self-help websites yields over 1,330,000,000 results. A search on Amazon for self-help books results in over 100,000 books. There are hundreds of quotes on self-concept and self-esteem available to purchase as wall art. It would be safe to say that the search for “self,” or the betterment of oneself, can be a lifelong journey. Like many journeys in life, there are hills and valleys, or bumps in the road that can impact how quickly we get to our destination. But what influences how we see ourselves? How much of ourselves is a product of our own making and how much of it is constructed based on how others interact with us? Can societal forces influence our sense of self, and if so, how do we manage how we present ourselves to others? We will begin to answer these questions in this chapter as we explore the self.

By studying the different concepts in this chapter, you will learn that your background, upbringing, family, friends, and teachers have been an integral part of the journey informing who you are. Interpersonal communication is an integral part of our self-concept and identity. Communication helps to form our self-concept, and in turn, how we see ourselves on any given day will shape how we communicate with others. You will also see that mass media, advertising, and social media platforms greatly influence your sense of self. As you progress through this chapter you will gain a better understanding of who you are through our communication with yourself and others.

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3.2: Understanding the Self—Who You Are

Perceptions of Self

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



Figure 3.2.1: Reflecting Bullmatian by 6SN7 from Flickr is licensed CC-BY 2.0

Self-Concept

If we said, "Tell me who you are," your answers would be clues as to how you see yourself, and what you know about yourself. **Self-concept** refers to the overall idea of who a person thinks they are. We could say "I have brown hair," "I am a professor," and "I am short." In some situations, personal characteristics, such as our abilities, personality, and other distinguishing features, will best describe who we are. You might consider yourself laid back, traditional, funny, open-minded, or driven, or you might label yourself a leader or a thrill-seeker. In other situations, your self-concept may be tied to a group or cultural membership. For example, you might consider yourself a member of a campus club, honor society, or athletic team. You also may consider your roles as part of your self-concept and this may include being a student, child, parent, co-worker, or friend. You may consider your heritage, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identification as integral to how you see yourself.

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

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

> I am a first-generation American and a child of immigrants. My brother and I were the first in our family to graduate college and go on for higher-level degrees. We also grew up in an economically disadvantaged family. We learned that to get ahead

in life we needed to work for it. *I know that I am a hard worker.* This knowledge is a result of the environment I grew up in, the lessons I was taught, and socialization. In sum, these influences are examples of how self-concept is impacted by nurture.



Figure 3.2.2: How Do I Look? By Subharnab Majumdar from Flickr is licensed CC-BY 2.0

Self-Esteem

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

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

> Not everyone may be a great Salsa dancer. While some may appreciate dancing as an art form, they may not consider an ability to Salsa to be a very big part of their self-concept. If someone critiqued that person's dancing negatively, their self-esteem wouldn't suffer too much. However, I consider myself a good professor and I have spent my entire career studying and expanding my knowledge of communication. If someone negatively critiqued my teaching knowledge and/or abilities, my self-esteem would be hurt. This doesn't mean that we can't be evaluated on something we find important. Even though teaching is very important to my self-concept, I am regularly evaluated on it. Periodically I am evaluated by my students, my dean, and my colleagues. Most of that feedback is in the form of praise and constructive criticism (which can still be difficult to receive), but when taken in the spirit of self-improvement, it is valuable and may even enhance my self-concept and self-esteem.

In fact, in professional contexts, people with higher self-esteem are more likely to work harder based on negative feedback. In addition, they are less negatively affected by work stress, can handle workplace conflict better, and are better able to work independently and solve problems (Brockner, 1988). Most important to consider here is that you may not be viewing yourself as you truly are. That is why this chapter is so important in helping you become less judgmental about yourself.



Figure 3.2.3: Body Dysmorphia Cartoon is in the Public Domain

Self-Awareness

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

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

Even if you don't remember your infancy—and most of us don't—we am sure that each of you has a moment when you first recognized something distinct about yourself. This could range from when you realized what color your eyes were to whether you were able to proficiently throw a ball. In other words, you were noticing your feelings, your reactions, your thoughts, your behaviors, and more. According to sociologist George Herbert Mead (1934), it helps to have a strong sense of yourself, because you monitor your own behaviors and form impressions of who you are through self-observation.

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

Self-Efficacy

Some people have a keen sense of their ability to succeed at things they attempt to do, while others may struggle in this area. **Self-efficacy** refers to a person's perception of their ability to perform a task and their expectation about the outcomes their behavior will have in a challenging situation (Bandura, 2012). Figure 3.2.4 illustrates the interconnections of self in its relationship to our self-concept, self-esteem, self-awareness, and our self-efficacy. It is important to keep in mind that all parts of the self will

always be interconnected. It is impossible to remove even one of the parts of the self.



Figure 3.2.4:Relationship between the Self, Self-Awareness, Self-Concept, Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy by Victoria Leonard is licensed CC-BY 4.0

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

Student Focus

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

Hopefully, you can see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles in our lives. While some of this

process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives. This is why the feedback we get from others can impact our self-esteem and self-concept.

Uppers, Downers, and Vultures

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



Figure 3.2.5: "In search of the Maltese Falcon #13 - White Backed Vulture, Malta Falconry Centre" by foxypar4 is licensed CC BY 2.0

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

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

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

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3.3: Forming the Self

How Others Affect the Self

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

Symbolic Interactionism

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

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

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

Reflected Appraisal

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

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

Social Comparison

Social comparison (Festinger, 1954) is also key to how symbolic interactionism takes place. When we judge ourselves in terms

of how we compare to others, we engage in such a process. The use of social media is one way to think about how we can constantly question if we “measure up” to others. If you have ever entered into a social situation like a party or a workplace event and compared yourself to your peers—either positively or negatively—you have experienced social comparison firsthand.



Figure 3.3.1: Comparison by ER0L is licensed CC BY 2.0

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

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

The Self and Family

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



Figure 3.3.2: Mali Family by Ferdinand Reus is licensed CC-BY-SA 2.0

Identity Scripts

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

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

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

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

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

> Black participants in this study did internalize racist scripts in early childhood, but were more adept at resisting negative racial messages in early adulthood. Parenting strategies could have contributed to the internalization of negative cultural scripts given that each respondent reported that their parents did little to shield them from internalizing presumptions of their racial inferiority. Instead, college served as a time when participants were able to develop and redefine their sense of worth and belonging into a more positive racial identity. (Llaguno Velarde, 2018, p. 2)

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

Attachment Styles

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

Based on this early research, other scholars have continued to explore how romantic attachments develop. Early attachments impact adulthood: attachment styles in infancy influence a person's development of positive and/or negative views of self and others. Figure 3.3.3 describes four attachment styles that have been posited as evolving from these early attachments we form: secure, fearful-avoidant, anxious-preoccupied, and dismissive-avoidant attachment styles. As shown in the figure,

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

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

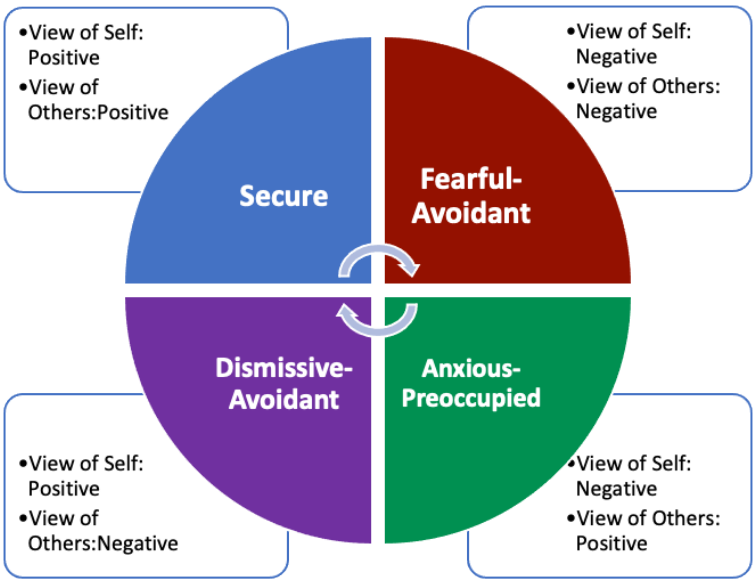


Figure 3.3.3: Attachment Styles by Victoria Leonard is licensed CC-BY 4.0

Secure Attachment

Individuals who have consistently caring and attentive parents or caregivers develop a **secure attachment style**. If the caregiving they receive is loving and stable, they develop a positive view of themselves and a positive view of others. Given this style, as people become adults, their approaches to romantic relationships are generally positive. Their communication behaviors

mirror this positivity. They find it easy to become emotionally close to others and they report greater relationship satisfaction. Securely attached people are also comfortable being both independent and interdependent with their partners. In addition, when a relationship hits a bump, securely attached individuals have the capacity to communicate well and work on those relationships. However, if a relationship doesn't work out, they are able to grieve and move on rather than ruminate over the dissolution of the relationship for a long time.

Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment

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

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

Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment

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

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

Fearful-Avoidant Attachment

The final attachment style we will examine is one that can have the most severe negative impact on one's sense of self. **Fearful-avoidant attachment styles** are created when a child experiences physical or emotional cruelty. There could be times when the "care" they receive is life-threatening. Clearly, this poses a dilemma for the child, who rightfully feels the parent should be their safety net. The only way a child can cope with the threat of verbal or physical abuse is to detach from the parent. As a result,

they have a negative view of both themselves and others. Most people want intimate relationships in their lives. However, when someone has grown up in fear it is difficult to trust other people. An inner conflict exists in this person. The desire for intimacy is often resisted based on their inability to trust or rely on others. They are often suspicious of others' intentions or actions, so they push people away. This is why expressions of affection are not readily expressed.

Students always ask, “Can your attachment style change?” Yes, it can, for either better or worse. As you experience life and relationships, you can change your attachment style. If you have a dismissive-avoidant style and meet a wonderful person who has a secure attachment style, you can change over time as trust is built. Similarly, if you have a secure attachment style, and end up in an abusive relationship, you can develop a fearful attachment style. Students also ask, “Can you have one attachment style with one person, and a different one with someone else?” The answer is yes, but most of us tend to have one dominant attachment style.

The Self and Society

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

Race and Ethnicity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Audio (24 minutes): Podcast: Today Explained, "The Talk"
- Transcript: Podcast: Today Explained, "The Talk"

Questions for Journaling or Discussion

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

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

Gender and Sexuality

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

The term **gender identity** was coined in the middle 1960s to describe one's persistent inner sense of femininity, masculinity, a

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



Figure 3.3.4: Day 31 - Gender by David Wallace is licensed CC-BY 2.0

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

Socioeconomics or Class

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

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

A number of signs point to the fact that our class hierarchy is becoming less flexible. The American Dream—the notion that hard work and persistence will surely result in prosperity and plentitude—is attractive, but largely a myth when we examine the numbers of people who move from poverty to the top echelons of wealth. In fact, the disparity in the United States between the top income earners and those at the bottom, far from moving toward equalization, is presently increasing each year. Executive pay and the wages earned by an average worker provide a snapshot of this condition. Chief executives of large corporations earn on average

320 times the amount of a typical employee, according to the Economic Policy Institute: “In 1989, that ratio was 61 to 1. From 1978 to 2019, compensation grew 14 percent for typical workers. It rose 1,167 percent for C.E.O.s” (Gelles, 2021, p. 24).

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

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

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

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3.4: Communicating the Self

Presentation of Self: Communication and Identity Management

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

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

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



Figure 3.4.1: "Day 165: 2 Self Portraits" by Sodanie Chea is licensed CC-BY 2.0

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

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

One of our authors provides an example:

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

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

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

Thoughts on Theory: Identity and Face Negotiation Theory

Have You Ever "Saved Face?"

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

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

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

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

Reflection

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

Presentation of Self: Communication in the Virtual World

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



Figure 3.4.2: Social Media Addiction by Today Testing is licensed CC-BY-SA 4.0

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

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

According to Nguyen, et al., as cited in Casale and Banshi (2020), “Social media addiction (or problematic social media use) classified into DSM V is a proposed form of psychological or behavioral dependence on social media platforms” (p. 257). Meanwhile, mental disorders (or mental illnesses) are conditions that affect your thinking, feeling, mood, and behavior (Medlineplus, 2020). It is hard for physicians to diagnose the disease if the addict does not report their problem. Young people and students are considered to be most vulnerable to problematic internet use (Kuss et al., 2013; Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016; Loannidis et al., 2018). A study in India showed that the rate of social media addiction was 36.9% among 1,389 social media users who were pre-university college students (Ramesh et al., 2018). Furthermore, the problem of social media use in children and

young people is often associated with symptoms of mental disorder, for example, anxiety and depression (Hoge et al., 2017). In the United States, approximately 25% of college students surveyed showed signs of depression when using Facebook (Moreno et al., 2011). A 2013 survey from the American Psychological Association found that psychological problems were increasing among college students, such as anxiety (41.6%), depression (36.4%), and relationship problems (35.8%) (American Psychological Association, 2013).

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

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

Explore: Social Media Use and Politics

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

Reflection

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

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

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3.5: Communication Styles

Communication Styles

Imagine two friends, Julie and Tammy, sitting in a restaurant. Their food arrives, but Julie's order is wrong. Tammy immediately says, "You should tell the server. You deserve what you ordered." Julie hesitates. "It's fine. I don't want to make a scene."

When the server returns, Tammy jumps in: "Excuse me—this isn't what she ordered." Julie forces a smile. "It's okay, really. I'll just eat it."

Same situation. Two totally different communication styles. And both styles come from deeper parts of who they are—their comfort levels, their upbringing, their culture, and their sense of self. This is why communication styles belong in a chapter on self-concept.

What Are Communication Styles?

As we've learned throughout this chapter, your self-concept is shaped by factors such as family dynamics, culture, social media, personal experiences, and the messages you receive from others. One important part of your self-concept is **how you communicate**—the patterns you use to express your needs, share your opinions, share your feelings, and navigate relationships.

A **communication style** is a consistent pattern of interaction and response across different people, topics, and situations. Your style influences how you express emotions, advocate for yourself, handle conflict, and how others treat and respond to you. Your communication style is not fixed; it evolves as you gain confidence, experience, and cultural awareness. You likely use more than one communication style, depending on the context of the interaction. The appropriateness and effectiveness of your communication style is highly dependent on perceptions of cultural, gender, and societal expectations.

Researchers have identified several major communication styles, including **aggressive, passive, assertive, and passive-aggressive** (Hedlund & Lindquist, 1984; Schanz et al., 2021). Later scholars, especially those working outside Western frameworks, added a fifth style—**soothing/obliging**, which we will refer to as **accommodating** (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Below are the five styles, each with original examples that illustrate how they sound in everyday life.

Activity

Communication Styles Self-Check

Before you learn about the different communication styles, let's use the short scenarios below to reflect on how you tend to communicate.

For each situation, choose the response that is closest to how you *would actually respond*, not how you think you *should* respond. Keep track of your letters.

Scenario 1: The Dirty Dishes

Your roommate left dirty dishes in the sink again.

A. "This is disgusting. Clean your mess NOW."
B. "Hey, can we revisit our dish agreement? I need the sink kept clear."
C. You wash the dishes yourself and say nothing.
D. You leave the dishes on their bed with a note that says, "Thought you might need these."
E. "It's okay, I'll take care of it—just try to remember next time."

Scenario 2: The Sweater Stain

Your sibling returned your favorite sweater with a stain.

A. "You ruin everything you borrow. Don't touch my stuff again."
B. "I'm upset the sweater came back stained. Can we figure out how to fix or replace it?"
C. You pretend not to notice and clean it yourself.
D. "Wow, thanks for taking such *great* care of my clothes." You might even stain a piece of their clothing to teach them a lesson.
E. "It happens. Let's see if we can get the stain out together."

Scenario 3: The Disneyland Friend

A friend owes you $50 but went to Disneyland instead of paying you back.

A. "Seriously? Pay me back TODAY or we're done."
B. "I noticed you went to Disneyland. Can we set a plan for you to repay the $50?"
C. You decide not to bring it up.
D. "*Must be nice* to afford Disneyland when you still owe people money."
E. "Don't worry about it right now—just pay me when you can."

Scenario 4: The Group Project

One group member still hasn't done their part.

A. "If you don't do your work, I'm telling the professor you're useless."
B. "We need your section to finish the project. When can you have it done?"
C. You quietly do their part yourself.
D. You submit the project without their name and don't tell them.
E. "If you're overwhelmed, I can help you get started."

Scenario 5: The Instagram Exclusion

Your friends went out without inviting you and posted it online.

A. "Wow. Thanks for excluding me. Don't bother inviting me again."
B. "I felt left out when I saw the posts. Can we talk about it?"
C. You say nothing and pretend it doesn't bother you.
D. You post a story that says, "Love being forgotten by my 'friends.'"
E. "I get it—plans happen. Let's hang out another time."

Scoring

Count how many A, B, C, D, and E responses you selected.

- **Mostly A:** Aggressive
- **Mostly B:** Assertive
- **Mostly C:** Passive
- **Mostly D:** Passive-Aggressive
- **Mostly E:** Accommodating
- **Mixed:** You may shift styles depending on the situation, which can be a strength when used intentionally.

Reflection Questions

1. What strengths do you see in your dominant communication style?

2. What challenges or patterns do you notice that might get in your way?
3. Which communication style would you like to develop further, and why?

Communication Styles Explained

Aggressive Communication

Aggressive communication is a dominant, competitive style that prioritizes one's own needs at the expense of others. It often involves attacking the self-concept of others, blaming, using profanity, making threats, and ridicule. Nonverbal behaviors can include a raised voice, intense eye contact, and strong hand gestures like pointing. This style can feel like an attack and create defensiveness in others, which may harm self-concepts and damage relationships over time.

Aggressive statements might sound like:

- "I'm raising my voice because you're not listening."
- "This is your fault—fix it."
- "You are such as idiot. I'm doing it my way."
- "If you can't handle this, maybe you shouldn't be here."
- "I'm done explaining—just do what I said."

Passive Communication

Passive communication is submissive and avoidant, meaning that individuals may not share their opinions, feelings, or needs, even if they are being taken advantage of. While passive communication can reflect an easygoing nature or lack of interest in a topic, it can also represent a struggle to express needs and emotions, even when they are overlooked or mistreated. Nonverbally, passive communicators are often characterized by a softer tone of voice, indirect eye contact, and even poor posture. This style may lead to internal frustration because the person's true feelings remain unspoken.

Passive statements might sound like:

- "It's okay... I don't want to bother anyone."
- "I'll just stay quiet—it's not worth it."
- "I guess it doesn't matter what I want."
- "Sorry! I'm sorry—I say the wrong thing sometimes."
- "Whatever you decide is fine with me."

Passive-Aggressive Communication

Passive-aggressive communication expresses anger or frustration indirectly. The person appears agreeable on the surface but communicates resentment through sarcasm, withdrawal, or subtle resistance. Passive-aggressive communicators may feel uncomfortable expressing their feelings, and rather use a roundabout way to let others know they are upset. This style is more difficult to identify non-verbally because the communicator is often trying to hide their true feelings--what you may observe instead is a mismatch between the message and the nonverbal behaviors, such as saying "I'm fine" with a big sigh. This style can confuse others because the message and the behavior do not match.

Passive-aggressive statements might sound like:

- "Sure, I'll handle it," followed by intentional delays.

- “I’m not upset,” said with a cold tone or distant body language.
- “Do whatever you want—I’m used to not being included.”
- “Wow, must be nice to have that kind of free time.”
- “No worries… I’ll just fix it later like I always do.”

Accommodating Communication

Accommodating communication emphasizes harmony, relationship preservation, and emotional comfort. This style prioritizes the other person’s needs and works to maintain peace, often through empathy, reassurance, and flexibility. Nonverbally, this style may include a calm tone of voice, gentle eye contact, open posture, and supportive touch when culturally appropriate. In many cultures around the world, an accommodating style of communication is preferred because it helps to promote long-lasting and harmonious relationships. While it can strengthen relationships, overuse may cause someone to neglect their own needs.

Accommodating statements might sound like:

- “Let’s go with your idea—I want everyone to feel good about this.”
- “I’m happy to adjust if it makes things easier for you.”
- “It’s not about who’s right; I’d rather keep things positive.”
- “Whatever works best for the group is fine with me.”
- “I understand where you’re coming from, and I’m okay adapting.”

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication balances respect for self and others. Assertive communicators express their needs clearly and honestly while also considering the other person's rights and feelings. Nonverbally, an assertive style includes direct eye contact, a confident tone of voice, and good posture. In Western cultures like the United States, this style is often considered the most effective because it promotes clarity, mutual respect, and problem-solving.

Assertive statements might sound like:

- “I want to share my perspective so we can find a solution.”
- “I disagree, and here’s why—but I’m open to hearing your view.”
- “When that happened, I felt overlooked. Can we talk about it?”
- “I need more time to finish this, so I’ll submit it tomorrow.”
- “I respect your opinion, and here’s what I need in this situation.”

Reflections on Research

Can You Be Aggressively Assertive?

Many people use the words *aggressive* and *assertive* as if they mean the same thing—“I just need to be more aggressive and go after what I want”—when what they really mean is that they want to be more assertive. In *Development and Validation of the Adaptive and Aggressive Assertiveness Scales (AAA-S)*, researchers set out to create a modern tool that separates healthy, respectful assertiveness from aggressive, rights-violating behavior. Using large student samples from a midwestern university and a clinical group from a private psychology practice, the authors conducted quantitative analyses to show that **adaptive assertiveness**—like calmly telling a store clerk, “I was here first, but I can wait my turn”—is fundamentally different from **aggressive assertiveness**, such as snapping, “Move. I was here first.” Their findings showed that adaptive assertiveness is linked to communication competence and lower anxiety, while aggressive assertiveness is tied to dominance

and hostility. The study also found no gender differences in adaptive assertiveness, though men scored higher in aggressive assertiveness. Because the AAA-S reliably distinguishes these communication styles, it gives researchers and clinicians a clearer way to assess how people express their needs without relying on outdated or misleading measures.

Discussion Questions

- When you need to stand up for yourself—whether with a friend, partner, coworker, or stranger—what does your *default* style look like: passive, assertive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive? What patterns do you notice?
- Think about a recent moment when you tried to express a need or boundary. What made it easier or harder to communicate assertively, and how did the other person's response shape your behavior?
- The study distinguishes between "getting your needs met respectfully" and "getting your needs met through force." In your own life, what does respectful assertiveness look like, and how do you know when you've crossed (or are close to crossing) into aggression?

Source: Smith, A. R., Davis, T. E., & Witte, T. H. (2024). *Development and validation of the Adaptive and Aggressive Assertiveness Scales (AAA-S).* Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment, 46, 1–15.

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3.6: Changing the Self

Set Yourself Up to Succeed

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

Commit to Personal Growth with Small Steps

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

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

Create and Maintain Healthy Relationships

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

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

Recognize the Subjective Nature of Self

If you have ever watched a movie with someone and the first thing you say after is "That was a great movie!" but the person you watched it with said, "I hated it," you will understand how everything we see is relative or subjective, meaning evaluated on the basis of personal perspectives. What we may find attractive, you may not. Through the years of teaching Communication classes, we have asked students to identify an attractive celebrity, and then we ask the rest of the class if they agree with these perceptions. There has never been a time when everyone felt the same way about someone. This same dynamic is true about perceptions of selfhood as well. We may view ourselves very differently than others do. In fact, we generally do not see ourselves the way others see us, and at times, we may not even be able to judge ourselves accurately even though the truth of our behavior may be staring us in the face.

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

Challenge: Try This

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

Recognize that the Self-Concept Resists Change

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

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

Be Mindful of the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

One challenge to changing the self can be found in the concept of **self-fulfilling prophecy**, introduced by the sociologist Robert Merton. The phenomenon suggests that our own expectations—and also those that others may place upon us—can shift our behaviors. When such a shift occurs, expectations we entertained may actually come to be. As Merton put it, a "false definition ...

evoking a new behavior…" can cause an "originally false conception [to] come true" (Merton, 1948, p. 193).

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

> My experience with my brother several years ago is a telling example. I believed my brother was not interested in having a close relationship with me (Phase 1). I, therefore, avoided calling him or reaching out in any tangible way. I figured, "Well, he is simply busy with his own life and I guess that's the way it is." I neglected to invite closeness with him; I behaved as if he did not want to know me or was unconcerned with my well-being (Phase 2). In a year or so our relationship had not only become more distant (Phase 3), but I also became even more sure that my original belief about his disinterest in me was true (Phase 4). Later, I found out he was experiencing some truly difficult health issues and was unable to communicate to me about these. I was completely wrong in my assumptions—but I sure believed them with gusto! It is noteworthy that I believed the distance between me and my brother was simply something *happening* to me, and yet I was the impetus. My expectation about my brother's intentions, in my mind, were proven true until I realized I had misperceived the situation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beware of Distorted Patterns of Thinking



Figure 3.6.1: Distorted [www.flickr.com] ["Distorted] by Carlos ZGZ is licensed CC BY 2.0

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

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

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

Challenge: Try This

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

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3.7: Summary and Review

Summary

Understanding what the self is, and how it is formed, is integral to recognizing who you are today—and who you may become tomorrow. We have suggested that selfhood is not only a product of your own thoughts, but also constructed through communication with others. In this chapter we have explained how aspects of self are interconnected, and that self-concept is integrally tied to self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-efficacy. We all engage in a never-ending process of building the self through interactions with family, friends, teachers, and others while responding to social and political forces alive in each historical era.

We learned that social identities impact our sense of self: a person's race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class shift communication patterns, perceptions, and interpersonal relationships in particular.

Additionally, we know now that relationships become tricky when individuals play roles such as uppers, downers, and/or vultures. Our sense of self-worth, impression management, and especially the way we see the world around us is linked to those with whom we communicate. This is why surrounding yourself with people who have healthy communication skills and positive self-esteem is so important. The interactions that we participate in literally produce and reproduce the people we become, whether in face-to-face or in virtual settings.

Because of this fact, we discussed different guidelines to aid you in transforming the self. We invite you to take stock of who you are and make shifts as you become your best "you." Such a road is not always easy, but it may be the most satisfying work any of us do.

If you think back to the beginning of this chapter, we described the overwhelming number of results that a Google search for the term "self-help," produces. Understanding the self is more than reading affirmations on wall art to improve self-esteem, of course. Our hope is that you now see such an endeavor cannot simply be answered by a simple search. Rather, it takes investment, self-reflection, and strength.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between self-awareness, self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, and how do you feel about each of these important aspects of self after having read this chapter?
2. Who are some of the uppers, downers, or vultures in your life and how have they impacted your identity?
3. What elements of your own selfhood have been affected by reflected appraisal or social comparison? Has social media had any impact on this process for you or others you may know?
4. Which of the strategies for changing the self resonate with you in particular? Do you believe one is more difficult to accomplish than others? Which one? Why?

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4: PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

- Explain the perception process and how it influences interpersonal relationships.
- Discuss the factors, including psychological tendencies that affect how we perceive others and impact our interactions.
- Identify both implicit and personal biases in your perception, and use strategies to separate observable facts from assumptions, in order to mitigate stereotyping.

4.1: Introduction to Perception and Communication

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

4.3: Perception Process - Part 3 (Interpretation)

4.4: Influences on Perception

4.5: Stereotyping, Microaggressions, and Bias

4.6: Guidelines for Effective Perception

4.7: Summary and Review

4.8: References

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4.1: Introduction to Perception and Communication

The Vignette: Making Assumptions

Imagine that you've sign up for a dating app at the recommendation of your best friend. You are excited to meet like-minded individuals, whom you hope to start a romantic relationship with. After scrolling through multiple “matches,” you land on someone who catches your eye. You notice their profile picture was taken at the beach, which you also love. You notice the career they list is one that has a six-digit income. From your perspective, the location they list is in a highly desirable area—and their hobbies and interests (for example, skiing, sailing, and international travel) require access to cash and free time.



Figure 4.1.1: Binary Heart by Alexander Sinn on Unsplash

Reflection Questions

1. What assumptions did you make regarding the “match” in the dating app?
2. What cultural norms or expectations did you notice in this person’s perception?
3. Can you name any stereotypes that you may have, based on the assumptions that you made in this vignette?

We make assumptions about people we have never met every day. Since we will not have the opportunity to get to know most of these individuals, we will never find out if our assumptions are accurate. There are many factors that go into how we interpret the world and the people we encounter. In this chapter, we will discuss the process of how we form perceptions, the factors that influence our perceptions, and how we can challenge ourselves to question our first impressions of others.

None of us enjoy it when others make assumptions about us, simply based on appearance—yet we are hardwired to be efficient in our lives, which sometimes involves taking shortcuts and making educated guesses about new people and situations. As you read through the chapter, we hope that you will take notice of factors in your own life that affect how you perceive others. Furthermore, we encourage you to engage in a process of perception checking, or questioning your assumptions of others, on a regular basis.

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

Basic Components of the Perception Process

The perception process has three stages: selection, organization, and interpretation (Knudsen, et al., 2021). As shown in Figure 4.2.1, the **perception process** is both cognitive and psychological. It can influence how we communicate with ourselves and others. Look at any number of objects around you. What you choose to focus on, how you would describe it, and finally what you think about that object is unique to you. In this section, we walk you through some of the basic components of the perception process. The goal here is to gain a better understanding of how our perceptions are formed, giving us some unique insights into how those impact our interpersonal relationships.

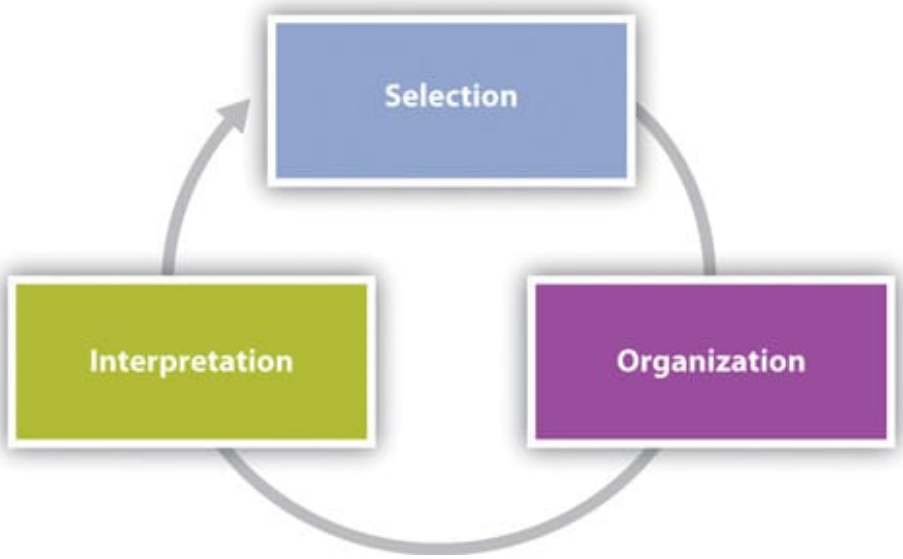


Figure 4.2.1: The Perception Process by Alex Mata licensed as CC-BY 4.0(opens in new window)

Figure 4.2.1 shows a continuous interaction of the three stages of the perception process. Selection influences organization; organization influences interpretation; interpretation goes back into selection; then the process starts over again.

Selection

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

Student Voices: Best Friends and First Impressions

"Perception is key" is a saying I've heard many times in my life. What I didn't realize is just how important our perception is to the world and people around us. A specific example in my life has been the assumptions I've made about those around me. These assumptions have been made based on my initial perception, and not any deeper understanding. When first being introduced to a new environment, it's only natural to look around and make some assumptions about the things around you. What's been interesting is recognizing how many of my initial assumptions have been incorrect.

The biggest example in my life has been the perception of my best friend. Before ever talking to him, I assumed he was likely a bad guy, based on his choice of presentation. He wore baggy clothes, had a few facial piercings, and looked like an all-around rebel. My perception of him was negative, and I wanted nothing to do with him. I later came to find out his mother was battling cancer, and his father was an alcoholic. This person I perceived as a bad person was someone struggling with some of the hardest things I could imagine. The more I got to know him, the more I realized my assumptions and perceptions were backwards, and having a more positive view of people is incredibly important. Without this realization, I never would have met my best friend or recognized the importance of limiting my negative perceptions.

Killian Murphy

Cerritos College, Nursing Major

Salience

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

Needs

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

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

Thoughts on Theory: How Standpoint Theory Helps Us Understand Each Other

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this YouTube Video online

Imagine you are at work and need to use the restroom. For most people, this is a mindless, two-minute break. But in the film *Hidden Figures*, Katherine Johnson—a brilliant mathematician at NASA—must run half a mile across the campus, in heels and rain, just to find a "Colored" bathroom. Her colleagues, mostly white men, are completely unaware of her absence or the exhaustion she feels. To them, the office is efficient; to Katherine, the office is a series of obstacles.

This difference in perspective is the heart of **Standpoint Theory**. It suggests that our social positions—shaped by race, gender, and class—determine what we notice and how we interpret our surroundings.

Social Location vs. Standpoint

To understand this theory, we must distinguish between where we are placed by society and what we choose to see:

- **Social Location (Passive):** This is your automatic place in the social hierarchy. For a Cerritos College student, your social location might be a **first-generation student balancing a part-time job**, while another person's might be a **tenured dean or a long-time local business owner.** These are the "starting points" society assigns us. In *Hidden Figures*, Katherine's social location was a Black woman in the segregated South.
- **Standpoint (Active):** A standpoint is **earned**. It is not just your identity, but your conscious awareness of how that identity is treated by power structures. You "earn" a standpoint by critically questioning why certain groups have more resources or fewer obstacles than others. Katherine didn't just experience the long walk; she developed a standpoint by recognizing that the walk was a result of systemic inequality.

The Impact of Standpoint Theory on Interpersonal Communication

Standpoint Theory challenges the idea of "objective" truth in our daily interactions. It suggests that individuals in **marginalized groups** often have a more comprehensive view of social reality than those in dominant groups. Why? Because to navigate society successfully, marginalized individuals must understand both their own lived experiences and the "rules" of the dominant culture to which they must often conform (Harding, 1991). Katherine Johnson had to understand the "white" world of NASA to do her job and her own world to survive it. Meanwhile, her white colleagues had the "luxury" of being unaware of her struggles.

In interpersonal settings, recognizing these different standpoints helps us communicate with greater empathy and reduces the common mistake of assuming our own experience is the "standard" for everyone else. By listening to those with different standpoints, we gain a more accurate picture of the world (Wood, 2012).

Discussion Questions

1. In the *Hidden Figures* example, why were Katherine's colleagues so surprised when they finally learned about her half-mile walk? How does "privilege" create a blind spot in communication?
2. Reflect on your own **social location** as a student. What is an obstacle you face that someone in a position of power might not even realize exists?
3. The theory claims that standpoints are "earned" through critical reflection. What is one social issue you have developed a specific "standpoint" on over the last few years?
4. How can understanding Standpoint Theory help a manager communicate more effectively with a diverse team of employees?

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Expectations

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



Figure 4.2.3: Selfie by June Aye on Unsplash

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

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

Organization

Now that we understand how we select which stimuli to pay attention to, let's look at how we organize that information. How we understand this process of organization comes from **gestalt theory**. *Gestalt* is German for "pattern" or "shape," and the theory asserts that we essentially process stimuli by blending external stimuli with internal processes (Rock & Palmer, 1990). In essence, how we perceive the external world is heavily determined by internal influences. To break this down further, we will look at how we organize stimuli based on the three most common factors: similarity, difference, and proximity (Coren, 1980).

Assumed Similarity and Difference

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

Stereotypes have been described in psychology as "allowing easier and more efficient processing of information" (Hilton & Hippel, 1996, p. 240). Our brains are trained, from early childhood on, to function in this way. Whether it's learning about animals, shapes, colors, or letters, we are taught to group similar-looking objects together as a means of understanding our

environment. Through repetition of such activities, our perceptions based on similarities and differences are formed, reinforced, and encouraged. Although stereotyping can serve as a path of least resistance, we know that it can also create barriers for our ability to create healthy relationships with others. Now that we understand why we may stereotype subconsciously, and how that can be dangerous, let us continue to build these assumed realities.

Proximity

Proximity refers to how we perceive one object based on its surroundings. So, as we go about our day, we do not see objects, situations, or scenarios as isolated, but in context to the surroundings. This concept has been highlighted in the figure-ground relationship, which argues that our focus, whether it be on the object or the background, will change our perception (Knudsen, et al., 2021). This is highlighted in the classic faces/vase image displayed in Figure ({4{.}2{.}\eatSpaces{4} \endSpaces}\). Depending on whether you focus on the black or white portions of the image, this determines which figure becomes prominent. Try for yourself. Do you see different the vase or the profiles?

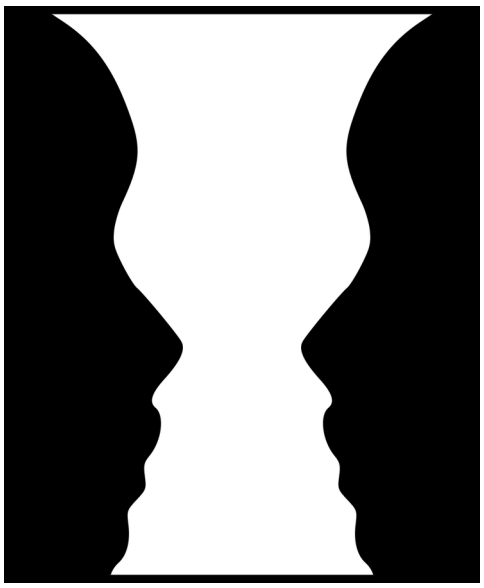


Figure 4.2.4: Figure-Ground by Bryan Derksen licensed CC0 1.0

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

Before we leave this section on proximity, let's acknowledge how commonly we, and others, use proximity to organize the intentions of those around us. Have you ever been out with a friend to have someone assume you were together, or on a date? Or if you encounter the scene in Figure 4.2.5, where one child stands over another, who is on the ground and crying, could there be an assumption that one child hit or caused the other to be upset? Based on proximity, your physical immediacy to another person, object, or location could lead to false perceptions about you and others. Perhaps these perceptions are harmless, but they can cause significant harm to one or more parties involved, particularly when it comes to how we manage our relationships with others. Asking questions and consistently examining our biases as we move through the world can help us avoid making assumptions.



Figure 4.2.5: Young boy crying on the floor. Photo by yang miao on Unsplash

Primacy and Recency Effects

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

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

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

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

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4.3: Perception Process - Part 3 (Interpretation)

Interpretation

The third stage of our perception process is **interpretation**. To close this loop, let us take a moment to review the perception process (Figure 4.3.1).

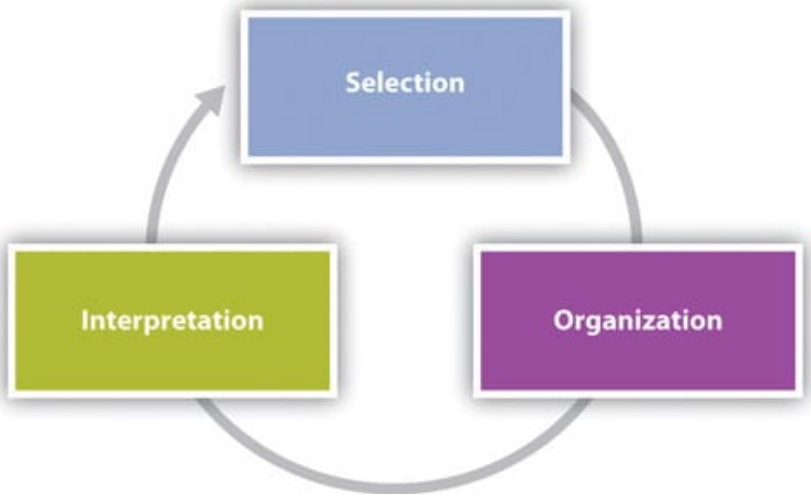


Figure 4.3.1: Perception Process by Alex Mata licensed as CC-BY 4.0

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

Confirmation Bias

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

Interpretation: An Interpersonal Example

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

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

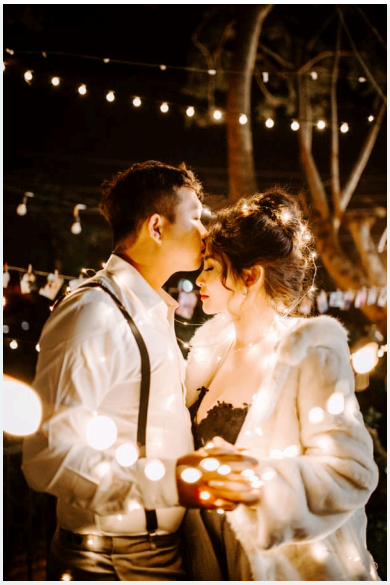


Figure 4.3.2: Man Kissing a Woman by Anthony Tran on Unsplash

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

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

Attributions

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

Fundamental Attribution Error

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

Self-Serving Bias

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

Self-serving bias is essentially an attribution process that we engage in to portray ourselves in the most desirable light. Although

research shows that we do this almost effortlessly for ourselves, we do not offer those same grace so easily to others.



Figure 4.3.3: Driver Looking In Rearview Window by Joshua Wordel on Unsplash

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

Halo and Horn Effects

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

Halo Effect

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

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



Figure 4.3.4: Woman Holding a Cow's Skull in Front of Face by Mallory Johndrow on Unsplash.

Horn Effect

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

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

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

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4.4: Influences on Perception

How Physiology and Culture Influence Perception

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

Physiology

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

Culture

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



Figure 4.4.1: Final Dance at Pamplona City Hall by San Fermin Pamplona - Navarra on Unsplash

Our cultural groups or cultural identities shape our perceptions of others. This includes the groups we belong to or are assigned

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

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

Race

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

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

Pros and Cons of Racial Categories



According to the 2020 US Census, the largest shift in how Americans self-identified in terms of race was the increase in people who self-identify as “more than one racial category” from 2.9% (9 million people) in 2010 to 10.2% (33.8 million people) in 2020 (Jones, et al., 2021, August 12). Although we have complex understandings of our own multiple identities, this does not protect us from other people’s quick perceptions. In real-life situations, we are sized up very quickly by those we meet for the first time. They look at our facial features, skin color, and clothing; and they listen to how we speak. Then they decide which racial category we belong to.Comedian Trevor Noah, in a February 2016 show he did for Comedy Central, talked about opening his first bank account in the United States. Trevor Noah was born in South Africa, during the era of apartheid. He is the child of an Black African mother and a White European father. When he sat down with the banker, he recalled the woman who helped him to open his account stating that he could “just go with whatever race you want.” He said that when he told the woman that he was going to choose White, it was obvious she had no idea what to do but was clearly having trouble accepting that choice. (You may watch the two-minute video clip on Comedy Central.)Figure 4.4.2: Child With Mom by Tyson on UnsplashWe do not have a choice when other people categorize us into racial categories. Please use the following questions to reflect and discuss your thoughts on racial categories and how they affect us.Reflection QuestionsDiscuss the pros and cons of using racial categories in your own life. How do you think we, as the United States, should move forward regarding race as a label?When you are asked to state your race, what feelings come up for you?Perhaps you identify with more than one racial background or the race you identify with is questioned by others. How can we effectively communicate our self-identified race or cultural group(s) to others?Has anyone ever misidentified your cultural background or race? How did you react to this?How can we communicate most effectively to give individuals the right to self-identify their cultural background?

Ethnicity/Regionalism

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

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

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

Sex Assigned at Birth, and Gender

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



Figure 4.4.3: Two Students in a Gender Neutral Bathroom by Zackary Drucker licensed as CC BY NC ND 4.0

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

Sexualities

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

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

In more positive news, limits on interpersonal interactions based on sexuality have seen some progress. In 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States (in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, reaching a 5–4 decision) found that the right to marry is a fundamental right, regardless of the sex or gender identity of the two partners. This decision, along with changing and more accepting attitudes in younger generations, has resulted in an increase of Americans who openly identify as **queer** (or anything outside of straight and cisgender). In fact, in 2020 15.9% or one in six 18–23 year olds (Generation Z) self-identified as other than straight. For these young adults, it is easier to self-identify as queer and speak freely regarding their sexualities, as there is less stigma and

discrimination among others in their generation. Discrimination still exists, however, as evidenced by Florida House Bill 1557, which became effective in July 1, 2022. Also known as “Don’t Say Gay,” this legislation limits discussion of sexuality in elementary schools.

Abilities

Quote

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

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

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

Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution (2020)

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



Figure 4.4.4: CampJened by Steve Honigsbaum licensed as CC BY-ND-NC 2.0

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

Reflection Questions

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

References:

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Social Cognitive Abilities

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

Face Blindness



Figure 4.4.5: Who Are You? by Afif Kusuma on Unsplash

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

Age

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

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



Figure 4.4.6: Lima market by Juan Arrondodo licensed as CC BY NC 4.0

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

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

Attributions

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4.5: Stereotyping, Microaggressions, and Bias

Stereotyping

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

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

Schemas and Scripts

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

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

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

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



Figure 4.5.1: Going Up! by Clyde Robinson licensed as CC BY 2.0

Microaggressions

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



Figure 4.5.2: Photo by Alexis Brown on Unsplash.

A microaggression is a statement or action that is made by a person with more power and privilege and delivered to a person who has less power and privilege. For example, an able-bodied interviewer might say to an interviewee using a wheelchair: "I'm impressed that you got here on time." Notice that the statement itself may not seem offensive at all. According to Derald Wing

Sue, who coined the term, microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults. ... Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communication" (Sue, et al., 2007) The statement "I'm impressed that you got here on time" carries the implication that due to using a wheelchair, the interviewee may have more difficulty navigating the travel from home to the office where the interview is held. Although this may be the case, the wheelchair user may hear the message that the interviewer has low expectations of their performance, before they have even had an opportunity to discuss the job itself.

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

Stereotype Threat

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

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

Listen to this Podcast on Stereotype Threat



Figure 4.5.3: Stereotype Threat by Yasin Yusuf on Unsplash

This podcast from Hidden Brain Media talks about how the stereotypes we hold impact every part of our lives, from parent–teacher conferences to workplace interviews, all the way to romantic relationships. Please listen to the podcast linked below, or read the transcript that appears on the podcast's web page. Podcast: How They See Us | Hidden Brain MediaNow, use the Reflection Questions to have an immersive small group, classroom, or discussion board conversation.

Reflection Questions

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

Reducing the Effects of Stereotype Threat

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

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

Implicit Bias and Discrimination

Human beings value a sense of belonging. We enjoy being members of a group, where we are treated with respect and kindness.

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

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

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4.6: Guidelines for Effective Perception

Perception Checking

Due to all of the influences on our perceptions, from physical and cognitive differences to membership in cultural groups, if we are going to practice effective communication it is essential for us to use strategies that decrease the inevitable biases each of us have. Perception checking involves taking extra time and effort to examine a situation from multiple perspectives, with the goal of increased understanding between two parties.

Subjectivity vs. Objectivity

Assumptions are subjective opinions. When something is **subjective**, according to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, that means it is "1. taking place or existing only within the mind. Or 2. particular to a specific person and thus intrinsically inaccessible to the experience or observation of others" (American Psychological Association, n.d.a). This is as opposed to **objective** observations, which involve facts or items "having verifiable existence in the external world, independently of any opinion or judgment" (American Psychological Association, n.d.c).

Let's imagine that Fernanda and Tran are assigned to be lab partners in Chemistry. It is the first day of class. Both partners identify as female, high-achieving students, and both are sophomores at the same college. Fernanda, a Mexican American student, stayed up late the night before, supporting her roommate through a very difficult time. As a result, she did not get much sleep and came into class wearing the sweatpants and T-shirt she put on for bed. Tran, who identifies as Vietnamese American, went to sleep early and got up at 6:00 a.m. to exercise, then showered, put on makeup, and dressed in a business casual outfit, because she has an interview for an internship later in the afternoon.

Although both Fernanda and Tran have a lot in common, in terms of their gender identity and excellent work ethic to meet their goal of succeeding in school, they are likely to make some wrong first impressions of each other, based solely on physical characteristics like clothing/dress or cultural identity/ethnicity. Tran may see Fernanda dressed in wrinkled sweatpants and a T-shirt and believe that she is not a serious student. She may therefore be disappointed in having her as a Chemistry lab partner. Fernanda may see Tran's makeup and business casual outfit as a sign that her lab partner is stuck up or thinks she is too good for anyone else.



Figure 4.6.1: Pink Sunset Couple. Photo by Harli Marten on Unsplash

Distinguish Facts from Non-Facts

In order to distinguish facts (or objective data) from non-facts, we can follow these steps:

1. Determine the facts or observable information. In this case, the facts include: Fernanda is dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt that are wrinkled. Tran is dressed in a business casual outfit and is wearing makeup. Notice that these facts are listed without any interpretation or personal feelings associated with them.
2. Identify your emotions and mental/physical state and assess whether how you are feeling influences your interpretation of the situation. In this case, Fernanda might recognize that she is exhausted and not at her cognitive best due to lack of sleep. Similarly, Tran may be able to identify the fear of failure that tends to lurk deep in the back of her mind and how that fear is driving her disapproval of her new lab partner
3. Use interpersonal communication to have a conversation or ask questions and confirm or refute any ideas you are not sure about. For example, Fernanda might say to Tran: "Wow! You are dressed for success today." In this case, Tran may explain that she has an interview coming up.

Monitor Self-Serving Bias

When checking your own perceptions, it is important to pay attention to your internal biases. Self-serving bias is "the tendency to interpret events in a way that assigns credit for success to oneself but denies one's responsibility for failure, which is blamed on external factors" (American Psychological Association, n.d.b). For example, let's say Aiesha does not study for her first Biology quiz, yet she gets a perfect score. In this example, if Aiesha gives herself credit for getting 100% on that Biology quiz, even though she has not studied, she would be attributing her success to internal factors—perhaps her knowledge of biology or her innate ability in the sciences. Now let's take this same example, but change one thing: this time, Aiesha (who still has not studied for the exam) gets a "D." If she is influenced by self-serving bias, Aiesha will attribute her bad grade to something outside of herself. For example, she may blame the teacher for giving an unfair quiz or for not reminding the class to study the day before.



Figure 4.6.2: Student Walking With Books by Element5 Digital on Unsplash

Although self-serving bias is common in many cultures worldwide, some people are more likely to fall prey to this tendency than others. According to a meta-analysis of 266 different studies of self-serving bias, the likelihood that a person would apply this bias depends on age, home country, and mental health (Mezulis, et al., 2004). Children and older adults were more likely than adolescents and young adults to demonstrate a self-serving bias. People in Asian countries displayed a much lower propensity for self-serving bias than Americans. Understanding that many Asian cultures are collectivist or value the goals of the larger group over personal needs may help explain this difference. Finally, subjects with depression and anxiety had lower rates of self-serving bias than the general population. One of the symptoms of depression, according to the current Diagnostic Statistical Manual is "feelings of worthlessness" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). We know that people with low self-esteem are more likely to underrate their abilities (Davis, et al., 2006), and this in turn could affect self-serving bias.

Avoid Mind Reading

While trying to form an objective and fair perception of another person, we must be aware of, and work to avoid, **mind reading**. It is easy to jump to conclusions about what another person's motivations are or to assume what they are thinking. We must be mindful that it is impossible to know what another person is thinking or feeling, simply by guessing from their words and facial expression. Practicing effective listening and asking questions can help us to clarify other people's thought processes and intentions. A saying that captures this sentiment appears on inspirational websites and memes (with a variety of wording and not attributed to a specific author): "You never know what another person is going through. Be kind. Always."

Verbal/Nonverbal Communication Skills

As you will learn in Chapter 4, effective communication skills are attained over time and with practice. Continuing to sharpen our verbal skills is one way to help us avoid misunderstandings.

Checking In

A great way to ensure we keep our perceptions in check is to engage in perception-checking strategies. Instead of assuming we know what others are thinking and feeling, we can learn to ask them. Imagine a scenario where you wrongly assume the feelings and thoughts of another, and base your entire interaction with them on this perception, only to learn that you were wrong. Aside from possibly damaging your relationship, you have also wasted time and energy on a misperception. To avoid these kinds of missteps, we can ask questions. Phrases like, "I wonder" or "I have noticed" can help us open up dialogue to check in with others. Imagine you start a challenging conversation with "I wonder if you are upset with me" or "I have noticed that you have been quiet today. Could something be bothering you?" When we ask questions, we can show others that we truly care and are interested in understanding how they feel (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Asking questions could also allow us to move towards a solution more quickly, convey more compassion, and be better listeners. Perception checking can take on many forms. One of the most basic starting points is a three-step process, outlined in the chart below.

Three Steps for Engaging in Perception Checking

Step	Description	Example
1	Describe the behavior or situation without evaluating or judging it. Perception checks include "I" language and a clearly stated observation or fact: "I heard you mention ____."	"I noticed you have been unusually quiet this evening."
2	Think of some possible interpretations of the behavior, being aware of attributions and other influences on the perception process. This is followed by 2 possible interpretations: "I am wondering if ___ or ___ is the case for you?"	"Earlier in the week, you weren't feeling well. I wonder if it is that. If not, did I say something to upset you?"
3	Verify what happened and ask for clarification from the other person's perspective. Finally, the perception check is completed with a clarification request: "Can you clarify?"	"I am sorry that comment was hurtful. I see how that was crossing the line and I will try not to say it again. Can you please clarify how I can do better?"

Perception checking can be new and uncomfortable at first, and here are some reasons why. First, perception checking might seem time consuming. After all, it takes a lot more work up-front to inquire, rather than just jump in with assumptions. However, jumping to conclusions could lead to more conflict or unnecessary back-and-forth, so perhaps this process can actually help you

save time, and possibly avoid hurt feelings. You might also notice that even though we are the ones initiating the conversations in perception checking, we are serving as listeners, rather than speakers. For some people, listening can be a challenge. As you get used to this process, try to work on actively listening and giving the floor to the other as they work through their feelings. Finally, perception checking really forces us to be accountable. We are encouraged to use "I" language, even when describing another's actions, because this is our perception of those actions. Lastly, you may have noticed that in the perception-checking process, we are taking ownership of our observations. This can be uncomfortable. We may need to own up to hurting others and accept fault in times of conflict. For those of us who are still practicing this, be patient and show yourself some grace. This serves a perfect segue into our next section, building compassion through perception.

Skill Builder Activity: Perception Checking

Perception checking is a simple but powerful tool for reducing misunderstandings in interpersonal communication. Because our interpretations are shaped by emotions, past experiences, and cultural expectations, slowing down to verify what we think is happening helps us communicate more accurately and respectfully. Use this activity to practice applying the three core steps of perception checking in real-world situations.

Practice the THREE core steps to perception checking:

1. **Describe the Behavior**: Think of a recent interaction where you may have misinterpreted someone's tone, facial expression, or behavior. How would you describe *only what you observed* without adding assumptions or judgement?
2. **Offer TWO interpretations**: What are two *different* explanations for the behavior you noticed? How might each interpretation change the way you respond?
3. **Ask for Clarification**: Write a perception-checking statement you could use with the other person. How would you invite them to clarify what they meant?

Apply It: Use each scenario to practice slowing down, describing what you observed, considering multiple interpretations, and asking for clarification before reacting.

- **A friend walks past you on campus without saying anything**, even though they usually greet you. Use this to practice **describing the behavior** without assuming they're upset.
- **Your roommate slams their backpack on the table** when they get home. Try **offering two interpretations** before reacting.
- **A classmate gives a short, blunt reply in a group chat**, even though they're normally friendly. Practice **asking for clarification** in a non-accusatory way.
- **Your partner responds to your text hours later**, even though they were active on social media. Use this to **check your emotions** before jumping to conclusions.
- **A coworker avoids eye contact during a meeting**, which feels unusual to you. Consider cultural differences as you **generate multiple interpretations**.
- **A professor returns your assignment with very brief comments**, and you're unsure whether they're disappointed or just busy. Practice **clarifying meaning** respectfully.
- **A friend cancels plans at the last minute**, saying they're "not feeling it today." Use perception checking to **respond thoughtfully** rather than assuming the worst.
- **Someone sighs loudly during your presentation**, and you're not sure if it's about you or something else. Practice **describing observable behavior** without labeling it.
- **A teammate keeps checking their phone during your group meeting**, and it feels dismissive. Use this to **ask for clarification** instead of assuming they're uninterested.
- **A friend reacts with a flat tone when you share good news**, leaving you unsure how they feel. Practice **offering two interpretations** before responding.

Building Compassion Through Perception



Figure 4.6.3: Two People Talking at Across a Table by Christina @ wocintechchat.com on Unsplash

In literature posted by the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research Education from Stanford Medicine (2021), compassion is defined as:

1. An awareness of suffering in others
2. A feeling of being emotionally moved by suffering
3. A motivation to see the relief of that suffering
4. An action and willingness to help relieve that suffering when possible

Research in compassion cultivation shows that "when perspective-taking is particularly geared toward imagining the other person's emotional state, rather than just her point of view, empathic responses and helping behavior are even more pronounced" (Batson et al. 2003, as cited in Seppala, et al., 2013, p. 416-417). There have been many publications regarding how compassion can benefit us in areas of physical and mental health, survival, happiness, social competence, and more (UCSD Center for Mindfulness, 2021). As you might conclude, understanding perception is of key importance in interpersonal communication. It is a foundation upon which we can build stronger and more meaningful relationships.

Reflections on Research

Listening That Changes What We See

A recent quantitative study by Itzchakov and Reis (2023) explored how *perception* shapes interpersonal communication by examining the link between **high-quality listening** and **perceived responsiveness**. In a series of controlled experiements, participants engaged in converstaions where the quality of listening was systematically varied. The researchers fund that when individuals *perceived* their conversational partner as attentive, understanding, and validating, they reported stronger feelings of connection, reduced defensiveness, and greater willingness to share openly. The study highlights that listening is not merely a behavior - it is a **perceptual experience** that shapes how people interpret one another's intentions and relational warmth. These findings reinforce the idea that improving how we listen can transform how others *feel* heard, vbalues, and understood.

Discussion Questions

1. How does high-quality listening influence your perception of another person's intentions or character?
2. Why might perceived responsiveness matter more than the listener's actually skill or effort?
3. How could you apply the findings of this study to improve communication in your personal or professional relationships?

Source: Itzchakov, G., & Reis, H. T. (2023). *Listening and perceived responsiveness: Unveiling the significance and exploring crucial research endeavors. Current Opinion in Psychology, 53*, 101662.

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4.7: Summary and Review

Summary

As we have examined throughout this chapter, we all come to relationships with a past, which shapes how we see the world. Through these unique lenses, we usually make swift and decisive assumptions about the intentions of others. We know that how we feel mentally, physically, and emotionally affects our ability to listen and make accurate judgments about others. The baggage of implicit bias we carry also makes it difficult to look at others with clear eyes.

As we have learned in this chapter, one prospective strategy towards decreasing our biases and errors is through perception checking. Another way forward lies within building compassion through perception. As we learn to recognize that others may have different perceptions than us, we might have more patience and tolerance for others. This ability to see our loved ones for who they are and where they are coming from, can help us build better connections with them as a result. In return, we are able to fulfill a primary psychological need for a sense of affectionate and loving connection to others (Maslow, 1943).

Discussion Questions

1. After reading this chapter, you now know how quickly we make assumptions about people, the first time we see them. What factors do you believe are most prominent or influential for you, in terms of how you might categorize someone you have just met?
2. Let's say you see someone you have never met and immediately make the assumption that this person will not be kind. What strategies can you use to check on your perceptions, decrease bias, and move forward?
3. Stereotypes are learned. What biases and stereotypes were common in your home, school, religious institution, or neighborhood?
4. What steps can you take to break down your own stereotypes?

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5: VERBAL ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

- Define verbal communication.
- Explain the role of language in our everyday lives.
- Identify barriers to effective verbal communication.
- Demonstrate effective verbal communication in interpersonal relationships.

Verbal communication refers to our use of words while nonverbal communication refers to communication that occurs through means other than words, such as body language, gestures, and silence. Verbal communication is an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols used to share meaning. In this chapter, we explore verbal communication in greater depth focusing on the nature of language, the impact of language on our lives, language barriers, and finally how to improve our verbal communication.

5.1: Introduction to Verbal Elements of Communication

5.2: The Nature of Language

5.3: Language Barriers

5.4: Improving Verbal Communication

5.5: Summary and Review

5.6: References

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5.1: Introduction to Verbal Elements of Communication

Using Language to Communicate

One of our authors shares this personal example, illustrating how easy it is to misunderstand someone else, even when we share the same language:

> In college, the car I drove was still registered to my parents, so when I got parking tickets they were mailed to my parent's house. At some point in my first year my parents threatened to stop paying for the registration because of the parking tickets. Stunned, I pleaded my case arguing I had only gotten a few tickets. In the course of nine months I had gotten seven parking tickets—and that was definitely not "a few tickets" in my parents eyes. Where they live, street sweeping comes once a month and they had a driveway to park in. So getting seven tickets was a lot. Where I was living at college, they came twice a week and I could only park on the street. In my mind the fact that I could get eight tickets a month, and I was only getting one meant those seven were just a few.

As you learned in Chapter 1, when we use language to communicate, we are engaged in verbal communication. When we think of verbal communication we often focus on speaking, but both verbal and nonverbal communication can be spoken and written.

Table 5.1.1: Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Means	Verbal Communication	Nonverbal Communication
Oral	Spoken language	Tone, inflection, laughing, crying, etc.
Non-Oral	Written language/sign language	Gestures, body language, etc.

Verbal communication refers to our use of words while nonverbal communication refers to communication that occurs through means other than words, such as body language, gestures, and silence. Verbal communication is an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols used to share meaning. This chapter will explore verbal communication in greater depth focusing on the nature of language, the impact of language on our lives, language barriers, and finally how to improve our verbal communication.

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5.2: The Nature of Language

Qualities of Symbolic Communication

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

Symbolic Language Is Arbitrary

We use symbols to encode what is in our heads, the thoughts, emotions, concepts, etc. so we can share them. The symbols we use are **arbitrary:** there is nothing inherent about the things we are sharing and the symbols that we use to represent them. If symbols are arbitrary, then how do we use them to communicate? Communication is only possible because speakers of the same language have agreed on these arbitrary meanings. We understand that when someone uses a particular word (symbol) that it represents a specific thing. This agreement is what makes communication via language possible. Ogden and Richards (1923) illustrated this idea with their triangle of meaning (Figure 5.2.1). In this example, the word *cat* represents both the concept of a cat and an actual cat. Communication is successful when the meaning attached to the symbol is shared.

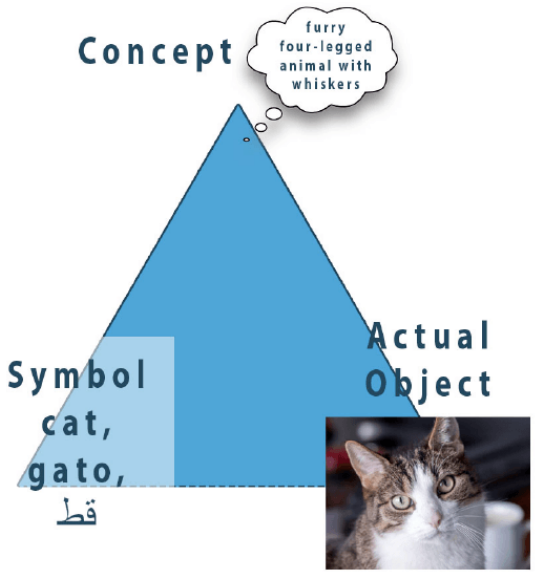


Figure 5.2.1: Triangle of Meaning by H. Rayl is licensed CC BY 4.0

Symbolic Language Is Ambiguous

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

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

You might be asking, “If symbols can have multiple meanings, then how do we communicate and understand one another?” We are able to communicate because there are a finite number of possible meanings for our symbols, a range of meanings which

the members of a given language system agree upon. Without an agreed-upon system of symbols, we could share relatively little meaning with one another.

Symbolic Language Is Abstract

Finally, symbols are **abstract**. The verbal symbols we use are not material. Because they are only representations of objects and ideas, a level of abstraction is inherent. In 1941, linguist S. I. Hayakawa created what is called the **abstraction ladder**. The abstraction ladder starts with the most abstract at the top and then moves toward the bottom rung ,which is the most concrete. For example, we could start with the most abstract (animal), moving to more concrete (fox), to the most concrete (a specific American Red Fox). As we move down the ladder, the symbol becomes more concrete and less abstract. In addition to relying on arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract symbols, the language we use is also governed by rules.

Language Is Rule-Governed

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

> If placing letters in a proper order was not important, then cta, tac, tca, act, or atc could all mean cat. Even worse, what if you could use any three letters to refer to cat? Or still worse, what if there were no rules and anything could represent cat? (Hahn & Paynton, 2021).

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

Semantic Rules

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

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

Syntactic Rules

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

In English, most basic syntax follows a subject–verb–direct object formula. For example, "Charlie kicked the soccer ball." The structure of the sentence is fundamental to how we make shared meaning. The other aspect of syntax that influences our verbal communication is grammar. For example, a comma can make a big difference in how people understand a message. As shown in Figure 5.2.2, "Let's eat grandma!" is quite different from saying "Let's eat, grandma!" The first implies cannibalism and the second a family dinner.



Figure 5.2.2: Punctuation Saves Lives by Darin McClure on Flickr

Pragmatic Rules

Finally, **pragmatic rules** help us use language appropriately. What is appropriate in one circumstance may not be in another. While you are working, you are likely to be more formal with your boss and customers than you are with your co-workers. Think about the terms *bowel movement, poop, crap,* and *shit*. While all of these words have essentially the same denotative meaning, people make choices based on context and audience regarding which word they feel comfortable using. These differences illustrate the pragmatics of our verbal communication.

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

Language Creates Meaning

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

Student Voice: Slang, Yesterday and Today

Three slang terms from the past that sound strange to me now are groovy, radical, and talk to the hand. I know they were popular when they were used, but if I heard someone say them today, I would probably think they were joking or are trying to be sarcastically funny???

Three current slang terms that I think will sound strange in ten years are rizz, simp, delulu, and no cap. I remember when people first started hearing rizz and I had no idea what it meant. It was honestly confusing because everyone seemed to know what it was except me but I also realized it was people who used it were not millennials; they were way younger than our generation. Once I found out it meant someone has charm or is good at flirting, it made more sense but I honestly thought it sounded corny. Still, it is one of those words that probably would not make sense to someone who is not online a lot or is not around a lot of younger people. This shows how quickly language changes and how quickly you can be out of the loop if

you're not around socializing with distant generations. Every generation creates new words and phrases that make sense at the time, but years later they can sound weird, confusing, or outdated. I can't wait to hear what people born in 2026 and later will come up with and what slang will survive the test of time. I think cool like "that's cool" will always stick around.

Luis Flores

Cerritos College, Communication Studies Major

Language Shapes Our Worldview

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

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

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



Figure 5.2.3: Shelli Getting Directions by Alan Levine on Flickr

Verbal communication helps us think, and to engage in abstract thought. Without verbal communication, we would not function as thinking beings. The ability most often used to distinguish humans from other animals is our ability to reason and communicate. Animals can communicate about what is present. Many animals have sounds used to designate the presence of food or to warn of a threat. What they lack is the ability to discuss complex ideas. Humans can talk not only about a visible and present threat but also the potential for threat and how to prepare for it. It is this capacity of verbal communication that allows humans to reflect on the past, consider the present, and plan for the future.

Verbal communication helps us shape our attitudes about our world. The way you use language shapes your attitude about the world around you. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf developed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to explain that language

determines thought. People who speak different languages, or use language differently, think differently (Whorf; Sapir; Mandelbaum; Maxwell; Perlovsky; Lucy; Simpson; Hussein).

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

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

Language Is Impactful

One of our authors shares this example:

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

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

Language Defines and Labels our Reality

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

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

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

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

Table 5.2.1: Pronoun Table (by Tiffany Ruggeri, licensed CC BY 4.0)

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

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

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

"Say my name, say my name. If no one is around you, say baby I love you" (Destiny's Child, 1999).

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (Shakespeare, Romero & Juliet).

"A person's name is to him or her the sweetest and most important sound in any language." (Dale Carnegie from Shultz, 2017)

As you can see from the collection of quotes above, names are important, and they matter. So much so, we are quick to correct those who mispronounce or misspell our names. Our name given to us at birth, or the name we choose to go by, is one of the most enduring symbols of identity we receive. Do you know the origin of your name? Do you have a middle name? Or, have you changed your name? The act of choosing a name for a child comes easily to some parents, perhaps because they had a name picked out from when they were young. For others, it's a spur-of-the-moment decision, or they wait to see the child once the child is born. For other folks, their chosen name just doesn't feel right or after transitioning a name they felt a stronger connection with was best.

Names shape how others think of us, how we view ourselves, and ultimately how we communicate. This connection between name and self is not incidental. A name accompanies a person like their own skin, carrying a rich influence on self-esteem and ego. It tends to fill people with a sense of pride, uniqueness, and self-acceptance. When that sense of acceptance is disrupted by ridicule, mispronunciation, or social stigma, the effects can be lasting. In his 2019 TED Talk, *Getting it right: why pronouncing names correctly matters*(opens in new window)," Gerardo Ochoa highlights the importance of putting in the effort to make sure you pronounce another's name correctly so as not to have that person feel invisible.

Reflections on Research: Your Name and Your Learning

Does your professor knowing your name change your experience in a large class?

In *What's in a Name? The Importance of Students Perceiving That an Instructor Knows Their Names in a High-Enrollment Biology Classroom,* researchers surveyed and interviewed students in an **185-person active-learning biology course at Arizona State University** to explore whether being known by name matters to students, and why. Before the course, 80% of students reported it was unlikely an instructor had ever known their name in a large class. By the end of this course, 78% felt their instructor knew their name — even though instructors could only actually identify 53% of students by photo. The gap reveals something important: students don't need instructors to truly know their names to feel known; the perception alone was enough to make students feel valued, more willing to seek help, and more connected to the course. **Students identified nine reasons why being known by name mattered, most commonly that it made them feel valued, signaled that the instructor cared, and made them more comfortable approaching the instructor.** The tool that drove this perception most was surprisingly simple: name tents — folded cards students wrote their names on and displayed each class. Students initially

resisted them as childish, but most came to appreciate them, including for use with each other during group work. The study concludes that using student names is a low-cost, high-impact practice that any instructor can implement regardless of class size.

Discussion Questions

1. Before reading this study, did you think it mattered whether your professor knew your name in a large class? Has your answer changed? Why or why not?
2. The study found that students felt known even when their names weren't actually remembered; the effort was enough. What does that tell us about what students are really looking for from their instructors?
3. Students said that knowing their names made them more comfortable attending office hours, asking questions, and even coming to class. What does that suggest about the connection between feeling seen and academic behavior?

Cooper, K. M., Haney, B., Krieg, A., & Brownell, S. E. (2017). What's in a name? The importance of students perceiving that an instructor knows their names in a high-enrollment biology classroom. *CBE—Life Sciences Education, 16*(1), ar8.

Language Shapes and Reflects Relationships

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

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

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

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

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

There are some additional examples of regional slang in Table 5.2.2.

Table 5.2.2: Examples of Regional Slang

Region and Saying	What It Means	What Other Regions Say
West Coast: “Animal Style”	The famous In-N-Out burger chain started out in California. Ordering something “Animal Style” meant ordering your fries or burger with cheese, Thousand Island dressing, and grilled onions.	No such thing as “Animal Style,” but In-N-Out has been expanding east…
New England: “Clicker”	Remote control for TV or other entertainment units.	“The remote” or remote
South: “It doesn’t amount to a hill of beans.”	Whatever you’re talking about isn’t worth much.	“Don’t waste your time.”
Midwest: “Puppy Chow”	Homemade sugary snack like Chex Mix with peanut butter and chocolate	“Muddy buddies” or “Monkey Munch”

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

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

Language Conveys Power

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 5.2.4: Thinking by Starlit Beaches from Flickr is licensed CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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

The "persistence of patriarchal power" can be found idealized all over the media in the form of romance novels, rom-com movies, social media postings of fancy proposals and men asking a woman's father for her hand in marriage—just to name a few. Depictions of these traditions help to maintain the romanticized dreams that girls can be swept away by a

knight in shining armor for their "happily ever after." The second core reason is more about maintaining the public optics of commitment to the family. Everyone having the same last name represents family unity. Duncan's study also found that parents were concerned their children would be confused if parents had different last names. However, Davies (2011) found children to be much more adaptable and accepting than adults.

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

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

Discussion Questions/Journal Prompts

1. Regardless of your gender, would you change your last name if/when you marry? Explain why/why not.
2. It's a "patriarchal tradition" to adopt the husband's last name upon marriage. How do you think the issue of last names is negotiated amongst same-sex couples?
3. What is the origin or back story to your last name?
4. Is there a difference in the importance placed on last names in different cultures? For example, Chinese culture is collectivistic, therefore your surname/last name is placed first. In the individualistic US culture, you're identified by your given name first.

Language Evolves

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



Figure 5.2.5: Father Taking a Selfie with His Son, by August de Richelieu on Pexels

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5.3: Language Barriers

Increasing Communication Competence

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

Communication Apprehension

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

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

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

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

Culture

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

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

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

Consider This: Introducing English Idioms to Second-Language Speakers

One of our authors shares this example:

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

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

Table 5.3.1: Common English Idioms

Idiom	What a Non-native English Speaker Might Be Picturing	Actual Meaning
Beat around the bush		To avoid getting to the point of an issue Example: "Stop beating around the bush, and tell me the bad news."
Let the cat out of the bag		To disclose a secret Example: "I accidentally let the cat out of the bag, and now everyone knows you won the lottery!"

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

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

Table created by Kim Yee CC BY-NC-SA
Clipart source: English idioms by Graphics RF from Vecteezy (Free License)

Discussion Questions/Journal Prompts:

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

Activities with Idioms:

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

Responsibility

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

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

Another practical tool for owning your communication is the **I-statements**, a concept developed by psychologist Thomas Gordon in the 1960s. Instead of leading with "you," which tends to put people on the defensive , I-messages keep the focus on your own feelings and experience. The basic formula looks like this: "*I feel [emotion] when [behavior] because [impact].*" So rather than "You never listen to me," you might say, "I feel frustrated when I'm interrupted because it makes me feel like I don't matter." Research backs this up: studies by Kubany and colleagues found that I-language was less likely to trigger negative emotions and more likely to generate compassion than you-language (as cited in Rogers et al., 2018), and a more recent study confirmed that using I-language significantly reduced perceptions of hostility during conflict (Rogers et al., 2018). It's a small shift in wording,

but it can change the whole direction of a conversation. By using I-messages, you are taking responsibility for your own emotions, rather than placing blame on the other, creating a defensive climate. As we'll learn in later chapters, using I-messages opens the door for dialogue.

Skill Builder: Putting Responsibility into Action

The language of responsibility asks us to pay attention to the words we reach for when we're frustrated, hurt, or in conflict. You-statements place blame. But-statements cancel out everything before them. It-statements and I-messages, on the other hand, keep the focus on the situation and your own experience, not on the other person's fault. Reframing how we say something isn't about being passive or holding back; it's about choosing language that keeps the conversation open rather than shutting it down. Let's practice by first changing these statements into it/we and I-messages, then spend two days putting this into action. When you find yourself about to start a sentence with "you", pause and swap that out with an "I" or "it" statement.

1. "You never make time for me anymore."
    1. It/We statement:
    2. I-message
2. "You always bring up past mistakes when we're arguing."
    1. It/We statement:
    2. I-message
3. "You make me so mad!!"
    1. It/We statement:
    2. I-message:

Food for thought:

1. Think of a relationship in your life where you tend to default to you-statements. What is one language of responsibility strategy, an it/we statement, dropping "but," or an I-message, that you could practice for the next two days?
2. Reflecting on your alternative statements above, which one was more challenging to change? It/we or I-messanges?
3. Take one of your I-messages and insert the word "but" somewhere in the middle. How does that one word change the tone or meaning of the statement? What does this reveal about how but-statements work in real conversations?



Figure 5.3.1: Relationship Couple Conflict, Amarpreet Singh, Pixabay

Defensive Communication

Defensiveness is the opposite of the language of responsibility, so it is important to start by recognizing when we use defensive language and then ensure we focus on the issue at hand instead of on the other person or their actions. John Gottman (2012),

a leading researcher in marital relationships, found that defensive communication is one of the most destructive relationship behaviors and in fact a leading indicator of future divorce. This research has been extended to communication in a broad setting. **Defensiveness** is defined by the perception of threat or threatening behavior (Gibbs, 1965). Avoiding defensiveness and airing grievances can spur relational growth and relational satisfaction (Gottman & Silver, 1994). I focus on four main types of defensive communication in this section: dogmatism, superiority, indifference, and control messages.

Dogmatism

Dogmatism is when we use emotional justification rather than evidence-based justification (Harrison, 2021). We typically do not notice when we respond using a dogmatic perspective. We are inextricably connected to our emotions, and with dogmatism we are operating from our sense of self. This is defensive behavior: when we use emotions to justify our stance, we leave out empirical evidence. We lack connection to our relational communication partners. This dismissive behavior hurts the relationships involved. For example, in a professional environment I was explaining why I process I had developed was a better option than our previous process. Another person said to me, "Why does that make you correct?" I realized I was using my emotions rather than logic in my explanation. I switched my tone and focused on the evidence that I had. Focusing on evidence and the argument itself can be a strong skill to develop.

Superiority

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

Indifference

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

Control Messages

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

Bias

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

response.

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

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



Figure 5.3.2: Two people, man, woman, working at a table, Amanda Mills, USCDCP, Pixnio

Prejudice

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

Hate Speech

Marginalized people are people that are excluded and discriminated against due to their group membership, typically related to race, sexual orientation, gender and/or gender identity, socioeconomic status, age, disability, and others. Microaggressions are hostile or negative messages towards people within marginalized groups. **Microaggressions** are defined as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults (Wing, 2007). These microaggressions can grow into hate speech. Hate speech

consists of abhorrent messages used to hurt, incite violence, and inflict psychological harm (ŞtefĂniÞĂ & Buf, 2021). It is used in multiple contexts and against many types of targets, but most commly against marginalized people. The receipt of hate speech results in fear and anxiety, which ultimately increases stress (Crichton, 2019). Targeted marginalized groups are often subject to violent acts, known as **hate crimes**. While hate speech in many forms is protected under the First Amendment, hate crimes are not.

Racism and Sexism

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



Figure 5.3.3: Child Mother Work From Home, Max Pixel

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

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

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

Thoughts on Theory: Muted Group Theory

How Muted Group Theory Helps Us Understand Each Other

In the previous sections, we looked at how racism and sexism operate through unequal access — who gets hired, promoted, believed, or given the benefit of the doubt. **Muted Group Theory** picks up where that conversation leaves off. It asks a different question: even when someone from a marginalized group *is* in the room, on the team, or at the table, whose way of speaking counts as the "normal" or "credible" one? Access is not the same as voice. A person can be present in a conversation and still be effectively silenced, not because anyone tells them to stop talking, but because the language, tone, and communication norms of that space were built around a dominant group's habits, not theirs.

Imagine sitting in a meeting where you have a good idea, but every time you start to speak, someone talks over you, or your comment gets credited to someone else moments later. Now imagine this happening not just once, but as a pattern that repeats across every meeting, every team, every job — until you start to wonder whether it's worth speaking up at all. This is a common experience for women, people of color, and other non-dominant groups in workplaces, classrooms, and everyday conversations: having a valid, well-formed idea that simply doesn't register the same way once it's spoken, because the space wasn't built with your voice in mind.

This dynamic, having a rich, complex inner experience that the dominant culture has no ready vocabulary to hear, is the heart of the theory. It suggests that language itself is shaped by dominant groups, which means non-dominant groups often lack the words or the platform to fully express their experience in ways the dominant group will recognize and validate. Just as racism and sexism can operate quietly, through assumptions no one states out loud, muting often works the same way: not through an explicit rule that says "you may not speak," but through a communication system that was never designed with certain voices in mind.

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

Discussion Questions

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. Think of a time you or someone you know stayed quiet in a meeting or conversation, only to have someone else say the same idea later and get credit for it. What does this reveal about how power shapes who gets to speak freely, and where?

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5.4: Improving Verbal Communication

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 communication competent. 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 children 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. How did that change your outlook on your situation and the relationship you had 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—and many unfortunate people had to tell others that the worst had happened, and death had occurred. So how do we do this in a communication competent way? 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. One of our authors shares this example: "When my father passed away, two things happened: many people stayed silent while others did not know what to say, but still reached out." 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 what if we do not speak the same language or have cultural differences? 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, what is the severity of the misunderstanding? If the misunderstanding could cost your company money, that would be 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. The first is to visualize the impact on the audience. 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.



Figure 5.4.1: Older man with cane and older women walking their dog. Older People Care, Pixy

Use the Language of Responsibility

As we discussed earlier, we should use the language of responsibility (using the pronoun *I* to accept responsibility for our thoughts and ideas), while avoiding gendered terms, "you" statements, and anything that assigns blame. This choice of language helps us to accept ownership of our emotions and perspectives while avoiding blame or alienating our communication partners.

The language of responsibility can be slowly integrated into our communication patterns until we do not have to think about it consciously. For instance, we know that the term *guys* is not directed exclusively toward males, but it is an exclusionary term. One of our authors shares this example: "When I started teaching, I slowly integrated the term *y'all* into my speech. Although I get asked a lot where I am from, this small change helps to make sure I do not alienate students from the conversation." Teachers also tend to use the inclusive language term *we*, as in "Our papers are due Sunday, please make sure we turn them in on time." This way we avoid blaming language and instead use an inclusive language.

Strive for Clarity and Accuracy

The abstraction ladder relates to the specific or equivocal language we use when communicating. Equivocation is when we use ambiguous or abstract language rather than concrete and specific language. For example, consider asking a housemate to take out the garbage. Specific language would be “Please take out the trash” whereas abstract language would be “the kitchen is flooded with trash.” In general an abstract message could be something like “education.” As a term this is abstract and could be interpreted differently depending on the context and the lived experience of the interpreter. However, stating someone has earned a PhD is more concrete because there are more rules that govern what this designation means.

Figure 5.4.2 shows examples of how we move from the abstract to the concrete. While in many relationships we create a shorthand language and can be ambiguous and still clear in our messages, most of our communication requires that we be specific in our language, which is called **concrete language**. When we lack clarity or use language that is culturally bound or ambiguous, that is considered **abstract language**. The abstraction ladder shows how we can move from the specific (concrete) to the abstract. At the bottom are "more concrete" statements, beginning with "We need to put the trash cans on the curb before the garbage collector gets here tomorrow morning," then moving up to "Tuesday night we should remember to put the trash cans out," and to "It is Tuesday, so we should move the trash cans." Near the top of the ladder, we see "We should remember to put out the trash cans this week," and finally, at the top of the "more abstract range," "Our trash cans are full."

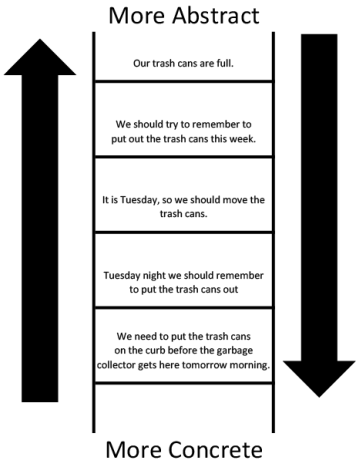


Figure 5.4.2: Abstraction Ladder by Tiffany Ruggeri

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5.5: Summary and Review

Summary

In this chapter we have discussed what verbal communication is, including that it is symbolic, arbitrary and abstract, rule-governed, and shapes our worldview. Verbal communication is used in our everyday lives through defining our reality, reflecting our relationships, and conveying power and evolving. Language creates and maintains barriers that we should become aware of in order to be communication competent. We also discussed how language helps shape our relationships and how effective verbal communication facilitates relational growth. We can avoid defensive communication and bolster the language of responsibility. By understanding our verbal communication, we are able to increase our communication competence.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between verbal and nonverbal communication? Think of an example of verbal communication that is not spoken? What about nonverbal communication that is vocalized?
2. Explain the difference between the various rules that govern communication.
3. What are pronouns? What pronouns do you use? Can the pronouns we prefer change over time? How and why? Why is it important to use someone's preferred pronouns?
4. In this chapter we discussed the importance of names and naming. What are your thoughts on last names? Would you take a spouse's last name? If you chose to adopt, foster, or have a child with someone, what last name would you want them to have and why?
5. We discussed communication apprehension, how that changes the forms of communication that we use, and how it is a barrier to effective communication. Name a time when you have experienced communication apprehension. After filling out the PRCA-24, what tools would have helped you? Now that you know when you have the most communication apprehension, what thought processes could you change to become more communication competent?
6. The chapter covered muted groups and four primary ways we can avoid muting others or being muted ourselves. Of these four strategies, which strategies would be easiest for you to apply in your life? What settings would these strategies work best in?
7. We discussed several tools to help us improve our verbal communication. What two tools could you utilize and how would they help? Would the changes you make be small at first, and if not, how could you make these changes in a way that makes it easier for you to adopt?

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6: NONVERBAL ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

- Define the roles and functions of nonverbal communication.
- Identify and describe various channels of nonverbal communication.
- Articulate the principles of nonverbal communication effectively in different contexts.

In this chapter, we discuss what nonverbal communication is and its significance in interpersonal communication. After defining nonverbal communication, we describe the role of nonverbal communication and identify the wide range of types of nonverbal cues. Finally, we address how nonverbal communication may differ in various contexts.

6.1: Introduction to Nonverbal Elements of Communication

6.2: Definitions

6.3: The Roles of Nonverbal Communication in Interpersonal Communication

6.4: The Six Functions of Nonverbal Communication

6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication

6.6: Case Study

6.7: Summary and Review

6.8: References

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6.1: Introduction to Nonverbal Elements of Communication

The Importance of Nonverbal Communication



Figure 6.1.1: A group of retired men and friends, playing a game of cards in Sorrento by Nick Fewings on Unsplash.

Nonverbal communication permeates every communication exchange that we have. That's a bold statement, but it's true! Let's begin by looking at a couple of examples.

As a sophomore in college, one of our authors studied German at the Goethe Institute in Arolsen, Germany. They share this example:

> One of my classmates was from Turkey. We spoke to each other in German, our common language. There were times when I would ask him a "yes–no" question in German, and he would respond with a nod of the head up and down. In the United States, where I grew up, a head nodding up and down meant "yes" in response to a "yes–no" question. I started to get irritated when I kept getting "mixed messages." For example, one time I asked him "Are you free on Saturday afternoon to study?" He responded nonverbally "yes," but then he didn't show up to study. When I asked him about it, he said that he had told me "no." I finally started to ask questions that he needed to respond to verbally, such as "When should we meet?" so that he would state a specific time. Why? In the culture that I grew up in, a head nodding up and down meant "yes," but in his culture, my friend's head nodding up and down meant "no." We both thought that we had communicated clearly, but that head nodding gesture meant something totally different in the two cultures! That insight may very well have been one of the reasons that I decided to become a Communication Studies professor!

Here is another example:

> When I was a flight attendant, I often went to Japan. Since I did not speak Japanese nor was I familiar with their nonverbal communication style, I encountered many situations that were confusing to me. For example, when I was offering drinks from the beverage cart, I expected either an up-and-down nod for "Yes, I want a beverage" or a side-to-side face movement meaning "No, I don't want a beverage." However, when I flew to Japan, I usually got two nonverbal signals at the same time. One was the up-and-down nod and the second was a hand gesture: the person would wave their hand back and forth in front of your face, with the thumb facing you and pinky away from you. When the two gestures came together I didn't know if the up-and-down nod said "Yes, I want a beverage" or if the hand gestures meant "No, I don't want a beverage." I later realized that Japanese culture does not feel comfortable saying just "no." So the nod that went up and down said "thank you" and the hand gesture meant "no."

What experiences have you had when you did not understand what a person was "saying" with their gestures or facial expressions? Have you ever had someone get the wrong impression or message because they misread something you were doing nonverbally?

In this chapter we discuss what nonverbal communication is and its significance in interpersonal communication. After defining nonverbal communication, we will describe the role of nonverbal communication and identify a wide range of types of nonverbal

cues. We will address how nonverbal communication may differ in various contexts.

As these opening stories illustrate, we navigate our daily lived guided by implicit rules of what certain movements, spaces, and gestures mean. But what happens when those rules are broken - either because of a cultural difference of a deliberate choice? To help us make sense of how we build expectations around nonverbal behavior, and how we react when those expectations are shattered, communication scholars look to a foundational framework: Expectancy Violations Theory.

Thoughts on Theory: How Expectancy Violations Theory Explains Our Hidden Social Rules

Imagine you are standing in a crowded elevator. Everyone is staring straight ahead at the door, arms crossed, maintaining a tense, silent bubble of personal space. Now, imagine a new passenger steps on, turns around to face the back of the elevator, stands just two inches away from you, and smiles without saying a word.

Your heart rate might spike. You might step back, look away, or nervously check your phone. In a matter of seconds, a simple shift in physical positioning has completely hijacked your attention. This is the core of **Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT)**, developed by Judee Burgoon. Just like the head-nodding misunderstandings in Germany or the drink-cart confusion in Japan, EVT explains how we react when people break the unwritten, unspoken nonverbal rules of social interaction.

The Three Components of an Expectancy Violation

To understand why some rule-breaking makes us angry while other times it intrigues us, EVT breaks our psychological reactions down into three distinct elements:

- **Expectancies (What we predict will happen):** Based on our culture, relationship history, and the setting, we have mental blueprints for how people "should" behave nonverbally. For instance, you expect a bank teller to stand behind the counter, but you might expect a close friend to hug you. In the introduction examples, the authors had clear *expectancies* for what a head nod meant based on American culture.
- **Violation Valence (How we rate the behavior):** When someone breaks our expectations, we immediately place a positive or negative value on the shift itself. If a stranger sits right next to you on a completely empty bus, the violation valence is usually highly negative. If a peer unexpectedly gives you a high-vive after a great presentation, the valence is likely positive.
- **Communicator Reward Valence (How we rate the person):** This is the "wildcard" of the theory. If the nonverbal violation is ambiguous or confusing, we look at the person who did it and calculate their status, attractiveness, and ability to reward or punish us.

The EVT Equation in Action: If a highly attractive classmate or a powerful boss stands closer to you than normal (an ambiguous violation), you are likely to interpret it positively because of their high reward status. If a rude or unkempt stranger does the exact same thing, you will likely interpret the violation as creepy or intrusive.

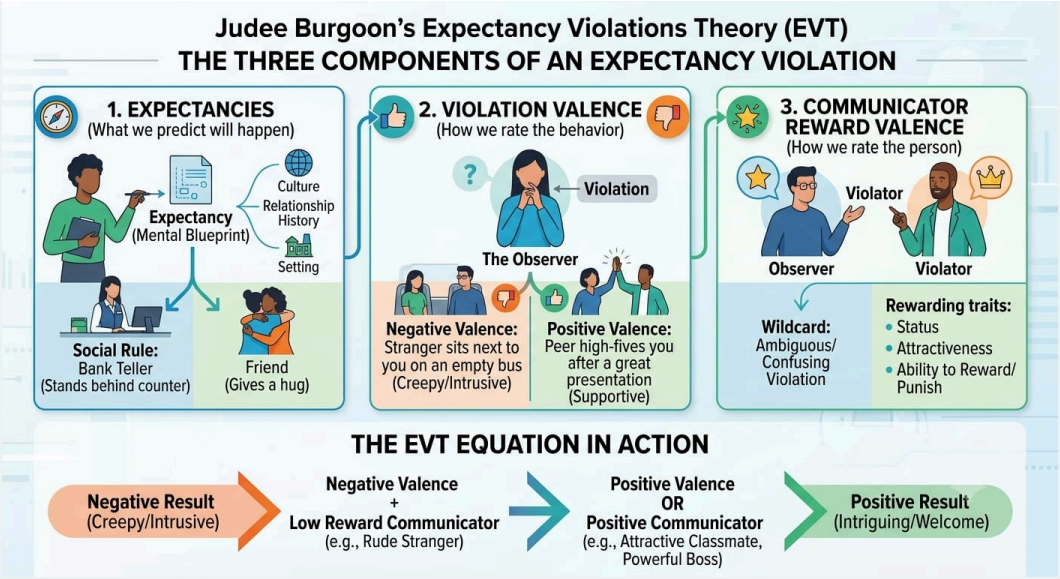


Figure 6.1.1: The Three Components of Expectancy Violation Infographic generated by Google Gemini (2026) from a text prompt based on Judee Burgoon's Expectancy Violation Theory.

The Impact of EVT on Interpersonal Communication

EVT challenges the idea that nonverbal communication has a fixed dictionary definition. A touch, a pause, or a steady gaze does not mean the same thing in every context. Instead, nonverbal communication is a constant dance of managing expectations.

In daily interactions, understanding EVT helps us become more mindful of our own nonverbal impact. It reminds us that we are constantly operating under a set of culturally learned boundaries (such as **proxemics,** or the use of space). When we intentionally or accidentally cross those boundaries, we force the other person to stop listening to *what* we are saying and focus entirely on *how* we are behaving

Discussion Questions

1. In the introduction's flight attendant example, the Japanese passengers used a hand-wave gesture that violated the American author's *expectancies*. How did the author's view of the passengers (their Communicator Reward Valence as customers) prevent this violation from causing an angry conflict?
2. Think about a time someone made intense, unexpected eye contact with you. Did your evaluation of the situation change based entirely on *who* the person was?
3. EVT suggests that sometimes, violating an expectation is actually *better* than conforming to it. Can you think of an interpersonal scenario where intentionally breaking a nonverbal rule could help you achieve a positive goal?
4. How can digital communication create "expectancy violations"? Think about response times (chronemics) or the use of ALL CAPS in text messages.

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6.2: Definitions

The Importance of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in our daily interactions with others. As you can see in Figure 6.2.1, there is a lot of nonverbal expression on a baby's face. How directly or indirectly we look at someone communicates a message. Speaking loudly or softly can change the meaning of a phrase. A touch may send a comforting message, make a connection with someone, or even serve as a display of power. Smells may remind us of a favorite holiday (such as the smell of vanilla) or encourage us to relax (such as the smell of lavender). Even taste might communicate a message. For example, a root beer float on a hot, sunny day could bring back good memories of childhood.



Figure 6.2.1: Baby displaying a facial expression of unhappiness by Ryan Franco on Unsplash.

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

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

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

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

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

Defining Nonverbal Communication

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

Many scholars use the term *nonverbal communication* to designate those communication cues that express ideas and the meanings of our words (our "verbal communication"). Matsumoto et. al (2012) define "nonverbal communication as the transfer

and exchange of messages in any and all modalities that do not involve words." Hall and Knapp (2013) identify "all potentially informative behaviors that are not purely linguistic in content" as nonverbal cues."

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

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

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

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

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

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

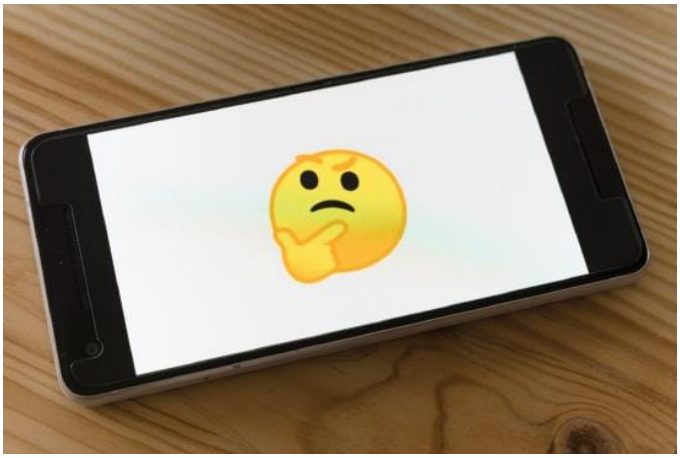


Figure 6.2.2: Emoji thinking by Markus Winkler on Unsplash.

Figure 6.2.2 shows an emoji "thinking" by a hand is placed on the chin while the eyebrows are pointing down. We can look at this image and interpret those nonverbal cues as communicating that little yellow face as "deep in thought." So much of our communication is now "computer-mediated communication." We are all familiar with the use of :-) (smiley face) and the :-((unhappy face). According to the definition in Encyclopedia Britannica (2022), an emoticon "is meant to represent a facial expression in order to communicate the emotional state of the author.... The word *emoticon* comes from a combination of the words *emotion* and *icon*." Figure 6.2.3 shows different of emojis.



Figure 6.2.3: Assorted emojis by Pixaline on Pixabay

During the pandemic, wore a face mask, which had an impact on our nonverbal communication. Even emojis joined in on this trend. What do the emojis wearing face masks in Figure 6.2.4 represent to you? What do they communicate?

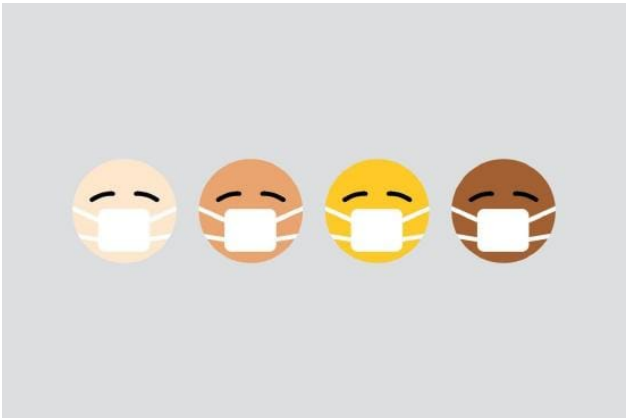


Figure 6.2.4: Coronavirus has no race by visuals on Unsplash.

Here are a few more questions to think about: Are emoticons and emojis nonverbal communication, verbal communication, or both? Are they almost a “universal language” that transcends verbal languages because of their common nonverbal meanings? What cultural differences are there in the use of these images? What do you think?

These shifts in our modern landscape - whether it is an emoji suddenly wearing a surgical mask, a classmate from another country using an unfamiliar head gesture, or someone texting you in ALL CAPS - show just how quickly our daily communication expectations can change. When these unspoken rules are disrupted, we experience what you read about on the previous page: **an expectancy violation**. As **Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT)** reminds us, we are constantly evaluating these subtle boundary shifts to make sense of the world around us.

Reflections on Research

When AI Reads What We Miss: How Technology Interprets Nonverbal Cues

Imagine you're sitting in a group meeting, trying to read the room. One classmate keeps glancing down at their phone. Another is smiling politely but not saying much. Someone else looks tense, but you can't tell if it's stress, confusion, or something unrelated. You're doing what humans do constantly - trying to interpret **nonverbal cues** to understand how people feel and how the interaction is going. But even with practice, we often miss things, misread signals, or focus on the wrong cues.

A 2025 quantitative study by Alharbi and colleagues explored what happens when artificial intelligence tries to do the same thing. Using a deep-learning system trained on thousands of video clips, the researchers tested whether AI could accurately recognize emotions from multiple nonverbal channels - facial expressions, posture, and movement. They found that the system performed best when it integrated ALL these cues rather than relying on just one. In other words, AI "understood" emotions most accurately when it looked at the whole picture, much like skilled human communicators do. The study highlights a key insight for interpersonal communication: **nonverbal meaning is multimodal**, and interpreting it well requires paying attention to more than just someone's face.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does AI's success in reading nonverbal cues suggest about how humans process emotional information?
2. How might relying on only one channel (like facial expressions) lead to misunderstandings in interpersonal communication?
3. What ethical or relational concerns arise when technology can interpret emotions from nonverbal behavior?

Source: Alharbi, A., Alshammari, R., Alshammari, M., & Alshammari, A. (2025). *Real-time emotion recognition using deep learning and multimodal nonverbal cues.* Applied Sciences, 15(13), 7499. 🔗

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6.3: The Roles of Nonverbal Communication in Interpersonal Communication

Functions of Nonverbal Communication

We engage in nonverbal communication throughout the entire day. It is part of everything we do and say. It's important for us to understand how nonverbal communication affects our behavior, perception, interpretations, and understanding. In this section, we will take a look at some of the roles and functions of nonverbal communication in our daily lives.



Figure 6.3.1: Two women talking by Christina@wocintechchat.com on Unsplash

Persistence of Nonverbal Communication

"You cannot not communicate." Have you ever heard that expression? Nonverbal communication is always present. We are constantly communicating through our nonverbal communication. Even silence is a form of communication. Have you ever given someone the "silent treatment?" If so, you understand that by remaining silent, you are trying to convey some meaning, such as "You hurt me" or "I'm really upset with you." When sitting alone in the library, working, your posture may be communicating something to others. If you need to focus and don't want to invite communication, you may keep your head down and avoid eye contact.

We assign meanings to people's nonverbal behaviors to interpret what they are really saying. For example, if you are having a conversation with your friend who just broke up with their significant other, your friend's facial expression, way of standing, rate of speech, tone of voice, and general appearance will indicate to you how you should respond. If they are sobbing, you might try to comfort them. If, on the other hand, they smile and sound happy, you might respond by saying, "You seem relieved. Were things not going well?"

The successful use of nonverbal communication requires an awareness of the value of nonverbal communication and the belief that it is valuable. When you were a child, did an adult ever say to you something like "It wasn't what you said, it was how you said it"? Or perhaps you tried to cover up having a bad day by saying "I had a terrific day at work," but your roommate countered with "You said one thing with your words, but your facial expression and tone of voice tell me something different"?

Nonverbal Communication in Initiating Relationships

Nonverbal communication is often the very first way in which we initiate communication. We may make eye contact or connect through touch, scent, hand gestures, physical appearance, and other nonverbal cues. We often use nonverbal communication to

relay to others an interest in continuing a conversation or leaving a conversation. For example, you may run into a colleague and strike up a conversation in the hall. The conversation is enjoyable. Your colleague may recognize that they need to get to a meeting and relates this information to you by looking at their watch, beginning to back away, or looking at the door they need to enter. We use nonverbal behaviors to begin, continue, and end our interpersonal interactions.

Nonverbal Communication and "Mixed Messages"

A particularly challenging aspect of nonverbal communication is the fact that it is ambiguous. In the 1970s, nonverbal communication as a topic was trendy. Some were under the impression that we could use nonverbal communication to "read others like a book." For example, people claimed that crossed arms signaled to others that a person was closed off. It would be wonderful if crossing one's arms signaled only one meaning, but think about the many meanings of crossing one's arms. An individual may have crossed arms because the individual is cold, upset, sad, or angry. It is impossible to know unless a conversation is paired with nonverbal behavior.

Another great example of ambiguous nonverbal behavior is flirting! Consider some very stereotypical behavior of flirting (e.g., smiling, laughing, a light touch on the arm, or prolonged eye contact). Each of these behaviors signals interest to others. The question is whether an individual engaging in these behaviors is indicating romantic interest or a desire for platonic friendship. Have you ever walked away from a situation and explained a person's behavior to another friend to determine whether you were being flirted with? If so, you have undoubtedly experienced the ambiguity of nonverbal communication. It is important to take time to observe before jumping to conclusions. This is exactly where Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) helps us crack the code of ambiguity. When a behavior like a light touch or prolonged eye contact confuses us, EVT suggests we look at the *Communicator Reward Valence* - our assessment of the person delivering the cue. If we already find the person attractive, high-status, or likable, we are much more likely to interpret their ambiguous "mixed message" as a positive violation (flirting) rather than a negative one (just being polite, or worse, intrusive). We need to "tolerate ambiguity" and reflect on possible differences in our nonverbal communication due to culture. This idea leads us into our next key role of nonverbal communication, which is how nonverbal communication is influenced by culture.

Nonverbal Communication and Culture

Just as we have discussed that it is beneficial to recognize the value of nonverbal communication, we must also acknowledge that nonverbal communication is culturally based. Raymond Birdwhistell, an American anthropologist who is recognized for his study of kinesics, shared the following observation in his book *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication* (1970):

> A body can be bowed in grief, in humility, in laughter, or in readiness for aggression. A "smile" in one society portrays friendliness, in another embarrassment, and, in still another may contain a warning that, unless tension is reduced, hostility and attack will follow.

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. There are two aspects to understanding that nonverbal communication is culturally based. The first aspect is recognizing that even if we do not know the appropriate nonverbal communication with someone from another culture, then we must at least acknowledge that we need to be flexible, not react immediately, and ask questions. The second aspect is recognizing that 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.

One of our authors shares this example:

> I remember watching an American student at a gathering who, to some of my fellow instructors and me, was engaging in obvious flirting behavior with a student from Thailand. When I was driving some of my students back to the residence hall, I asked my student from Thailand how she felt because of all of the flirting behavior that she had received. She said that she had no idea that the American student had been flirting with her.

As you can see, culture certainly does play a critical role in the use and interpretation of nonverbal communication!

Nonverbal Communication and Trust

Communication scholars agree that the majority of meaning in any interaction is attributable to nonverbal communication. It isn't necessarily true, but we are taught from a very early age that lack of eye contact is indicative of lying. We have learned through

research that this “myth” is not necessarily true, although this myth does tell a story about how our culture views nonverbal communication. That view is simply that nonverbal communication is important and that it has meaning.

Another example of nonverbal communication being trusted may be related to a scenario many have experienced. You may have been asked to say, “I’m sorry” to someone. Someone might not have believed your sincerity and told you that “it wasn’t what you said, it was how you said it.”

So now that we have discussed the role and general characteristics of nonverbal communication, let’s jump into a discussion of the six functions on nonverbal communication in our everyday lives.

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6.4: The Six Functions of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal Communication in Interaction

Research into nonverbal communication resulted in the discovery of multiple utilitarian functions of nonverbal communication. Consider the following six functions of nonverbal communication, which we adapted from "Importance of Nonverbal Communication in Interaction" (Wrench, et al., 2020):

Complementing

Complementing is defined as nonverbal behavior that is used in combination with the verbal portion of the message to emphasize the meaning of the entire message. An example of complementing behavior is when a child exclaims, “I’m so excited” while jumping up and down. The child’s body is emphasizing the meaning of “I’m so excited.”

Contradicting

At times, a person’s nonverbal communication contradicts verbal communication. This is referred to as a “double bind.” Imagine a situation where a friend says, “The concert was amazing,” but their voice is monotone. Communication scholars refer to this as “contradicting” verbal and nonverbal behavior. When the verbal and nonverbal messages are incongruent, we tend to believe the nonverbal communication over verbal communication.

From a theoretical standpoint, a contradicting message is a direct **expectancy violation**. Because we socially predict that a person's words and bodily cues will match, a "double bind" shatters our mental blueprint for that interaction. As Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) suggests, this contradiction forces us to pause, look at our relationship history with the speaker, and figure out *why* they are violating our expectations - whether they are being sarcastic, hiding their true feelings, or trying to mask an emotion.

Accenting

Accenting is a form of nonverbal communication that emphasizes a word or a part of a message. The word or part of the message accented might change the meaning of the message. Gestures paired with a word can provide emphasis, such as when an individual says, “no (slams hand on table), you don’t understand me.” By slamming the hand on a table while saying “no,” the source draws attention to the word. Words or phrases can also be emphasized via pauses. Speakers will often pause before saying something important. Your professors likely pause just before relaying information that is important to the course content (and could very well appear on the next test!).

Repeating

Nonverbal communication that repeats the meaning of verbal communication assists the receiver by reinforcing the words of the sender. Nonverbal communication that repeats verbal communication may stand alone, but when paired with verbal communication, it serves to repeat the message. For example, nodding one’s head while saying “yes” serves to reinforce the meaning of the word “yes,” and the word “yes” reinforces the head nod.

Regulating

Regulating the flow of communication is often accomplished through nonverbal behavior communication. You may notice your friends nodding their heads when you are speaking. Nodding one’s head is a primary means of regulating communication. Other behaviors that regulate conversational flow are eye contact, moving or leaning forward, changing posture and eyebrow raises, to name a few. You may have noticed several nonverbal behaviors people engage in when trying to exit a conversation. These behaviors include stepping away from the speaker, checking one’s watch/phone, or packing up belongings. These are referred to as leave-taking behaviors.

Substituting

At times, nonverbal behavior replaces verbal communication altogether. For example, a friend may ask you what time it is, and you may shrug your shoulders to indicate you don't know. At other times, your friend may ask whether you want pizza or sushi for dinner, and you may shrug your shoulders to indicate you don't care or have no preference. "Emblems" are a specific type of substituting nonverbal behavior that have direct verbal translation. Emblems may generally be understood outside of the context in which they are used. Some highly recognizable emblems in US culture are the peace sign and the OK sign.

What are some of the possible messages being communicated nonverbally by the person in Figure 6.4.1? What functions of nonverbal communication are being displayed by this person's facial expression?



Figure 6.4.1: Person making a face by Ayo Ogunseinde on Unsplash

Charades! Guess the Nonverbals

Objective: Explicitly observe how much we rely on facial expressions, body language, and gestures when communicating.

Directions:

1. Divide the class into two groups.
2. Each group will send a member to pick a card from the deck and act out what is described on the card. During your team's turn, you will have 30 seconds to act out and guess.
3. Each correct guess is worth 5 points. Correct answers must include type of nonverbal communication (facial expression, gesture, or body posture) *and* the word/phrase being communicated. Note: Some of the meanings may be conveyed through one, two, or all three "channels" of nonverbal communication. However, the actor must concentrate on conveying what the card indicates (facial expression, posture, or gesture), and the guessers must guess *both* type and meaning correctly to get the points.

Debrief and Discussion:

- What types of nonverbals (face, gesture, or body) were easiest/hardest to guess?
- What types of nonverbals (face, gesture, or body) were easiest/hardest to act out?

Charades

Facial Expression Anger	Body Posture Sympathy	Gesture Listen up!
Facial Expression Contempt	Body Posture Anxious	Gesture Go away!
Facial Expression Disgust	Body Posture Not interested	Gesture Anger
Facial Expression Fear	Body Posture Bored	Gesture Victory/Winning
Facial Expression Surprise	Body Posture Bring it on! (Aggressive)	Gesture Warning
Facial Expression Amusement	Body Posture Confidence	Gesture I don't want to hear it!
Facial Expression Awe	Body Posture Anger	Gesture I can't hear you.
Facial Expression Concentration	Body Posture Frustration	Gesture Come here.
Facial Expression Disappointment	Body Posture Guilt	Gesture Call me.
Facial Expression Pain	Body Posture I'm in control here!	Gesture Good job!

Facial Expression Confusion	Body Posture Confusion	Gesture I'm not hiding anything.
Facial Expression Boredom	Body Posture Impatient	Gesture Here you go.
Facial Expression Naughty	Body Posture Leave me alone!	Gesture Thank you
Facial Expression Doubt	Body Posture Deep in thought	Gesture Money
Facial Expression Elation	Body Posture Showing interest	Gesture Naughty/Shame on you
Facial Expression Guilt	Body Posture Insecurity	Gesture I'm nervous.
Facial Expression Satisfaction	Body Posture Lying	Gesture Good luck!
Facial Expression Joy	Body Posture Shy/Introverted	Gesture Let's go.

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6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication

Seven Types of Nonverbal Communication

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

One reason that nonverbal communication is so rich with information is that humans use so many different aspects of behavior, appearance, and environment to convey meaning. These types of nonverbal communication can vary considerably across cultures. Figure 6.5.1 identifies the seven types of nonverbal communication that we will examine in this section:

1. Kinesics
2. Vocalics
3. Haptics
4. Proxemics
5. Artifacts and Environment
6. Olfactics
7. Chronemics

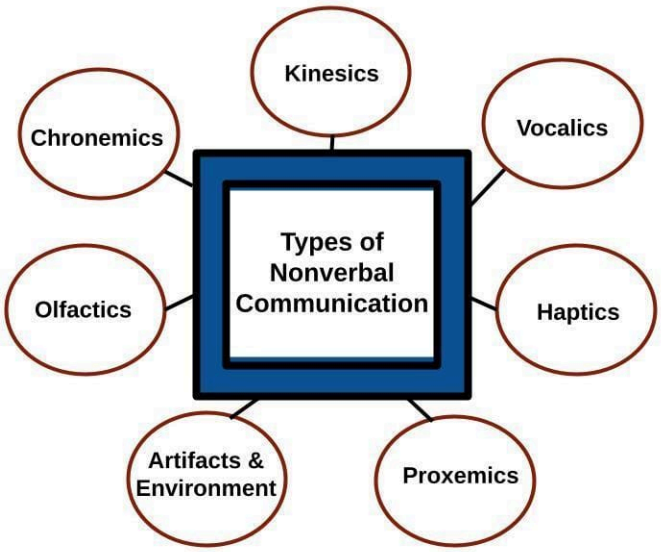


Figure 6.5.1: Types of nonverbal communication by Armeda C. Reitzel is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

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

Kinesics

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

Facial Expressions

You may have heard the expression “a smile is worth a thousand words.” We have been smiling most of our lives, ever since

the fourth week of life. These spontaneous smiles turn into smiles of genuine enjoyment known as **Duchenne smiles**. What is a Duchenne smile? According to the Paul Eckmann Group (2022):

> FACS [Facial Action Coding System] research has shown that in a true enjoyment smile, the skin above and below the eye is pulled in towards the eyeball, and this makes for the following changes in appearance: the cheeks are pulled up; the skin below the eye may bag or bulge; the lower eyelid moves up; crows feet wrinkles may appear at the outer corner of the eye socket; the skin above the eye is pulled slightly down and inwards; and the eyebrows move down very slightly. A non-enjoyment smile, in contrast, features the same movement of the lip corners as the enjoyment smile but does not involve the changes due to the muscles around the eyes.

The photograph in Figure 6.5.2 shows a great example of a Duchenne smile, that "genuine smile."



Figure 6.5.2: Smiling girl by Jonathan Borba on Unsplash

One of the first foundational studies of culture and emotion was conducted by Paul Ekman and Wallace Freisen in the 1970s. The research conducted across the world led to the development of the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) that we mentioned earlier. FACS analyzed specific facial muscle movement associated with specific emotions (Tsai, 2021). Across cultures, individuals were able to correlate facial movements to specific emotions, leading to the development of what is now known as the seven "universal" facial expressions. These seven facial expressions include happiness, surprise, contempt, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger. Examples are depicted in Figure 6.5.3. You might consider the acronym SADFISH as a way to remember these seven universal facial expressions.

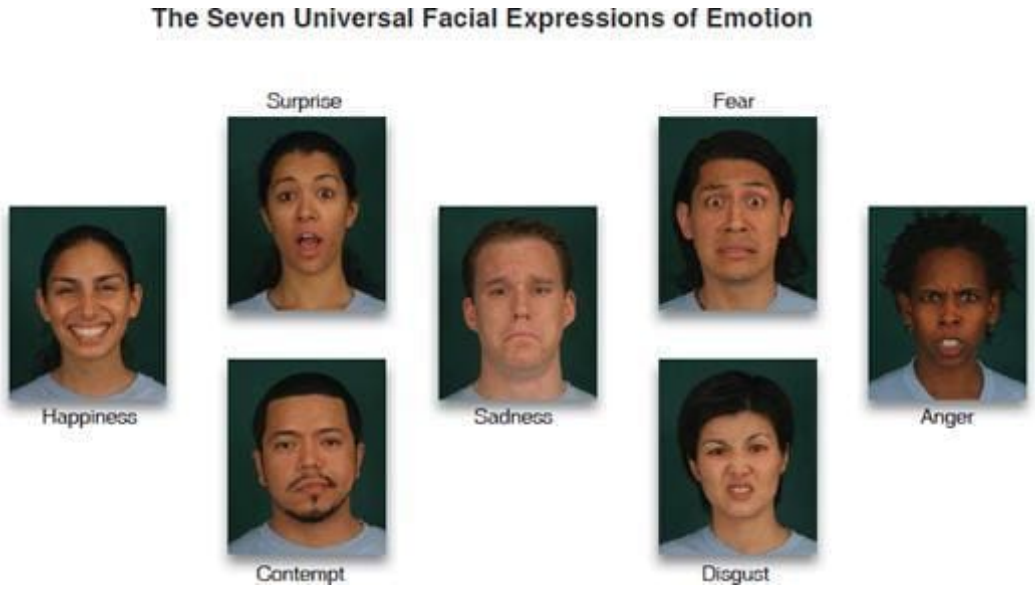


Figure 6.5.3: The Seven Universal Facial Expression of Emotion from the US Department of Justice CC0

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

Research has shown that collectivistic cultures, where social harmony is emphasized, are less likely to showcase negative emotions, such as disgust or anger, in social settings. Individualistic cultures, where personal self-concept is emphasized, are more likely to showcase emotions of anger or disgust no matter the social context (Dzokoto et al., 2018). Research suggests that people from individualistic cultures, like the United States, use exaggerated facial expressions to showcase emotion as a way to influence others and gain attention from those around them (which is accepted within an individualistic culture). This is opposed to the actions of people from collectivistic cultures, such as Japan, where the tendency is to suppress or not show their emotional expressions as a way to observe the social context and interaction between interpersonal relationships. Because collectivistic cultures put primary concern on the interdependence of the cultural group, emotional displays are direct reflections of the family system, and the primary driver is to maintain relationships (Anonymous, 2022).

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

We rely on reading facial expressions so much in our interpersonal interactions. This was quite a challenge when we needed to wear face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. About 50% of our face was covered with some sort of cloth or covering. This often created some ambiguity when it came to deciphering what a person might be saying. In addition, Deaf individuals were not able to see the movement of the lips, face, or tongue to engage in lip reading when their conversation partner's nose and mouth were covered. Some people, such as the person in Figure 6.5.4, started wearing masks with a clear mouth window so that at least their mouth could be seen.



Figure 6.5.4: Showing a smile under a COVID-19 face mask by Armeda C. Reitzel is licensed CCBY-NC-SA 4.0

Oculesics

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

Gestures

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

Emblems

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

Illustrators

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

Affect Displays

Affect displays show feelings and emotions. Consider how music and sports fans show enthusiasm. It is not uncommon to see people jumping up and down at sports events during a particularly exciting moment in a game. However, there are different norms depending on the sport. It would be inappropriate to demonstrate the same nonverbal gestures at a golf or tennis game as a football game. The gesture displayed in Figure 6.5.5 shows the "pure joy" of a person who just made a strike.



Figure 6.5.5: A man smiling in a bowling alley by Pavel Danilyuk on Pexels

Regulators

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

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

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

Gesture Meanings and Contexts

Graphic of Nonverbal	Meaning in United States	Meaning Elsewhere
 Thumbs-Up by Tumisu from Pixabay	Positive meanings including: everything is good/OK, and good going.	Considered a very rude gesture in the following countries: Australia, Sardinia, Iran, Nigeria, Ghana, and Soviet Union. If counting - In Germany "thumbs up" = !; in Japan "thumbs up" = 5

Graphic of Nonverbal	Meaning in United States	Meaning Elsewhere
 Fingers-Crossed by Evan-Amos from Wikimedia Commons	Wish for luck or good results. Sometimes used by children as an excuse to tell a little lie or break a promise made.	This same gesture in Vietnam is equivalent to us “giving someone the bird.”
 Kid saying OK from Freesgv.org Public Domain	OK; good; everything is fine.	• In the South of France this means “zero” or “worthless.” • In Japan, this is a symbol for money because it looks like the shape of a coin. • In Brazil, this indicates female private parts and is considered extremely rude. • It is also insulting in Malta, Sardinia, Greece, Tunisia, Italy, Turkey, and Paraguay.
 Sign of the horns from Freesgv.org Public Domain  Hand sign by ChininiProductions from Pixabay	• Hang loose = chill; be relaxed; don’t take things too seriously • Rock on = positive exclamation expressing enthusiasm, excitement • Hook ‘em Horns = official hand sign of various universities in the United States whose mascot has some kind of horns (University of Texas, Austin, Texas Christian University, North Carolina State, North Dakota State).	• In Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Spain, Italy and Portugal this is a sign that tells someone their spouse is cheating. • In some African countries, flashing this gesture indicates you’re placing a curse on them.

Graphic of Nonverbal	Meaning in United States	Meaning Elsewhere
 Hand-man-number from pxhere.com CC0	In the United States, this sign (with the palm facing in or out) can have several meanings, none of which are negative. It could mean “peace.” It could also signal “V” for victory, or it could signal the number “2.”	In Ireland, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, displaying this same gesture with the back of the hand facing outward is an obscene and insulting gesture.

Discussion Questions

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

Video Resources

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

Vocalics

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

Pitch

Pitch is how harmonically high or low you say something. The rate at which your vocal folds vibrate in your throat are responsible for the pitch of your voice. Low-frequency vibrations make for a lower-pitched sound, while higher frequency vibrations make for a higher-pitched sound. If you end the sentence on a high note (known as “uptalk”), you might be perceived as sounding uncertain about the claim (Linneman, 2013). If you end it on a low pitch, it might sound like you are stating a fact confidently.

Pace

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

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

Disfluencies

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

Volume

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

Haptics

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

Proxemics

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

1. **Intimate space:** The intimate zone is typically reserved for only the closest friends, family, and romantic/intimate partners. It involves any communication that is 18 inches or less from a person’s body. It is impossible to completely ignore people when they are in this space, even if we are trying to pretend that we’re ignoring them. While some people are comfortable engaging in or watching others engage in PDAs (public displays of affection) others are not.
2. **Personal space:** The personal zone is typically reserved for friends, close acquaintances, and significant others. Much of our communication occurs in the personal zone, which is what we typically think of as our “personal space bubble” and extends from 18 inches to 4 feet away from our body.
3. **Social distance:** Communication that occurs in the social zone, which is 4 to 12 feet away from our body, is typically in the context of a professional or casual interaction. This distance is preferred in many professional settings because it reduces the suspicion of any impropriety. The expression “keep someone at an arm’s length” means that someone is kept out of the personal space and kept in the social/professional space. If two people held up their arms and stood so that just the tips of their fingers were touching, they would be around 4 feet away from each other, which is perceived as a safe distance. Students in large lecture classes should consider sitting within the social zone of the professor, since students who sit within this zone are more likely to be remembered by the professor, be acknowledged in class, and retain more information because they are close enough to take in important nonverbal and visual cues. Choosing where to sit or stand in relation to someone else is a daily exercise in managing **Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT)**, which we introduced earlier in the chapter. When a student chooses to sit much closer to a professor during office hours than the typical four-foot "social zone" boundary, they cross into personal space. According to EVT, this unexpected closeness forces the professor to calculate the student's *Communication Reward Valence*. If the student is highly engaged and polite, the closer distance might be interpreted positively as a sign of enthusiasm. However, if the student is confrontational, the exact same spatial violation will likely be perceived as aggressive and intrusive.
4. **Public distance:** Public space starts about 12 feet from a person and extends out from there. This is the least personal of the four zones. It is typically used when a person is engaging in a formal speech. It would be difficult to have a deep conversation with someone at this level because you have to speak louder and don’t have the physical closeness that is often needed to promote emotional closeness and/or establish rapport.

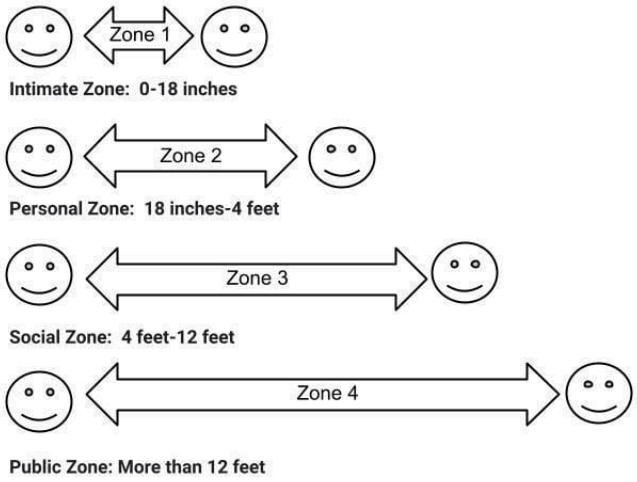


Figure 6.5.6: Hall's Zones of Interpersonal Distance created by Armeda Reitzel CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.You may read a full description here: Hall's Four Zones of Interpersonal Distance

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

What is physical distancing? "Physical distancing is the practice of staying at least 6 feet away from others to avoid catching a disease such as COVID-19" (Maragakis, 2020). Figure 6.5.7 displays the outline of two shoe prints along with the verbal explanation to "Please help by keeping a safe distance of 6 feet. Thank you for social distancing."



Figure 6.5.7: Please help by keeping a safe distance of 6 feet. Thank you for social distancing. by Elizabeth McDaniel on Unsplash.

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

Artifacts and Environment

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

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

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

Keep in mind that tattoos in different cultures, communities, and countries may still have a negative connotation. What do the tattoos in Figure 6.5.8 communicate to you nonverbally?



Figure 6.5.8: Woman with Tattoo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

Clothing stimulates meaning. For example, my father always asked me, "How do you know if someone is a priest, painter, judge, police officer, or doctor?" It is because they have a uniform that represents that profession. Dress and physical appearance can be important identifiers for membership in particular groups. What do the casual sweatshirt and shorts worn by the person in Figure 6.5.9 say to you? How does the environment that this person is in affect your reading of their clothing?



Figure 6.5.9: Appearance by Aiman Zenn on Unsplash

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

Olfactics

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

because of its scent, which perhaps reminded you of something positive?

Scent can draw others in or repel them, and the same scent can have different affects on different people. The United States places a lot of emphasis on smell. Consider the impact of failing to manage one's natural scent in the workplace. Countless articles in the popular media address how to deal with a "smelly coworker." Thus, it is crucial to be aware of one's scent, including the ones we wear in an effort not to offend those around us. Although smelling "bad" may end a relationship or at least create distance, an attractive scent may help individuals begin a new relationship. Have you ever purchased a new scent before a first date? If so, you are aware of the power of scent to attract a mate.

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

Chronemics

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

Biological Time

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

Personal Time

The way we experience time is referred to as **personal time**. This varies based on our mood, interest level, and other factors. Think about how quickly time passes when you are engaged in something that really interests you. People with past-time orientations may want to reminisce about the past, reunite with old friends, and put considerable time into preserving memories in scrapbooks, photo albums and on Instagram. People with future-time orientations may spend their time making career and personal plans, writing to-do lists, researching future vacation spots or deciding what program they're going to binge-watch next month.

Cultural Time

How a large group of people view time is called **cultural time**. There are cultures that tend to value **polychronic time**. There are other cultures that operate on **monochronic time**. The term **polychronic** contains the idea of "many" (poly) and refers to the idea of many things happening in a fluid, flexible fashion. Polychronic people tend to engage in multiple activities at the same time and do not create specific time frames to work on particular tasks. We might view such people as "simultaneous multitaskers" who juggle multiple activities and people at the same time. Time is not seen as linear, and schedules may be regarded as only suggestions. For example, polychronic people tend to "go with the flow." They would never think of telling someone when a party is scheduled to end. Why? They would say that it is because a party ends when it is over.

Monochronic people tend to schedule their time more rigidly and focus on one task at a time. They make schedules and stick to them as much as possible. Events begin at a specific time and they end at a specific time. An invitation to a party hosted by a monochronic person might even announce an ending time as well as a start time for the festivities. A monochronic person might interpret the behavior of a polychronic person as rude or uncaring because they did not bother to show up on time. A polychronic person may perceive a monochronic person as uptight or harsh because they seem to care more about time than about people. As you can see, our concepts about time influences our social realities and how we perceive and interact with others.

Our status may influence the way that we view and use time. For example, doctors can make their patients wait, and executives and celebrities may run consistently behind schedule, making others wait for them. Promptness and the amount of time that is socially acceptable for lateness and waiting varies among individuals and contexts. One of the authors is an English as a second language teacher-trainer who has traveled all over the globe, and can share the following: "The sense of time definitely differs from

culture to culture. I learned to be flexible about the start time for my workshop sessions in Nicaragua. When I was in Germany, a train conductor apologized to the whole trainload of passengers for arriving one minute late to a stop."

These cultural differences are a prime example of how deeply our nonverbal *expectancies* are trained by our environments. When a monochronic business personal from the United States expects a meeting to start exactly at 2:00 PM, a polychronic partner arriving at 2:30 PM commits a major **expectancy violation**. Because the American's mental blueprint for professional respect relies on strict promptness, this lateness carries a highly negative *violation valence*. As EVT reminds us, cross-cultural friction often happens not because of what people say, but because their cultural orientation toward nonverbal cues, like time, shatters our unwritten rules.

What instances of time differences have you experienced that may have been influenced by culture?

Nonverbal Communication in Different Settings

Nonverbal communication covers a lot of territory. It's important to consider our nonverbal communication in different contexts: from the classroom to the grocery store to the courtroom to the job interview. Think about the different situations that you find yourself in and how you might need to adjust your nonverbal communication to fit the circumstances. How would you characterize the role of nonverbal communication with friends and family? How is that the same or different from the nonverbal communication appropriate in a professional setting? Let's take a quick look at recommendations to healthcare professionals in interacting with their patients for a context-specific example.



Figure 6.5.10: A doctor looking forward and thinking by Usman Yousaf on Unsplash.

Example 6.5.1: Example of nonverbal communication in a specific context: Healthcare settings

There is great interest in the study and teaching of confirming nonverbal behaviors in interpersonal communication in healthcare contexts.

> In addition to effective verbal communication, nonverbal behavior is critically important for achieving patient satisfaction, adherence to treatment, and shared medical decisions. Patients are calling for more compassionate care, and the government and third-party payers are now basing hospital reimbursement on patient satisfaction ratings. (Reiss & Kraft-Todd, 2014)

For example, a doctor will focus on a patient's facial expressions and tone of voice to tap into their concerns while a patient relies on a doctor's nonverbal behavior to figure out what the doctor means (Ishikawa, et al., 2006). Patients have identified eye contact as being significant in their interactions with their doctors. According to Timmermann, Uhrenfeldt, and Birkelund,

"Eye contact substantiated the patients' experience of being confirmed. Simultaneously, it became apparent that eye contact alone was not enough for the patients to feel confirmed. It was the body language as a whole that the patients interpreted" (2017).

There are two acronyms that address how nonverbal communication might be used effectively in healthcare settings: EMPATHY is one; SOFTEN is the other. As suggested by Reiss and Kraft-Todd (2014), a healthcare professional should show empathy by paying attention and listening to the nonverbal communication of their patients:

- **E** = Eye contact
- **M** =Muscles of facial expression
- **P**= Posture
- **A** = Affect
- **T** = Tone of voice
- **H** = Hearing the whole patient
- **Y** = Your response).

Roger (2002) shared a framework proposed by Joan Damsey for making patients feel more comfortable through positive nonverbal communication behavior. The acronym SOFTEN captures the key suggestions:

- **S** = Smile. This can create a positive interactional climate that can lead to more open communication between the healthcare professional and the patient.
- **O** = Open posture. An open posture (no crossed arms or legs) indicates a willingness to listen to what the patient has to share.
- **F** = Forward lean. This may suggest to the patient that you want to listen to them.
- **T** = Touch. A touch can signal a positive nonverbal message and provide some information about how the patient is feeling.
- **E** = Eye contact. Maintaining eye contact for about 80% of the time may make the patient feel as if you are focusing your attention and efforts on them.
- **N** = Nod. Nodding occasionally tells the patients that the healthcare professional is listening to them and what they have to say.

These specific suggested nonverbal cues tend to be confirming communication behaviors and can actually lead to a faster, more productive exchange of information.

So, as you can see, nonverbal communication is important in establishing a positive communication climate between patients and healthcare professionals. Would you like to learn more about this topic? Then check out this resource on "Basic Non-verbal Communication Skills" in a healthcare setting.



Figure 6.5.11: Healthcare professional with a patient by the National Cancer Institute on Unsplash.

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6.6: Case Study

Cultural Appropriation: High School Celebrates Graduating Seniors with “Senores/Senoritas” Dress-Up Day

Dressing up in costume has long served as a nonverbal medium for personal expression and social identity. However, when costume choices cross into stereotypical depictions of specific social or ethnic groups, nonverbal expression can quickly spark intense debate around cultural appropriation and communication ethics. This case study examines a real-world incident at an Orange County high school to illustrate how nonverbal artifacts, power dynamics, and administrative oversight intersect in public communication.

The Context and Incident

In 2012, Canyon High School in Anaheim, California, made regional headlines due to its annual senior spirit day, titled **"Señores and Señoritas Day"**—a wordplay intended to celebrate graduating seniors alongside California’s regional heritage.

While the city of Anaheim had a Latino population of roughly 52.8% between 2008 and 2012, demographic data for Canyon High School in Anaheim Hills painted a different picture: approximately 55% of the student body identified as White, compared to 16% Latino, and White faculty made up 87% of the school’s staff, while Latino faculty accounted for 8%.

Without specific structural guidelines or administrative framing beyond a broad call for "Hispanic-themed attire," the event resulted in nonverbal displays that relied heavily on cultural caricatures. Students arrived on campus wearing costumes depicting U.S. Border Patrol agents, immigration officers, manual laborers with lawn equipment, pregnant women pushing baby strollers, and gang members wearing bandanas and temporary teardrop tattoos.



Figure 6.6.1: Canyon Students Cultural Appropriation

Administrative Response and Investigation

Initial student concerns raised during the event were dismissed on campus. However, after a former student formally brought the issue to the school district level, an internal investigation was initiated. The inquiry—which included reviews of emails, social media posts, and interviews with staff and students—concluded that a significant lack of administrative oversight allowed the event to occur.

The official district report noted that even if strict dress code guidelines had been implemented, relying on an ethnic identity as a costume theme inherently risks promoting hurtful and reductive stereotypes regarding Mexican and Latino culture.

To address the findings, the district mandated several corrective steps:

- Comprehensive cultural sensitivity training for school administrators.
- Formal written communication from the principal to parents acknowledging the inappropriateness of the event.
- The establishment of an annual "International Week" to focus on educational and cultural exchange.
- The implementation of a rigorous review process for all proposed student activities to evaluate potential cultural impact prior to approval.

Understanding the Communication Dynamics

As media scholar Sojin Arya notes, understanding **cultural appropriation** requires recognizing the asymmetry of power between dominant and marginalized groups. Cultural appropriation occurs when elements of a marginalized culture are adopted by members of a dominant culture without context, respect, or permission—often reducing rich traditions to nonverbal caricatures.

This case highlights how nonverbal artifacts (clothing, props, symbolic imagery) communicate powerful social messages. When institutional leaders fail to consider demographic context, historical power imbalances, and the impact of nonverbal signaling, school-sponsored events can easily shift from intended cultural appreciation to public misstep.

Reflection Questions

1. **Defining Concepts:** How would you define *cultural appropriation* in your own words? In what ways did the nonverbal elements of this spirit day cross the line from cultural appreciation to cultural appropriation?
2. **Nonverbal Analysis:** Identify two specific nonverbal artifacts or behaviors described in this case. What messages or stereotypes did those nonverbal cues broadcast to the broader community?
3. **Setting Norms for Inclusion:** School campuses frequently host cultural celebrations. What practical steps can organizers take to ensure these events foster genuine cultural intelligence and respect rather than relying on shallow or offensive caricatures?
4. **Evaluating Outcomes:** Review the four corrective actions mandated by the school district. Which of these measures do you think is most effective for long-term cultural learning, and why?
5. **Real-World Application:** Can you identify another example from current media, sports, or pop culture where nonverbal symbols or attire sparked a public debate over cultural appropriation? How was that situation handled?

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6.7: Summary and Review

Summary

This chapter has covered a very big topic in interpersonal communication: nonverbal communication. What is nonverbal communication? It refers to how we express ourselves beyond words, including how we say the words. We discussed the roles, functions, and types of nonverbal communication that we find in our everyday lives. Central to understanding all of these moving parts is **Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT)**. As we explored throughout the chapter, our cultures and relationships give us hidden mental blueprints for how people "should" behave nonverbally. When people violate those expectations - whether through a mixed message, an unexpected physical distance, a cultural difference in time, or an intentional display of warmth - it completely changes how we interpret the interaction.

There are lots of articles, books and videos about nonverbal communication because people find it so intriguing because of its significance and pervasiveness in our interpersonal interactions. Amy Cuddy's TED Talk does a good job of summing up the critical role that nonverbal communication plays in our interactions and our own identities:

> So when we think of nonverbals, we think of how we judge others, how they judge us and what the outcomes are. We tend to forget, though, the other audience that's influenced by our nonverbals, and that's ourselves. We are also influenced by our nonverbals, our thoughts and our feelings and our physiology. (Cuddy, 2012)

A good understanding of how nonverbal communication influences our identity and our interactions with others is vital in becoming a better interpersonal communicator.

Consider This: Nonverbal Immediacy

Building and maintaining relationships are central to healthy human existence. Immediacy behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, are important in the building and maintenance of relationships. **Nonverbal immediacy** refers to behaviors that decrease “real or perceived physical and psychological distance between communicators” (Comadena et al., 2007). For example, posture, gestures, touching, smiling, eye contact, and even tone of voice can indicate approachability of an individual. Of course, cultural background, gender, individual preferences, and context are some factors that influence these behaviors and cues. We can look at immediacy through the lens of **Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT)** to understand how these behaviors land in real life. When you meet someone new, your baseline expectation might be a polite, socially distanced handshake. If that person instead gives you a warm smile, maintains steady eye contact, and leans in slightly, they are technically violating your expected baseline. However, because these immediacy behaviors signal warmth and approachability, they carry a highly positive *violation valence*. By intentionally using immediacy cues, you can create positive expectancy violations that immediately boost your *communicator reward valence*, making others perceive you as friendly and trustworthy right from the start.



Figure 6.7.1: Upper School Teachers greet their new students by San Antonio Academy of Texas from Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0

You can assess your nonverbal immediacy by taking the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale developed by Virginia Richmond, James McCrotsky, and Aaron Johnson in 2003. The interactive version of the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale is a 26-item test that can be completed in 4 to 8 minutes. Upon completion, your results are automatically calculated. You will also be able to explore the Statistical Properties and Correlations of the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale. Higher scores suggest that one is more approachable, friendly, and warm.

Discussion Questions

1. Think of a teacher or boss with whom you liked and got along. What nonverbal immediacy behaviors did they exhibit that made you feel comfortable?
2. Before taking the self-inventory below, predict whether you would score high, medium, or low, on nonverbal immediacy (high = you're very approachable). Then take the self inventory below. Think about your own nonverbal immediacy behaviors. Did the results match your prediction? Explain why or why not.
3. Does your nonverbal immediacy vary from situation to situation and/or person to person? Or do you feel your nonverbal immediacy behaviors remain consistent. Explain.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever communicated with someone outside of your culture? How were their nonverbals similar to your own, or different?
2. Have you ever had your nonverbal cues misinterpreted? For example, someone thought you liked them because your proxemics suggested an intimate relationship. Using **Expectancy Violations Theory**, how did your spatial behavior accidentally trigger a negative or confusing expectancy violation for that person? How did you correct the misinterpretation?
3. What kind of nonverbal communication do you use every day? What does it accomplish for you?
4. Which do you consider has greater weight when interpreting a message from someone else, verbal or nonverbal communication? Why?
5. Research shows that instruction in nonverbal communication can lead people to make gains in their nonverbal communication competence. List some nonverbal skills that you think are important in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic.
6. To understand how chronemics relates to nonverbal communication norms, answer the following questions: In what situations is it important to be early? In what situations can you arrive late? How long would you wait on someone you were meeting for a group project for a class? A date? A job interview?

Skill Builder: Reading the Whole Message - Improving Your Nonverbal Awareness

Nonverbal Communication is happening all around you, whether you notice it or not. In conversations, people send signals through their facial expressions, posture, gestures, eye contact, and even the space they keep between themselves and others. But most of us only pay attention to one or two cues - usually the face - and miss the rest of the message. This Skill Builder helps you to slow down, observe more intentionally, and interpret nonverbal cues with greater accuracy.

Step 1: Notice Multiple Channels

Instead of focusing on just one cue (like a smile or a frown), scan for three channels at once - for example, facial expression, body posture, and vocal tone. This gives you a fuller picture of what the other person may be feeling.

Step 2: Match Cues to Context

Nonverbal signals don't mean the same thing in every situation. A crossed arm might mean defensiveness in one moement and simply being cold in another. Before interpreting a cue, ask yourself: *What is happening in the situation that might shape this behavior?*

Step 3: Check Your First Impression

Our brains make snap judgements, but they're not always accurate. Pause and consider **at least one** alternative explanation for the nonverbal behavior you noticed. This reduces misinterpretation and helps you respond more thoughtfully.

Apply It: Three Questions for Practice

1. When you think about your last conversation, which three nonverbal channels did you notice most clearly - and which did you overlook?
2. Think of a time when you misread someone's nonverbal cues. How might **context** have changed your interpretation?
3. Choose a recent first impression you formed. What is one alternaternative explanation for the nonverbal behavior you observed?

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7: LISTENING

Learning Objectives

- Describe the five stages of the listening process.
- Explain the functions and styles of listening.
- Identify barriers and ineffective listening practices.
- Describe ways to become a better listener.

As a communication act, listening is often underestimated when compared with other forms of communication. Although all communication skills are important for success in life and relationships, listening is at the heart of effective relational communication. In this chapter, we explain the listening process, stages of listening, functions of listening, styles of listening, barriers and pitfalls to effective listening, and how to become a better listener. Our goal is to help you become the best listener you can be in all relationships and in all contexts.

7.1: Introduction to Listening

7.2: Stages of the Listening Process

7.3: Functions of Listening

7.4: Listening Styles

7.5: Barriers to Listening

7.6: Ineffective Listening Practices

7.7: Becoming a Mindful Listener

7.8: Listening Responses

7.9: Summary and Review

7.10: References

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7.1: Introduction to Listening

Listening: The Heart of Effective Communication

As Jamal was watching Monday night football, his partner needed to discuss their upcoming vacation to Cancun. Shenise had a list of questions for him. During what she perceived to be a pause in the action, she approached him with three questions: "Is flying in the evening fine with you? Do you care if we pay for one extra bag? Can we pay for our seats in advance to make sure we sit together?" Jamal's answers were, in order, "sure, no, yeah." Given the brevity of his responses, Shenise had this feeling that he really wasn't listening to her. So she went up to ask him one last question: "Jamal, do you care if I hit on some other guys while we are there?" Jamal's response was, "no problem." This is when Shenise went and stood in front of the television screen, at which point Jamal said angrily, "What are you doing? I'm trying to watch the game!" Chances are pretty high you have experienced or observed a scenario like this. We are susceptible to not giving others our full attention when they are speaking.

As a communication act, listening is often underestimated when compared with other forms of communication. Although all communication skills are important for success in life and relationships, listening is at the heart of effective relational communication. In this chapter we explain the listening process, stages of listening, functions of listening, styles of listening, barriers and pitfalls to effective listening, and how to become a better listener. Our goal is to help you become the best listener you can be in all relationships and in all contexts.

The Importance of Listening

Listening may seem like a natural skill, but there is much more to this communicative act than it appears on the surface. To help you improve your own listening skills, you must have a better understanding of why listening is so important and what is involved in the listening process.

One of our authors shares this example:

> When my daughter was 5 years old she came up to me one day as I was working on my computer. As someone who professed to be an efficient multitasker, I acknowledged what she was saying with a series of head nods and "uh huh's." She said, "Mommy, are you listening to me?" and I responded affirmatively with "yes." She grabbed my face and said, "I know you can *hear* me, but you are *not* listening." I felt awful because she was absolutely correct. I was too focused on my computer to give her my full attention, thinking that my head nods conveyed I was listening. Yet my daughter was not feeling heard. As a result, I realized how important it is to fully listen to my daughter, so she does not feel dismissed, unseen, or unappreciated.

Even as communication scholars, we experience difficulties with listening. In fact, listening is considered the most challenging area of communication in general. As communicators we spend a lot of time thinking about what we want to say and the best way to say it. As a result, there is less time spent on the listening process. Graham Bodie et al., (2020), as cited by McCornack, states that "As adults, we spend more time listening than we do in any other type of communication activity: research suggests as much as two-thirds of our communication time is spent listening" (McCornack, 2018, p. 177). If we consider the length of an average waking day as being 16 hours, we could assume that almost 11 hours a day is spent listening. In exploring how college students engage in listening, research reveals that

> Listening comprises 55.4% of the total average communication day followed by reading (17.1%), speaking (16.1%), and writing (11.4%). Each of these communication behaviors includes some aspect of internet use. College students spend as much time listening to media as they do engaged in interpersonal interaction. (Emanuel et al., 2008)

Research exploring the lives of college students shows that they spend about 45–55% of their day listening (Barker et al.,1981; Emanuel et al., 2008). In the *Journal of Business Communication*, Keyton et al. (2013) stated that "listening" was the most prominent communication skill observed by adults in their place of employment. Whether you are listening in class, at work, or to friends, this form of communication takes up much of our day. Listening allows us to learn new information, connect with others, and learn about ourselves, but we are not born with this skill. As you read this chapter you will gain insight into the complexities of the listening process and be able to identify your own listening styles and challenges. Becoming a better listener will allow you to be a more productive student, a better relational partner, and a more successful professional.



Figure 7.1.1: Disabled and Here By Chona Kasinger is licensed CC-BY 4.0

The Listening Process

If you are like many people, you may have gotten the word *listening* and hearing confused. We may ask someone, “Did you hear me?” when in reality what we really mean is “Were you listening to me?” **Hearing** is the physiological process of taking in sound. Whether you hear a thunderstorm or music, when sound waves hit your ears, your brain enables you to make sense of what you heard. It is one of the senses humans may have, but the ability to hear does not mean you listen well. Listening is a more complex process that is learned. **Listening** is an active process where we make sense of, interpret, and respond to the messages we receive. Without mindfulness, effective listening cannot occur. **Mindfulness** refers to being present in the moment, with increased awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and communication behaviors. Think of mindfulness as being the center of the listening process. As you go through the stages of listening, mindfulness should be at the heart of each stage. Although listening may seem like it should be a fairly simple process, there are several steps. Just as you learned these steps occur so rapidly that we may not even realize we are doing them.

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7.2: Stages of the Listening Process

The Six Steps in Listening

Have you ever baked a cake or followed a new recipe for dinner? If you have, then you are aware that you needed to follow a series of steps to get to the end result. When we listen to others, we rarely stop to consider that there are multiple steps involved in the listening process. On the surface, listening seems less complex than baking. However, there are several stages of listening that occur rapidly, involving many nuances that impact how well we listen. In this section, we explain each stage of the listening process, including receiving, attending, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to messages.

Receiving

In Chapter 1 you learned about how messages are received, which builds the foundation for the listening process. **Receiving** is taking in information using our auditory and visual senses. Hearing is one of our senses that allows us to receive messages through sound. Sight is also important because visual cues can influence how you receive a message. Therefore, before you get to any other stage in the listening process, you must receive stimuli. As we listen to someone speak, we may not consciously realize how important these channels are, but they influence how we interpret messages.

Did You Know?

In Chapter 3, you learned the definition of culture and were provided with some examples of co-cultures. One co-culture that is important to address is **Deaf culture**. The 2022 Academy Awards highlighted this co-culture by awarding the Best Picture Oscar to the movie *CODA*. The movie provided insight into the Deaf community in a unique way that was magnificent. Individuals with varying amounts of hearing loss may not receive a message if they are unable to hear it, and would have more difficulty in the receiving stage of the listening process. The movie appropriately highlighted that deafness and hearing loss can occur at any age. Communicating with a person who has hearing loss requires thought and skill regardless of how old they are.

We want to also highlight another co-culture because it involves a group of individuals whose hearing loss is specific to age. Older adults are considered to be those who are 65 and older. Normal aging results in a slow down of reflexes and processing. Older adults also suffer from **presbycusis**, which is the normal hearing loss associated with age. Whether one has hearing loss associated with age (presbycusis), or is someone who had hearing loss early in life, it is more difficult for deaf or hearing impaired individuals to distinguish certain sounds.

Whether your communication is with someone young, or older, how can you attempt to communicate with them so that they can listen more effectively? According to scholar Jake Harwood (2017), sounds like “s” or “th” can be difficult to distinguish, especially when the communication is taking place in an environment that is noisy. To allow for optimum communication, it is best to place any person with hearing loss in a location that has three walls around them. Have them sit at the back wall and face you so that they can also read your lips. The best communication will take place if the room is somewhat quiet so that background noise is filtered out.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you have someone in your life who has hearing loss, and if so, do you find it difficult to communicate with them?
2. What do you think you have learned that you might consider when you encounter someone who is deaf or has hearing loss?

Attending

We are bombarded with stimuli daily, so how do you decide what to pay attention to? In Chapter 3 you learned about the first part of the perception process, and attending in the listening process is much like the selection process in perception. **Attending** in listening means filtering out what is salient (i.e., noticeable or important). We often attend to stimuli that are visually or audibly

stimulating. For example, if you hear a new song on Spotify, the tune might be so great that you stop to do a Google search to find the lyrics—or, as your Instagram or Tik Tok feed shows the latest music video by your favorite artist, you may focus on that and ignore everything else that is showing in your feed. We also attend to stimuli that appeal to our needs or interests. In class, you might find yourself starting to tune out until your instructor says the word *exam*. At this point, you might tune in because they are about to cover important information that can impact your grade. The content is salient as it meets a need that is important to you.

Interpreting

The next stage in the listening process is interpreting. **Interpreting** is integrating both visual and auditory cues to make sense of, or attribute meaning to, what we hear. It is how we understand a message. We base our interpretations on our *previous* understanding of phenomena in our world. We observe nonverbal cues, such as tone of voice, facial expression, or eye contact to be able to interpret a message correctly. One of our authors shares this story:

> I was teaching a class once and I heard a student "sigh" loudly. I looked at her face to see if I understood the auditory cue. A sigh can be due to boredom, but it could also be that she was thinking of her recent break-up. I then studied her face and saw that she looked sad. I would not have been able to interpret her message had I not been able to hear her sigh, and see her face.

Recalling

Have you ever wondered why you may not remember what your partner, instructor, or boss told you only a day or two earlier? As humans, we are so busy in our lives, that sometimes we find it difficult to remember what we were just told. In some circumstances that may not be a problem, but in other cases, our memory could get us into trouble. **Recalling** is the ability to remember the information one receives. Recalling information is difficult for many people, and this is impacted by where our memories are stored. According to Owen Hargie (2010), we forget about 50% of what we hear immediately after hearing it. After eight hours we recall about 35% and can recall about 20% after an entire day. Recalling what your partner's favorite food is, what genre of music they like, or where their favorite vacation spot is might be important for that relationship to develop. If we are not able to recall these kinds of details, our partners may think we are not that important to them.

Evaluating

Have you ever listened to a friend or partner tell you why they did not show up to a party? Or, have your parents given you "the look" when you tried to tell them why you were not home when you were supposed to be? **Evaluating** is the stage of listening where one assesses the validity and credibility of the message. Evaluating what we hear is a normal part of communication. Whether we are listening to the news, a professor, or a friend or loved one, this means that to some degree we are judging the speaker's comments. It is important to think about the words that are used, the completeness of the message, and the truthfulness of the message. Critical thinking is essential to judge what you hear accurately. No one comes to any communicative event without some form of bias. So whether you are listening to a speech about COVID-19 or immigration, or whether you are listening to your partner tell you that you have said something that made them feel bad, you will find that you immediately begin to break down their message and compare it to what you believe to be true.

The process of evaluation can be quick, or it can be painstakingly long. If the goal is to become the best communicator you can and to develop authentic relationships then it is important to focus on what is being said, not just who is saying it. Humans tend to judge others before a message has been conveyed, so we owe it to ourselves to be as open as we can to what we are hearing and go through a critical process of analyzing the message before responding.

Responding

When we communicate with others, there is an expectation that they will provide us with some form of feedback. Can you imagine pouring your heart out to your best friend about your recent devastating break-up, and only receiving a blank stare in return? Of course not! We do expect that our messages will be acknowledged. This last stage in the listening process is responding. **Responding** is sending verbal and nonverbal feedback to a message you received. When communicating with anyone, there is some expectation that people will respond to what you are saying offering some kind of acknowledgment that they hear you speaking to them.

Back-Channel Cues

As communicators, we may provide **back-channel cues** as a type of response. Back-channel cues are verbal or nonverbal forms of feedback that suggest we are listening. These include such behaviors as nodding our heads, leaning toward a speaker, or saying "uh-huh" or "right," but that does not necessarily mean we were listening intently. If you recall, earlier in this chapter one of our authors shared an example of where she was not listening to her daughter, even though she was using a back-channel cue. If someone responds by looking away, saying “mmhm” while using their phone, or shifting in their seat, we would interpret those cues negatively. However, if someone is looking at us and nodding their head while saying “mmhm,” we interpret such cues positively. Both verbal and nonverbal response cues do not always represent authentic listening, so it is important to pay attention to the cues that you are giving. Managing your responses to your speaker is one of many aspects of listening that we must learn to manage to be an effective listener.

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7.3: Functions of Listening

Listening Functions

Listening plays several essential roles in our everyday lives. At the most basic level, hearing alerts us to danger, grabs our attention, and helps us interact with the world around us. But in interpersonal communication, listening does much more than process sound—it helps us build connection, reduce misunderstandings, and strengthen our relationships.

In this section, we'll explore the major interpersonal functions of listening and how they shape the way we relate to others. Before diving in, take a moment to review the *Thoughts on Theory* box. It uses **Interpersonal Needs Theory** to explain *why* listening is such a powerful relational tool and how it meets our core needs for inclusion, control, and affection.

Thoughts on Theory: Interpersonal Needs Theory and Listening

Interpersonal Needs Theory (Schutz, 1958) helps us understand *why* listening matters so much in relationships. The theory proposes that people have three core relational needs—**inclusion**, **control**, and **affection**—and listening is one of the main ways we meet these needs with others.

- **Inclusion:** We all want to feel seen, valued, and part of the conversation. When someone listens with attention and presence, it communicates "you matter," which satisfies our need for inclusion. Poor listening can make people feel invisible or dismissed.
- **Control:** Listening also shapes how we negotiate influence and autonomy. Someone with a high need for control may interrupt or steer conversations, while someone with a lower need for control may listen quietly or defer. High-quality listening supports healthy balance by giving speakers space to express themselves without feeling overpowered.
- **Affection:** Listening is one of the clearest ways we show warmth and emotional availability. When we listen with empathy and responsiveness, we meet the need for affection and strengthen relational closeness. When listening is distracted or judgmental, affection needs go unmet and emotional distance grows.

Understanding listening through Interpersonal Needs Theory helps us see listening not just as a skill, but as a **relational process** that communicates belonging, respect, and care. When we listen well, we help others feel included, empowered, and connected—three needs at the heart of healthy interpersonal relationships.

Reflection Questions

1. Think of a recent conversation where you felt truly listened to. Which interpersonal need— inclusion, control, or affection—felt most satisfied, and why.
2. Identify a relationship where listening sometimes feels challenging. Which interpersonal need might be influencing the way you or the other person listens.
3. Create a metaphor that captures how listening meets interpersonal needs. For example, listening might be like adjusting the temperature in a room—too hot or too cold affects everyone's comfort.

APA Source

Schutz, W. C. (1958). *FIRO: A three-dimensional theory of interpersonal behavior*. New York, NY: Rinehart.

Listen Skills Vary by Context

We might assume that many of you have noticed that when you are watching a movie, or listening to music, you are engaged differently than when you are listening to one of your professors. Similarly, we think that when you are having a heart-to-heart conversation with a friend, family member, or partner, you might be tuned in with more intensity than you are in class. We listen differently in different situations, and that is entirely appropriate! There is value in understanding that there are different functions of listening because we can then use the most appropriate listening skills to meet the purpose or occasion. Using these functions

appropriately will lead to better engagement and understanding.

Comprehensive Listening

Victoria was not the best student until she was at university. It was as though a light bulb went off in her head that said, “if you want good grades, you better listen.” Being a student, employee, friend, or partner in a relationship may require that you engage in comprehensive listening. **Comprehensive listening** is the type of listening we engage in with the goal of understanding information. We all listen to messages throughout the day that require comprehensive listening. If you listen to a podcast, national or local news, or attend work meetings, you would still want to understand what you heard. This function of listening is what you would access if you were listening to a lecture in class, an employer giving you instructions on how to learn to use the POS (point of sale) system, or your partner telling you what their needs are in a relationship. Numerous careers place a heavy demand on this type of listening. Physicians need to understand the area of pharmacology to prescribe medication correctly. If physicians didn't listen well while in medical school or retain and recall that information, they could make life-threatening mistakes in prescribing if the medications one might be taking are incompatible. Depending on the context you are in, you may find that it would be difficult to have information repeated to you so listening well is important. At the deepest level of interpersonal communication, comprehensive listening may impact a relationship for better, or worse.

Evaluative Listening

In the stages of listening you learned that you need to assess the credibility of what you hear, and this means you will need to analyze what you hear. **Evaluative listening** is a function of listening that fulfills the goal of analysis and evaluation of messages. We engage in evaluative listening in many of the same contexts where we engage in comprehensive listening. Evaluation allows us to determine whether a message is true, or logical. Whether you are a juror on a murder trial or listening to your partner’s excuse regarding why they were late coming home, you will analyze the messages that you hear. Although not all evaluative listening may be a matter of life and death, it may still impact another person.



Figure 7.3.1: Vice Presidential Debate - by Lawrence Jackson is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0

How we engage in evaluative listening can also impact us at the relational level. If you have ever disagreed with a parent, friend, partner, or co-worker, you might find that you have had to analyze the messages you are listening to quite intently. Or perhaps as you offer an explanation of your behavior to someone in your life you have noticed their reactions as you are speaking. Are they making eye contact with you or looking down? As you learned in Chapter 5, looking into a person's eyes helps us interpret messages because we rely on nonverbal behaviors to assess the truth of a message. Evaluative listening allows us to assess whether people in our lives are being candid, genuine, and truthful.

Discriminative Listening

At different times we may hear our partner tell us a story, and their voice just sounds different. You might perceive that they sound sad or distressed. What is it about their tone that made you so sure something was wrong? Although this next function of listening may not be used as much as others, it still serves an important function. **Discriminative listening** is a unique function of listening that occurs during the receiving stage of the listening process and involves the ability to discern sounds. This form of listening is physiological, and if you can hear, then you can access this function of listening. For example, an automotive mechanic may be quite skilled at listening to the sounds of a car that someone brings in to be repaired and they can discern which part of the car needs repair. If you are sitting on a jury listening to testimony, would you be able to tell if someone is lying? Communication scholar Judee Burgoon notes that it is difficult to speak using complex utterances when you are attempting to provide a fraudulent story (Burgoon, et al., 2015). If you have ever caught someone in a lie, your first clue may have been the way that person stammered while speaking. As you can see, we listen by using all of the stimuli available to us including our voice, tone, and other nonverbal behaviors.



Figure 7.3.2: Herbert Doyle by Defense Visual Information Distribution Service is in the Public Domain CC0

Appreciative Listening

Do you think that all forms of listening must be connected to your ability to understand or recall information? No! **Appreciative listening** is our ability to listen for enjoyment and is considered the easiest of all listening functions. Listening to music, watching a television show, attending a concert, or even listening to a great speech or classroom lecture are examples of appreciative listening. There are times when we are listening purely for enjoyment, but there are also occasions when we might be combining listening functions. If you consider the example of a great classroom lecture by your professor, you might be listening for comprehension, evaluation, and appreciation all at the same time! One of these functions of listening will be the dominant form based on the occasion.



Figure 7.3.3: Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett by J. Breschoten is licensed CC-BY-SA 4.0

Relational maintenance often requires appreciative listening. Focusing on the words you are hearing, the sound of someone's voice that brings you joy, or listening to someone important to you tell a story would be examples of appreciative listening. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us were forced to rely on technology such as FaceTime, Messenger Video, or Zoom to communicate with loved ones. Although it was not in-person communication, we were still able to keep our connection with others during such a difficult time.

Empathetic Listening

Have you ever just needed to vent, or have someone listen to you because you needed a friend? Or have you been placed in that position where someone needed *you*? **Empathetic listening** occurs when we try to feel what another person is feeling, and this can be considered the most challenging of all listening functions. Empathy means listening to understand the other person's feelings and/or emotions with the goal of validating them. Empathic listening is a higher-level listening skill and therefore requires more energy. It has often been described as "putting yourself in someone else's shoes."



Figure 7.3.4: Listening Attentively by Beatrice Murch is licensed CC-BY-SA 4.0

One of my students described her sadness over the cancellation of her sister's *quinceañera* due to local public health guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are unfamiliar with this custom, it is described as follows:

> [The] celebration of a girl's 15th birthday, marking her passage from girlhood to womanhood; the term is also used for the celebrant herself. The *quinceañera* is both a religious and a social event that emphasizes the importance of family and society in the life of a young woman. It is celebrated in Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean, as well as in Latino communities in the United States and elsewhere. (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.)

Based on students' facial reactions, even in Zoom, it was evident that many students were able to empathize with the student. Let's look at one student's story that helps illustrate the importance of empathetic listening.

Student Voice

One of our authors shares her experience:

> In teaching Interpersonal Communication for many years I have always appreciated students who are willing to share their experiences. To provide you with some context for what you will read, I'd like to remind you of the shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012. While he was visiting his father in Florida, he was spotted by George Zimmerman, who was a Neighborhood Watch volunteer. Zimmerman thought Martin was up to something criminal, and in his report, he described Trayvon Martin as wearing a hoodie. Zimmerman used one single shot to gun down Martin, and since that day, the hoodie has been a symbol that reminds us that even the clothing we wear can be a life-or-death matter. Now, recall the murder of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, who was fatally shot in a racially motivated hate crime while jogging in Satilla Shores in Georgia on February 23, 2020, a mere eight years after the murder of Trayvon Martin.
>
> In June 2020, I invited one of my former students to speak at a campus-wide panel on racism. Brandon, who is Black, shared his experience of living in Georgia for a while when he went to stay with family during the pandemic: "You will see how I am dressed today. I am wearing a shirt and tie with a pullover sweater. I no longer leave the house wearing a hoodie. I will never wear a hoodie again because I *can't*. I can't risk being out in public and looked at as a thug or criminal because of how I'm dressed."

Why do you think I felt that this story was important enough to share with you? This powerful student story is emblematic of two important aspects of interpersonal communication. First, this story demonstrates that not all listening functions *require* a response, and this was one example where someone just needed to be heard. Brandon's story is sadly not unique, but it conveyed the importance of when it is more important to listen and not speak. What this story also represents is the *imperative* that we have in our society to listen so that we can help create the change that needs to happen to improve race relations. As educated as we, and as much as we think we know, this story is one of several that day that pierces our hearts. We can be better by listening to others.

Reflection Questions

1. Has there been a time when someone needed you to listen and you didn't realize the importance of their need until later?
2. Did this story help you better understand how empathetic listening can impact individuals and society as well?

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7.4: Listening Styles

Attitudes and Beliefs about Listening

Now that we have a better understanding of the importance of listening, the stages, and functions, let's learn about four different listening styles. Just as there are different types of listening, depending upon the context of the situation, there are also different styles of listening. More often than not, we as competent communicators will adjust and switch our styles of listening depending upon the context of the situation. First, we need to define what a listening style is before we define the different types. A **listening style** is "a set of attitudes and beliefs about listening" (Floyd, 1985, p. 136). Researchers Kittie Watson, Larry Barker, and James Weaver III (1995) identified four distinct listening styles: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented. You might have a dominant style that can be seen on multiple occasions, but you can adjust to the situation. Tables \({7{.}4{.}\eatSpaces{1–4} \endSpaces}\ break down the four types of listening styles, list some of the common positive and negative characteristics, and provide strategies for communicating with different listening styles. (These tables are used with permission from their author, Kina Mallard, 1999.)



Figure 7.4.1: GPS Train the Trainer on Flickr is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0

People-Oriented

If you are a **people-oriented listener** you tune in to people's emotions, feelings, and moods (Bodie & Worthington, 70). You relate more to relationship building when listening to someone communicate with you, often being considered the type of person who will "lend an ear." You try to find common interests with the other person and listen to others without judgment. As a people-oriented listener, you allow 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.

Table 7.4.1: Understanding the Four Listening Styles—People-Oriented Listeners

Positive Characteristics of People-Oriented Listeners	Negative Characteristics of People-Oriented Listeners	Strategies for Communicating with People-Oriented Listeners
Show care and concern for others	Overly involved in feelings of others	Use stories and illustrations to make points
Are nonjudgmental	Avoid seeing faults in others	Use "we" rather than "I" in conversations
Provide clear verbal and nonverbal feedback signals	Internalize/adopt emotional states of others	Use emotional examples and appeals
Are interested in building relationships	Are overly expressive when giving feedback	Show some vulnerability when possible
Notice others' moods quickly	Are nondiscriminating in building relationships	Use self-effacing humor or illustrations

Action-Oriented

This type of listener values clear, organized, and error-free messages. Typically, **action-oriented listeners** are listening as though they are organizing their "action" list to make things happen, like a builder or engineer. If you are an action-oriented listener watching a presentation, you will most likely notice errors and inconsistencies throughout the presentation. In fact, an action-oriented listening style is common 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.

For example, Tanika exemplifies action-oriented listening. She likes it when her assistant presents her daily activities in a clear, easy to follow, and straightforward manner. If they are delivered any other way that is not purposeful, such as with embellishments or superfluous information, Tanika gets frustrated. At home, when Tanika's girlfriend wants to discuss a recent conflict about household responsibilities between them, instead of saying "I'm sorry you feel that way," Tanika often responds with action, saying "OK, I will start doing the dishes three times a week." She is looking for the solution with action as opposed to connecting to her partner through an emotional exchange. Her response, however, is still beneficial to the relationship; it is simply less empathetic than that of a people-oriented listener.

Table 7.4.2: Understanding the Four Listening Styles—Action-Oriented Listeners

Positive Characteristics of Action-Oriented Listeners	Negative Characteristics of Action-Oriented Listeners	Strategies for Communicating with Action-Oriented Listeners
Get to the point quickly	Tend to be impatient with rambling speakers	Keep main points to three or fewer

Positive Characteristics of Action-Oriented Listeners	Negative Characteristics of Action-Oriented Listeners	Strategies for Communicating with Action-Oriented Listeners
Give clear feedback concerning expectations	Jump ahead and reach conclusions quickly	Keep presentations short and concise
Concentrate on understanding task	Jump ahead or finishes thoughts of speakers	Have a step-by-step plan and label each step
Help others focus on what's important	Minimize relationship issues and concerns	Watch for cues of disinterest and pick up vocal pace at those points or change subjects
Encourage others to be organized and concise	Ask blunt questions and appear overly critical	Speak at a rapid but controlled rate

Content-Oriented

Individuals who favor technical, complex or challenging information tend toward this style of listening. **Content-oriented listeners** prefer to hear all of the information being presented before forming any sort of judgment. A content-oriented listener 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 a content-oriented listener if you enjoy hearing presidential debates to evaluate your political views. In interpersonal relationships, a content-oriented listener will want to "hear out" the other person, ask for elaboration, details, and clarifications in an objective manner, and may challenge the other person's thinking with the "other side of the argument." Content-oriented listeners likely need time to process information before making decisions or committing to any sort of action.

For example, when Arturo and his brother discuss making plans for a vacation to Mexico, Arturo asks about all of the possible venues to stay, costs of food and travel, and events happening. He wants to read reviews on all of the different options, and he needs time to evaluate the pros and cons before committing to a plan with his brother. Arturo is not spontaneous, as he wants to make the best possible choices using all of the information he can get his hands on. If his brother says, "This venue I'm looking at has a 4-star review. Let's go there." Arturo will counter with, "Okay, but what do the 1, 2, and 3-star reviewers have to say? How many reviews has it had? It's not reliable unless there are at least 100. Plus, who knows how many of those are paid reviews. We need to read them to be sure." In other words, content-oriented listeners like Arturo have an analytical nature.

Table 7.4.3: Understanding the Four Listening Styles—Content-Oriented Listeners

Positive Characteristics of Content-Oriented Listeners	Negative Characteristics of Content-Oriented Listeners	Strategies for Communicating with Content-Oriented Listeners
Value technical information	Are overly detail oriented	Use two-sided arguments when possible
Test for clarity and understanding	May intimidate others by asking pointed questions	Provide hard data when available

Positive Characteristics of Content-Oriented Listeners	Negative Characteristics of Content-Oriented Listeners	Strategies for Communicating with Content-Oriented Listeners
Encourage others to provide support for their ideas	Minimize the value of nontechnical information	Quote credible experts
Welcome complex and challenging information	Discount information from nonexperts	Suggest logical sequences and plan
Look at all sides of an issue	Take a long time to make decisions	Use charts and graphs

Time-Oriented

If you are efficient with your use of time, then you are likely a time-oriented listener. 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 a time-oriented listener, you might even avoid eye contact, or interrupt to move the conversation along and end it promptly. As a result, this type of listener can appear insensitive or uncaring toward others. A prime example of a time-oriented listener 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.

In an interpersonal relationship between close friends, an exchange with a time-oriented listener might look something like this:

> Friend 1: "Hey, good to see you. How was your day?"
>
> Friend 2: "It was great. How was yours?"
>
> Friend 1: "Oh, you won't believe what happened with Celia today! I had to review the meeting notes with her, and she started to..."
>
> Friend 2: (Interrupts Friend 1 while checking the time) "Actually, tell me about it over dinner, so we're not late for our reservation. We need to be there before five o'clock."

Although the interruption may be perceived as insensitive, the time-oriented listener (Friend 2) is communicating that they are not ready to fully listen until their perceived time constraints have been met. People often confuse time-oriented with action-oriented listeners, but the action-oriented listener does not mind taking time on a matter if it is focused on action-oriented solutions, whereas the time-oriented listener's predominant focus is meeting time constraints efficiently.

Table 7.4.4: Understanding the Four Listening Styles—Time-Oriented Listeners

Positive Characteristics of Time-Oriented Listeners	Negative Characteristics of Time-Oriented Listeners	Strategies for Communicating with Time-Oriented Listeners
Manage and save time	Tend to be impatient with time wasters	Ask how much time the person has to listen

Positive Characteristics of Time-Oriented Listeners	Negative Characteristics of Time-Oriented Listeners	Strategies for Communicating with Time-Oriented Listeners
Set time guidelines for meeting and conversations	Interrupt others	Try to go under time limits when possible
Let others know listening-time requirements	Let time affect their ability to concentrate	Be ready to cut out unnecessary examples and information
Discourage wordy speakers	Rush speakers by frequently looking at watches/clock	Be sensitive to nonverbal cues indicating impatience or a desire to leave
Give cues to others when time is being wasted	Limit creativity in others by imposing time pressures	Get to the bottom line quickly

Combining Styles

People tend to have one 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 four 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. Different combinations of listening styles can exist within each person. Once you identify your 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.

Gender Spotlight

There has been much debate over the impact of gender on listening. Research from the 20th century has resulted in stereotypes that should be re-examined. The initial research into what was called "masculine" or "feminine" speech focused on the speech communities in which we are raised. Research suggested that masculine communicators engage in "report" talk, whereas feminine communicators engage in "rapport" talk (Tannen, 1986, 2013). Those who engage in **report talk** are said to be concerned with the exchange of information and getting things accomplished. Those who engage in **rapport talk** are concerned with establishing connections and maintaining the relationship (Fixmer-Oraiz & Wood, 2019).

This area of research has also been explored from a scientific perspective. According to audiologist Beth McCormick (2018):

> Research findings suggest that men do in fact listen differently than women. But are the identified differences straightforward, clear cut or even black and white? Actually they might be—gray and white that is. Our brains are composed of both gray matter and white matter.

A study between University of California, Irvine, and University of New Mexico researched differences and found that "The amount of gray matter was six times greater in the brains of the male research participants, while the women participating in the study had 10 times the amount of white matter the men did." This finding supported the notion that men and women may "listen and assimilate information differently, [but] the difference does not appear to affect cognition or our ability to listen."

> What does all of this mean in terms of listening? People *do* have different styles of communication, and as a result, may engage in different listening styles, regardless of gender. We may prefer to engage in report talk when we are conversing with someone at work and may choose to engage in rapport talk when we are with our partners or friends. Although there are scientific differences from a biological perspective, one's *identified* gender also impacts how they may listen. Having moved beyond binary views of gender, we know that our style of communication is as fluid as our gender.
>
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7.5: Barriers to Listening

Understanding Barriers for Better Listening

Now that you have a better understanding of the functions and styles of listening, we will discuss the barriers to listening. A **barrier to listening** is anything that is hindering you from recognizing, understanding, and accurately interpreting the message that you are receiving. We'll discuss four barriers to effective listening: information overload, prejudice or prejudging, rate of speech and thought, and internal and external distractions. When you have a better understanding of the potential barriers to effective listening, you can pinpoint your weaknesses and work on building them up to make you a better listener.

Information Overload

We now know that a majority of our time communicating is spent listening. With all the listening we are doing, there are going to be times when we experience information overload. **Information overload** is when you have so much information coming at you, it's easy to become overwhelmed. In a Public Speaking class, for example, you can experience this when listening to your classmates give speeches, especially if you're hearing 20 speeches, one after the other. You become overwhelmed and you'll probably find yourself tuning out at some point. Or what if a speaker condenses so many statistics into the presentation that you cannot keep track of all the numbers? That's information overload.

To cope with information overload, you might consider taking notes to increase focus and your ability to process the information being delivered. If appropriate in the circumstances, such as in a business meeting or professional training, you might politely ask the speaker to repeat a point you missed, briefly paraphrase what they've said to ensure you've gathered the key points accurately, or even simply ask clarifying questions. You might also ask for resources or recordings that you can reference later at your own pace.

Prejudging

We, as humans, tend to be closed-minded at times. If you have an emotional reaction to a person or disagree with their ideas personally, you might be allowing personal prejudices to distract you. There are various ways we **prejudge** others. We may unconsciously prejudge a speaker because of their age, race, sexual identity, appearance, occupation, or political affiliation. Keeping an open mind when speaking with others is optimal but often challenging, because you may not even know this barrier is preventing you from fully showing up as a listener. Furthermore, you might have a hard time listening because you disagree with the speaker.

One way to identify some unconscious biases you may have towards others is to take the free Implicit Association Test (IAT). This test measures "attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report" (Rudman, Greenwald, & McGhee, 1998). There are a variety of tests one can take, and the results are anonymous and allow you to examine unknown biases you may have toward others. Taking the time to examine your biases can help you become a better listener because you can suspend judgment and listen with an open mind. While you may disagree with the person's perspective, you may learn more about them, yourself, or the topic they are sharing. You'll never know unless you hear them out.

Journal Exercise: Try this!

It can be a struggle to open ourselves up to opinions, perspectives, or people with whom we adamantly disagree. These differences can create real problems in our relationships, at home, and at work. Deliberate listening can be a powerful tool in learning to connect more effectively with the people in your life.

For this entry, sit down with someone that you know who has an opinion or idea you find ridiculous or simply disagree with … and spend at least 10 minutes engaged in listening to them.

After your conversation, take some time to reflect on your experience as a listener and let your insights sink in. Consider questions like:

- In what ways did you find listening to the other person challenging?
- How did you prejudge the speaker?
- What strategies did you use to suspend judgment while listening?
- What did you learn about the other person by listening to them?
- What did you learn about yourself as a listener?

Rate of Speech and Thought

A recent study suggests that most people speak at a rate of 100 to 150 words per minute (wpm) in everyday conversation or when presenting. However, voice readers of audiobooks, radio hosts, and podcasters were found to speak at rates of 150-160 wpm. In the same study, auctioneers' speech rate was 250 wpm, and commentators came in at 250-400 wpm. (Barnard, 2022). So why does this matter? Ideally, the speaker's rate of speech would line up with the listener's speed of thought in processing the words spoken. A consideration is that the speech rate changes depending on who or what we are listening to. The question becomes "Can our brains keep up?"

A 2019 study conducted by Muller, et. al. that analyzed listening efforts in conjunction with varying rates of speech found that "the brain adapts to the auditory input for an optimal stimulus processing…show[ing] a clear influence of speech rate averaged across participants." In other words, our brains will automatically adjust to increased speech rate. So, yes, our brains can keep up. Furthermore, it has been found that most people process between 400 and 800 words per minute (Hargie, 2011). But our brains can process information several times faster than the speed at which words are typically spoken. As a result, a **mental lag** can occur. Since we listen and process information much faster than the average rate of speech, including the high rate at which commentators speak, we tend to fill the void with other thoughts and cognitive biases. In turn, this speaking–listening differential can halt our listening altogether. We find ourselves tuning in and out while our minds are busy making predictions, perhaps prejudging and veering off into other related thoughts, or even simply slipping into a daydream.

To be an effective listener, one has to be mindful of this difference and use strategies to prevent the mind from veering off for too long. One strategy to prevent this mental lag is to mentally summarize the speaker's ideas from time to time to keep yourself engaged. Taking notes, doodling images or symbols of things you are hearing, or visualizing what the speaker is sharing might also help to fill the void while still remaining engaged as a listener. The point is that awareness of this mental lag can help you build your mindfulness around your capacity as a listener and develop strategies that take advantage of the thought–speech differential.

Internal and External Distractions

Let's face it, you have a lot going on in your life. You attend school, you probably work, you might be raising a family, and you have your own issues to work through every day. Sometimes when we are absorbed in our own thoughts and concerns, we can't focus on what someone else is saying. We have all experienced moments of being physically present but mentally absent. This is known as **mind-wandering** or blue-skying, when instead of listening you are thinking about anything but the message at hand. Instead of truly listening, your mind is worried about something happening at work or feeling excited about an upcoming event scheduled later in the day with friends. You could also simply be thinking about your to-do list or reflecting on a conversation you had with a partner the previous night. When you allow those thoughts to take your focus, you will find that you become a less effective listener. Such distracting thoughts and feelings are your **internal distractions.**

In addition to internal distractions, we also experience **external distractions** as a listening barrier. External distractions come from the physical environment and involve any visual, auditory, or other sensorial elements within the space that captures your attention. Perhaps the most prominent external listening barrier today involves technology. The powerhouse technological distractor that most of us carry around is a smartphone. We use our cell phones to send a text message to a friend, make a call to a significant other, record a video on Tik Tok, post a thought of the day or special photo on social media, surf the web, and use the calculator, only to name the basics.

We have created a culture of cell phone dependency and seek out personal connections through our technological devices, which has increased exponentially due to the significant worldwide impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Entire communities around the world shut down and moved to technology to stay connected. However, our dependency has become so great that it is a frequent source of external distraction. For example, when someone is trying to communicate with you, and you hear the notification chime go off on your phone, immediately picking it up to see what it was before the other person has finished speaking, you have just experienced an external listening barrier. Next time, you might consider silencing your phone and placing it out of reach, especially when someone is trying to emotionally connect or engage in an important conversation with you. That being said,

putting the phone down for *every* conversation is ideal for improving communication overall.

Furthermore, external technological distractions may occur when you are on a virtual platform (such as Zoom) for a meeting, college class, or even a virtual video call with a friend. You might experience technical issues with the audio or video components that disrupt the listening process, such as the microphone not working, losing internet connection, or even the video feature malfunctioning. This can be especially frustrating for both parties if, let's say, your mother is telling you something that is important to her and you don't hear everything because the audio cut out. Testing these components beforehand could alleviate the potential for distraction and avoid such frustrations. We know we can't control all of the technical difficulties that could arise; however, taking time to test for issues in advance is one way of being mindful and intentional in your listening practice. Likewise, working, reading, or typing in other applications or browser tabs, checking notifications from Facebook, or checking the email that just came in while you are on a video call would be considered, in part, external distractors. To avoid this, you might consider closing all the tabs you have open and either temporarily disable or plan to ignore notifications that come through while you're on a video call.

The physical environment can also be a source of disruption to listening. Classroom doors slamming, cell phones ringing, or students having conversations outside in the hall are some examples. When working from home, you can experience extensive environmental listening barriers from the mess around you that still needs cleaning, the temptation of grabbing a snack in the refrigerator, the dog barking, the baby crying, a strong odor, the pain in your back, cell phones chiming (there they are again), the glare of the light on your screen ... the list goes on and on. When all of these distractions are happening, it is easy for your ability to listen to be dramatically reduced. Consider planning ahead for these things to maximize your ability to listen fully. Play with the dog right before your virtual meeting to tire them out. Turn your cell phone to silent mode. Have a snack beforehand. You get the idea.

Given the numerous internal and external distractions that are likely to occur frequently in your everyday life, the question becomes "How can I minimize these distractions to become a better listener?" More often than not, the answer is mindfulness. A little planning, preparation, and practice can help you to prevent these types of listening barriers effectively.

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7.6: Ineffective 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.

Imagine a scenario where you have shared something important with a friend and found out that they had not listened to you at all. Although they may have felt they were trying to be a good friend by showing you they were listening, it can cause more harm than good. We should avoid pseudo-listening when possible and should avoid making it a listening habit. Although we may get away with it in some situations, each time we risk being “found out” there could be negative relational consequences. On the other hand, if you catch yourself pseudo-listening, a mindful practice involves admitting to the person speaking to you that you were not being fully attentive and kindly asking them to repeat themselves (while re-engaging your full attention on them).

Selective Listening

Do you have a favorite color? If so, when you look at clothing when shopping do you find yourself drawn to the color that you like most? If so, what you are exhibiting is a preference to stick to something that you already favor. Selective listening is an ineffective listening practice that operates in much the same way. **Selective listening** means only paying attention to the points someone makes that are important to you, that impact you, or that you agree with. Children may not pay attention to their parents’ conversation until one of them says “You need to have a B average if you want us to pay your car insurance.” Only then do you attend to what your parents are saying. Even friends, roommates, or romantic partners engage in selective listening. If you were sitting and scrolling through Instagram while someone was talking to you, you may not be paying a lot of attention to what is being said until you hear "It's your turn to do the laundry." You may have no interest in doing the laundry. You don't *want* to do the laundry! But, because the statement has a direct impact on you, you now listen to what is being said. Although this is a relatively benign example that doesn't have significant depth, selective listening can still lead to conflict as someone may feel that you don't find it important to listen to what they have to say.

Defensive Listening

Have you ever been told you were being defensive about something? I think we all know what that means in general, but we don’t often realize it is tied to our listening practices. **Defensive listening** is a practice of listening where you perceive an attack where one does not really exist. Sometimes this occurs when we feel guilty, or even insecure. We tend to personalize a comment that might be made innocently. For example, imagine that you have a roommate, and they make the following comment: “Gosh, the shower in here sure gets moldy easily.” If you are a defensive listener, you would assume that your roommate was somehow accusing you of not taking better care of the shower. If you both had a rule that said you would wipe the shower down each time you used it, but you had neglected to do so several times, then some guilt might be at work as well!

Student Voice

Recently, one of our students, Reynaldo, shared a great example of defensive listening. He wrote:

> I recently began a job at a local fast-food restaurant. One of my main tasks is making tacos and burritos. Lots of tacos and burritos! When I started, my manager and trainer explained how important it was to build these in a specific order. It seemed really easy, but I made a mistake on my first day because I confused the order of the taco and the burrito. I was told that I had made a mistake, and I was pretty upset by it. I wrote notes to myself to bring in and put on the wall where I was working. By the end of my second week, the manager called me into her office. As soon as she said my name, I felt myself start to shake and knew I was going to get in trouble, if not fired. Then she said, “Reynaldo, I just wanted to tell you how impressed I've been with your work these past two weeks. You've really got this down." I felt so stupid because I realized that I had already started listening defensively.

As with many ineffective forms of listening, we may not even realize we are engaged in defensive listening.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of an example where you engaged in defensive listening at work, at home, or with friends?
2. What did you feel when you were listening, and what triggered the defensiveness? How did you react?
3. Looking back, what might you have done instead of engaging in this ineffective listening practice?

Aggressive Listening

You might be familiar with the term **aggression**. Oftentimes people view this as a way that someone can use words or actions that are mean-spirited or violent, as you will see in later chapters. Although somewhat different, there is an ineffective listening practice that holds some similar characteristics to aggression. **Aggressive listening,** also referred to as ambushing, is an ineffective listening practice where individuals listen specifically so that they can attack back. It is likened to "lying in wait," so you can pounce. People who engage in aggressive listening are prone to attack someone based on their ideas, personality, or other factors that give them a reason to attack. One can see aggressive listening in politics during political debates. Reasons that this type of listening occurs in interpersonal relationships are often centered around a build-up of tension or frustration. Unfortunately, there are times when things come to a head if people don't communicate with each other.

The following scenario shows how egregious aggressive listening can be. Let's assume Crystal wanted to go away for a weekend, so she found Antonio's calendar and looked at what he had planned for the next few weekends. She was able to see that he had made plans for a getaway with someone else and had written in code.

> Crystal: "I was wondering if you were planning to book a reservation for a weekend getaway next weekend."
>
> Antonio: "Well babe, I really want to go away with you, but I am not sure what my workload will be."
>
> Crystal: "Really? Do you have a lot of work that you can't get done during the week?"
>
> Antonio: "It's still early in the week, so I'm not going to know until at least Thursday."
>
> Crystal: "Hmmm. Well, do you think that we could talk about this Thursday night?"
>
> Antonio: "Yeah, sure, we can talk Thursday about making a weekend trip, whether we can go over the weekend. If not this weekend, maybe another weekend."
>
> Crystal: "Antonio, that's a load of crap. You *already* have plans with someone else this weekend and you totally lied, you jerk. Who is 'FS'?! I'm done with you. You're a liar and a cheat."

As you can see, Crystal perceived that Antonio was cheating on her and that led to aggressive listening on her part. Her perception put her into a mode of attack. Little did Crystal know that Antonio was meeting with FS Catering Company to plan her surprise 21st birthday party. Instead, Crystal’s aggressive listening style potentially had detrimental effects on her relationship with Antonio. Do you think a more positive outcome could be achieved had she gotten more information? Asking clarifying questions before making assumptions would have been more productive, and both Crystal and Antonio might have felt better about the exchange

and the outcome.

Narcissistic Listening



Figure 7.6.1: 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."

At times, this type of response is not done maliciously. A conversation may genuinely remind you of something you have done that is similar. A more appropriate response would be to wait until the speaker has finished. Using back-channel cues, you can easily acknowledge the person speaking. When they have finished making their point, acknowledge what you heard and then you might add your contribution to the conversation.

Habitual narcissistic listeners can be identified by continued comments when you are speaking. They may say, “Oh, that reminds me of the time that,” or “I went through the exact same thing,” or “Wait until you hear this one!” An occasional interruption of this type does not mean someone is a narcissistic listener. It is when there are repeated offenses that you see the pattern of this type of listener.

Sometimes you might notice the narcissistic listener changes the topic completely:

> Hunter: "Hey, did you see the game Friday night? We scored two touchdowns in the first ten minutes of the game!"
>
> Jacques: "Dude, I now have over 5,000 followers on Tik Tok! I’ve been changing up my workout routine and now I’m getting at least 50 new followers a day!"

At times like this, it would feel appropriate to address the listener's shift response, so that you can continue the conversation or topic you tried to initiate. However, be mindful that too much work on your part to understand the narcissistic listener puts an extra burden on you. If the listener is a true narcissist, you might consider having a conversation with them about their listening habits and how it affects you. If your attempt is unsuccessful, then you might suggest they seek professional help to learn best practices in communication.

Insensitive Listening

If you recall the definition of **empathic listening**, you will find that insensitive listening is the opposite. Often referred to as "literal listening," **insensitive listening** focuses only on the content level of meaning. Insensitive listeners do not explore the nonverbal cues that accompany the message. Imagine if your friend did not pass an exam, and then tells you. Rather than asking questions, or providing an empathetic response, your response is "I guess you didn't study" or "Yeah, school can be hard." Neither response will allow your friend to feel positive about the exchange. One's tone of voice alone can let you know how someone is feeling or we can also look into someone's eyes to discern sadness or other emotions because insensitive listening can be hurtful.

One of our students shared this story in class: "When I told my mother that I forgot to do my quizzes last week, she just glared at me without saying a word. She didn't have to say anything because this is how she typically responds to me. I'm a Japanese American student, and our culture is a high-context culture. Most of what I understand about my mom's feelings is through her nonverbal communication."

Focus on Culture

Does your culture impact the type of listening practices you engage in? There is a wealth of research in the area of culture that demonstrates that our communication patterns are learned. Let's look at how culture can influence messages.

Culture can often impact whether you pay attention to the relational, or underlying meaning of a message or just the words of a message. Low-context cultures emphasize explicit meaning (Hall & Hall, 2001). For example, US culture places great emphasis on words, or literal meaning. We are taught from an early age to "Say what you mean," or "Use your words." This can contribute to misunderstanding or not seeing the nonverbal cues that give greater meaning to a message. On the other hand, high-context cultures rely on information that is implicit and nonverbal (Hall & Hall, 2001). Individuals from high-context cultures rely on the context, tone, or other nonverbal behaviors to understand a message, which can then affect the interaction. It is important to note that if you were born in the United States, but your family of origin is from a high-context culture, your method of communication will be largely influenced by your family's culture.

One of our authors, Professor Leonard, comes from a high-context culture where indicators of listening meant that when she was young she only nodded as a response to her parents, rather than commenting back. She also did not make direct eye contact when listening because at times that could appear to be disrespectful to her parents. This example is probably the opposite of your professor's expectations of you in a classroom. When you listen in class, your professor might expect you to look them in the eye and participate verbally as a sign of respect. These two scenarios involve very different interpretations of nonverbal communication based on the context of the culture in each situation. These examples demonstrate how culture plays an important role in listening. Great communicators learn to adapt their communication behaviors according to cultural context of the setting and who they are communicating with.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you come from a high-context or low-context culture?
2. How does your family communicate meaning? Is it through direct communication (words), or more through the nonverbal channel (such as eye contact, or silence?).
3. How might you adapt your listening now that you know more about the importance of culture?

Interrupting

Most of us understand what an interruption is, even when we have not defined the term. Simply, **interrupting** is the unintentional or intentional act of delaying or preventing communication. One of the first communication rules that we remember teaching our children was not to interrupt. It was so important to us to instill proper manners in them, that we developed a code for when they wanted to tell us something if we were talking to other people, either on the phone or in person. We told our children to approach

us and put their hand on our arm, or leg, depending on how tall they were at the time. In response, we would take one of our hands and cover their hand. This served as a nonverbal acknowledgment that we were aware that they had something to say. They both learned to wait until there was a break in the conversation, then we would turn to them and ask, “What did you want to tell me?” Sometimes our hands remained in the same place for several long minutes! As you learned in Chapter 5, the regulating function of nonverbal communication means that conversations are based on turn-taking. Whether the turn-taking cues are overt or not, we know when it is our turn to speak.

We try not to interrupt while others are speaking, but sometimes we do unintentionally interrupt. We may have accidentally misinterpreted the turn-taking cue and thought someone was done speaking. In a case like this, it is not a pitfall of listening. There are other times when people are talking excitedly about something and their words or sentences overlap. Back-channel cues can sound like an interruption even if they are just designed to show support.

Occasionally, interruptions are intentional and appropriate. This happened to one of the authors once when a nursing student was giving them a shot, and she was interrupted by her supervisor to tell her that she was inserting the needle at the incorrect angle! Although we am sure that the result would have been no more than an uncomfortable shot, not all situations are the same. These are the times when intentional interrupting is appropriate. Other interruptions are intentional and *inappropriate* when they are used to control or dominate the conversation.

Consider assessing your own patterns of interrupting. Are you afraid you are going to forget what you want to say? If this is a reason for interrupting, the appropriate course of action is to tell the person you are speaking to that you are sorry to interrupt, and that you just want to get your thoughts out before you forget them. After, you should immediately give the platform back to the other person.

Eavesdropping



Figure 7.6.2: 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. There may be a variety of reasons that people eavesdrop, and some of those reasons are altruistic. If you heard someone say “bomb” you might position yourself closer to eavesdrop. However, to simply engage in eavesdropping because you find a conversation interesting or titillating would be violating the privacy of others. When caught, not

only would you be embarrassed, but also others could easily be angry with you.

One of our authors shares this example:

> I remember a time when a friend told me that she was worried about some of the things her daughter might be doing, so she would routinely position herself outside her daughter's bedroom to try and listen to her conversations. On more than one occasion the parent listened at the door while her daughter was in a therapy session with her psychologist.

Although a parent may have cause to be concerned about their child, listening at the door could easily lead to a violation of trust and this could harm the relationship greatly. Finally, eavesdropping could lead to you hearing something that is said about you. Although we don't condone people talking behind others' backs, there may be reasons to do so before that information is presented to someone.

If you, or someone in your life, has engaged in an ineffective listening practice, it can be beneficial to learn how journaling can help you process the emotions that arise from these practices.

Journal Exercise: Try This!

Spend the next week journaling as much of the communication as you can between you and the individuals you live with. If you live alone, you can try this with co-workers or friends.

1. Describe the communication interactions that took place and whether you believe they exemplified an ineffective listening practice.
2. Interpret what you believe the communicator wanted to convey as you were listening.
3. Evaluate how the interaction made you feel.
4. Assess what you learned from your evaluation.

The reason that journaling is so important is because it can help us reflect on not only our listening behaviors, but that of others as well. You can use this journal prompt for any of the ineffective listening practices described in this textbook.

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7.7: Becoming a Mindful Listener



Figure 7.8.1: Listening together. Generated by Google Gemini.

Mindful Listening

Before their Communication Studies midterm, four friends—Olivia, Matthew, Jake, and Stephanie—were talking before class. Matthew joked that he should audition for the next season of *Love Island*. Stephanie admitted that after learning so much about interpersonal relationships, she was starting to doubt the guy she had been talking to. Jake shared something more serious: he wasn't sure he wanted to stay in his major anymore.

As Olivia listened, she realized each friend needed something different from her. Matthew wanted playful attention. Stephanie needed relational support. Jake needed space to explore his uncertainty. In that moment, Olivia recognized that effective listening isn't one-size-fits-all—it requires adapting to the needs of the situation. What she was practicing, without fully naming it, was **mindful listening**.

Listening is one of the most important and most undervalued skills in interpersonal communication. People love to be heard, but they are often far less enthusiastic about listening. Traditional "active listening" focuses on what listeners do in the moment: paying attention, retaining information, and responding appropriately. Mindful listening takes a step back and asks listeners to first understand what the listening situation requires.

Mindful listening is the practice of being aware of the purpose, context, and relational needs of a listening interaction and adapting your listening behaviors accordingly. Different situations call for different approaches: listening to a friend vent, listening to a lecture, listening to instructions, and listening to a partner express hurt all require different types of attention, emotional presence, cognitive effort, and response.

Mindful listening begins with three questions:

- What is the purpose of this listening moment?
- What does the speaker need from me?
- What type of listening will best support this interaction?

To help students remember the process, we use the acronym **A.N.C.O.R.**: **Awareness, Nonverbal Support, Clarify the Goal, Orient Attention, and Respond.** These steps anchor mindful listening in intentional, adaptive communication.

ANCOR

A – Awareness

The first step in mindful listening is developing awareness of the listening situation. This includes checking in with yourself: Are you ready to listen? Are you distracted, tired, or preoccupied? Can you set aside time to listen, or do you have a major deadline approaching? Awareness starts with recognizing the need to listen and preparing yourself physically and mentally to do so. It also involves the willingness to suspend judgment of the speaker and topic, and to listen with an open heart. When listeners begin from a place of awareness, they create the conditions for psychological safety and genuine connection.

Example: When Stephanie shared that she was having doubts about the guy she had been talking to, Olivia recognized that this wasn't a moment for multitasking or humor. She closed her laptop, turned toward Stephanie, and gently asked, *"Why? What's going on?"* This simple question signaled that Olivia was present, ready to listen, and aware that Stephanie needed relational support.

N – Nonverbal Support

Nonverbal communication plays a central role in mindful listening. As Ting-Toomey (2015) notes, mindful listening requires using our "ears, eyes, and heart" to understand the speaker's needs. Facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture provide clues about what the speaker is feeling and what they may need from us.

Nonverbal attending behaviors also communicate that we are listening. Eye contact, open posture, and appropriate facial expressions show interest and care. Minimal encouragers—such as head nods, soft "uh-huhs," "go on," or smiling at a joke—provide micro-feedback that keeps the speaker engaged.

Example: As Stephanie continued sharing her concerns, Olivia leaned in slightly, nodded, and maintained soft eye contact. These nonverbal cues signaled empathy and encouraged Stephanie to continue.

Exercise: Try this!

Listening With Your Whole Body

Grab a piece of paper and a pen and make two lists. For your first list, think of a person you consider an excellent listener. Picture that person clearly in your mind. Focus on what they do, not what they are saying. Describe what actions and postures they use to show they are listening. What are they doing with their eyes, hands, and body?

For your second list, think of a person you consider a poor listener. Picture that person clearly in your mind. Focus on what they do, not what they are saying. Describe what actions and postures they use to show they are *not* listening.

Now compare these lists with your behavior. How many of the body language signals from each side do you think you exhibit? How can you add more of the attitudes and actions in the first list to your behaviors? How can you control those behaviors you recognize in yourself from the second list?

C – Clarify the Goal

Listening serves different functions, such as comprehension, appreciation, and relational support. Clarifying the goal means identifying what the speaker needs in the moment. Mindful listeners shift their behaviors to match the situation. A friend expressing hurt may need empathy and paraphrasing. A professor explaining a concept may need you to take notes and ask clarifying questions. Clarifying the goal prevents misunderstandings and ensures that listeners respond to the *actual* need rather than relying on assumptions or habitual listening patterns.

Example: When Jake said, "I'm not sure I want to stay in my major anymore," Olivia recognized that he wasn't asking for quick advice—he was disclosing something personal and uncertain. She clarified the goal by asking, "Do you want to talk through what's making you unsure, or are you just needing to get this off your chest?" This helped Jake identify what kind of support he needed.

O – Orient Attention

Once the listening goal is clear, listeners orient their attention to match the situation. This means removing distractions such as putting away your phone, turning off the TV, and setting aside what you are doing in the moment. Orienting attention is an intentional shift from general awareness to focused engagement. It signals to the speaker that they are a priority and that their message matters.

Example: After Jake indicated he wanted to talk it through, Olivia shifted her attention from the group conversation to him. She put away her phone, turned her body toward him, and focused on his explanation of what felt confusing or overwhelming about his major.

R – Respond

Mindful listening does not end when the speaker stops talking. Richard Carlson, author of *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, explains that many people treat conversations like a horse race—they "race ahead," predicting what the speaker will say, finishing their sentences, or preparing their own response before the speaker is done. This creates disconnection and misunderstanding. Mindful responding requires slowing down, staying present, and choosing a response that fits the speaker's need. Appropriate listening responses include questioning, empathizing, paraphrasing, analyzing, or offering support.

Example: After Jake explained his uncertainty, Olivia paraphrased: "It sounds like you're feeling torn—you like parts of your major, but you're worried it might not fit who you're becoming. Is that right?" This response helped Jake feel understood and opened the door for deeper reflection.

In the next section, we will review different listening responses and how to select the best one based on the needs of the listening situation.

Reflections on Research

Does your listening style shape the outcome of your conflict?

In *The Effects of Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Listening Responses on Relational Outcomes*, researchers examined how different listening styles influence emotions and conflict resolution. Using a mixed-methods design with 975 university students from **California, Texas, and New York**, participants imagined confronting a classmate and then rated how they would feel if the classmate responded with passive, aggressive, or assertive listening statements. The findings showed that **assertive listening**—responses that acknowledge the other person's feelings and take responsibility, such as "My thought is you're feeling angry with me, and you want me to listen to you"—produced the best relational outcomes, including lower anger, greater openness, and higher satisfaction. In contrast, passive responses ("Don't worry, everything will be okay") and aggressive responses ("You need to stop being so angry") made participants feel ignored, dismissed, or attacked. Qualitative comments revealed that assertive listening felt validating and accountable, while passive and aggressive listening felt distancing or hostile. Overall, the study demonstrates how small shifts in wording can dramatically change the emotional climate of a conflict and increase the likelihood of resolution.

Discussion Questions

1. When someone is upset with you, which listening style do you tend to fall into—passive, aggressive, or assertive—and how does that shape the direction of the conflict?
2. Think about a recent disagreement you had. What kind of listening response from the other person would have helped you feel more understood or respected?
3. Assertive listening reduces anger and increases openness. What specific phrases or approaches could you practice to become a more assertive listener in your relationships?

Winer, S., Salazar, L. R., Glowacki, Z. R., Howe, W. T., Quirarte, B., Anderson, A. M., & Macpherson, I. D. (2025). Resolving Conflict in Interpersonal Relationships using Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Listening Statements. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *18*(3).

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7.8: Listening Responses

Types of Listening Responses

Now that you have learned about Mindful Listening, let's consider a variety of different and appropriate listening responses and how you can integrate them with the needs of the listening situation. Ronald Adler, Lawrence Rosenfeld, and Russell Proctor are three interpersonal scholars who have made significant contributions to the study of listening.[57](opens in new window) Based on their research, they have found different types of listening responses: silent listening, questioning, paraphrasing, empathizing, supporting, analyzing, evaluating, and advising (Figure 7.8.1).[58](opens in new window)

Types of Listening Responses

Figure 7.8.1 Types of Listening Responses

Silent Listening

Silent listening(opens in new window) occurs when you say nothing. It is ideal in certain situations and awful in other situations. However, when used correctly, it can be a powerful tool. If misused, you could give the wrong impression to someone. It is appropriate to use when you don't want to encourage more talking. It also shows that you are open to the speaker's ideas.

Sometimes people get angry when someone doesn't respond. They might think that this person is not listening or trying to avoid the situation. But it might be because the person is just trying to gather their thoughts, or perhaps it would be inappropriate to respond. There are certain situations, such as in counseling, where silent listening can be beneficial because it helps the person figure out their feelings and emotions.

Questioning

In situations where you want to gather information, it can be beneficial to use questioning techniques. You can accomplish this in several ways. There are several ways to question in a sincere, nondirective way (see Table 7.5).

You might have different types of questions. Sincere questions are those created to find a genuine answer. Counterfeit questions are disguised attempts to send a message, not to receive one. Sometimes, counterfeit questions can cause the listener to be defensive. For instance, if someone asks you, "Tell me how often you used crystal meth." The speaker implies that you have used meth, even though that has not been established. A speaker can use questions that make statements by emphasizing specific words or phrases, stating an opinion or feeling on the subject. They can ask questions that carry hidden agendas, like "Do you have $5?" because the person would like to borrow that money. Some questions seek "correct" answers. For instance, when a friend says, "Do I look fat?" You probably have a correct or ideal answer. Some questions are based on unchecked assumptions. An example would be, "Why aren't you listening?" This example implies that the person wasn't listening, when in fact they are listening.

Table 7.5 Types of Nondirective Questioning

Reason	Example
To clarify meanings	A young child might mumble something and you want to make sure you understand what they said.
To learn about others' thoughts, feelings, and wants (**open/closed questions**)	When you ask your partner where they see your relationship going in the next few years.
To encourage elaboration	Nathan says, "That's interesting!" Jonna has to ask him further if he means interesting in a positive or negative way.
To encourage discovery	Ask your parents how they met because you never knew.
To gather more facts and details	Police officers at the scene of the crime will question any witnesses to get a better understanding of what happened.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing(opens in new window) is defined as restating in your own words, the message you think the speaker just sent. There are three types of paraphrasing. First, you can change the speaker's wording to indicate what you think they meant. Second, you can offer an example of what you think the speaker is talking about. Third, you can reflect on the underlying emotional theme of a speaker's remarks. Paraphrasing represents mindful listening in the way that you are trying to analyze and understand the speaker's information. Paraphrasing can be used to summarize facts and to gain consensus in essential discussions. This could be used in a business meeting to ensure that all details are discussed and agreed upon. Paraphrasing can also be used to understand personal information more accurately. Think about being in a counselor's office. Counselors often paraphrase information to better understand exactly how you are feeling and to analyze the information more effectively.

Steps for paraphrasing include:

- Listen to the entire message. What is the need of this exchange?
- Repeat a short summary of the message back to the speaker.
  - Content Summary: Capture a highlight of the facts.
  - Emotional Summary: Capture the essence of how the other person is feeling.
- Request feedback: Check in with the speaker to make sure you understood them correctly. For example, "Did I understand you?" Or "Is there anything I missed?"

Empathizing

Empathizing(opens in new window) is used to show that you identify with a speaker's information. You are not empathizing when you deny others the rights to their feelings. Examples of this are statements such as, "It's really not a big deal" or "Who cares?" This suggests that the listener is attempting to evoke a different emotional response from the speaker. In minimizing the significance of the situation, you are interpreting the situation in your perspective and passing judgment.

Sample empathetic listening responses include:

- "It sounds like this situation has been weighing heavily on you, and you've been carrying a lot on your own."
- "I hear how frustrated you're feeling, and it makes sense given everything you've been dealing with."
- "It seems like you're feeling really overwhelmed right now, and I want you to know I'm here with you."
- "From what you're sharing, it sounds like you're torn and trying your best to navigate something really difficult."
- "I can hear how important this is to you, and it makes sense that you'd feel emotional about it."

Supporting

Sometimes, in a discussion, people want to know how you feel about them instead of a reflection on the content. Several types of supportive responses are: agreement, offers to help, praise, reassurance, and diversion. The value of receiving support when faced with personal problems is very important. This has been demonstrated to improve psychological, physical, and relational well-being. To effectively support others, you must meet certain criteria. Make sure that your expression of support is sincere, be sure that the other person can accept your support, and focus on "here and now" rather than "then and there."

Sample supportive statements may include:

- Your family is lucky to have you during this difficult time.
- I can't imagine a better person for the job.
- I know you are feeling down about relationship right now, but can you see how far you've come?

Analyzing

Analyzing(opens in new window) is helpful in gaining different alternatives and perspectives by offering an interpretation of the speaker's message. However, this can be problematic at times. Sometimes the speaker might not understand your perspective or may become more confused by accepting it. To avoid this, steps must be taken in advance. These include tentatively offering your interpretation rather than presenting it as an absolute fact. By being more sensitive to it, the speaker might feel more comfortable accepting it. You can also ensure that your analysis has a reasonable chance of being accurate. If it were inaccurate, it would leave the person more confused than before. Additionally, ensure that the person will be receptive to your analysis and that your

motive for offering is genuinely to help the other person. An analysis offered under any other circumstances is useless.

Evaluating

Evaluating appraises the speaker's thoughts or behavior. The evaluation can be favorable ("That makes sense") or negative (passing judgment). Negative evaluations can be critical or non-critical (constructive criticism). Two conditions offer the best chance for evaluations to be received: if the person with the problem requested an evaluation, and if it is genuinely constructive and not designed as a putdown.

Advising

Advising differs from evaluations. It is not always the best solution and can sometimes be harmful. In order to avoid this, you must make sure four conditions are present: be sure the person is receptive to your suggestions, make sure they are truly ready to accept it, be confident in the correctness of your advice, and be sure the receiver won't blame you if it doesn't work out.

Effective versus Ineffective Listening

Effective (Listen Mindfully)	Ineffective
S: "I can't believe they lied to me!"	**S: "I can't believe they lied to me!"**
D: "It sounds like you're really hurt and upset. Do you want to tell me what happened?"	**D: (while scrolling on phone) "Yeah, that sucks."**
S: "They told me they were going to a movie with a friend, but they were out all night at the club and didn't even text."	**S: "They told me they were going to a movie with a friend, but they were out all night at the club and didn't even text."**
D: "So you're feeling betrayed because they didn't tell you the whole truth."	**D: (laughs while looking at phone) "Ha ha ha! Have you seen this cat video? It's hilarious! Sorry, what were you saying?"**
S: "Yes! I can't stand being lied to, so I just broke up with them."	**S: "Forget it! You clearly don't care."**
D: "I'm sorry you're going through this. Have they lied to you before?"	**D: "You're just overreacting."**
S: "Not to my knowledge. But that's a deal-breaker for me.v	**S: "What do you *mean* I'm overreacting? They *lied* to me!"**
D: "So you're saying that honesty and full disclosure are extremely important to you in a relationship?"	**D: "I just don't see the big deal. You probably misunderstood them."**
S. "Yes! 100 percent. I just don't think people should have anything to hide in a relationship. (sighs) I can't believe this is happening. Thank you for being here and listening."	**S: "You're not listening to me. They didn't even tell me they were going out to the club. I thought they were going to be home way earlier. And I got no phone call or text or anything. That's *not* a misunderstanding. You know what? Forget it. I need to go."**

Notice how the effective listener acknowledged the speaker's feelings, asked clarifying questions and paraphrased their message. In the end, the speaker expressed gratitude to the listener, implying that they were feeling truly heard. However, in the ineffective listening example, the listener is not fully engaged. They are scrolling on their phone, looking at an unrelated video, interrupting, and making judgmental statements. These actions leave the speaker feeling defensive and unheard, causing a rift in the relationship. Reflecting on the exercise you completed earlier, identify your strengths and weaknesses with active listening, and consider how your actions as a listener affect your relationships. What might you change in your listening habits to better support someone important in your life and potentially strengthen that interpersonal relationship?

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Adler, R., Rosenfeld, L. B., & Proctor II, R. F. (2013). *Interplay: The process of interpersonal communication*. Oxford.

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7.9: Summary and Review

Summary

Although we greatly underestimate the power of listening, it is perhaps the most valuable skill for effective communication. Understanding the five stages of listening and its different functions deepens our knowledge regarding the complexity of listening. Furthermore, identifying our listening styles, barriers, and ineffective practices can help us hone our strengths and reduce our weaknesses as listeners.

As you learned in this chapter, increased awareness around listening and the use of strategies offered in this chapter, you will improve communication in your relationships simply by becoming a better listener. Active and mindful listening can make a difference in all interpersonal contexts you communicate within.

Remember the beginning of this chapter where Jamal was engaging in what you now know is called pseudo-listening while Shenise was trying to engage him in a discussion about their upcoming trip to Cancun? If Jamal had exercised active listening and employed some of the techniques discussed in this chapter, it is likely that Shenise would not have gotten angry. Active listening is a gift that you give to both yourself and others.

Discussion Questions

1. After reviewing the stages of the listening process, which of the stages do you find the most challenging? How might you use active listening to improve in that area?

2. What is your listening style? Can you think of an instance when this listening style can be beneficial? Can you provide an example of when this listening style is harmful? How can knowing this information help improve your listening?

3. What barriers to listening impact you the most? What steps can you take to lessen these barriers within different contexts of communication?

4. Which of the ineffective listening practices do you find yourself prone to using? What specific changes do you need to make to minimize or eliminate these practices?

5. Which of the active listening strategies can you use to improve your relationship with others?

Glossary

Action-Oriented Listener

Appreciative listening

Attending

Back-channel cues

Clarifying questions

Comprehensive listening

Content-Oriented Listener

Discriminative listening

Empathetic listening

Empathy

Environmental noise

Evaluating

Evaluative listening

Hearing

Interpreting

Listening

Listening style

Mindfulness

Paraphrasing

People–oriented listener

Physiological noise

Psychological noise

Recalling

Receiving

Responding

Sympathy

Time-Oriented Listener

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8: EMOTIONS

Learning Objectives

- Identify the dimensions of emotions and summarize their impact on interpersonal communication.
- Analyze emotional intelligence and its importance within communication competence.
- Apply communicative skills to understanding, expressing, and responding to emotions.
- Implement key strategies to manage debilitative emotions and how to foster facilitative emotions (managing emotions).
- Construct ways that help to cope with challenging emotions during difficult times.

In this chapter, we will focus on what emotions are, how they are shaped by our culture and environment, shape our perspectives, how to overcome emotional challenges, and how to utilize our skills to ensure our emotions help us to achieve our communication goals within our interpersonal relationships.

8.1: Introduction to Emotions

8.2: What Are Emotions?

8.3: Influences on Emotional Expression

8.4: Emotions in Relationships

8.5: Managing Emotions

8.6: Guidelines for Communicating Emotions Effectively

8.7: Coping with Challenging Emotions

8.8: Summary and Review

8.9: References

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8.1: Introduction to Emotions

Emotions and Interpersonal Communication

Emotions are a part of who we are as humans. Take for instance, that you are being interviewed for your dream career position. As you are waiting to be interviewed, you are experiencing many emotions: excitement for the opportunity, nervousness that your strengths will not show, discomfort at the concern that the interviewer may not understand you, and more. Each of these emotions come from our self-concept, our life experiences, and our desire to be successful and impact our relationships with others from how they perceive us to how our communication unfolds.

Historically, people believed that these feelings were automatic biological reactions to our environment. However, communication scholars now know that our emotions are heavily driven by our thoughts. According to **Cognitive Appraisal Theory**, the anxiety or excitement you feel while waiting for that interview isn't caused by the interview itself, but by how you mentally interpret, or *appraise*, the situation.

Recognizing this connection between our thoughts, our feelings, and our spoken words is the foundation of **Emotional Intelligence (EQ).** EQ is the ability to monitor your own and others' feelings, to discriminate among them, and to use this emotional information to guide your thinking and behavior (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). When you possess high emotional intelligence, you can actively change how you appraise a stressful situation - transforming debilitating nervousness into productive excitement before you even shake the interviewer's hand. Therefore, it is important that we explore the facets of emotions.

Emotions are heavily influenced by our social interactions and communication with others. Emotions are a key component of self-concept and how we interact with others. Often we find ourselves focused on the feeling we are experiencing in the moment, rather than 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 will focus 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 to achieve our communication goals within our interpersonal relationships. From our 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 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.

Thoughts on Theory: How Cognitive Appraisal Theory Powerfully Drives Emotional Intelligence

Imagine you send a detailed text message to a close friend, and you see the dreaded "read" receipt pop up. One hour passes. Then three hours. Still, no reply.

How do you feel?

If you think, "*They are ignoring me because they are mad at me,*" you will likely feel hurt or angry. If you think, "*Oh no, they must be having a crazy day at work or dealing with an emergency,*" you will likely feel worried or empathetic. If you think, "*They always do this! They are so disorganized,*" you might just feel mildly annoyed.

Notice that event itself - the unreturned text message - did not change. What changed was your internal story. This is the heart of the **Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT)**, pioneered by psychologist Richard Lazarus (1991). It explains that we do not passively experience emotions. Instead, our brains actively interpret, or *appraise*, our surroundings first.

Learning to master this appraisal process is exactly what communication scholars mean when they talk about **Emotional Intelligence (EQ)**. Coined by Peter Salovey and John Mayer (1990) and later popularized by Daniel Goleman, EQ is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions, while also recognizing and influencing the emotions of others. CAT provides the step-by-step cognitive machinery that makes high EQ possible.

The Two Steps of Emotional Appraisal

According to CAT, emotionally intelligent individuals navigate a two-step appraisal process to prevent themselves from being hijacked by automatic, negative reactions:

- **Primary Appraisal (Is this relevant to me?):** The moment an interpersonal event occurs, we assess whether it matters to our personal well-being, goals, or happiness. If you decide an event is harmless, no significant emotion triggers. High EQ individuals use self-awareness during primary appraisal to catch themselves before making assumptions of a personal "threat" or "loss."
- **Secondary Appraisal (Can I handle this?):** If the event is important, your brain shifts to assessing your coping options. You ask: *Who is responsible? How much control do I have? Can I handle the fallout?* A person with high EQ utilizes emotional regulation during this step, recognizing that while they cannot control other people's actions, they have full control over their own communicative responses.

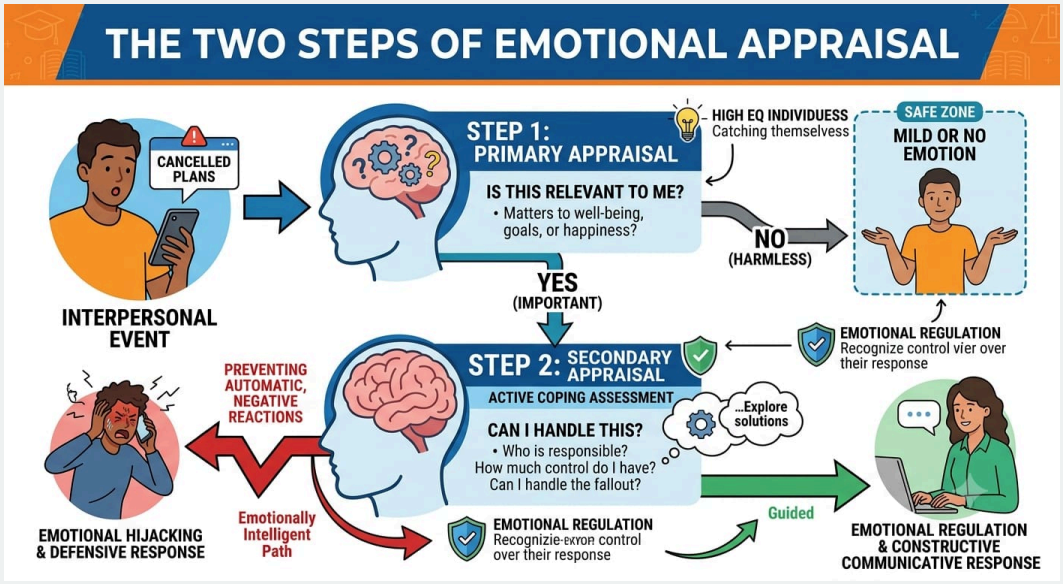


Figure 8.1: The Two Steps of Emotional Appraisal Infographic generated by Google Gemini (2026) from a text prompt based on Richard Lazarus's Cognitive Appraisal Theory and Daniel Goleman's framework for Emotional Intelligence.

The Impact of CAT and EQ on Interpersonal Communication

Merging Cognitive Appraisal Theory with Emotional Intelligence is highly empowering because it disrupts the myth that other people can "make" us feel a certain way. Your partner doesn't *make* you jealous, and your group project partners don't *make* you feel furious. Instead, your internal appraisals of their actions create those emotional states.

In interpersonal settings, pairing CAT with EQ introduces the power of **cognitive reappraisal**, the practice of consciously changing how you think about an event in order to alter its emotional impact (Gross, 2002).

When you pause to question your primary appraisals during a tense conversation, you are actively practicing EQ. This mental pause allows you to bypass defensive communication, reduce misunderstandings, and choose empathetic responses that heal relationships rather than escalate conflicts. Ultimately, EQ isn't about suppressing your feelings. It's about using the logic of cognitive appraisal to drive healthier emotional outcomes.

Discussion Questions

1. Think about a recent interpersonal conflict where you lost your temper. Looking back, how did a lack of *emotional intelligence* cause you to rush through your primary and secondary appraisals without questioning them?
2. How can practicing *cognitive reappraisal* help you boost your empathy (a core component of EQ) when interacting with a friend who is acting unusually distant or irritable?
3. Emotional intelligence involves recognizing the emotions of *others*. How can understanding Cognitive Appraisal Theory help

you realize that when someone is angry with you, it might be due to their own internal "appraisal filters" rather than anything you actually did wrong?

4. How can a manager use the dual concepts of *secondary appraisal* (assessing coping mechanisms) and *EQ* to coach an employee who is experiencing intense anxiety and burnout over a looming project deadline?

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8.2: What Are Emotions?

Emotions Defined

Emotions and related terms can be misunderstood, so we will start by defining what emotions are. “Emotions are constituted by a process of categorizing the self as being in an emotional state” (Pober, 2018, p. 640). This process is both immediate and rapid (Rohmann, et al., 2009). Emotions are not synonymous with feelings. Emotions are more than the feelings we experience, although feelings are a big part of emotions. Feelings can be fleeting, while emotions are not fleeting and tend to be accompanied with physiological and nonverbal changes. Emotions can change over time and context, and are connected to physiological dimensions, cultural dimensions, cognitive interpretations, personality, and expression.

Consider This: Where Did You Learn To Feel? By Brielle Plump

Have you ever thought about where you learned how to feel? 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 you would think.

For example, there is one particular theory that can help us consider how we learned how to feel: the dimensions of cultural variability (Hofstede, 1980), which is based on a global study conducted by the researcher Geert Hofstede in the 1970s. Although culture has changed a lot 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. Per the theory, every country exists on a scale between the two extremes (high or low) of each dimension. For now, we will just look at one, 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 have many limitations, it does help us understand how society impacts our communication surrounding emotions and emotional expression.

Reflection Question

1. Consider some of the other generalized ways achieving and nurturing cultures differ. How may emotions and feelings be valued or expressed as a result?
2. Also, consider your family history, where you grew up, and whether or not your surroundings represent a more achievement based or more nurturing culture. How might that impact how you process emotions?

Reflecting on these cultural foundations is a core component of **Emotional Intelligence (EQ)**. High-EQ individuals possess the cultural self-awareness to realize that their emotional baselines are not "univeral truths," but are deeply shaped by their upbringing. By understanding that an achievement-based culture teaches subtle emotional restraint while a nurturing culture encourages over display, you can better empathize with conversational partners whose emotional styles differ from your own.

Emotions are often seen as inherently negative. "Why are you so emotional? Oh, that person is too emotional." Beyond these uncomplimentary descriptions, why do we see emotions as negative? Why is it a bad idea to “be emotional?” As humans we are interconnected with our emotions. We literally have sayings like these: “Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?” “Don’t be so emo,” or “Don’t be so salty.” These sayings infer that from the start of our day, we are experiencing emotions and this connects to the events we experience in our day. Our emotions relate to our interpretation of events with others, our perceptions of those events, and our reaction as a result, which we call **reappraisal**. Since we communicate in our interpersonal relationships from our identity outward and that affects our perceptions, then 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). For instance, consider the last time you felt incredibly excited. What other emotions were you experiencing? Let’s say you just got asked to go on a date with someone you really like. Perhaps you

are excited but also nervous, apprehensive, invigorated, and even reluctant. It is common for us to experience all these 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). That sense of happiness may turn to elation, pride, and a sense of giddiness. Whereas the apprehension you experience may create or increase the likelihood of nervousness, reluctance, and fear over the date or romantic appeal of the person.

Emotions Are Relational

Not only do we internally experience emotions and are affected by others emotions, but we create **chain emotions**. Figure 8.2.1 showcases psychologist Robert Pluchik's wheel of emotions, which showcases eight central emotions that polarize one another. The eight emotions are joy and sadness, trust and disgust, fear and anger, and lastly, surprise and anticipation. These eight central emotions then extend outward and inward of the wheel, showcasing intensity of the emotions that can be felt. The information in this figure is also provided in Table 8.2.1, which lists the central emotions alongside the varying levels of intensity that can be felt from them. 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 we get closer to our date, our ecstasy and nervousness/anticipation might turn to optimism.

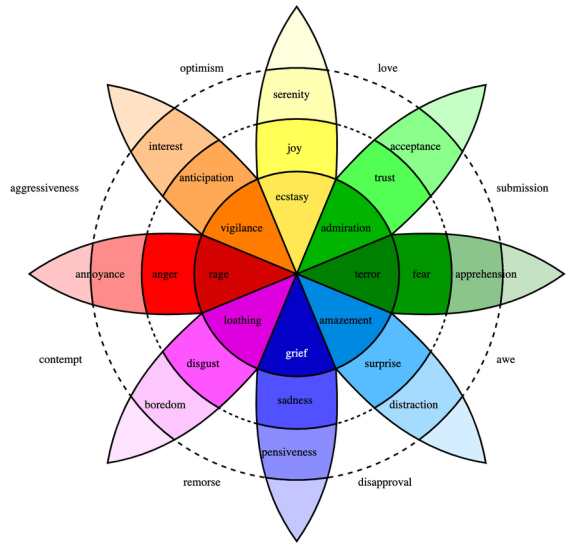


Figure 8.2.1: Plutchik Wheel by Robert Pluchik on Wikipedia Commons

Intensity of Emotions as Displayed in the Plutchnik Wheel

Central Emotion	Varying Intensities of Central Emotion
Joy	Ecstasy, serenity, optimism, or love
Trust	Admiration, acceptance, love, or submission
Fear	Terror, apprehension, submission, or awe
Surprise	Amazement, distraction, awe, or disapproval
Sadness	Grief, pensiveness, disapproval, or remorse
Disgust	Loathing, boredom, remorse, or contempt
Anger	Rage, annoyance, contempt, or aggressiveness
Anticipation	Vigilance, interest, aggressiveness, or optimism

Table 8.2.1: Intensity of Emotions by Elizabeth Encarnacion is licensed under CC BY 4.0

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 type of relationships we have developed. When you are sick, is there someone who brings you comfort? Does just the thought of that person being near you result in you not feeling as sick, starting to smile, or even feeling physically stronger? One of our authors shares her experience:

> When my child was a baby and I had a bad day, seeing that baby face would result in me feeling better. Similarly, when I was sick as a child, I wanted to be near my grandmother. I had scarlet fever as a teenager, and I wanted her to be near me. She couldn't provide medical assistance, but her presence resulted in a different mood and therefore, more positive emotions. Family, or other people we would 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, affect 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. A **mask** is our presenting self that we use to conceal certain aspects of ourselves. Perhaps at work, although we are still ourselves, we avoid certain language that we use in other contexts, do not share personal stories, or avoid certain details to meet the professional climate. Many of us have had an unexpected event that created sadness, anger, or frustration before we entered an environment where we did not want to share those emotions, which resulted in us masking our emotions. One of our authors shares an example: "My father had cancer and it was clear we had a small window of time before he passed away. I had lectures planned and wanted to avoid my students becoming my support system, so I used masking." This is commonplace in many professional settings, but also used in other contexts. Many of us have had to conceal information from others, which results in us using a mask. You may have heard the saying "wear many hats." This is a way of saying we present certain aspects of ourselves 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 our emotions, we tend to use masks without being conscious of the decision to do so. However, masking is common when we experience negative emotions. This is related to the physiological changes we experience with emotions. While masking is a conscious attempt to manage what others see, **Emotional Intelligence** asks us to go a step deeper than just hiding a feeling behind a mask. EQ requires *emotional self-regulation*, not just suffocating a negative emotion until it manifests as stress or physical fatigue, but actively working through the feeling. Masking simply changes your outward presentation. High EQ involves addressing the internal root of the emotion so you do not have to carry the heavy burden of a mask indefinitely.

Physiological Changes

Emotions are a deep-seated process that is happening continuously. When an event happens that results in our emotion occurring, we look at the physiological changes. This includes sweating, an increase in heart rate, a flush in our face, all the things we experience physiologically and nonverbally as we experience our emotions. Think of the last time you were "red hot angry" or "excited down to your toes." What did you experience physiologically? Did you experience a feeling of raciness, perhaps an increased heart rate? Did you feel hot all over, perhaps 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 the external sources of emotions are accompanied by internal physiological factors that impact the heart, lungs, gut, and so forth. Our body expresses emotions through our blood flow in order to regulate our homeostatic balances. For example, someone in a state of anger generates more "heat," or excess blood flow throughout their body near the head, chest, and arms. Someone on the opposite end of the spectrum, in a neutral, state, generates so much less physical "heat" that the blood flow to extremities like their arms and legs is "cooled" or has slowed down. In addition, emotions can create physical reactions such as higher sweat production, restlessness, faster heartbeat, or increased breath rate. For example, the feeling of excitement and nervousness are usually characterized by the same physical traits while the emotions themselves are opposites.

To continue our example from earlier, when we are interacting with someone we want a romantic relationship with, that person might make us feel happy and nervous at the same time. Those two emotions may both showcase themselves through the same physiological changes of jittery movements, increased heart rate, and maybe sweaty palms. The same can be true of more unfavorable emotions. When we are experiencing a fight or argument within our interpersonal relationships, this can cause emotions of anger, anticipation, anxiety, and doubt. Those emotions can manifest themselves physiologically as rapid heart rate, sweat, increased breathing patterns, and jitteriness as well. This physiological overlap is the ultimate proof of **Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT).** If a racing heart and sweaty palms can signal both paralyzing terror *and* thrilling excitement, your body clearly relies on your brain to break the tie. As CAT demonstrates, your physical body experiences the raw stimulus, but your cognitive appraisal acts as a translator. Your internal story is what ultimately labels those identical physical sensations as a

positive thrill or a negative threat.

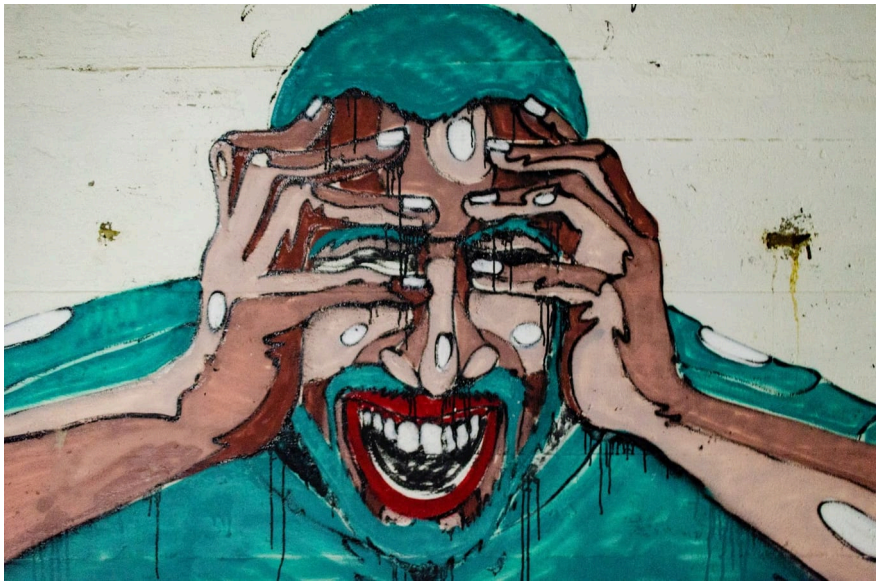


Figure 8.2.2: Painting of a man by Aarón Blanco Tejedor on Unsplash

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 our race, ethnicity, geographical locations, political affiliations, socioeconomic status, or the like, but rather includes who we are as people on the whole. Every culture is different and has its own set of norms, rituals, and customs. Even when we share a culture with someone, our interpretations and experiences shape them differently. For example, do you identify with a religion or spiritual practice? Have you had disagreements about your interpretations of what that means to people within that group (**in-group**) or someone outside of that group (**out-group**)? How do these differences shape what emotions you experience?

One of our authors shares this example:

> I grew up with two uncles who are ministers. Each within the same religious community, but both had different interpretations of the doctrines of their religion. When my uncle earned his PhD in religious studies, he told me as he counsels his parishioners and his advice when it comes to infidelity is to always work through it. My other uncle would not suggest the same idea, but rather attempts to understand the details surrounding the infidelity and not to give advice. In this illustration, we have two people of the same faith, raised similarly, with different outlooks ("worldviews") that would alter how they experience emotions, despite being in a similar predicament.

Cognitive Dimensions and Personality

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 this emotion, called the **activating event**. Emotions can be driven by this cognitive dimension (Kriegel, 2014). This cognitive dimension is exactly what we explored through **Cognitive Appraisal Theory** earlier. Whether we realize it or not, our brains are constantly running primary and secondary appraisals on those activating events. Our personality traits, such as high neuroticism or high agreeableness, largely act as the permanent lenses through which those rapid cognitive appraisals are filtered. Whether we are conscious about emotions as they are occurring, that does not change their presence. 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 make-up. Emotions are affected by the type of personality we have. Personality types have been used in two primary models, the Myers Brigg Type Indicator or the Big Five model (openness, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism). This is discussed further in the next section. 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.



Figure 8.2.4: Woman in black knit sweater covering face with her hand by Toa Heftiba on Unsplash

Nonverbal Expression

As you learned in Chapter 5, we 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 Western society, 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 in our emotions and also our expressions of our emotions. Take for instance stress. When we experience stress, it tends to be implicitly expressed. Successful management of our stress can avoid negative effects, such as anger (Suzuki & Tanaka, 2021). For example, if you perceive that you am physically hot and it is harder to mask, this could imply that you are upset or angry. Perhaps if you were unaware of these expressions, I may not realize that you are truly angry. Becoming aware of our implicit and explicit expressions of emotions can help us to 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. Take for instance, being asked if you are upset. You say “no!”—but your 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 of our authors shares the following example:

> When my son was in the hospital and we were not sure what was going to happen, there was a lot of uncertainty and the emotions were negative. It was stressful, scary, frustrating, heartbreaking, and overwhelming. I exhibited a range of expressions as a result of these emotions. I would lash out at my partner (verbal) who was out of town, and then stonewall (nonverbal). It was not my partner’s fault, but my anger and frustration were clear in my expressions. I would yell or become

> silent on the phone when explaining the latest update from the doctor to my family.

Silence is culturally seen as a positive or negative. In Western society, it is seen as largely negative, whereas in other cultures silence is an important tool without a negative perception. Our author reflects:

> Internally, my stress and anxiety were high. I was not managing my fear and the situation, so it made the experience harder. Had I managed this stress and anxiety, I would have been able to communicate more effectively with the doctors and my family, and my nonverbal expressions would have been more productive.

We cover coping with challenging emotions, such as fear and anxiety, at the end of the chapter. There are many influences that affect our emotional expression.

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8.3: Influences on Emotional Expression

Emotions and Experience

There are many influences on our emotional expression. These influences help shape the way we perceive and interact with our emotions. We may think that our emotions are singular and not attached to other emotions and experiences. In this section we clarify how our emotions affect other emotions and experiences. We focus on how we interpret and react differently based on our own personality traits, our cultural background, and how our culture and society itself shape not only the emotions we experience, but how we react in communication events.

Personality

Emotions are an important aspect in how we build our social interactions with people around us. Whether strangers or people who have a significant impact on our lives, people tend to consciously or unconsciously work at monitoring, observing, and regulating emotions around others. Our interactions with others help to shape our own emotions as well as aspects of our personalities and moods. But what is the difference between these terms? We've defined emotion earlier in this chapter, but how do we know the distinction between what is an emotion, what is a mood, and what is part of our personality?

The biggest difference is the longevity of the feeling. Where **emotions** may last seconds to minutes, moods can last hours to days. A **mood** is built from the collection of emotions and feelings, whereas **personality** is built from stable sets of moods and traits such as social interactions, behaviors, and values, as well as cultural and environmental factors.

One of our authors shares her example:

> I can confidently say that I have a "grumpy" personality. Even photos of me as a young child showcase that I tend to have a pout on my face, and I pride myself in being able to think of the "glass as half empty" more often than not. This is part of my personality that I own and accept. Although I may have what I consider a "grumpy" personality, that does not mean every day of my life is lived in a bad mood. I, like all of us, have days, weeks and months filled with good moods, but I also experience bad moods from time to time. I share laughter and joyful emotions with friends and loved ones regularly, as well as feeling emotions of love and grief equally. While I may say my personality is "grumpy" I would say my mood tends to be positive, and my emotions tend to be neutral.

Acknowledging the complex interplay between your baseline personality, your current mood, and your passing emotions is the cornerstone of **Emotional Intelligence (EQ)**. Highly emotionally intelligent people do not try to erase a naturally skeptical or "grumpy" personality trait. Instead, they leverage emotional self-awareness to recognize when a temporary negative mood is threatened to turn into a destructive interpersonal behavior. EQ gives us the capacity to say, "*I might naturally look at the glass as half-empty, but I have the skills to monitor my emotional state so it doesn't damage my relationship with the person sitting across from me.*"

Consider This: The Big Five Personality Traits

Personality can be seen as a dimension of an individual, where the aspects of what we think, feel, and the ways in which we behave based on our emotions are constructed to make up our unique personality in specific ways (Filipiak & Łubianka, 2021). When looking at personality, research has consistently found that there tends to be five major dimensions called Big Five personality traits.

The Big Five personality traits are an important aspect when understanding emotion and interpersonal communication. The outcomes of this model are used to help make important predictions on individual behaviors and outcomes. The Big Five personality traits shown in Figure 8.3.1 (and listed following the figure), help us not only to understand our individual experiences and allow us to put into words and categorizations how our emotions interact with our behaviors, but it has also given researchers reliable associations and predictions in life outcomes such as "health, political participation, personal and romantic relationships, purchasing behaviors, and academic and job performances" (Sachl et. al, 2020).

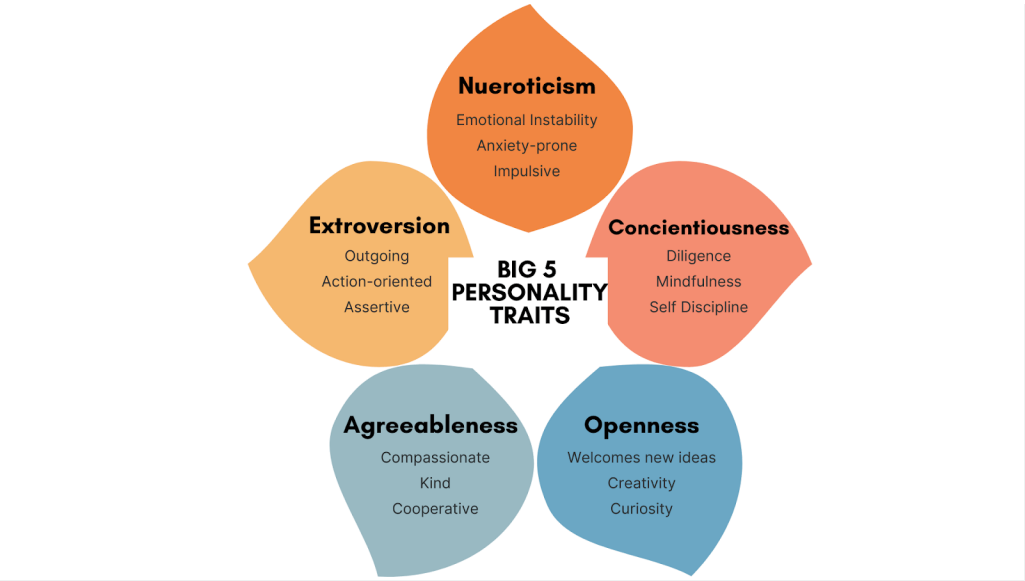


Figure 8.3.1: Big 5 Personality Traits by Elizabeth Encarnacion is licensed under CC BY 4.0

The Big Five Personality Traits

1. **Neuroticism:** 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 maintain internal support through these notable emotional charges is the skill of emotional stability.
   From the perspective of **Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT)**, scoring high in neuroticism fundamentally alters a person's *primary appraisal* process. When an unexpected interpersonal event occurs, an individual high in neuroticism is cognitively predisposed to instantly appraise the situation as a high-stakes threat or a personal "loss," even if the event is objectively harmless. Recognizing how your personality biases your primary and secondary appraisals is a massive step toward developing greater emotional stability and cognitive regulation.
2. **Conscientiousness:** Conscientiousness includes aspects of personality such as organization, planning, and dependability. It includes characteristics of being diligent, careful and mindful of the work one is doing, and having self-discipline. The key characteristic of this personality is the aspect of working towards these characteristics and having them as a goal to achieve, even if that may not always be the outcome. For example, we may not always be the best at organizing and keeping our room clean, but it's something that we strive to be diligent and hold value towards.
3. **Openness:** *Openness to experiences* and *open-mindedness* are terms that are used to describe the ability to welcome new ideas, information, and even arguments that may differ from our own. Being open to experiences includes curiosity and creativity. It allows for critical and rational thinking to make judgments and come to conclusions from these new ideas.
4. **Agreeableness:** Agreeableness is the habit of being kind, compassionate, warm, and cooperative. This is in contrast to traits such as suspicion, mistrust, combative, and unfriendly.
5. **Extraversion:** Extraversion refers to how outgoing or sociable a person is. Extroverted personality traits include high energy, talkative, assertiveness, and being action-oriented. This is in contrast to introversion, where the personality is focused on internal thoughts and feelings as opposed to external social interactions.

These personality traits are meant to be broad and open categorizations that are relatively stable throughout a person's life and universally applicable (Stachl et. al, 2020; Filipiak & Łubianka, 2021). When looking at these five personality traits in relation to how we interact with others, they can help us see patterns and help us to interpret behaviors influenced by social expectations and societal norms. For example, research has shown that nurses and other members of the medical field who score low in neuroticism are less likely to experience burn-out and report job-related stress. Traits such as openness, agreeableness, and extraversion are strong indicators of engagement and empathy in the nursing profession (Martinez et. al, 2021). Individuals are more drawn to certain professions over others given their personality trait characteristics, and a variety of different combinations of personality traits are found in the wide variety of professional careers.

Discussion Questions

1. What role of the Big Five personality traits do you see in your communication with others? Do you have significant others with some of these traits?
2. Out of all five personality traits, is there one that stands out to you that is predominant in your own identity? How do you think this personality trait impacts your communication with others?

Culture

Our culture is based on the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a given group, and includes rules and norms that members of the culture follow. The way in which we display, recognize, and interpret emotions is heavily influenced by our social environments and cultural worldview because of their norms and rules (Course Hero, n.d.c). Different cultures have different structures of behavior and therefore different rules regarding how they display their emotions, which are connected to the cultural display rules discussed in Chapter 5. Research has shown that cultures that are more collectivistic, and where social harmony is emphasized, are less likely to showcase negative emotions such as disgust or anger in social settings. In contrast, individualistic cultures, where personal self concept is emphasized, are more likely to showcase emotions of anger or disgust no matter the social context (Dzokoto et. al, 2018). For example, research demonstrated that people from individualistic cultures, like the United States, used exaggerated facial expressions to showcase emotion as a way to influence others and gain attention from those around them, which is accepted within an individualistic culture (University of Minnesota, n.d.). This is opposed to people from collectivistic cultures, such as Japan, where the tendency is to suppress or not show their emotional expressions as a way to observe the social context and interaction between interpersonal relationships. Because collectivistic cultures put the primary concern on the interdependence of the cultural group, emotional displays are direct reflections of the family system and the primary driver is to maintain relationships (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

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



Figure 8.3.7: Standing man wearing blue v-neck shirt by Elevate on Unsplash

Social Conventions and Roles

There are many unwritten rules of communication that discourage direct expressions of most emotions. As we said earlier, “being emotional” is largely seen as negative, and our roles in certain contexts are affected. For example, do you curse in the workplace? We attempt to be professional in workplace environments. This includes presenting ourselves as professionals, avoiding unacceptable language for that climate, and preserving face. **Face** concerns how we present ourselves to others and

how we are seen by others. In the workplace, face is an important aspect of the climate. We want to preserve the face of others and avoid **face-threatening behaviors** (actions that would result in our communication partner losing face). Perhaps you have heard the phrase “saving face” used in this context before. Therefore, there are not only social expectations of us, but we also have processes of self-protection and protection of others.

We have many social and professional roles. How we interact within these roles relates to our environment and our relationships with our communication partners. **Gender roles** have a lot to do with how we interact with others as well as how we perceive ourselves internally. Keep in mind that biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression are different constructs. **Gender identity** refers to our internal perception of self, and how we see ourselves. **Gender expression** refers to how we showcase our gender identity through our appearance, clothing, and verbal and nonverbal expression. These traits relate to how we mask (when, why, and to preserve face) and our reluctance or openness to engage in conversations related to our emotions. Gender expression is also related to the cultural climate we were raised in and our lived experiences.

In a professional setting, we may mask more or avoid dialogue related to emotions, in an attempt to be seen as fulfilling a professional role. In a social setting or role, we may use masking or our decision to engage in discourse related to emotions to promote relational growth. For example, there are certain emotions that may be more often avoided by certain people in the workplace for a variety of reasons. Women, particularly women of color, are less likely to overtly showcase emotions of confidence, assuredness, or even sadness or anger in the workplace so as to not be deemed “too emotional,” because perceptions of assertiveness can turn into aggressiveness or confidence can be misconstrued as arrogance. When we deconstruct how different individuals are or are not “allowed” to experience emotions in different settings, we can start to draw out the stereotypes and biases within our social conventions and society roles.

With the many roles we take on, we utilize these tools to be communication competent. We should beware of **emotional labor**, the expectation to manage emotions in work environments. Some settings require a lot of masking, which can take a toll on us as individuals and within our interpersonal relationships. If we mask at work all day, we become exhausted. The more we mask or avoid engagement in our emotions, the more we experience emotional labor. Later in this chapter we will discuss identifying our emotions and using reappraisal as a strategy. The capacity to recognize and act on certain emotions decreases without practice. This is exactly why practicing high **Emotional Intelligence** is so vital in professional and social roles. Superficial masking is a form of emotional labor that simply hides the symptom of a stressful situation, which eventually leads to burnout and exhaustion. Conversely, someone utilizing high EQ relies on *cognitive reappraisal* to actively change their internal narrative regarding the stressful event. By changing how they cognitively appraise the situation at the baseline, they reduce the internal friction, decrease the physical toll of emotional labor, and protect both their own well-being and their workplace relationships.

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8.4: Emotions in Relationships

Emotional Intelligence, Awareness, and Contagion

Emotions are deeply rooted within our relationships. In some relationships certain language is faux pas, whereas in another relationship the language is acceptable or even wanted. We will discuss the **relational context** in this section. We know that suppressing our emotions facilitates negative emotions, but we are connected to our emotions. Therefore, we discuss **facilitative** and **debilitative emotions**. In this section we discuss the role of emotional intelligence, emotional awareness, and emotional contagion.

Emotional Intelligence

Many of us are familiar with the term **IQ** ("intelligence quota") that research has historically used to study the standards of human intelligence. In parallel to our IQ, researchers also study our **emotional intelligence**, or **EI**, which measures our ability to process emotions and emotional information (Alegre, et al., 2019). EI is a social intelligence that helps us manage our emotions within our social interactions. It helps us dictate aspects of our expression of emotions, as well as works to help regulate our emotions. Having a high emotional intelligence means that you are not only able to showcase self-awareness of your own emotions to control and balance them, but also able to monitor and accurately understand the emotions within others (Connor et. al, 2019). Psychologist Daniel Goleman conducted extensive research into categorizing what are now known as the **five key elements of emotional intelligence**: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skill (Issah, 2018). Table 8.4.1 describes each key element of emotional intelligence as well as highlights specific communicative elements that emotional intelligence is enacted through.

Table 8.4.1: Varying Intensities of Central Emotion

Component	Description
Self-awareness	The conscious understanding of our character, feeling, emotions, desires, personality, and individuality. Includes elements of humility, self-confidence, and our impact on others.
Self-regulation	The ability to respond to emotional stimuli in ways that promote facilitative control over feelings, thoughts, and physiological responses. Includes elements of emotional flexibility, comfort with ambiguity, and openness to change. Self-regulation is achieved by using the **cognitive reappraisal** process to stop automatic negative reactions and intentionally choose a more positive and helpful way of thinking about a situation.

Component	Description
Self-motivation	The drive to set attainable goals using personal desire as opposed to external influence. Includes elements of organization, commitment, and optimism.
Empathy	Listening for understanding of the other person's feelings and/or emotion with the goal of validating. Empathic listening is higher-level listening and therefore requires more energy. Includes elements of intercultural communication competence, and nonverbal awareness.
Social skill	The ability to build and maintain relationships. Effectively interacting with others, managing social norms, and rules within communication. Includes elements of verbal and nonverbal communication norms, intercultural communication competence, and active listening.

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Emotional Awareness

Although relationships affect our emotions, relationships themselves don't experience the emotions, we do—as the interpersonal members of the relationship. Within the study of EI, researchers have expanded their understanding into more precise applications. One area that has been expanded upon from original research in EI is the concept of emotional awareness. **Emotional awareness** is the conscious understanding and recognition of one's own and others' emotions (Agnoli et al., 2019; Alegre, et al., 2019). This is an important aspect of emotional intelligence. In order to act, or communicate effectively within a given range of emotional interactions, we must first be acutely aware of what emotions are present to begin with.

Emotional awareness is often experienced at its height during adolescence, when we are experiencing puberty and our understanding of ourselves in relation to other people. During this time period in our age and development, as many of us probably remember all too well, it can also be difficult to regulate emotions (Agnoli et al., 2019). Because of the changes that are occurring in our physiological and emotional selves, this time period of learning and growing is usually met with lots of bumps and bruises (both physically and metaphorically). This rocky road into adulthood is beneficial for our emotional intelligence and emotional awareness, and it is crucial in our development of self-concept and self-esteem, which help to mold our emotional intelligence and awareness as well (Agnoli et al., 2019).

We are constantly being affected by the people around us and managing the emotional responses in those interactions. When looking at the communicative interaction of our emotions with other people, there are two primary ways we classify emotions: **emotion traits** and **emotion states**. Trait emotional awareness exists when we experience a specific emotion during person-to-person interactions regardless of whom we are interacting with (Alegre, et al., 2019). **Emotion traits** are connected to our personality and demonstrate our habitual and prolonged set of baseline emotions. Emotion traits are inherently linked to the theoretical framework of the Big Five personality traits we discussed earlier in this chapter (Alegre, et al., 2019). For example, specifically looking at conscientiousness and neuroticism, and agreeableness, an emotional trait we may label ourselves as could be as an "anxious person," where we may not be effective in regulating the feelings of worry or fear. Or we may define ourselves

as a “people-pleaser” if we are consistently focused on other people’s needs and attending to them as opposed to ourselves.

Emotion states exist in smaller “windows" of time; experiencing them is much less dependent on our personality. Emotion states are emotions that we experience in a specific moment of time and are generally impacted by the conversations, interactions, and individuals we are in the presence of. Emotion states come and go much more easily than moods or personality, and they can change from one moment to the next. Some emotion states we experience are connected “directly to other people, like anger, envy, jealousy, hate and shame” (The Libarynth. n.d.). For example, we may find that we feel joy and comfort in the presence of certain people in our lives, while we may feel a sense of annoyance or frustration when interacting with others. Our emotional awareness that allows us to tune in to these different sets of emotional states and understand the connection and the reasoning as to why we experience these emotional reactions in the presence of certain people. This greater understanding allows us to better manage our emotions and create facilitative or positive emotional boundaries, which we will discuss later in this chapter. This is where your emotional awareness intersects directly with **Cognitive Appraisal Theory**. When an individual triggers an unfavorable emotion state in you, like irritation or defensive anxiety, high EQ allows you to pause and analyze your *primary appraisal*. By becoming aware of *why* you appraise this specific person as a threat to your mood, you can actively shift your *secondary appraisal* to focus on your coping options. Instead of letting a fleeting emotion state hijack your communication, you utilize cognitive reappraisal to regain control of the interaction.

Emotional Contagion

Emotions are like yawns: they are contagious. When we see someone yawn, it creates the urge to yawn ourselves—and emotions work in the same way. This “emotional yawn” is called **emotional contagion**. Emotional contagion occurs when we are exposed to other individuals' emotions during social interactions. Our instincts tend to impact these social interactions and create an alignment with the emotional states we are perceiving in others (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021).



Figure 8.4.1: Baby’s Grey Knit Hat by Minnie Zhou on Unsplash

Emotional contagion can be both a conscious and unconscious reaction. When we are in social settings with people whom we feel close to and would identify as significant individuals in our lives, we might be able to pick up and be impacted by their emotion states more quickly and without reason, as if it is an “automatic” connection we have with the person, whereas other interactions may require us to appraise, or assess the emotional state of the other person to establish our own reaction (The Libarynth. n.d.). This distinction highlights the difference between primitive emotional mimicry and an active **cognitive appraisal**. When you must consciously assess someone else's emotional state, you are running a primary appraisal to determine how their mood impacts *you* and your communication goals. Highly emotional intelligent folks recognize when they are about to mimic a negative emotion (like catching a coworker's panic) and use their EQ to step in. Rather than blindly absorbing the emotional contagion, they appraise the situation objectively, keeping their own emotional boundaries intact so they can offer steady, constructive support. Both reactions are part of our emotional awareness in balancing our communication to being effective and appropriate.

Emotions can be transferred from one individual to another through a wide array of communicative expressions: physical features, such as the urge to smile at someone when they smile at you; vocal expressions, as when someone starts to become tearful while

they are talking, we might find ourselves holding back tears as well; posture or kinesics, when we see someone slump down into a chair we might feel their exhaustion; as well as through our nervous system, where our brain and nerve cells transmit information, we are able to not just perceive the emotions of others but literally feel them within ourselves.

Empathy versus Sympathy

Emotional contagion relates to the concepts of empathy and sympathy. **Sympathy** is the ability to understand your own experiences and emotional reactions to the environment around you and use that as a way to compare to other individuals who may be having similar emotional experiences. Sympathy is the projection of our emotions on other people, where we might feel bad for the person but we don't see ourselves as agents in the emotional state. **Empathy**, in contrast, is sharing the emotional experiences with the other person. By showcasing emotional awareness to experience the emotional state of the other person. Empathy is directly connected to the concept of emotional contagion" in order to feel empathy, one must be able to rely on our instincts in order to align to the communicative expressions that the other person is conveying. Empathy is expressed in phrases such as "I understand how hard this is."

Empathy is a learned skill that not everyone has or will enact the same way as others. Some individuals may not experience empathy at all, may have heightened levels of empathy, or may be at the same level as others. However we experience empathy, it does not mean we cannot communicate in an effective manner—but it may mean these aspects of emotional expression do not come as easily or in the same manner as others. For example, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized as having more difficulty enacting communication and social functioning as those who are neurotypical. Individuals who have ASD may express emotions and empathy in various ways that may look different, such as displaying an overabundance of emotional expression and empathy, or displaying very little. This impacts the amount of emotional contagion that is being experienced on the individual level.

Cultural Understanding

Another example of ways in which empathy and emotional contagion may be showcased in different behaviors is through **cultural understanding**. All cultures have different display rules regarding emotional expression, as we've learned, and that will translate to affecting others around them in various ways. Research has shown that within many cultures, negative emotional reactions and the subsequent impact of emotional contagion creates different display rules as well, therefore there are different measures of emotional contagion in order to understand these concepts within context (Kuang, et al., 2019). One example of different ways various cultures will showcase empathy include expressions of love. While some cultures showcase love outwardly through public displays of affection such as hand holding, kissing, or hugging, other cultures do not welcome these overt demonstrations of love in public ways.



Figure 8.4.2: Man hugging woman near trees by Gus Moretta on Unsplash

Skills Builder: Strengthening Your Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence is the ability to understand your own emotions, recognize emotions in others, and use that awareness to communicate more effectively. In interpersonal communication, EI isn't a bonus skill, it's the foundation for empathy, conflict management, and meaningful connection. This Skill Builder helps you build practical EI habits you can use in everyday interactions.

Step 1: Recognize Your Emotions

Pause and identify what you're feeling - frustration, excitement, anxiety, relief. Naming emotions reduces their intensity and helps you respond intentionally instead of reacting automatically.

Step 2: Understand the Trigger

Ask yourself what caused the emotion. Was it someone's tone, a misunderstanding, stress from outside the interaction, or an unmet expectation? Understanding the source helps you communicate more clearly and avoid misplaced reactions.

Step 3: Read Others' Cues

Pay attention to facial expressions, vocal tone, posture, and pacing. Emotional cues often appear before words do. Noticing them early helps you respond with empathy rather than assumption.

Step 4: Regulate Your Response

Choose how you want to show up in the interaction. Slow your breathing, soften your tone, or take a brief pause. Emotion regulation allows you to stay grounded even when conversations become tense or emotional.

Step 5: Respond with Empathy

Empathy doesn't require fixing the problem. It requres understanding the feeling. Use statements like "I hear you," "That sounds tough," or "I can see why you'd feel that way." Empathy strengthens trust and connection.

Apply It: Three Questions for Practice

1. Think of a recent moment when you felt a strong emotion during a conversation. Which **emotion** did you identify? What triggered it?
2. Recall a time when you noticed someone else's emotional cues. How did those cues shape your understanding of the interaction?
3. Choose a recent conflict or tense moment. Which of the above emotion-regulation strategy could have helped you respond more effectively?

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8.5: Managing Emotions

Context for Managing Emotions

Managing emotions can be difficult given a lot of different factors, including aspects of our internal and external selves that may be impacting or impacted by the emotions we are experiencing. For example, our self-concept and self-esteem have a large impact on our emotions and our ability to be effective communicators when these emotions are running high. Managing our emotions does not mean that we are trying to suppress or make our emotions disappear, but instead it explains how we are reacting to the emotions we are feeling. There is an unlimited amount of ways we can react, just like there are unlimited amounts of emotions or combinations of emotions we can feel at any given time. Managing our emotions means that we are feeling our emotions and we are in control of how we are reacting to them given our surroundings (Course Hero, n.d.b). When people are able to manage their emotions, they understand that emotions are an important part of the self and that expressing emotions is a natural, healthy, and necessary part of life—but are also self-aware enough to realize that there are productive and nonproductive ways to react.

Facilitative and Debilitative Emotions

Choosing how we react to our emotions instead of allowing our emotions to overcome us is an important aspect of being a competent communicator. This conscious choice is the ultimate application of **Emotional Intelligence (EQ)**. As we learned through **Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT)**, an event does not instantly trigger a destructive emotional reaction; our internal interpretation of that event does. Being able to know what emotions are **facilitative**, or helpful, versus what emotions are **debilitative**, or harmful, allows us to be able to understand that our emotional reactions do not just affect ourselves and our internal dialogue but also the way in which we interact and engage with others around us.

When we explore the wide range of possible emotions one could feel, we can generally classify most of those emotions into one of two categories— and the difference between these two categories really relies on the intensity of the emotion itself. **Facilitative emotions** tend to be emotions that do not negatively impact us from the daily tasks or functions of our lives; they allow us to progress forward in a positive way. **Debilitative emotions**, on the other hand, tend to be emotions that stop or slow us down from tasks or functioning effectively. Debilitative emotions typically result in destructive behavior (Lumen, n.d.b). For example, if we are at work and a co-worker makes us annoyed because of a certain action or behavior, we can generally move past that emotion quickly and continue working without letting that emotion or the individual causing the emotion to impact our work. However if instead of annoyance, we were feeling anger, or even rage, that might make it more difficult for us to continue working in the environment. The emotion might take over us in that moment and it would become harder to make sure our actions and communication were effective and appropriate.

Ask yourself: “Have I ever felt a sense of rage?” How would you describe that feeling? Many people might say that they “saw red” in a moment of rage, and they were unsure of what happened next because their emotions were so all-consuming.

Another important factor that makes up debilitative emotions is the longevity of the emotion. There is a difference in feeling something for a moment in time and then allowing an emotion to pass, and for that emotion to be part of a person’s mindset and way of thinking. Debilitative emotions can take a person longer to recover from and tend to linger or get thrust into more intense or dramatic emotions more easily. For example, let's say that you work in a store: If you are having a bad day, it is much easier for that bad day to be made worse by the smallest things than it is for you to turn that bad day into a good one. If your co-worker has already annoyed you when you came to work, it might be easier for you to feel annoyed by customers whom you interact with throughout the day as well. This might make it harder for you to smile or act friendly when new customers enter the store, which then creates a negative emotional spiral in all of your interactions for the day. Table $8.5.1$ details descriptions of both facilitative and debilitative emotions in comparison to one another.

Facilitative and Debilitative Emotions

Emotional State	Description
Facilitative emotions	• Can result in constructive behavior (positive outcomes). • Emotional states feel supportive and benefit personal growth. • Include neutral emotions, such as contentment. • Intense positive emotions may not last long, but create positive moods. • Focus on aspects that bring the individual joy and happiness.
Debilitative emotions	• Can result in destructive behavior (negative outcomes). • Emotions tend to take control and become overwhelming. • Take a long time to recover from or "snap out" of the negative emotion, creating negative moods. • Fostered by irrational thinking. • Focused on negative self-talk.

Table 8.5.1: Facilitative and Debilitative Emotions by Elizabeth Encarnacion is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Minimizing Debilitative Emotions

Debilitative emotions are fostered by irrational thinking. **Irrational thinking** is when our mind wanders down a path of thought that links things together that are unrelated, or makes us only consider our options in a scenario as "black and white" when there are many possible outcomes that may occur. Irrational thinking can lead to overgeneralizing about the emotions that we are feeling or about the interactions that caused the emotions. In order to overcome debilitating emotions, there are four steps to help minimize them, in order to reduce how much impact they are having over us, so that we can instead manage them effectively both in the moment and in the long term.

Step 1: Monitor Emotional Reactions

What is happening internally at the moment? We should try to name the emotion we are feeling. It is important to be able to gauge the intensity and severity of the emotion we are feeling. By naming the emotion, we are better able to gain self-awareness of what that emotion is doing to us both physically and emotionally. In Goleman's EQ framework, this is the vital stage of *self-awareness*. Before you can change a negative emotional spiral, you must have the EQ to pause and recognize that your physiological changes are signaling a shift into a debilitative state. Does the emotion change over time or does it stay the same? Does it get more intense or does it seem to fade? Are there certain people, places, things, phrases, etc. that bring the emotion back or make the emotion worse? Looking at the example that we provided earlier, if you are aware that you are working with a coworker whom you typically don't get along with, it will be important for you to be aware that you get more easily agitated with them. Maybe you will shorten conversations with them or try to stay busy in areas where they aren't so that you can avoid communication that might make you internalize that annoyance. This allows you to focus on communicating with customers and actively putting a smile on your face in order to hopefully help change your mood internally as well.

Step 2: Note the Activating Event

What caused this emotion to develop inside of me? Does it relate to the setting I am in? The types of people I am communicating with or interacting with specific people? Or maybe its specific topics of conversation that tend to make this debilitative emotion "rise to the surface." One of the authors shares a personal example:

> I have a difficult relationship with my mother that extends back the majority of my life. There are many times when I can remember getting extremely angry in conversations with her, where I have left crying or close to crying because of what was said. When I try to look back at all the times those types of incidents have happened, I might be able to identify what the activating event is that creates these extreme and long-lasting emotions. Once I can make the connection that the topic of conversation around weight or physical features tends to push me into debilitating emotions very quickly, I can then be aware of when those interactions might come up with my mother in order to have a greater sense of control on how I handle them, or if I need to avoid them all together. In the language of CAT, identifying the activating event allows you to predict

what environmental triggers spark an automatic *primary appraisal* of threat or personal loss.

Step 3: Record Self-Talk

Recording our self-talk is an important part of being able to change the internal dialogue and take back control of the way in which we allow that emotion to take up space internally. Going back to the workplace example: If you allow yourself to get aggravated with your co-worker, you might start to hate your job as a whole. While you don't work with this co-worker all the time, you are letting the interactions that you have with them impact your overall experience of the workplace. This might begin to impact your self-concept of your work ethic and your interactions with customers overall. Repeating the internal dialogue of "I hate this place" might perpetuate conflict with customers or co-workers that you don't want to occur. For the author's example, she may feel that she wouldn't get into these arguments with my mother if she lost weight, or if her body looked different in some way, or if she exercised more. She may believe that it is her fault these arguments occur because of the way that she looks. This internal script is the exact phrasing of your *primary appraisal*. Recording your self-talk exposes the hidden, often irrational assumptions your brain is making before your secondary appraisal even begins.



Figure 8.5.1: Day 3 - Callen-Lorde-4196 by Zackary Drucker from The Gender Spectrum Collection.

Step 4: Dispute Irrational Beliefs

This leads us to the final step in minimizing debilitative emotions, which is to dispute irrational beliefs. You are not a "bad person" because you don't get along with all of your co-workers, nor is our author's physical size or shape responsible for the relationship with her mother. When we start to monitor and take specific note of the self-talk that the debilitative emotions are making us feel, we can start to see how irrational those debilitative emotions truly are. Being able to see the logic—or the lack of logic—in our own thought patterns allows us to see that the emotion is taking over control of what we know is true and real. This crucial final step is what CAT calls **cognitive reappraisal**. By disputing your irrational beliefs, you are actively utilizing the EQ skill of *self-regulation*. *You step into the driver's seat of your cognitive processing, dismantle the negative primary appraisal, and rewrite your internal script to change the emotional consequence*. Even being able to read the self-talk that we used as examples earlier showcases the disconnect the thoughts have in response to the interaction that is causing these emotions. That does not mean those emotions are not valid—all emotions are valid —however, in those moments, our emotions are controlling us instead of us controlling our emotions.

Being able to get to a point where we can identify our own irrational beliefs is not always as easy as it sounds, and it is much easier when written into four steps than it is to practice in real-life examples—especially attempting to do it in the moment when the emotions are controlling us. But the idea is to challenge our internal dialogue by asking questions, and as with most things in life, practicing this technique makes us better able to see, recognize, and take back control of these emotions over time.

The four steps in minimizing debilitative emotions are challenging to complete, and require a lot of time, practice, and patience to work through. It is important to remember that becoming a more competent communicator takes time, and "perfection" does

not exist. Once we feel we are at a place where we are continuously remembering to monitor our emotional reactions and to note the events that tend to activate certain debilitative emotions, where we are more aware of our self-talk and how to pinpoint the thoughts and beliefs that are interfering with our lives, we can begin to work on changing our self-talk.

There are many ways we can approach changing our self-talk, but some of the most common advice stems from treating ourselves like we would treat a friend, based on the cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) through self-compassion. Self-compassion essentially means that we are being kind to ourselves—understanding that we are all learning and growing, and with growth comes making mistakes. It is also important to remember that we are all critical of ourselves from time to time, and sometimes our mind does trick us into believing things that are not true about ourselves. Trying to catch negative self-talk in the moment, and either stopping it completely or challenging it, is an important way to stop debilitative emotions from spiraling and allow more facilitative emotions to come forward.

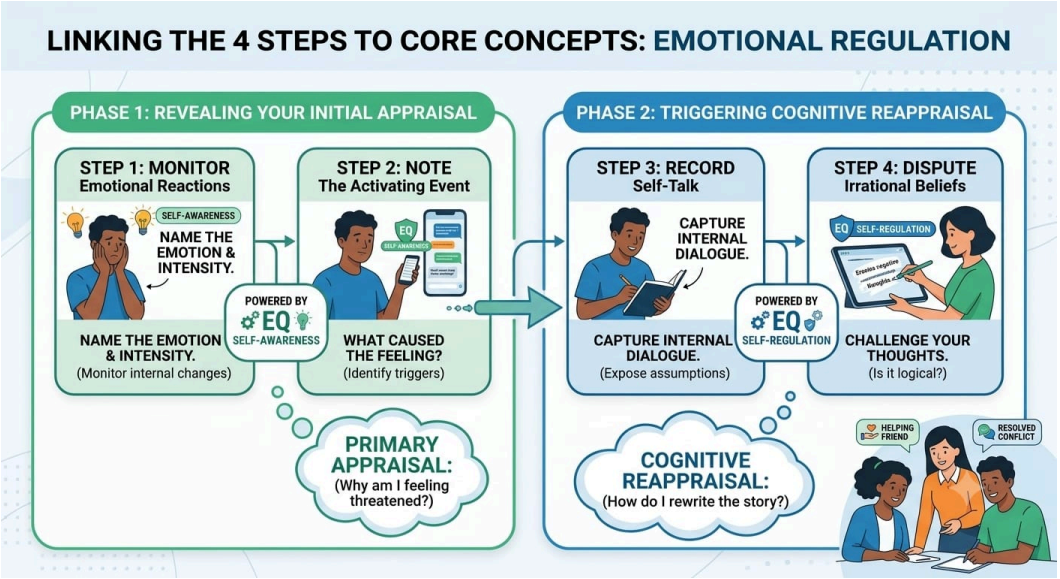


Figure 8.5.2: Linking the 4 Steps to Emotional Core Concepts: Emotional Regulation from a text prompt generated by Google Gemini (2026).

Maximizing Facilitative Emotions

Now that we have looked at ways we can work through overcoming debilitative emotions, it is equally important to learn how we can maximize facilitative emotions. It is important to understand that all emotions live in tandem with one another; while one moment we feel a high level of a positive emotion, in the next moment we could be met with a neutral or negative emotion. When working towards maximizing our **facilitative**, or **positive emotions**, it is important to keep at the forefront three important thoughts: emotions are complex, neutrality in emotions is facilitative, and how culture impacts how facilitative emotions are constructed.

Emotions Are Complex

Emotions are complex aspects of our identities. In the same way we view the intersection of our identities as being the overlapping and interdependent social systems that contribute to our understanding of ethnic and cultural identity, we can view emotions as having the same intersection and interdependence. Emotions do not live in a vacuum, and they are often difficult to distinguish because there are multiple emotional reactions being felt at the same time. Because of these complexities within emotions, it is important to understand that modeling facilitative emotions is going to look different for each person. Research has consistently shown that maximizing facilitative emotions depends strongly on “fit” or the ways in which the strategies to promote facilitative emotions positively connect to a person’s interests, values, strengths, motivation, or needs (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). In order to sustain facilitative emotions, it is important to make sure the strategies being used are ones that connect to the needs and goals of the individual. Choosing activities, exercises, or strategies to promote facilitative emotions that are uniquely satisfying to the individual will help create habitual commitment and increase the likelihood of the facilitative emotion being increased and sustained (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

Neutrality in Emotions Is Facilitative

This also leads to the understanding of what neutrality in emotions are. Neutrality is defined as

> feeling indifferent, nothing in particular, and a lack of preference one way or the other. Note, when we use the term *indifferent*, we do not use it to indicate disliking something because that would imply a negative rather than a neutral reaction. (Gasper, et al., 2019)

This neutral emotion can also occur at the same time as other positive or negative emotions as well, relating back to the complexity that emotions can have within us. Neutral emotions are important to understand and acknowledge within the rollercoaster of emotions so they are not ignored. Oftentimes neutrality can be seen as a lack of emotion, where emotion is defined as the reaction to experiences, and in order to have a reaction, it must be charged as either positive or negative. However, neutrality is often the existence of a more subtle understanding that we do not feel one way or another about our environment, such as the feeling of contentment, or just feeling "OK" versus feeling "good" or "great." Neutrality could have a "range of potential consequences, including helping people cope" with the given environment. As such, neutral emotions are not negative; they are stable in long-term understanding of our mood and personality traits. This harkens back to our definition of facilitative emotions being ones that allow us to progress forward in a positive way (Gasper, et al., 2019). When looking at facilitative emotions and ideas for how we can better foster facilitative emotions, it is important to be mindful and realistic in what facilitative emotions we can achieve. Not every facilitative emotion is going to be high on the "positivity scale" ; being able to acknowledge when we are able to reach a level of neutrality in our facilitative emotion building is an important skill.

Culture Impacts how Facilitative Emotions Are Constructed

Research demonstrates that emotions are social interactions that are created within our interpersonal interactions and our social environments. As you have learned in this book, culture has an important impact on our interpersonal interactions because our social environments are culturally constructed. Emotions also impact and are impacted by our culture as well (Cho et. al, 2019). Geert Hofstede's foundational research in cultural dimensions showcases six prominent ways in which a culture's values, needs, and social behaviors can be analyzed. The six value dimensions include collectivistic and individualistic cultures, where values of individual versus group needs are heightened. Research on emotions has traditionally emphasized intrapersonal and individualized aspects, such as personal self-esteem and our internal dialogue as separate from our interpersonal, communal, communication (Cho et. al, 2019). These ideas showcase the individualistic understanding of emotion as a cultural value, but do not showcase collectivistic understanding. Within collectivistic cultures—such as East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian cultures—emotional values gravitate towards prioritizing group needs as well as emotional well-being (Tsai, 2021). There are many ways in which emotions are similar across cultures (including our physiological responses to emotions) but there are also important ways in which emotional behaviors differentiate, and these differentiations are important to understand in making sure we are creating effective and appropriate interpretations on our emotional response within communication interactions. From a **Cognitive Appraisal Theory** standpoint, our culture acts as the primary software update for our sppraisal filters. An individeual raised in an individualistic culture is taught to appraise a personal achievement with overt pride and outward celebration. Conversely, someone raised in a collectivistic culture might run a primary appraisal on that same achievement and view outward pride as a threat to group harmony, choosing instead a facilitative state of quiet humility. High emotional intelligence requires realizing that cultural display rules fundamentally dictate how we appraise our surroundings.



Figure 8.5.2: Friendship by Chona Kasinger on Disabled and Here

Facilitative emotions are imperative to our mental well-being as individuals as well as our well-being within relationships (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Creating and fostering positive emotions takes time and effort, and while there is no "one size fits all" method to maximizing facilitative emotions, research does show there to be some strategies that are likely to work given commitment and longevity of practice (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006):

- Spend time socializing or doing activities that bring joy.
- Become present-oriented to help enjoy and savor positive emotional experiences.
- Regard challenging situations as opportunities for growth.
- Express gratitude in order to savor positive experiences with others.
- Commit to acts of kindness.
- Identify and use your unique strengths.
- Visualizing ones' best possible self in all aspects.
- Working on personal goals.
- Choose compassion for others, understanding that we all have different experiences that make up who we are, instead of contempt in viewing others as below or beneath us.

Consider This: *Encanto* Connections

Encanto (2021) is a film showcasing the Madrigal family, who live in Columbia. They have been gifted with an enchanted candle and *casita* (house), which they have used to support an enchanted village community. The lineage of Madrigal family members each have a special gift, except Mirabel. Throughout the story, viewers can see facilitative and debilitative emotions at work. To illustrate how we could maximize our facilitative emotions and minimize our debilitative emotions, we will use these characters as an example.

There are many facilitative emotions where the emotions the characters experience are positive and connect to our identities and interests. For instance, the sister relationship between Mirabel and Luisa is one of support and love. The interaction where Mirabel is scared and is asking Luisa about what could be causing the enchanted house to crack, we see that Mirabel's attitude goes from worrying about the house, to focusing on supporting her sister. Through this change in emotions, Maribel is showcasing how to support her sister's development of facilitative emotions through her active listening. By the end of this scene, Luisa relaxes into Maribel and cries, allowing her to break down the emotional walls she had built up.

We see a few instances of debilitative emotions and how they hurt the characters as well. Let's talk about Bruno. Why is Bruno a taboo topic? The Bruno character is vilified because his gift of premonition is seen as creating negative outcomes, although the future is not dictated or guided by Bruno in any way. Bruno is able to experience very big and powerful emotions and experiences a high amount of emotional contagion from the other family members. While many of the family members perceive Bruno's gift as negative, we know that debilitative emotions are fostered through irrational thinking. Had

the family members been aware of the blaming language they used, they could have changed this language and reframed their perceptions of his gift to promote their relationship with Bruno as well as to understand the true meaning of his power. Conversely, Bruno could have stood up for himself and explained how their language and actions were negatively affecting him so that he did not feel that leaving the family was necessary.

The Madrigal family, like many Colombian families, is collectivistic and works together to achieve their goals. Their collectivism and unity is the family's true gift and strength, but without proper communication channels and facilitating emotional growth of each member, this strength can also become their downfall, creating cracks in the foundation of their identity. Through promoting positive communication tools and skills, the family members learn how to overcome these cracks and rebuild a stronger foundation. Luisa should work on communicating the feelings of being burdened by her daily responsibilities and Bruno should find ways to soften harsh realities that will occur. The family could then reframe their beliefs about his powers and it could change the consequences. Both of these two characters could record their self-talk. Luisa and Bruno perpetuated debilitative emotions through the language they used when describing themselves. By being trapped in these negative loops, both characters were suffering from skewed primary appraisals - Luisa appraising any sign of vulnerability as a catastrophic loss of her worth, and Bruno appraising his own protective gift as a permanent threat to his family. Finally, they could dispute irrational beliefs. Strength is not always physical, and Luisa's character was strong even when she was physically weak. Bruno was helping the family even when hiding in the house's walls. Bruno was simply using the gift he was given, and this was not a reflection of his identity. By identifying and using their unique strengths, they made the family stronger. We can follow these steps to help us minimize the debilitative and maximize the facilitative emotions we experience.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some constructive ways you can work towards maximizing facilitative emotions in your own life? Think of three to five specific strategies that you can draw from when debilitative emotions start to form. Spend a week being mindful of your emotions, both facilitative and debilitative, and take notes on what helped you the most during these emotionally charged events.
2. We know that emotions are contagious (emotional contagion). Is there an example you have that shows when you have experienced a positive or negative emotional contagion? Are there ways for us to promote positive emotional contagion? How does this relate to facilitative versus debilitative emotions?

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8.6: Guidelines for Communicating Emotions Effectively

Reflections on Research

Why Some People Are Better at Managing Others' Emotions

Think about the last time a friend was upset and you tried to help them feel better. Maybe you offered reassurance, cracked a joke, or siimply listened. Sometimes these efforts work - and sometimes they don't. A 2024 review study by Niven and colleagues explores exactly this everyday challenge: why some people are more successful than others at regulating the emotions of people the interact with.

The researchers examined dozens of studies on interpersonal emotion regulation, the process of intentionally trying to change how someone else feels. They found that success depends on a combination of factors: personality traits (like empathy), cognitive abilities (such as perspective-taking), and emotional intelligence skills. People who are better at reading others' cues, choosing appropriate strategies, and adjusting their approach in real time tend to be more effective at helping others feel supported, calmer, and more understood. The reveiw also highlights that poor attempts at emotion regulation can backfire, sometimes harming relationships or increasing distress. This research underscores a central idea in interpersonal communication: *emotions are social*, and our ability to influence them play a major role in relationship satisfaction and connection.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of a time when someone successfully helped regulate your emotions. Which personal qualities or communication behaviors made their approach effective?
2. Why might certain emotion-regulation attempts - like giving advice or trying to "fix" the problem - sometimes make people feel worse?
3. Which interpersonal skills (empathy, listening, perspective-taking) do you personally want to strengthen to improve your ability to support others emotionally?

Source: Niven, K., Hughes, D. J., Tan, J. K., & Wickett, R. (2024). *Individual differences in interpersonal emotion regulation: What makes some people more (or less) successful than others?* Social and Personality Psychology Compass.

The ABC Model

We've spent a majority of this chapter looking at the various ways in which we are effected and affected by our emotions. Emotions are powerful parts of our identities; there are many ways in which our emotions positively and negatively impact our life experiences. Being able to distinguish our emotions from one another, anticipating when debilitative emotions may arise, and recognizing the power we hold in order to change our emotional reaction based on our perceptions is the next step in important skills we can add to our toolbox of competent communication.

Psychologists have largely studied the ways in which emotional responses occur within the mind and body. The appraisal theory of emotions demonstrates that emotions arise from how our internal communication responds to an event. More specifically, as we explored through **Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT)**, our brains process every interpersonal event through primary and secondary appraisals. An **appraisal** is our internal communication creating an opinion, interpreting, judging, and responding to an event (Course Hero, n.d.a). When we appraise an event, we are creating an emotion in response based on our beliefs and perceptions. Stress can be a great example of how appraisal works. When we experience stress, there are often times that we can pinpoint what is causing the stress, called the **stressor**. Our perception of the stressor is that it is overwhelming or that it is causing an extraordinary amount of pressure. These judgments of the stressor are creating our emotional reaction to the event itself (Spielman, et al., n.d.a). The event we are experiencing does not cause the emotion: our judgments about the event do. But these judgments are rarely done with complete conscious awareness on our part. The appraisal process is automatic, which is why we can often find ourselves in an emotional state that we can't explain and do not prefer. Interrupting this automatic cycle is the ultimate hallmark of high EQ. But we do have the ability to reappraise our emotion-based judgments. **Reappraisal** is the process of consciously reevaluating the interpretations and responses to events. Our appraisal process is constantly learning and adapting to the environment and can be guided. When we are equipped with skills to actively reappraise situations and contexts

that block our ability to feel productive emotions, we can work to reframe the internal communication and change the thoughts and beliefs into rational ones.

Rational-emotive behavioral therapy is a type of therapy that helps individuals gain communicative skills in the reappraisal process. The framework behind the rational-emotive approach involves trying to gain a deeper understanding of the causes behind emotional reactions. This type of therapy has three guiding principles, which fall under the ABC model. The **ABC model** aims to identify the activating event (A) that causes the irrational belief (B), then to understand and adjust the emotional response, or consequence (C) to better process the information and adjust the emotional outcomes (Turner, 2016). Next, we will walk through the ABC model with examples of how it might play out in our everyday life.

Recognize the Activating Event (A)

We start the ABC model with recognizing the activating event. Sometimes when we are in the middle of experiencing an emotion, we do not stop to isolate what happened beforehand. We can start to recognize this activating event to help us understand where we are emotionally. You may ask yourself:

- What happened right before I noticed the change in my emotional state?
- Who was around me or involved in the event? How did they react or what did they do in the event?
- What was my role in this event?

Answering these questions requires a deep reliance on the EQ component of **self-awareness**. Then it is important to be able to name the emotion we are experiencing. It is important to be able to build up self-awareness and to be able to name and identify our emotions. Pay attention to the way your body reacts to emotions: What are you feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally? Are you sad, frustrated, or angry? Sometimes our physical reactions to these very different emotions can feel the same. Being self-aware and tapping into our emotional intelligence will allow us to fine-tune what we're truly feeling and how we choose to name it. In terms of CAT, you are catching your raw *primary appraisal* in real time before it turns into an uncontrollable behavioral reaction.

For example, in the workplace we tend to mask a lot. Reappraisal is an effective tool to avoid the emotional labor of constant masking. Consider if you have a boss that tends to be insensitive frequently. Once we have made a generalization of someone's actions, it is easy to continue this trend. Once someone acts on our beliefs of what that person's personality traits are we tend to see their actions as fitting into those characteristics, which we call **confirmation bias**.

One of our authors shares her personal example:

> I had a boss once who was very terse in the morning before drinking coffee, yet made comments to me about my morning attitude. I tried to understand why he made these attributions of my behavior and found that I was using confirmation bias, but should have used reappraisal to avoid this trend. I looked first at the activating event itself. I found that in going straight to my computer before a morning greeting, I was in fact supporting his confirmation bias that I was unfriendly in the morning. Not starting with a morning greeting was that activating event. In reflecting on the previous questions, it was easier for me to see, I played many roles in this event. First, I had confirmation bias, so it is easy not to accept that I played a role in his perceptions of my behavior. Second, I was able to name my emotions. It was hurtful and resulted in me feeling defensive.

So why was she mad? This leads to the next step, which is challenging our interpretations of the event.

Challenge the Irrational Beliefs (B)

Once we have isolated the activating event and are able to name our emotion(s), we can start to challenge any beliefs that are proliferating negative emotions, which are called **irrational beliefs**. This term may imply that we are illogical, but in this sense it refers to the loss of connection from our experiences to our understanding (of lack thereof) of those experiences. We can start by being blunt, honest, and logical with ourselves in order to push towards changing our thoughts and behaviors. This is a straightforward request of ourselves, but it is difficult to do. This step is where you actively execute a **cognitive reappraisal**.

When we carry irrational beliefs or view situations in rigid "black and white" terms, our cognitive appraisal filters automatically categorize neutral events as personal threats or catastrophic losses. When we challenge our deeply held beliefs, we can start to make changes where we find it beneficial to. We need to own our feelings. This involves using the language of responsibility. Recall that some language assigns blame, which is not necessarily used intentionally. If we remove "you" language and use "I"

language or “we” language, we can open the door to understanding. We can avoid “but” statements or anything defensive. In Chapter 4, we discussed defensive language in detail, but here we can add that removing defensive language can open the doors to effective communication. We should strive for accurate and authentic conversations, and avoid speaking in generalities, counterfeit emotional language, and patronizing responses. We should focus on owning feelings, or revisiting “I” language. Then we can identify the underlying thought patterns and beliefs that lead us to conclusions about the intent behind the message, the relational dimensions attached to our emotions, and challenging “absolutes.” These will often be reflected as absolutes, such as “I must,” “I should,” or “I cannot.” Possessing rigid expectations of ourselves and others only leads to disappointment, judgment, regret, and anxiety.

For example, consider this statement: ”My roommate makes me so angry! He always eats the food in the refrigerator that I have my name on!” This can be reframed without the absolutes, to give ourselves room for alternative conclusions: "I am really frustrated because the food in the refrigerator I wanted to eat is gone." By removing the absolutes and blame, we open ourselves to understand this could have been unintentional and gives us room to move through the emotion instead of spiraling the emotion or enhancing the negative consequences of that emotion.

Recognize the Emotional Consequences (C)

Often we see our emotions as our own, but our emotions affect others (like with emotional contagion). We can attempt to recognize the consequences for experiencing our emotions. Perhaps we do not want to be seen as “angry” at work or “defensive” with friends. We can start by changing our listening style when we notice activating events occurring. When we are people-oriented listeners, we focus on the relational dimension instead of the circumstances of the moment. Then we can respond sensitively when others communicate their emotions. If our emotions are contagious and we influence each other in multiple dimensions, it is important to ascribe to the policy “treat others the way you want to be treated.” We want validation. When we share our emotional experiences with others, it can allow us to feel vulnerable. We can validate emotional responses of others while respecting boundaries to ensure our relational partners know they are respected. When we reframe or reappraise the situation, we give ourselves room to change our perspectives and our underlying emotions.

There are steps we may take proactively to avoid needing to constantly reappraise. We start by using the language of responsibility from Chapter 4. When we use language that automatically places blame on others, we may become defensive. If we follow the steps of the language of responsibility, we are taking responsibility for our actions and beliefs without blaming others. We can also look at past encounters and figure out if there are patterns that we can avoid. There are times we have irrational thoughts (such as assigning intentionality) we can avoid. When we are faced with similar situations in the future, the emotionally healthy response recognizes failure is a part of life, and that all emotions are necessary (to some extent) but need to be channeled appropriately. By recognizing patterns, we can change our thinking in an attempt to change our negative emotions and channel them in a way that protects ourselves and our relationships. Ultimately, completing the ABC model allows you to master the highest levels of **Emotional Intelligence:** *self-regulation* and *social skill*. By using CAT to intentionally restructure your interal thoughts (B) following an activating event (A), you take total accountability for your emotional consequences (C). This ensures your communication remains competent, supportive, and relationally constructive.



Figure 8.6.1: Emotional Expression Manifested Physically. From *Painting of a man screaming*, by A. Blanco Tejedor, n.d., Shutterstock. Copyright by Shutterstock. Reprinted under royalty-free license.

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8.7: Coping with Challenging Emotions

Ways to Find Support

Throughout this chapter we have explored the variety of ways our emotions can manifest themselves. We have also discussed ways to understand where our emotions stem from both internally as well as 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 control 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 ourselves.

From the perspective of **Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT)**, intense crises like grief or trauma can completely overwhelm our secondary appraisal filters. When we are deeply suffering, we look at our internal resources and might conclude, "*I cannot handle this fallout on my own.*" This is precisely where tapping into your **Emotional Intelligence (EQ)** becomes a life-saver. High EQ allows us to recognize this cognitive limitation. It prompts us to move past superficial masking, lean into self-awareness, and realize that when our internal coping mechanisms are depleted, we must actively alter our environment to find external balance. It can feel impossible to reach out for support or know where we can turn to to find empathy, but expanding your coping network is an extremely important step in being able to cognitively reappraise and cope with these emotions.

Among our basic needs as human beings are social needs: we need to be able to find others who are like us and that we can express ourselves to. During times where 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 our daily life. Finding support comes in many forms, and the kind of support we need in one instance will change to the next. Having the ability to pull from our support resources will allow 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 single person needs to be supported by others throughout our lives. We will be able to be that support for someone else when they need it one day, and provide empathy for their situation.

Some ways in which we may find support in order to help cope with challenging emotions include:

- Find someone we feel safe with. Find friends, family, or loved ones who can be there to listen to us. While it can feel really difficult to reach out, remember that the loved ones we choose to reach out to are honored to be able to help us in such important ways. Verbally processing our thoughts with a safe persona allows us to hear our own self-talk aloud, making it much easier to step back and dispute irrational beliefs.
- Take care of a pet. Being able to care for an animal and feel love from an animal has significant benefits for our mood regulation both mentally and physically. Animals provide safe, judgement-free relational spaces that lower our physiological fight-or-flight triggers, calming our nervous system so we can achieve a more stable baseline state.
- Showcase support. Sometimes being able to be of help to others allows us to feel supported ourselves. Volunteering or providing service can help to strengthen our goals and regulate our mental outlook. This directly uses the EQ component of empathy; by focusing on the emotional well-being of others, we naturally shift our own primary appraisals away from our internal stressors.
- Join a support group. Talking with and listening to other individuals who are going through similar emotions as us is a really humbling way to make sure we know we aren't alone. Witnessing how others successfully use cognitive reappraisal to navigate the exact same hardships gives us a healthy blueprint to mirror, helping us leverage positive emotional contagion.
- Seek medical help. Therapy and counseling can be beneficial for many people in order to not only talk out their thoughts and emotions, but to gain feedback and support in a constructive manner. Clinicians are explicitly trained to help us untangle our automatic primary appraisals and teach us structural EQ habits to manage our emotional states long-term. While many counselors do cost money, there are free and affordable options through colleges and universities, as well as city programs that we can use in order to get the appropriate care we deserve.



Figure 8.7.1: C "Dominique Davis for Disabled and Here" By Dominique Davis on Disabled and Here.

Student Voices:

Right before this class began, I broke off a long-term romantic relationship of mine. The fallout of the breakup was intense, and it affected my other relationships, daily life, and my mental health as a whole. I was skeptical of how this class would play out for me; I've had issues with communication throughout my life, and continue to struggle with my self-worth and verbalizing my emotions when they become too much for me to handle. It was when we reached the emotions chapter that I was able to find a well-paced coping mechanism for my overwhelming emotions. The chapter mentioned a breathing exercise, and I tried my best to practice it even when I wasn't stressed (in order to improve the muscle memory of doing it in times of turmoil). Due to this discovery, I've now been able to take the time to take a step back in intense moments, and focusing on my breathing and reflecting on *why* I feel the way I do has helped my healing process tremendously. I also downloaded an app that helps me log my emotions twice a day, and provides a list of words to accurately describe the way I feel. Due to this class and its materials, I feel lighter, and I'm definitely going to revisit the material often to help me continue to heal.

Madison, Art Major

Tips on Managing Debilitating Emotions in the Moment

Managing debilitating emotions can take a lot of energy. In the moment we don't always have the opportunity to connect with another person. In the meantime, you might find these coping tips helpful.

Just breathe: If you are experiencing a debilitating emotion such as overwhelm or anger, remember to breath. Taking just 1-2 minutes to practice box breathing can help reset your parasympathetic nervous system and help you communicate more calmly.

- **Inhale:** Slowly breathe in through your nose for a count of **4**.
- **Hold:** Gently hold your breath for a count of **4**.
- **Exhale:** Smoothly breathe out through your mouth for a count of **4**.
- **Hold:** Wait with your lungs empty for a count of **4**.

Mindful Avoidance: If you are in a state of a heightened emotion such as anger, it can help to take a time out before communicating. I personally try to avoid communicating with others if I am feeling angry or upset. I might say, "I am angry right now. We can talk when I cool off."

Label the Emotion: When in conversation with another person, it can help to label the emotion. For example, "I am feeling stressed right now, and I might cry." This simple act of labeling and acknowledgement can help us calm down in the moment.

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8.8: Summary and Review

Summary

In this chapter we discussed how to identify psychological, cultural, cognitive, and expressive dimensions of emotions and their impact on interpersonal communication. We covered personality, social, and relational influences on emotional expression and how they impact our perceptions. Specifically, we explored how **Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT)** serves as the internal mechanism behind our emotional reactions, demonstrating that our primary and secondary appraisals of an event - rather than the event itself - dictate how we feel. Emotional intelligence plays a large role in communication competence, and understanding the dimensions of emotional intelligence helps us to achieve our goals. By pairing the cognitive machinery of CAT with the core components of EQ, we gain the power of cognitive reappraisal to actively shift our internal narratives. After reading this chapter you should be able to apply the skills we discussed in order to understand, express, and respond to emotions, and implement strategies like the ABC model to manage or minimize debilitative emotions and how to foster or maximize facilitative emotions. By managing and coping with our emotions during difficult times and using external support networks, we can increase our communication competence.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think that the language used around emotions impacts how that emotion is experienced? For example, using the word “furious” as opposed to “angry”, or “confident” instead of “successful” can impact the physiological or psychological impact of that emotion? How might the specific words we choose alter our *primary appraisal* of an interpersonal event?
2. Is there a time you have used masking (intentional or unintentional) that helped or hindered your communication? How does relying too heavily on masking instead of practicing genuine EQ *self-regulation* contribute to emotional labor and burnout?
3. How do you think the ABC model relates to emotional intelligence and Cognitive Appraisal Theory? Draw a connection between an **Activating event (A)**, your **Beliefs/Appraisals (B)**, and the resulting emotional **Consequences (C)**. Have you had an experience where you used the ABC model to enhance an experience? Are there ways that you can continue to use the ABC model to promote relational and self growth?
4. We know that emotions are not inherently negative as we experience them at all times, but the perception is that we should avoid being “emotional.” Is there a time in your life when you experienced a reaction to being “emotional?” Is there a way for us to change this perception?
5. How do you think social media impacts your emotions? Do you think that you experience emotional contagion from the types of social media you consume? How can you use EQ *self-awareness* to spot negative emotional contagion online before it hijacks your mood?

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9: COMMUNICATION CLIMATE

Learning Objectives

- Define communication climate and describe how it develops.
- Distinguish between supportive and defensive patterns of communication.
- Apply skills to promote confirming communication climates.

In this chapter, we define and explore the basic principles of communication climate. Then, we lay out some strategies for identifying, achieving and responding to supportive and defensive patterns of communication. Lastly, we explore some skills to support confirming communication climates. Understanding climate can help us communicate more purposefully to achieve our interpersonal needs and goals.

9.1: Introduction to Communication Climate

9.2: Confirming and Disconfirming Climates

9.2.1: Confirming and Disconfirming Responses- Well, It Depends!

9.3: Context Can Play a Role in Identifying Confirming and Disconfirming Responses

9.4: Supportive versus Defensive Communication

9.5: Skills to Support Confirming Communication Climates

9.6: Summary and Review

9.7: References

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9.1: Introduction to Communication Climate

Defining Communication Climate

Ever notice that as rain drops from the sky, your mood sometimes drops, too? You might chalk it up to coincidence if you feel meh on a dreary day. Sure, the Carpenters sang, “Rainy days and Mondays always get me down.” Rain can and does put a damper on the mood.

So, too, the “climate” of our interpersonal communication may influence our mood. When someone acknowledges our ideas, we may feel “warm” inside with that positive validation. On the other hand, we might experience a “cold,” empty feeling if our ideas are totally ignored or attributed to someone else. You might think about communication climate as a sort of “interpersonal communication weather report.”

Communication climate is the "overall feeling or emotional mood between people" (Wood, 2015, p. 218). If you dread family get-togethers because there is tension, or you look forward to getting together with friends because you know you will have a good time, you are responding to the communication climate— the overall mood that is created because of the people involved and the type of communication they bring to the interaction.



Figure 9.1.1: Smiles in the street from mom by Sai De Silva on Unsplash

In this chapter, we will define and explore the basic principles of communication climate. Then, we will lay out some strategies for identifying, achieving, and responding to supportive and defensive patterns of communication. Lastly, we will explore some skills to support confirming communication climates. Understanding climate can help us communicate more purposefully to achieve our interpersonal needs and goals.



Figure 9.1.2: Young People in Conversation by Alexis Brown on Unsplash

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9.2: CONFIRMING AND DISCONFIRMING CLIMATES

Messages that Shape Communication Climate

We all experience the realities of confirming and disconfirming responses in interpersonal interactions in our everyday lives. One of our authors shares this example:

> My daughter taught me an important lesson about disconfirming and confirming responses when she was a kindergartener. One Saturday afternoon, I was busy cooking in our apartment's tiny kitchen when she came up to me and started a conversation about wanting to go outside to do something. I kept focusing on what I was cooking on the stove because I did not want the food to burn. I simply replied with "We'll see" before she had even gotten to the end of her request. She tugged on my shirt, looked up at me, and said: "I need you to look at me so I know that you are listening to me. I know that you said, 'We'll see,' but that really means 'no.'" Well, that young girl really caught her mother, a professor of communication, in the midst of giving her different disconfirming responses. What was great about this incident was that she pointed out these disconfirming responses in such a clear, positive way! This is a story that I still share with my interpersonal communication students. Have you had a similar experience?

Let's start by looking at positive and negative climates created by confirming and disconfirming messages. **Confirming climates** occur when we receive messages that show we are valued by others. Conversely, we feel **disconfirming climates** when we receive messages that suggest we are devalued and unimportant. Next, we will examine confirming climates along the dimensions of **attending, affirming,** and **accepting** messages. After that, we will explore negative climates in terms of **disregarding, disparaging,** and **denouncing** messages. Finally, we look at at three types of messages that create confirming and disconfirming climates. Keep in mind that all three types of messages can be conveyed both verbally and nonverbally. Obviously, most of us like to be in confirming climates, because they foster emotional safety as well as personal and relational growth. However, it is likely that our relationships fall somewhere between the two extremes.



Figure 9.2.1: Mom & Son By Saradhi Photography on Unsplash

Confirming Climates

Attending Messages

An **attending message** indicates 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. In fact, sending 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 you will 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 to establishing a positive communication climate.

Affirming Messages

Affirming messages go beyond attending to also convey our interest and concern for the other party. Nodding our head while listening, or laughing appropriately at a funny story are nonverbal affirmations of interpersonal engagement. When your significant other tells you they had a really bad day at work and you respond with, “I’m sorry to hear you had a bad day. Do you want to have some coffee and cake and tell me about it?” you are acknowledging and responding to their 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 comes to you upset, after a fight with their partner. If you respond with, “Wow, I can understand why you are upset” you are endorsing their right to feel upset. When we let people own their emotions and do not tell them how to feel, we are creating supportive climates that provide a safe environment for them to work through their problems.

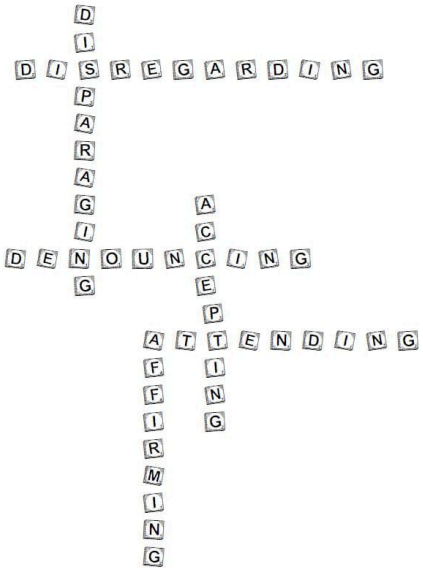


Figure 9.2.2: Confirming-Disconfirming GameTiles by Kim Yee is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Moving from top to bottom, the tiles spell out "disparaging," "disregarding," "denouncing," "accepting," "attending," and "affirming."

Reflections on Research

Does a coach's communication style impact athletic performance?

In *Communication for the win: task benefits of coach confirmation in collegiate athletics*, researchers examined how a coach's use of confirmation, praising past success (**acceptance,** such as acknowledging when an athlete performs well) and positively pushing for skill improvement (**challenge,** such as pushing an athlete to reach their full potential), influences athlete confidence, teamwork, and winning. Surveying 117 Division-I student-athletes alongside their actual team winning percentages, the study found that **challenge** is a massive motivator that directly spikes a player's self-confidence and team chemistry. While just being nice and accepting didn't do much on its own, a powerful combination emerged: coaches who paired high acceptance with high challenge built teams with the highest cohesion. Overall, the study proves that a coach's words don't magically win games on their own, but rather build tight-knit teams that ultimately deliver wins. Go team!

Discussion Questions

1. When someone is coaching, managing, or teaching you, which style do you tend to respond to best, supportive validation (acceptance) or being pushed to fix your mistakes (challenge), and how does that shape your confidence?
2. In a college classroom or a workplace, what are some everyday examples of how a leader can send these confirming messages without sounding generic or insincere?
3. Have you ever experienced a situation where a teacher, boss, or coach tried to challenge you to do better, but it backfired and felt disconfirming (like an attack or personal insult) instead? What minor change in their wording or body language could have turned that interaction into a genuinely confirming message?

Cranmer, G., Ash, E., Fontana, J. L., & Mikkilineni, S. (2020). Communication for the win: Task benefits of coach confirmation in collegiate athletics. *Communication Quarterly*, *68*(5), 539-559.

Disconfirming Climates

While attending, affirming, and accepting have both confirming and disconfirming attributes, disconfirming messages can further be classified as **disregarding, disparaging,** and **denouncing.**

Disregarding Messages

Messages that disregard can be seen as the opposite of attending. D**isregarding messages** convey to the other person that they are unimportant or even nonexistent. In recent times, we have become so attached to our electronic devices that phubbing has become an easy and prolific way of disregarding people in face-to-face interactions. **Phubbing** (**ph**one + sn**ubbing)** occurs when we snub, or ignore, others by giving our attention to our electronic devices. Typical phubbers fail to provide nonverbal cues to communicate recognition, like eye contact or a smile. Additionally, phubbing behaviors are seen as signs of disrespect. We have all experienced phubbing, either from the giving or receiving end, or maybe even both! Now that you're aware of phubbing, you can be more consciously mindful of your intent (Kelly, et al., 2019).

Disparaging Messages

Disparaging messages range from passive-aggressive to downright aggressive, showing discord and disgust. Sometimes, a disparaging message can look like 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]." Behaviors like name-calling, sarcasm, badgering, yelling, taunting, and put-downs attack the person you are communicating with (Bishop et al., 2012). The strategy here is that the disparaging party tries to establish superiority by tearing down the other person's self-worth.

Bullying is a form of aggressive, disparaging conduct that has gotten a lot of 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" (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Physical, in-person bullying has always been a problem. Now, with increased use and reliance on electronic devices, **cyberbullying** has become almost an epidemic. "Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else" (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). It seems many cyberbullies experience the **disinhibition effect** (Suler, 2004). Hiding behind electronic devices, devoid of face-to-face interactions, appears to bring out a side of people that they would otherwise not have the courage to show. As a result, online name-calling, put-downs, etc. in comments and social media forums have spiked in recent years contributing to an uptick in social anxiety as well.

Denouncing Messages

Being denounced is the worst form of disconfirmation. When we are **denounced**, we are excluded, banished, or shunned on purpose. Most of us have probably experienced this (from either the giving or receiving end) at one time or another. According to Parramore (2014), being denounced hurts even more than being bullied. At least when we're bullied, we're receiving some kind of attention/feedback, albeit negative. When denounced, we are ostracized and made to feel nonexistent—not even worth the effort to be bullied. Experiences can range from getting the silent treatment from an angry parent to ghosting or getting ghosted by "friends," to being outright stonewalled by your significant other. The person denouncing is exercising almost abusive power over the other person by purposely excluding them and making them feel diminished.

When too many disconfirming messages are being 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 rather escalate whatever conflict already exists.

Student Voices: Parenting and Communication Climate

The last couple of days have been a bit challenging for my kids and I. When it comes to my family, I currently use Control and Superiority. As a kid growing up in a single-parent household, we had a routine that usually involved mom telling us what to do and we just did it... We would mope and groan, but we did it and if it was not to her standards, we would do it again. I did not really realize that I had adopted the same behaviors and interactions with my kids. And because of those behaviors, my communication with my kids was limited and not something they really looked forward to. Repeating the cycle and being a single parent myself, I felt like I had to constantly be monitoring them and making sure they were taking steps toward their progressions in life, but for some reason, they hadn't been.... until this experiment.

I started to compliment them more on things they were doing. I would laugh more at their jokes; I sat and watched their shows with them and asked them questions about them and let them explain the content we were watching at that time. I showed them some old shows that were similar and we bonded over some music. Then I would give them some space so I would not overwhelm them. I noticed that their demeanor changed with me. My eldest son, Nate, popped into my room a bit more to see if I was ok, because I was doing some work for this class. Instead of asking the kids for help in taking out the trash, I went to do it myself and my son Xavier noticed and came over to grab the trash bag himself and threw it out. Before he wouldn't have given it a second thought, because I almost used to command help and attention from them because in my eyes they "hadn't done anything all day!" It really took a deep toll on them. We sat down and had a serious talk about their futures, and I mostly asked questions and let them speak freely about the plans they have for themselves. I offered help and words of encouragement. I apologized for being a tyrant, making sure that I only had the best of intentions... also I didn't know it would backfire on me so badly! lol. My daughter came up with her own time frame and encouraged the boys to do the same. Now they are betting to see who finishes their goals first.

I feel a sense of relief.... I was adhering to the lessons and pressures I was taught to endure as a kid growing up... and once I had my first child, I was seen as a kid growing up with my kid. My "life was over..." or so I was told. But this interaction washed over me and calmed my expectations. I still believe in hard work, but now I know that if I can just be more supportive, be patient, actively listen and offer help, life doesn't have to be so stressful, we can just learn to live it better when we work together.

Anonymous



Figure 9.2.3: Worthlessness by John Hain from Pixabay. The man's figure is made up of word such as "ignored," "undeserving," "devalued," "insigificant," and other synonyms for "worthless."

9.2.1: Confirming and Disconfirming Responses- Well, It Depends!

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9.2.1: Confirming and Disconfirming Responses- Well, It Depends!

It is important to note that many behaviors may be interpreted differently—as disconfirming at one end of the continuum or as confirming at the other end of the continuum. Sometimes cultural norms play a 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 his 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 on the part of someone outside of Japanese culture.

You might be familiar with a response that sometimes comes up in interpersonal interactions known as a **tangential response.** This occurs when the speaker briefly acknowledges a person's contribution to a conversation, but then immediately changes the direction of the discussion. Why is this a potentially a disconfirming response? After all, the person is acknowledged. The conversation partner may feel disconfirmed because the gist of what they said was not addressed in any way. The speaker changed the topic and basically ignored the individual's contribution. The speaker's comment was irrelevant to the topic that had been brought up by the conversation partner. In our Communication classroom discussions, we have sometimes used a tangential type of response in facilitating classroom discussions. We use a tangential response because we want to acknowledge a student's question or comment, but we may need to move the discussion on because of time. We will typically affirm a student's question or comment by thanking them by name and telling them that we appreciated their contribution, but that we must move on to the next topic due to time. We do our best to make sure that a student is heard and acknowledged even if we must move the discussion along. (By the way, our Interpersonal Communication students usually smile and acknowledge my affirming tangential"response after we have covered the chapter on communication climate!) Our students understand that we use tangential responses as a way to keep the class discussion going.

So, it is important to note that different communication behaviors may have more than one intended message and, in turn, have more than one possible interpretation. The continuum shown in Figure 9.2.1.5 is a visual representation of how we can slide back and forth from disconfirming responses to confirming responses in our interpretation of messages. 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.

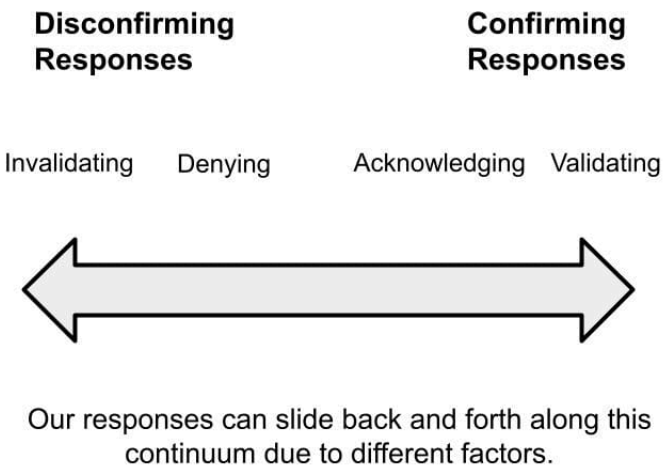


Figure 9.2.1.5: Disconfirming Responses and Confirming Response Continuum by Armeda C. Reitzel CC BY-NC-SA 4.0



Figure 9.2.1.6: Frustrated by Robin Higgins from Pixabay



Figure 9.2.1.7:U

A person might perceive a response by 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 be somewhat flexible in interpreting what a person might mean because there could be some differences in communication style and strategies.

Here are some examples of communication behaviors that could be regarded as disconfirming at times, but they could also be seen as confirming in other communication interactions. As stated earlier, “Well, it just depends!”

- One conversation partner gives no overt response to the other. That person is not acknowledged verbally or nonverbally.
  - Disconfirming interpretations of this behavior might be interpreted by the receiver as:
    - “I feel totally ignored.”
    - “I am a ‘nonentity.’”
    - “I am not worth recognizing.”
    - “I do not even warrant a negative response.”
  - On the other hand, that same behavior could have a confirming interpretation attached to it:
    - “What I said or did was best left without acknowledgement.”
    - “Maybe this was a ‘face-saving’ strategy on the part of my conversation partner(s).”
- 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.
    - “What I have to say is insignificant.”
    - “My conversation partner’s ideas are more important than mine.”
    - “I am not worth listening to.”
    - “My conversation partner jumps right into what I am saying to take “center stage” and all of the attention and dismiss my contributions.”
  - That same “interrupting behavior” could also be interpreted in a confirming way.
    - “Wow, we are both on the same page! We are thinking alike!”
    - “My conversation partner is in sync with what I have to say and how I am saying it.”
    - “I have piqued the interest and enthusiasm of my conversation partner so much that they want to jump into the conversation.”

- One conversation partner gives the other mixed verbal and nonverbal signals or is ambiguous in their message to them.
  - When meanings are vague or when the verbal and nonverbal cues contradict each other, disconfirming interpretations might include:
    - "My conversation partner is lying to me. They say one thing verbally but another thing nonverbally."
    - "My conversation partner is not being transparent or truthful with me."
    - "My conversation partner is purposely trying to confuse me so I lose my focus."
  - Sometimes this same vague or ambiguous message could be seen as affirming behavior, such as:
    - "I know that my conversation partner needs time to think about what is being said."
    - "My conversation partner needs time to figure out what their viewpoint or answer is."
    - "My conversation partner may be engaging in some face-saving behavior at the moment."
    - "I know that the answer is really 'no' even though that is not what my conversation partner is saying with their words. They are trying to lighten the 'no' by using the word 'maybe' or the phrase 'We'll see.'"
- One conversation partner changes the topic.
  - This last example can leave a person feeling disconfirmed. Possible interpretations may include:
    - "I feel totally ignored."
    - "I am a 'nonentity.'"
    - "I am not worth recognizing."
    - "I do not even warrant a negative response."
  - Yet there could be other ways to interpret this communicative behavior that actually can be seen as confirming.
    - "What I said or did was best left without acknowledgement."
    - "Maybe this was a 'face-saving' strategy on the part of my conversation partners."

What does all of this mean? It suggests that there may be different ways to perceive and interpret communication that may leave one conversation partner thinking that they are being disconfirmed while another might see that same behavior as a positive, supportive behavior. Culture is a key factor in determining these differing perceptions of the same verbal and nonverbal cues. The concepts of **high-context** communication and **low-context** communication play a critical role here. Having a clear understanding of context can help you become a more effective communicator by lowering the chances of miscommunication and misunderstandings.



Figure 9.2.1.8: Feedback by Mohamed Hassan from Pixabay

Enhancing your Knowledge



Figure 9.2.1.4: People first Collage on CDC is in the Public Domain

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) 1 in 4 adults in the United States experience some type of disability. In the past, people with disabilities were segregated into different classrooms and separate schools. We've come a long way from that to mainstream students with disabilities into the general education classrooms. As a result, we're teaching children from a young age to be inclusive and accept people of all abilities. Even still, people sometimes unintentionally use words and phrases that are insensitive and do not promote dignity, respect, or understanding for folks with disabilities. Unintentional or not, it sends disconfirming messages of disrespect all the same.

Table 9.2.1.1: CDC Recommendations for "People-First" Language

Tips	Use	Do not Use
Emphasize abilities, not limitations	Person who uses a wheelchair Person who uses a device to speak	Confined or restricted to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound Can't talk, mute
Do not use language that suggests the lack of something	Person with a disability Person of short stature Person with cerebral palsy Person with epilepsy or seizure disorder Person with multiple sclerosis	Disabled, handicapped Midget Cerebral palsy victim Epileptic Afflicted by multiple sclerosis
Emphasize the need for accessibility, not the disability	Accessible parking or bathroom	Handicapped parking or bathroom
Do not use offensive language	Person with a physical disability Person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability Person with an emotional or behavioral disability, a mental health impairment, or a psychiatric disability	Crippled, lame, deformed, invalid, spastic Slow, simple, moronic, defective, afflicted, special person Insane, crazy, psycho, maniac, nuts

Avoid language that implies negative stereotypes	Person without a disability	Normal person, healthy person
Do not portray people with disabilities as inspirational only because of their disability	Person who is successful, productive	Has overcome their disability, is courageous

Discussion Questions/ Journal Prompts

1. Drawing on your past experiences, what have you learned from working with people of all abilities, whether in the classroom, workplace, or another context?
2. Disabilities are not always “visible.” One of our authors shares a personal example: "My mom was a cancer patient who was weakened by her chemo treatment. As a result, she was able to get a disabled parking placard. Upon first glance, some people thought she was cheating the system and would say unkind things to her." What can we do to create a safe space/confirming climate in situations where we are not aware or privy to this information?
3. Describe a situation where you had unintentionally created a disconfirming situation involving a person who has a disability. Reflect on your verbal and nonverbal messages and discuss what you think went wrong.

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9.3: Context Can Play a Role in Identifying Confirming and Disconfirming Responses

High- versus Low-Context Communication

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall applied the concept of **context** to different cultures and how people communicated. He introduced the idea of **high-context cultures** and **low-context cultures** (Hall, 1976).

So what is context and why is it important to interpersonal communication? The Department of State's resource titled *So You're an American? A Guide to Answering Difficult Questions Abroad* provides a good definition of context in communication between people from different cultures:

> Context literally means "with text"—it's all of the information surrounding what is being said, from the setting to the people involved and their standing within a given culture. The context of any interpersonal exchange can impact much of what is said and meant. Cultural norms regarding context vary greatly. In many ways, these cultural differences related to context influence how people communicate. (Foreign Service Institute, n.d.)

High-context communication typically occurs when, because of common history, a group of people have shared meanings, routines, and rituals. Because of this, communication tends to be indirect and implicit, and people rely on their intuition in interpreting what is being said and not said. Nonverbal behavior takes a central role in communication in high-context interactions.

Low-context communication occurs when messages must be direct and explicit because there is a lack of shared meaning. Ideas are expressed by individuals verbally with a good amount of explanation and reasoning. Things must be stated in an articulate, unambiguous manner without relying on intuition because there is little or no perceived common history.

In-Groups versus Out-Groups

This idea of high-context and low-context communication can be used to discuss the characteristics of groups. An **in-group** is a social group that people identify with and feel that they belong to. Members share the interests, narratives, and language (both verbal and nonverbal) of the in-group. The members of an in-group would typically communicate with each other toward the high context end of the high-context and low-context continuum.

An example of an in-group is Major League Baseball (MLB) fans. Members of the MLB fan in-group most likely know quite a bit about the history, statistics, language, and logos of the sport, especially for the team that they support and root for. One of our authors provides an example:

> I remember an informative speech that a student gave on the history of the San Francisco Giants in my public speaking class. They delivered a well-organized speech in which they did a great job of outlining and explaining the history of the team. Since I am a big fan of major league baseball, I understood all of the lingo and examples that they used in their speech. I was reminded that I was a member of the MLB fan in-group when several of the students in the audience asked "What is an 'RBI'?" and "Could you explain what a 'tablesetter' and a 'southpaw' are?" I had understood what the speaker was referring to, but the students in the class who did not identify as major league baseball fans had no clue about what was being talked about when these terms were used. Those students were part of the out-group and did not share the same knowledge that the speaker and I had about baseball. The speaker and I both understood the high-context aspects of the informative speech. The students who were not baseball fans needed a more low-context approach to understand the speaker's message and feel confirmed as audience members interested in learning more about the San Francisco Giants.

The High Context–Low Context Communication Continuum

Context plays a major role in our interpretation of the communication climate of a situation and whether we feel confirmed or disconfirmed by our conversation partner. High-context communication and low-context communication can be depicted at the opposite ends of a continuum, as shown in Figure 9.3.1. An accessible text version of the infographic is linked in the figure

caption.

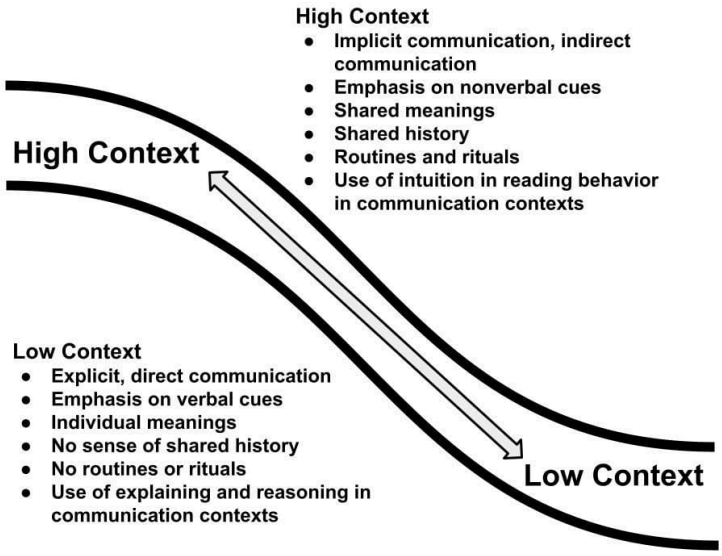


Figure 9.3.1: The High Context–Low Context Communication Continuum by Armeda C. Reitzel is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0An accessible text version is provided here: High Context-Low Context Communication Continuum with Explanations

How might a person from a high-context culture or in-group view the direct, explicit, detailed verbal communication style of someone using low-context communication? They might feel that the low-context person is talking down to them because they do not need all of that explanation or detailed instructions. They might think: “Why does that person think that I don’t get it? Do they think I can’t figure it out? Do they think that I am stupid? Do they not trust me?” These interpretations certainly lead to feelings of disconfirmation.

A person from a low-context culture could also experience feelings of disconfirmation when interacting with someone who is from a high-context culture or in-group. They might view the high context communicator as evasive, ambiguous, deceitful, and maybe even dishonest. They might think: “Why is this person so vague in their responses? Are they being lazy or sneaky? Maybe they just don’t get it. I just don’t know what they want or need. Why don’t they get to the point?”

High- and Low-Context Communication Interactions

As you can see, context can be a powerful factor affecting how people feel about an interpersonal interaction. In reality, most of us go back and forth between low-context and high-context communication all day long in our interpersonal interactions. Think about Figure 9.3.2, which shows a few examples of high-context and low-context culture (an accessible text version is linked in the figure caption). Then think about different examples of communication interactions that you have had today and consider where you might plot them along the high context–low context continuum.

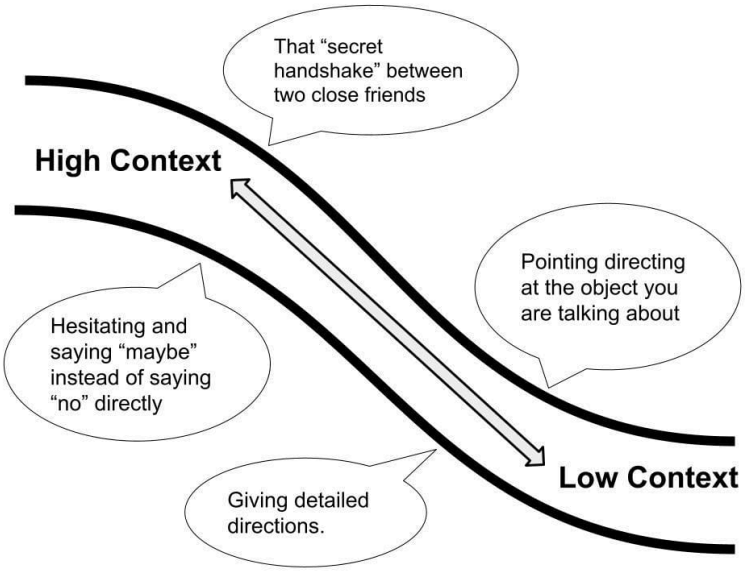


Figure 9.3.2: The High-Context and Low-Context Continuum with Examples by Armeda C. Reitzel is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0An accessible text version is provided here: High-Context and Low-Context Continuum with Examples

Here is an example for you to think about as you reflect on your communication interactions. Let's say your professor tells you to: "Write an essay about communication climate," and that's all they say. For many students, that may be considered very vague, ambiguous communication because no details or direct instructions were given for guidance. The directive could be interpreted as a disconfirming response by those students because they do not know what the expectations are nor how they will be graded. On the other hand, let's say that some of the students in the class have taken multiple classes from that professor and know what the expectations are because of their previous experiences. They know the number of pages required, how to organize the five-paragraph essay, how much description and analysis to go into, how many specific sources to cite in APA 7 Style, etc. They already have a good idea of what the professor is looking for in a paper on communication climate without the professor having to go into details about their one-sentence direction: "Write an essay about communication climate." For these students, they understand the implicit high-context directive. It would not be seen as a disconfirming response to them.

As stated earlier, high-context communication involves shared communication norms within an in-group because of familiarity and a common history. Think about some in-groups you belong to: your work group, different circles of friends, and your family. Because of shared experiences, you may even develop your own jargon or slang. This can certainly happen within a family. Families often have their own words and phrases for things that would confuse someone outside of that household. One of our professors provides this example:

> Our minister's wife came over to babysit my very young daughter one evening. When I returned home, the minister's wife was very concerned about something that my daughter kept repeating over and over during the evening: "Fire. Fire. Fire." I was confused that the minister's wife did not understand what she was saying. Why? Because I knew that my daughter had not been saying "fire." She had been saying "fier" as in "paci**fier**," her word for her pacifier. My daughter's communication was clear to me because we all understood what she meant within our family culture, but to someone outside of the family, her communication was unclear. Being a Communication professor, I reflected on this incident because it was a great example of how high-context communication within a family could lead to a misunderstanding by someone outside of the family. After that, I gave my babysitters a list of words and phrases that my daughter might say that were particular to our family communication patterns. I used a low-context way of informing our babysitters about our high-context family communication style. That low-context glossary of my family's vocabulary seemed to do the trick!

High-and-Low Context Activity

Let's explore high- and low-context communication within an in-group and between an in-group and an out-group.

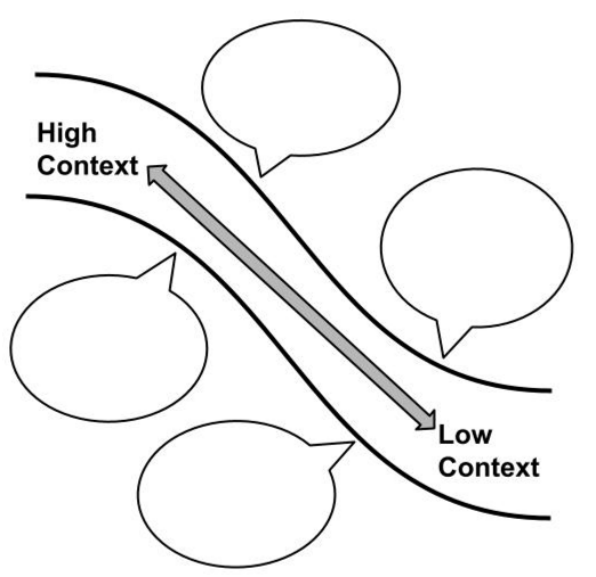


Figure 9.3.3: The High-Context and Low-Context Continuum Fill in by Armeda C. Reitzel is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0Reflection ActivityNow that we have gone over high and low context, let's explore them a bit further and consider the ways in which our identities and culture influence our daily communication. Over the next few days/week, pay attention to your communication interactions and note the differences between how you communicate with members of your in-group versus out-group members.Bring to mind one group you identify with (Dodgers fans versus Cubs fans, Bruins versus Trojans, marching band, musical theater, engineers, accountants, Red Cross volunteers, student government members) and write it down in your first journal entry. Next, provide examples of high-context communication within your group when you interact with each other as compared to using low-context communication when interacting with others outside of your group.Using Figure 9.3.3, plot your examples of high- and low-context communication along the continuum.Pay attention to the different contexts you use with people you have relationships with. Describe how you use high and/or low context in your interactions within three different relationships.

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9.4: Supportive versus Defensive Communication

Six Ways to Understand Communication Climate



Figure 9.4.1: Migration by Capri23auto from Pixabay

Thoughts on Theory: Climate Theory

How Climate Theory Explains the Vibe Between You and Someone Else

Think about the last time you held something back in a conversation. Maybe you had a question but didn't ask it. Maybe you disagreed but stayed quiet. Maybe you wanted to share something personal and decided against it at the last second. Chances are, it wasn't because you lacked the words — it was because something about that moment told you it wasn't safe. That feeling has a name: **communication climate**.

Climate is the emotional tone of a relationship — the invisible force that determines whether two people feel free to be honest with each other or compelled to self-protect. It lives in the small moments: how someone responds when you share bad news, whether a silence feels comfortable or loaded, whether you leave a conversation feeling closer or more guarded. And unlike the weather, it is not something that simply happens to us. We build it together, one exchange at a time. To see this play out in a vivid, recognizable way, watch this clip from The Office(opens in new window), where a single broken promise collapses the trust and the climate of an entire group in minutes.

Jack Gibb (1961), argues that communication environments exist on a spectrum from **defensive** to **supportive**. In a defensive climate, people feel evaluated and controlled — so they guard themselves, say less, and take no risks. In a supportive climate, people feel valued and heard — so they engage honestly and collaborate freely.

Climate Theory's central insight: the emotional tone of a relationship is not one person's responsibility. Both people either raise or lower the safety of their connection through the communication choices they make every day (Poole, 1985). A single moment of genuine curiosity, or one choice to respond with empathy instead of defensiveness, can shift a climate — sometimes permanently.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever unintentionally created a defensive climate in a relationship- through sarcasm, dismissiveness, or shutting down when things got vulnerable? What do you think you communicated to the other person, and what would you do differently now that you understand how climate works?
2. Think of a close relationship in your life — a friend, a partner, a parent, a sibling. Would you describe its communication climate as more *defensive* or *supportive*? Identify two or three specific behaviors — things one or both of you actually say or do — that create that emotional tone.

3. Do you think a defensive climate can ever be fully repaired? What would that take?

Gibb, J. R. (1961). Defensive communication. *Journal of Communication, 11*(3), 141–148.

Poole, M. S. (1985). Communication and organizational climates: Review, critique, and a new perspective. In R. D. McPhee & P. K. Tompkins (Eds.), *Organizational communication: Traditional themes and new directions* (pp. 79–108). Sage.

Our natural instinct when we feel threatened is to become defensive. As a defensive communicator, we focus on protecting ourselves and our interests, which is not necessarily a bad thing as we must learn to stand up for ourselves. Unfortunately, defensiveness is usually a negative cycle that creates defensiveness in others and causing conflicts to escalate. For example, defensive behaviors, such as rolling the eyes, not listening, making excuses, or blaming others can cause your communication partner to argue back louder, walk away, blame you back, and gunnysack (a non-productive conflict tactic where one saves up or "gunnysacks" all their complaints until they burst with anger, spilling all their grievances at once) all sorts of other issues to "make a mountain out of a molehill." And we have all been in the position before where the more defensive we become, the less we are able to communicate effectively.

Conversely, supportive climates create more calm and productive communication outcomes. This allows for communicators to better focus on the intent and meanings of messages. In 1965, psychologist Jack Gibb came up with six pairs of supportive and defensive behaviors to help provide a better 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. Here, we examine each pair and consider its potential behaviors and outcomes.

Description versus Evaluation

Description

- Description: Neutral facts that avoid any "loaded" words or judgments.
- Example: "I feel left out when you guys go to the mall without me."
- Possible interpretation: The recipient knows exactly how you feel about what is bothering you. Using the I-message doesn't place blame and communicates an openness for calm discussion.

Evaluation

- Description: Statements containing a tone of accusation, blame, and/or judgment.
- Example: "You guys always abandon me and leave me out when you go to the mall."
- Possible interpretation: Recipient feels attacked and judged for something that may have been unintended and misinterpreted.

Collaboration versus Control

Collaboration

- Description: The parties involved are working with each other toward a win-win situation. Everyone's voice and ideas are just as important as the next person's.
- Example: "Let's go around and share what has worked for you and what has not worked for you."
- Possible interpretation: Everyone involved feels included, respected, and productive.

Control

- Description: Speaker conveys a "know it all" attitude showing little or no interest in the receiver's needs and ideas.
- Example: "I'm right. You're wrong. We do it my way, or we don't do it at all!"
- Possible interpretation: Recipients may feel hostile, competitive, and disrespected toward the speaker which may result in reluctance and uncooperativeness.

Straightforwardness versus Manipulation

Straightforwardness

- Description: Direct, candid, unambiguous, open, and honest
- Example: “You didn’t get a raise this quarter, because while you made more sales, the volume of those sales has been down.”
- Possible interpretation: The recipient may still be disappointed but knows exactly how and why the raise did not come through.

Manipulation

- Description: To exploit, maneuver, or mastermind with hidden intentions
- Example: “If you put in more hours and effort like John, you might have seen a raise this quarter.”
- Possible interpretation: Recipients may feel judged that John did a better job and that his/her efforts were not appreciated. Recipients may also feel defeated and unmotivated.

Empathy versus Indifference

Empathy

- Description: Walking a mile in the other person’s shoes and trying to relate to and support the other person
- Example: “I understand you’re going through a rough time. I hope that extending the deadline for you will help relieve some of the stress and pressure you must be feeling.”
- Possible interpretation: Recipient feels compassion, understanding, and even relief.

Indifference

- Description: Apathetic, detached, and aloof; general lack of concern for the other person.
- Example: “Everyone’s got problems! If you can’t meet the deadline, you’ll just have to pay the penalty.”
- Possible interpretation: Recipient feels unimportant and insignificant.

Equality versus Superiority

Equality

- Description: A sense of fairness, justness, and impartiality; everyone has the same chance.
- Example: “I remember struggling when I first started, too. It’s going to take some time, but let me help you.”
- Possible interpretation: Recipients may feel validated, respected, and capable.

Superiority

- Description: Communicating a sense of dominance; having an upper-hand
- Example: “I’ve shown you how to do this a million times! Move over! Let me finish it!”
- Possible interpretation: Recipients may feel inept, inadequate, defensive, and angry.

Flexibility versus Certainty

Flexibility

- Description: Open-minded and show a willingness to adapt to something better
- Example: “I’d love to learn how we can use this new technology to work smarter, not harder.”
- Possible interpretation: Recipients may feel encouraged to investigate, share, and try new things.

Certainty

- Description: Overconfidence that “I’m right. You’re wrong.” No other input is needed.
- Example: “I’ve done this a million times. This is the only way to fix it!”
- Possible interpretation: Recipient feels unwelcome, unvalued, and unwilling to put themselves out there.

Activity: Reframe the Vibe and Turn Defensive into Supportive Communication

Directions: Let's try changing the vibe. Randomly choose a scenario and use one of Gibb’s supportive communication strategies discussed in section 8.2 to reframe the situation.

Scenario 1

- Person 1: "Why do I have to nag you every time to unload the dishwasher?"
- Person 2: "Why do you have to nag me when you know I’ll eventually get to it?"

Scenario 2

- Person 1: "Why can’t you ever get ready on time when we go out to dinner with my parents?"
- Person 2: "Well, last time we went out with my family I had to wait for you to get home from work and we ended up stuck in traffic for an extra hour!"

Scenario 3

- Person 1: "Why don’t you ever clean your room like I ask you?"
- Person 2: "I know I’m supposed to keep my room clean, but I work two jobs and I just don’t have the time or energy to keep my room clean."

Scenario 4

- Person 1: "You got home so late we missed our dinner reservation! Why didn’t you call?"
- Person 2: "I know, but I got caught up at work with a big project and forgot."

Scenario 5

- Person 1: "The computer has been running super slow since you last used it!"
- Person 2: "Why do you always blame me when something goes wrong with the computer?"

Scenario 6

- Person 1: "When can we leave?"
- Person 2: "I just want to stay until after the award presentation."
- Person 1: "I really want to leave now!"
- Person 2:" Come on! Just wait until after the awards!"

Discussion Questions

1. What are some adjectives that come to mind when you hear the word **defensiveness**? What are some adjectives that come to mind when you hear the word **supportiveness**?
2. Were there supportive strategies you found easier to use than others? If so, what were they and why were they easier for you to use?
3. Share a scenario you think would have benefited from one of Gibb’s supportive communication strategies.

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9.5: Skills to Support Confirming Communication Climates



Figure 9.5.1: Raised Fists by Chona Kasinger from Disabled and Here

Receiving and Giving Feedback

How we respond to negative feedback, criticism, and corrections can reveal a lot about who we are. Do we respond defensively, or do we receive criticism and feedback graciously and with an open mind? Responding negatively to feedback communicates that we are closed-minded and unwilling to learn and change. On the other hand, thoughtfully receiving feedback shows a willingness to adapt, change, and grow.

In this section, we're going to learn how to respond non-defensively to feedback and criticism, how to manage frustration while remaining professional, and how to provide positive feedback as well.

Responding Non-defensively to Feedback and Criticism

We need to reflect on how we react to criticism from others and develop our skills in responding in a constructive way. That requires us to take the time and make the effort to process the feedback that others give us in different situations. According to an article titled "The Right Way to Respond to Negative Feedback" (Eurich, 2018):

> We can't act on feedback until we truly understand it. Especially when we hear something new, it's usually a good idea to ask a few trustworthy sources whether they've noticed the same behavior. Not only does this give us more detail about what we are doing to create a certain impression, it helps us avoid overcorrecting based on one person's opinion. After all, as Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius stated, "Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact."

First off, set your defenses aside and engage your active listening and empathy skills. For empathy, keep in mind that it may be just as difficult for the person giving the feedback as it is for you to receive it. Active listening is important to prevent you from jumping to conclusions and becoming defensive. Additionally, putting defensiveness aside, you may learn something helpful and constructive. Upon receiving feedback, whether in person or in writing, here are some helpful strategies to help you react and acknowledge the feedback.

Use the Feedback WALLET

Consider turning those potentially negative initial reactions to feedback into an opportunity for reflection, planning, and future action. Keep the acronym WALLET in mind, and pull out these helpful suggestions from your "feedback WALLET" to use: **W**ait,

Avoid attacking back, **L**isten, **L**earn, **E**ngage in planning, and **T**ake control:

1. **Wait**. Take a moment to digest the information before making any response or decision. Give yourself some time to hear, review, and contemplate the information that is being shared with you. Giving yourself some time to think about and reflect on the feedback can help you avoid jumping to conclusions. This is possibly one of the most important tips to take out of your "feedback WALLET" to use.
2. **Avoid attacking back**. It's human nature to become defensive when engaged with something unpleasant, like receiving feedback. Listen with an open mind and resist the urge to rebut every point of "criticism" from your communicating partner.
3. **Listen**. Focus your attention and energy on actively listening to the feedback. Identify the key points being made. Ask for clarification and/or examples to help you better understand the messages being shared with you.
4. **Learn**. Reframe the feedback and criticism as an opportunity to learn and grow. Even if you don't agree with the feedback, there is always something to be learned from how others perceive you.
5. **Engage in planning**. Don't make excuses. Make a plan instead! Start making a plan of action to correct the issue or work towards a solution. This shows your initiative for problem-solving.
6. **Take control**. "Responsibility" is not the same as "fault." It's easy for us to place blame on others or external circumstances. Taking responsibility means taking control of your behavior and responses. Ask yourself, "What can I do differently to get the desired response/results?" By doing this, your perception changes to one of action and looking for opportunities, rather than self-pity and playing the blame game.

Stay Clear of Negative Responses

1. **Don't take it personally.** Reframe the feedback and criticism as an opportunity to learn and grow. Even if you don't agree with the feedback, there is always something to be learned from how others perceive you. For example, portray yourself as a gracious recipient of feedback by responding with, "Thank you for taking the time to notice my work and share your thoughts with me."
2. **Don't react right away.** It's human nature to become defensive when engaged with something unpleasant, like receiving feedback. Listen with an open mind and resist the urge to rebut every point of "criticism" from your communicating partner. Ask for time to process and digest the feedback when necessary.
3. **Don't argue back.** Take this opportunity to listen and learn. Sometimes receiving feedback that seems to conflict with our self-image can make us feel threatened. In this case, rather than respond with something like, "You're out of your mind! I don't do that!" It's quite ok for you to use an "I-message": "I feel surprised that you see my work rushed and sloppy. What can you suggest to help me improve on this?"
4. **Don't point fingers and blame others.** Remember "responsibility" is not the same as "fault." It's easy for us to place blame on others or external circumstances. Taking responsibility means taking control of our behavior and responses. Ask yourself, "What can I do differently to get the desired response/results?" By doing this, your perception changes to one of action and looking for opportunities, rather than self-pity and playing the blame game.
5. **Don't make excuses.** Start making a plan of action to correct the issue or work towards a solution. This shows your initiative for problem-solving.

Practice Positive Responses

1. **Be grateful.** Simply thank your communication partner for taking the time to offer their feedback. By thanking your partner, you are not only acknowledging their comments, but you are also showing your open-mindedness.
2. **Ask questions.** It's OK to ask for clarification if you don't understand what's going on or why/how the negative feedback came about.
3. **Paraphrase** and restate what you understood to have heard to ensure that you interpreted the feedback correctly.
4. **Ask for help.** Ask for one or two simple steps that can nudge you towards improvement.
5. **Aim for mutual satisfaction.** Are the proposed corrections mutually agreed upon? As we know from experience, if one side is not happy with something, that side will not follow through.
6. **Follow-up to follow-through.** Hold yourself accountable and schedule a follow-up. That shows your communicating partner your willingness to learn and improve. But don't wait too long to schedule that follow-up or you'll lose your momentum.

Managing Frustration while Remaining Professional



Figure 9.5.2: youtuber-blogger by Lukas Bieri from Pixabay

No one likes to deal with a Negative Nellie (or Neil). So how do we remain professional when we're feeling frustrated? The definition of **professionalism** varies, but it generally boils down to being good at what you know and do, maintaining a positive attitude, treating the people you work with respectfully, maintaining a professional appearance, and meeting your professional obligations promptly. However, all of us, at one time or another, have had our professionalism tested by a co-worker, a superior, a client/customer, or an unanticipated situation. How we handle ourselves in these situations directly impacts the communication climate, either positively or negatively. Here are some suggestions:

- **Take a deep breath.** Pause and give yourself some time to think about how you want to respond. We often end up regretting those “in the heat of the moment” responses. Research indicates that different emotions are linked to different types of breathing (Philippot et al., 2002). For example, when we are feeling stressed or anxious, our breathing tends to be short, shallow, fast, and irregular. On the other hand, deep, slow, and regular breaths are associated with feelings of joy. This study suggests that when we take the time to mindfully breathe deeply and slowly we will begin to associate the corresponding emotions of calm and joy.
- **Look for the positives.** There is always something to be learned from every situation. According to the Mayo Clinic (2022), positive thinking leads to positive health benefits. While researchers are still not certain why positive thoughts lead to better health, one theory believes that having a positive outlook allows us to handle stressful situations better, thus reducing the harmful effects stress can have on our bodies. Accordingly, focusing on our strengths and not weaknesses will not only help to energize us but will help build on a positive outlook.
- **Reframe how you look at the feedback and use it as motivation.** Stacey Finkelstein and Ayelet Fishbach (2012) point out that our experience level dictates the kinds of feedback that motivates us. Novices look for encouragement and positive feedback. Experts prefer more critical feedback that could help develop weaker skills. Therefore, put the negative energy and frustration to work for you to find ways you can turn the obstacle into an opportunity. Set new goals and focus your energy on achieving your new goals.
- **Remember that you are in control.** Don’t forget that you are in charge of your life and what you need to do to be happy and successful. Choose to use the feedback that you decide is useful and lose the feedback that is not helpful or relevant. It is important to “remember that you don't have to use every bit of feedback that comes to you. You have the power” (Furlan & Schneider, 2021).

Giving Constructive Feedback

Providing constructive feedback is a key factor to support a positive and productive environment. **Constructive feedback** involves providing individuals with timely and meaningful information regarding strengths and weaknesses in their interpersonal interactions as well as concrete steps for improving any areas of weakness thus fostering personal and professional growth. You may think that simply giving feedback is helping the recipient improve. But giving good, positive, and constructive feedback is not an easy task. Here are some things to consider:

- Are you in a position to comment or provide feedback?
- Is the recipient ready to receive your feedback? If not, you're walking into a negative communication climate that's not going to get any better. Timing is important.
- Does the other person want your feedback? If the response is no, you'll have to come up with another way to deal with the problem at hand.

If all the stars align and the recipient is open and ready to engage in a feedback discussion, be sure to keep these three things in mind as you craft your feedback:

- **Be positive.** Especially when you know the feedback will include criticism, start and end with positives. Sandwiching the criticisms and corrections between the good points and what they are doing right will help your message be received more positively. See Figure 9.5.3 for a diagram of the "Feedback Sandwich" (an accessible text version is linked in the figure caption).
- **Avoid using absolutes or negative words.** Absolutes include words like *always, never,* or *don't.* Avoiding using absolutes communicates you are open to different interpretations, solutions, and entertaining the "gray" areas. Psychology research has shown that as humans, we tend to focus more on the negatives to try and make sense of our world. Knowing that, try to replace negative words and phrases with positive ones.
- **Avoid comparison.** According to social comparison theory, it's natural that we want to compare ourselves to others. But these comparisons also tend to result in resentment and frustration when the comparisons portray us as less than. Stop comparing people and situations.
- **Be specific.** Avoid using evaluative adjectives and remember to try and use *descriptive* words that are precise and straightforward. Address specific issues, behavior, or attitudes that can be improved upon and/or changed. If you are suggesting improvements/changes, specify what you expect and how to achieve it.

All in all, for feedback to be positive, it needs to:

- be given and received at the right time and right place;
- be given with positive points and a specific plan of action;
- be based on facts and information directed at working towards a solution.

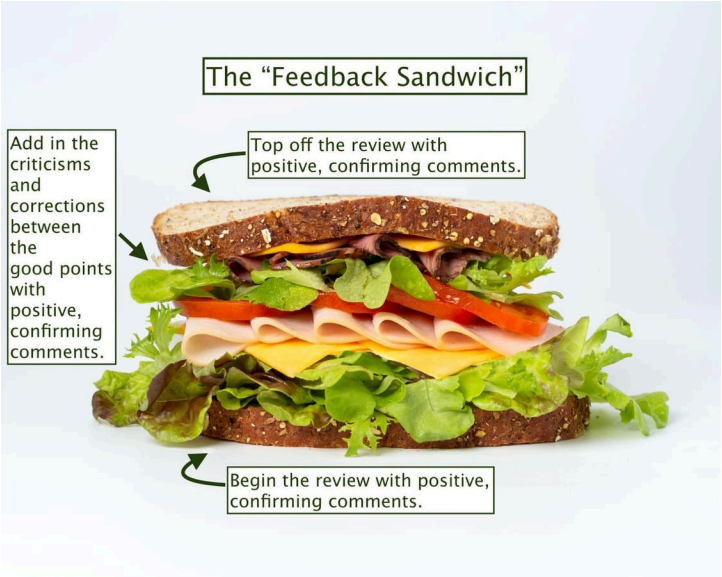


Figure 9.5.3: A sandwich by Mae Mu on Unsplash, modified into "The Feedback Sandwich" by Armeda C. Reitzel CC BY-NC-SA 4.0An accessible text version is provided here: The Feedback Sandwich

Getting Critical

Jackson Bird presents “constructive feedback” to his audience about interacting with people who identify as transgender. Through his TED Talk on transgender experiences, he discusses topics such as pronouns, bathroom usage, and more, all while bringing humor, empathy, and transparency to the conversation in an effort to bring awareness and acceptance. Watch the TED Talk or read the transcript and then complete the reflection questions.

Reflection Questions

1. How does aspects of your identity (race, religion, nation, age, sex, and so forth) shape your understanding of gender?
2. After receiving this “feedback” from Jackson, reflect on your own reactions when first meeting someone who identifies as transgender. For example, can you relate to what Jackson talks about in terms of people’s curiosity regarding transgender bathroom use and their sex lives? How do you keep that curiosity in check so as not to offend your communication partner?
3. What tips do you find most useful from the TED Talk?
4. Based on the information in this chapter on confirming and disconfirming messages, how can you apply the information to improving the way you talk and listen to transgender people?

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9.6: Summary and Review

Summary

In this chapter, we have introduced and discussed how to create a supportive climate with confirming responses to promote positive, effective communication in a variety of contexts. The idea of **communication climate** is similar to a weather report. Is the communication interaction a warm and sunny experience or does it feel more like a chilly and dismal exchange? Is it such a cold, negative, disconfirming encounter that it leaves you feeling numb, almost as if you have frostbite? Communication climate can definitely affect our mood, impact our behavior, and even influence our self-identity.

Communication climate was defined as the "overall feeling or emotional mood between people" (Wood, 2015). We identified and described the characteristics of supportive and defensive communication climates, along with a discussion of specific types of confirming and disconfirming responses that could influence our feel for a conversation. Context and culture do matter!

So whether you are heading for a family get-together, an evening with friends, an employee work evaluation, or a team meeting, consider the role of communication climate in the forecast of a potentially terrible or terrific experience.



Figure 9.6.1: Two children looking at the horizon by Torsten Dederichs on Unsplash

Discussion Questions

1. How can you adjust for a supportive communication climate when communicating online versus face-to-face?
2. Select a friend with whom you have a good relationship. Pay attention to your communication climate. How do you and your friend demonstrate attending, affirming, and accepting messages to build a confirming climate?
3. Think about a situation where the communication climate could use some improvement. What are some verbal and nonverbal messages you can use to try and turn that climate in a more positive direction?

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10: INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Learning Objectives

- Define interpersonal conflict, conflict goals, and conflict outcomes.
- Describe unproductive approaches to conflict management.
- Compare and contrast conflict management styles.
- Recognize interpersonal communication skills that contribute to peaceful conflict resolution.

Communication and conflict are interwoven and affect most interpersonal relationships at some time, including, but not limited to, romantic partnerships, family, friends, and co-workers. Communication is a key component of interpersonal conflict in that communication behaviors can create conflict, reflect conflict, and serve as the instrument that delivers productive and unproductive conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018).

10.1: Introduction to Interpersonal Conflict

10.2: Interpersonal Conflict Defined

10.3: Conflict Goals and Outcomes

10.4: Conflict Management Style

10.5: Unproductive Conflict

10.6: Interpersonal Conflict and Social Media

10.7: Conflict Resolution

10.8: Summary and Review

10.9: References

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10.1: Introduction to Interpersonal Conflict

Introduction

In 2021, news stories were dominated by the “Free Britney” movement and the battles between Britney Spears and her family. In November 2021, a judge terminated the conservatorship that had controlled the last 15 years of her life. She publicly blamed her family, saying “they hurt me deeper than you will ever know,” and severed her ties with her parents and sister. This case, which held the attention of fans around the world, is an example of both interpersonal and family conflict, centering on issues of power and control. Most of us, hopefully, will never experience conflict that is so severe and so public. But the underlying themes of conflict in this family dilemma are more common than one might expect.

When was the last time you had a disagreement, argument, or conflict with someone you cared about? Whether a conflict is minor, such as whether the dishwasher has been loaded properly, or major, such as dealing with issues of money, child-rearing, and relationship expectations, chances are you recently experienced interpersonal conflict. Communication and conflict are interwoven and affect most interpersonal relationships at some time, including, but not limited to, romantic partnerships, family, friends, and co-workers. Communication is a key component of interpersonal conflict in that communication behaviors can create conflict, reflect conflict, and serve as the instrument that delivers productive and unproductive conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). This chapter will call on you to reflect on your conflict patterns and to develop communication skills to help you navigate conflict more effectively in the future.

Benefits of Studying Interpersonal Conflict

The pervasiveness of conflict in everyday life provides a strong justification for studying interpersonal conflict. There are several personal benefits you may receive from studying interpersonal conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018).

- Conflict management skills are not inborn, rather they are learned. By studying interpersonal conflict, you can learn helpful relational skills for peaceful conflict resolution.
- Mental health may be improved as constructive approaches to conflict are practiced.
- Family relationships and overall well-being are linked to constructive conflict management.
- Long-term marital satisfaction may depend on effective conflict management.
- Romantic partners who practice positive conflict management are more likely to have happy relationships (Cramer, 2000).
- Workplace relationships are characterized by conflict by almost 85% of employees surveyed (1995). Learning effective conflict negotiation skills can help improve the quality of your work life.
- Victims of abuse benefit from examining alternative constructive models of conflict.

The next section of this chapter addresses various aspects of conflict including interpersonal matters, cultural differences, gender differences, and the digital divide.

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10.2: Interpersonal Conflict Defined

Key Concepts in Interpersonal Conflict

Chris and Michelle are a married couple with young children. Chris would like to move from California to Texas to raise their children, for job opportunities, and to afford a home. Michelle does not want to leave Southern California, her family and close friends, and her rewarding job. To add to the stress, Michelle's parents are pressuring her to stay in California. Chris and Michelle are experiencing what is known as interpersonal conflict. **Interpersonal conflict** occurs when two or more interdependent parties perceive and experience a struggle over incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Here is a breakdown of some of the key concepts in the definition.

- **Interdependence**: Interpersonal conflict occurs in part because individuals are connected and depend on one another. In the example, as a married couple with children, Chris and Michelle are very invested in their relationship, with very integrated lives.
- **Incompatible goals**: Each of us has goals for our relationships, our identity, and ourselves. Sometimes our goals do not match up with the goals of others, and this can create a conflict. In the example, Chris's goal was to move to Texas, whereas Michelle's goal was to stay in California.
- **Scarce resources**: Resources are commodities such as money, time, relationships, and affection. If we believe there are not enough resources available (such as money), this can create conflict. In the case of Michelle and Chris, there are a variety of resources at stake, such as relationships with families and friends, future employment, and housing.
- **Interference from others**: Interference from others can come from any outsider who gets in the way of your relationship. Marriage and family therapists have long noted that in-laws are among the top sources of conflict and divorce for couples. Whether it is a mother-in-law interfering with your decision-making, or a brother-in-law who is constantly borrowing money, it can create stress and frustration for a relationship. In the example, Michelle's parents are pressuring her to stay in California.

Now that we have identified some common causes of conflict, can you recognize some of the conflicts you have experienced with friends, family, and romantic partners? In addition to causes of conflict, factors such as culture, gender, and even social media add a layer to how we experience and negotiate conflict.

Conflict and Culture

Laura, who is Japanese Hawaiian, and Steve, who is Italian, have been married for more than 40 years. They often reflect on how bringing their diverse cultures together has enriched their lives, but not without a few bumps in the road along the way. Over the years, they have observed that their cultural differences shape how they negotiate issues ranging from food (Italian vs. Japanese Hawaiian), child-rearing, religion, and family expectations. They are not alone. According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2019, roughly 1 in 5 marriages in the United States were interracial (Parker & Barroso, 2021). With the increasing diversity in our society, you will likely have friends, neighbors, co-workers, romantic partners, and family members from culturally different groups. While increasing interaction between diverse individuals enhances our lives in many ways, it can add an important layer to conflict exchanges, and that is how our culture shapes the way we negotiate conflict. In this section, we will look at how culture plays a part in our conflict experiences, by examining face negotiation theory, cultural background, and situational factors.

Thoughts on Theory: Face Negotiation Theory

Have you ever heard someone say, "I need to save face?" In the United States, face-saving generally refers to an individual recovering from embarrassment, a put-down, or a public disappointment. However, the concept of face takes on a different meaning when we examine it from a lens of conflict and culture. **Face** refers to the favorable social impression we would like to present during social interactions (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). For example, you might want the people in your life to see you as a caring family member, a trusting friend, a good student, and as funny and adventurous. The concept of face is at the heart of **face-negotiation theory**, which provides a useful way to understand the relationships between culture and conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1988). The theory suggests that we use communication to maintain and negotiate our face and that culture influences the way we handle conflict because of our face concerns, cultural background, and situational factors. These three factors interact to shape how we communicate about conflict.

Take a moment to pause and reflect: How do you want other people to see you? The impression you would like to make on others is known as our face concerns. **Face concerns** are the social impression you would like to make on others and are tied into your identity. Take, for example, when you meet a romantic partner's family for the first time. It is likely that you would like to make a positive impression on the family and hope that they will like you for who you are. We have two face concerns: self-face and other-face. **Self-face** is when we focus on maintaining the image we project to others, and **other-face** is when we focus on protecting the image and feelings of others. Your face concerns are, in turn, shaped by your cultural background.

It is important to understand that conflict is viewed differently across cultures. Consider what you recall from Chapter 8 on how low- and high-context cultures and communication shape our interpersonal relationships. See for example this YouTube video on "The Importance of Face in China," which explores the idea that winning a conflict isn't seen as positive in all cultures. In the video, Rupert Munton talks about a situation that involved two British engineers who were based in Beijing and their interaction with a local engineer. In this video, you will come to find out that sometimes winning an argument or being "right" will cost you.

Creative Commons Video: The Importance of 'Face' in China - Rupert Munton - ClarkMorgan Insights - YouTube – accessible with closed-captioning and transcript included.

Discussion Questions

1. Reflecting on your culture, how do you view conflict? Is conflict good? Is it bad?
2. When you are in conflict, what is your main goal?
3. What does "saving face" mean to you?
4. Do you try to save face during the conflict, or save the group's face?
5. Do you adjust your conflict management style when working cross-culturally?
6. What is one main takeaway from the video that you can apply in school, at work, or in your social life?

Your cultural background is shaped by your family's cultural heritage, ethnic identity, and cultural values, such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, and high- and low-context communication styles (Hofstede, 2001). In **individualistic, low-context cultures** like that of the United States, where people tend to prefer individuality, autonomy, and care for themselves and their immediate family, people are more likely to feel comfortable disagreeing openly and communicating directly about conflict. In **collectivistic, high-context** cultures like those in China and Mexico, where people tend to put group needs before individual needs in exchange for loyalty, and expect their in-groups will take care of them, people may be more likely to use indirect messages, avoidance, and accommodation. Low- and high-context communication, which is covered in detail in Chapter 8, Section 8.3, refers to the degree to which cultures prefer direct, explicit messages or indirect, implicit messages (Hall, 1976). For example, research across different cultures, including those in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Mexico, and the United States, found that participants' levels of individualism/collectivism directly impacted their conflict styles, with collectivists preferring integrating and compromising approaches and individualists relying on more competing and dominating styles (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Situational factors include the roles you play (daughter/son, boyfriend/girlfriend, employee/boss), your status, your communication preferences, and cultural norms and rules that guide your behavior. To illustrate, cultures have different beliefs about how power should be shared amongst the people in the culture, known as **power distance** (Hofstede, 2001). In low-power-distance cultures, such as the United States, power is supposed to be distributed equally, meaning that the culture tries to diminish the differences between low- and high-status individuals. In high-power-distance cultures, it is accepted that power is distributed unequally, thus people in high-status positions are afforded special treatment and privilege. For example, in the United States, it is considered appropriate for college students to question and at times challenge their professors. In high-power-distance cultures, such as in China, it is considered inappropriate and disrespectful for a student to question a professor, even if the professor has made an error. Differences in perceptions of status and power will influence how, why, and with whom we choose to initiate conflict.

Gender Communication and Conflict

In 1992, psychologist John Gray published the book *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. This runaway bestseller was based on the idea that not only are people different genders, but we are from completely different planets in terms of our problem-solving communication. The truth of the matter is a little more nuanced, with research showing that while there may be some differences, there are likely more similarities in how people handle conflict (Cupach et al., 2010). In fact, most of the research on gender differences and conflict management has shown weak or inconsistent results.

Researchers have long tried to establish a link between biological sex, gender roles, and approaches to managing conflict. One large study of more than 6,000 men and women in the workplace, spanning 40 years, demonstrated that women were more likely to use other-face conflict management strategies in order to maintain relationships, and men were more likely to use self-face strategies that are competitive in nature (Rahim & Katz, 2019). Other researchers have argued that gender identity roles (the degree to which one identifies as stereotypically feminine or masculine) are a better predictor than biological sex of conflict approaches. One study of gender role identity and conflict found that individuals who identified as masculine showed a preference for a dominating approach, whereas individuals who identified as feminine were highest on avoiding, and individuals who identified as androgynous preferred an integrating style (Brewer et al., 2002). What is clear is that more research is needed to examine some of the subtle variations in conflict style that are related to gender roles and identity.

Most observations regarding interpersonal conflict and gender differences are likely due to our cultural beliefs and stereotypes, not differences based on gender or sex. Although early research on gender differences in conflict tried to draw conclusions based on biological sex, recent research shows that how you communicate during conflict is more likely a result of factors such as your family upbringing, societal expectations, and cultural background. To illustrate, in Nila's family, she and her sister are constantly told to be nice and play fair when they have arguments, but their brothers are told to take their problems outside and that "boys will be boys." If you grew up in a family with other children, you may have witnessed firsthand that your family expected different behavior from your siblings based on their gender. Yet, in other families, children may have been raised without strict gender norms. These expectations set us up to communicate with people based on our stereotypes of their sex or gender, which can influence how we handle conflict. Contrary to sex-role stereotypes about conflict within interpersonal relationships, women have been shown to be more assertive and openly address conflict, whereas men have been shown to be more likely to withdraw. However, as our knowledge about gender and sex-role identities continues to evolve, it is clear that it is difficult to draw conclusions about conflict behavior based solely on gender.

As we can see, the research findings on conflict and gender are mixed, and likely other factors shape how you handle conflicts, such as your age, unique family dynamics, cultural background, stereotypes, and the topic of conflict. It is important to be aware of sex-role stereotypes and how they shape our responses to other people. We need to take the time to get to know people so that we can adjust our communication to the individual, and not just the stereotypes we hold regarding their gender, culture, age, and other traits. Take some time to reflect on how gender stereotypes regarding conflict play out in your life. Have you ever been in a situation where you made judgments about someone's ability to manage conflict based on their biological sex or gender identity? Have you ever been in a situation where you felt someone else stereotyped you due to culturally based gender role expectations?

Digital Communication and Conflict

With the invention of the internet, cell phones, and social media, the world experienced a revolution through the creation of new computer-mediated communication channels. These technological innovations have had a profound impact on communication, changing how we date (Match.com, Plenty of Fish, Bumble), how we communicate with our friends (Snapchat), how we share hobbies (i.e. Twitch for gaming), and how we communicate at work (Zoom). It was inevitable that these innovations would also impact how we experience and negotiate interpersonal conflict. Digital forms of communication, whether e-mail, texting, or using an app like Snapchat, have become sources of conflict, changed how we handle conflict, and contributed to problematic conflict behaviors.

Digital mediated communication has become a source of conflict for people. To illustrate, the Pew Research Center (Lenhart et al., 2020) found that among coupled adults in the United States (married, cohabiting, or in a committed relationship), approximately half (51%) say that cell phones can be a cause of conflict because their partners are distracted by their cell phone while they are trying to have a conversation with them. Not only can the amount of time spent on cell phones be a source of conflict, but also can social media. "Teens, technology, and friendships" (ibid.) reports that 31% of social media users have fought with a friend over something that occurred online or through a text message. Social media has been shown to promote conflict in romantic relationships by increasing jealousy, suspicion, negative social comparisons, and online opportunities for infidelity (Clayton et al., 2013). Part of the challenge is that the use of computer-mediated communication, whether texting, emailing, or tweeting, is accompanied by a loss of important communication cues, such as tone of voice and micro-facial expressions. "Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can inhibit what people are willing to express" (Suler, 2004, p. 322). When negotiating conflict online, whether through email or social media, there is often a loss of immediate feedback. In addition, media platforms promote negative social comparisons and can serve as a distraction in face-to-face interactions.

Have you ever tried to settle an argument on social media? Or have you ever tried to negotiate a conflict through a text message? If so, you are not alone. Changes in social media and technology dependence have provided people with new options for responding to conflicts. For example, we have witnessed the birth of "call-out culture." Call-out culture refers to using social

media to confront someone publicly. One call-out technique is flaming, a hostile and aggressive online interaction that involves directing insulting messages at another person. Online communication has a **disinhibition effect**, which means that people feel safe saying things online and through digital media that they would rarely say to someone if they were in a face-to-face interaction. For example, in 2013 rapper Meek Mill publicly shamed a lifelong friend for asking for money by posting the entire exchange on Instagram. Airing grievances and making personal attacks such as this in public online settings may make the attacker feel as though there is a veil of protection but, in reality, public shaming can heighten the hurt of the conflict. If you have a conflict that does not go well, you have other options that are not available in face-to-face conversations, such as blocking the other person, leaving their messages unread, or copying and sharing messages for feedback from others. Research has shown that 60% of all teens report taking an action like unfriending, blocking, or deleting photos of a former friend (Lenhart et al., 2020).

Addressing interpersonal conflicts through digital communication media may provide some protection for freely sharing your feelings on difficult issues without facing immediate criticism, nonetheless, as with face-to-face communication, we should make every effort to practice mindful communication skills when negotiating conflict in a digital world.

Before calling someone out through social media, consider these tips:

1. If you are going to send a harshly worded email, text, or post, consider having a trusted friend review the message first.
2. Take some time to pause and cool down before sending critical or combative messages.
3. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were on the receiving end of the message.
4. Regarding personal relationships with friends, family members, or romantic partners, although digital forms of communication provide some protection when delivering critical messages, make every effort to try and resolve relational conflict in a setting that allows for real-time feedback, such as face-to-face, via video calls, or through a phone call.

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10.3: Conflict Goals and Outcomes

Conflict Goals

Have you ever been in a conflict or disagreement that ended up feeling like an extended game of tug-o-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.



Figure 10.3.1: Silhouette Relationship Conflict by Mohamed Hassan from Pixabay

Now that you have a better understanding of factors that shape interpersonal conflict, let's take a look at common sources of conflict.

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, Julie was really upset with her husband, Todd, because of how he squeezed the toothpaste out of the tube. She liked to squeeze the toothpaste from the end of the tube and her husband squeezed the tube where he 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 US government has been characterized by division and animosity, Native American 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.



Figure 10.3.2: Argument by Andrew Malone from Flickr CC BY 2.0

Conflict Outcomes

In most professional sporting events in the United States, 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 of Maya, a recent graduate of the California State University system. Before graduation, Maya submitted applications to several different companies. She was thrilled when she was offered her dream job at a gaming company. However, when she sat down to discuss the details with Human Resources, she was 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 Maya would lose out on her 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 Maya 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, Maya made a counteroffer that was accepted by the company, leading to a win-win outcome.

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. This next section speaks to five different approaches to managing conflict.



Figure 10.3.3: Argument for a gender non-conforming couple by Zackary Drucker from “The Gender Spectrum Collection” CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

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10.4: Conflict Management Style

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 (win-win, etc.). **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. For example, take Tony, a manager at a large retail store in the mall. He displays high concern for others when making the weekly schedule, respecting his employees' school schedules and family lives. His counterpart, Alyssa, demonstrates high concern for herself in demanding that employees miss school and family events to give herself the best schedule. 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, 1983a). For example, when Sophia and AJ experience a conflict, they tend to view it as an opportunity to understand each other better, and they sit down and try to tackle the issue together. Integrating, also known as **collaborating** (see Kilman & Thomas, 1977), consists of problem-solving, open communication, open confrontation of conflict, assertiveness, and cooperation (Rahim, 2010). 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, 2010). 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.

Obliging

Do you ever find yourself sacrificing your needs to make someone else happy or to keep the peace in the relationship? Take, for example, Naomi, who has many friends and is considered easy to get along with. She often finds herself going along with the wishes of others, whether it's her parents or her close friends. 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, 1983a). 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, 2001). 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).

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, 1983a). For example, Bella's friend

Damien loves to debate every little topic, from climate change to the best local fast-food burger joint, and he will not let the conversation drop until Bella gives in. 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 et al., 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.

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. For example, Delaney is angry with her two closest friends. Rather than dealing with it, she blocked them on all her social media accounts. This approach consists of a low concern for self and low concern for others, and is sometimes viewed negatively in US 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, 2001). 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, 2010, p. 54)

Compromising

In US culture, many of us have been taught to solve our problems by **compromising**, sharing, or splitting the difference. For example, Javier and Jeff tend to argue over what movie they would like to see; rather than battling it out each week, they have decided to take turns choosing the movie of the week. This means that every other week Javier must see a movie that he would not have chosen on his own. 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, 2001).

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. In the next section, you will learn about the "Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse" and common unproductive conflict behaviors.

What Is Your Preferred Style of Conflict Management?

Now that you have reviewed the different styles of conflict management, it is time to reflect on your own approach to resolving conflict. Below are five situations involving common relationship conflicts. For each scenario, read the five actions and choose the response that is closest to the way you would like to respond if you were in a similar situation. Your answer should reflect what you think you *would* do, not what you think you *should* do. Keep track of your choices for each item.

Scenario 1: Divorce Dilemma

You are a single parent. Ever since the divorce, you have been trying to better connect with your teenage son, Tamer. You've noticed that they have been a bit distant and have been lying to you about where and who they've been hanging out with. You text Tamer that you'd like to talk over the weekend about their recent behaviors. You look at your phone and the text indicates "read," yet Tamer doesn't text you back nor bring up the text to you when you see them the next day. How do you respond?

1. Skip the conversation; you don't want to ruin the weekend.
2. Gently suggest to Tamer that you would appreciate it if they responded to your text messages.
3. Tell Tamer that as the parent you are responsible for their well-being. Insist that they explain their recent lying and failure to respond to texts or you will take away their phone.
4. Propose a middle ground such that if Tamer will agree to respond to your texts quickly, you will agree to give them more freedom in how they spend their time.
5. Try to empathize and understand how Tamer is feeling, and then propose that you develop some guidelines together for family communication.

Scenario 2: Social Media

Your best friend has a habit of posting unflattering pictures of you on their social media account. You have asked them to stop but the problem has continued. If you let them know an image bothers you, they are quick to remove it. Your friend has now posted a picture that you find embarrassing and you want this practice to stop. How do you respond?

1. Say nothing and suffer in silence. They haven't stopped and you doubt they ever will.
2. Try to get over it and not be so self-conscious.
3. Threaten your friend that if they don't stop you will start posting embarrassing pictures of them.
4. Try to find a middle ground and ask your friend to agree that you will both share pictures with each other before posting.
5. Wait until a suitable time to sit down with your friend and talk about the situation. Listen to their side of the story and then disclose how this is making you feel. Work towards a solid solution you can both agree with.

Scenario 3: Money Matters

Your closest friend always seems to be short of cash. Recently, their dog got sick and as a result of the vet bills they asked you to spot them $50 so they could pay for their gas. They promised to pay you back on Friday, but a week later they still have not paid you. How do you respond?

1. Put off talking about it. It just doesn't seem like a good time.
2. Let it go since your friendship is worth more to you than $50.
3. Threaten your friend that if they do not pay you back you are going to cut off the relationship.
4. Instead of paying you back, ask them to complete some repairs around your house in exchange.
5. Sit down and talk to your friend. Try to understand the problem, then propose a repayment plan.

Scenario 4: Helicopter Parent

Your parents have been extremely hands-on and supportive throughout your childhood, coaching sports, volunteering in your classes, and helping you prepare for college. Now that you have entered college, your parents are insisting on choosing your major and it is a field you are not interested in. Your parents have told you that if you do not major in their chosen field, they will not pay for your college expenses. How do you respond?

1. Do nothing. You are afraid of your parents' response.
2. Accept your parent's decision, as they are paying for your college expenses and you want to make them happy.

3. Tell your parents that they are being unreasonable. If that is how they feel, you will move out and pay for your own education.
4. Propose taking a class in each field and then reporting back to your parents.
5. Listen to your parents to try and understand their point of view, and then share with them the career opportunities for your major to see if you can reach an agreement.

Scenario 5: Holiday Drama

You and your significant other are looking forward to celebrating the holidays together—until you realize that both your families celebrate on the same day and at the same time. This conflict is creating a lot of frustration for you and your partner. How do you respond?

1. Say nothing and celebrate with your family. It's not worth the trouble at this time to change.
2. Agree to spend the holidays with your partner's family. It seems like your partner cares more about the issue than you do.
3. Demand that if your partner really cares about you and your future together, they will make the effort to spend this holiday with your family.
4. Propose that you and your partner spend half of the day with your family and half of the day with their family.
5. Set aside a good time to talk and empathize with your partner. Discuss developing a plan for how and where you will spend the holidays together.

Scenario 6: Extroverts and Introverts

Your significant other likes to go out to clubs and parties, and have friends over, but you are much more introverted. You would rather stay in, study for school, play video games, or watch movies. One day your partner tells you that they feel like they are missing out on their social life and they want to talk about how you spend time together. You are afraid they will break up with you. How do you respond?

1. Avoid your partner so you don't have to deal with the problem in the middle of the semester.
2. Give in and agree to start going to parties and clubs to keep them happy.
3. Tell your partner they are being selfish for trying to change you and refuse to socialize with their friends.
4. Agree to start going out more if your partner is also willing to learn about your favorite video game.
5. Ask your partner to talk to see if you can work together to make some adjustments and find some activities outside of the house that you can enjoy together.

Results

Tally up the number of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Es you selected. Your answers indicate your preference for managing conflict.

- Majority of A answers: indicates a preference for avoidance
- Majority of B answers: indicates a preference for obliging
- Majority of C answers: indicates a preference for competition
- Majority of D answers: indicates a preference for compromising
- Majority of E answers: indicates a preference for integrating
- Mixed answers: If you have a tie or two close scores, it may indicate that you are skilled in more than one style and adapt based on the needs of the situation.

Discussion and Reflection

As we can see from these scenarios, there are many different ways to respond to conflict. Having an understanding of your own and others' conflict styles can help you choose the best approach to achieving peaceful and meaningful conflict resolution. Take a moment to reflect on your conflict preferences.

1. What are the potential strengths of your style preference?
2. What are the potential weaknesses of your style preference?
3. Explain which of the five styles you would like to work on developing.

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10.5: Unproductive Conflict

Learned Communication Responses to Conflict

Have you ever walked away from a conflict feeling bad about your behavior? You are not alone, as conflict can be a frustrating emotional experience that can bring out the worst in us. Unproductive conflict behaviors consist of learned communication responses to conflict that can damage relationships, escalate a conflict, stifle conflict resolution, and contribute to dysfunction in relationships. Unproductive conflict behaviors are often used to set up attacks in conflict. They may lead to short-term wins, but they sacrifice the health of the relationship and the self-concept of the other people in the conflict. In this section, you will first learn about the Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse, which are broad patterns of responses to conflict that harm relationships. Second, you will be introduced to unproductive communication behaviors that are ineffective for conflict resolution.

Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse

Imagine that you are about to get married, and a family member comes to you and tells you that they can predict whether or not you will be divorced in five years. Would you like to know their prediction? While much of interpersonal research has focused on what we can do with our communication to have happy relationships, researcher John Gottman has made a career of studying communication behaviors that sabotage our closest relationships and what we can do to change these negative patterns. He has identified four communication styles that can predict the end of a relationship due to their unproductive and dysfunctional nature (Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman, 2014). He calls them the Four Horsemen of the Relational Apocalypse: criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness. These four forms of communication can sabotage your successful management of conflict.

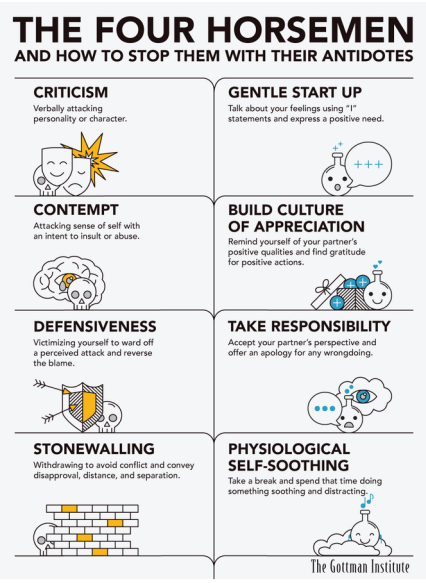


Figure 10.5.1: The Four Horsemen are used by permission from The Gottman Institute. Image by Julie Schwartz Gottman, John Gottman, and The Gottman Institute. Source: The Four Horsemen: The Antidotes.

The Four HorsemenCriticism

This occurs when we publicly or privately call out someone's faults in a negative manner. In Figure 9.5.1, criticism is described as verbally attacking someone's character or personality. In relationships, it can be necessary to offer feedback, share complaints, or offer a critique. However, criticism is different in that in addition to the issues being discussed, it relies on making a personal attack on the other person's self-concept. Criticism can be private, such as between two people, or public, such as when someone criticizes their partner in front of other people. Public criticism can feel more damaging because it is shared in front of other people, causing the recipient to lose face or experience shame. Ongoing criticism can lead to conflict.

Complaint: "I feel frustrated because you keep buying candy for the kids. I thought we agreed that we are going to try to

limit how much candy they eat."

Criticism: "You are a horrible partner and parent. Not only do you not honor our agreement, but you are also encouraging unhealthy eating habits in our kids by loading them up with sugar."

Contempt

This refers to the extreme dislike of another person and may include negative verbal and nonverbal expressions towards another person. Figure 9.5.1 captures that contempt leads to attacks, insults, and abuse. Specific communication messages that fall under contempt include insults, mockery, sarcasm, disapproval, judgment, name-calling, and negative labels (Gottman, 1994). Nonverbal indicators of contempt include eye-rolling, facial expressions indicating disgust and anger (such as the nose wrinkle), and aggressive hand gestures. Contempt is considered to be one of the most corrosive behaviors for relationships.

Consider this exchange between David and Stephanie, where Stephanie's response indicates she is feeling contempt for David.

David: "I would like us to take another look at our family budget. I am worried that our family is making too many materialistic purchases that are not in our family's best interest."

Stephanie: "Hah! Are you suggesting I'm materialistic? Give me a break (rolling eyes)! If you learned to manage your money better and figure out a simple budget, I wouldn't have to break my back trying to support this family. I should have listened to my family when they told me you were going to bleed me dry financially."

Defensiveness

This is a common response to feedback and criticism. Figure 9.5.1 identifies that when people are defensive, they assume the role of the victim and try to reverse the blame. Rather than listening and considering the feedback, the recipient tries to protect themselves by making excuses, denying responsibility, blaming and or accusing the other person, justifying their behavior, or offering a counter-criticism. The problem is that deflecting criticism with defensiveness leaves conflict issues unresolved. Gottman found that there are specific communication behaviors that trigger defensiveness, including negative mind-reading and the speaker's tone of voice. Negative mind-reading occurs when someone makes negative attributions about our thoughts, motives, and behavior, such as "You always put yourself first and you never think about how I feel." Negative mind-reading is further exacerbated by a negative tone of voice, which can receive a different response than if the message was delivered with a neutral or positive tone of voice.

Stonewalling

This occurs when the receiver emotionally or physically withdraws from the interaction, closing themselves off from the other person because they feel overwhelmed. Stonewalling is a form of avoidance that is often a response to criticism and contempt. As Figure 9.5.1 indicates, stonewalling is used to create distance, indicate disapproval, and create separation. According to Gottman, it is common for people to become physiologically flooded during conflict exchanges (in other words, overcome with negative emotions), which leaves them needing a break from the interaction. When we use stonewalling as a response, we tend to stop listening, try to change or avoid the subject, and physically turn away from the other person. Nonverbal indicators of stonewalling include a lack of eye contact, minimal facial expressions, head movement, and vocalizations.

For example, consider the situation of Rebecca and Javier, the happy new parents of a baby boy. Javier's mother lives just five minutes away from the new parents and has taken to dropping in daily to visit her grandson. Rebecca is frustrated by the unannounced visits and would like Javier to intervene with his mother. Javier believes his mom just wants to help and feels trapped between his wife and mother. The next time that Rebecca brings up the issue, Javier is overwhelmed with feelings of guilt. Rather than dealing with the problem, he tells Rebecca that he does not have time to discuss the issue and he leaves for a walk. Continued unresolved conflict may lead to defensiveness.



Figure 10.5.2: Four horsemen of the apocalypse by Humber Museums Partnership from Flickr is licensed CC BY NC SA

Communication Barriers to Conflict Management

Now that you understand the Four Horsemen of the Relationship Apocalypse and the negative communication patterns that can harm relationships, let's examine some specific unproductive responses to conflict. Increasing your awareness of unproductive conflict can help you recognize how these behaviors can create negative conflict spirals, identify these behaviors in your interactions with others, and promote awareness of alternative, more collaborative and peaceful, responses.

Gunnysacking

A gunnysack is a large burlap sack. In the world of conflict, gunnysacking refers to storing up one's grievances and unloading them all at once at a later date on the other party. For example, consider the couple Erin and Gavin who have been dating for two years. Erin would like to discuss the future of their relationship, but Gavin, in a defensive response, uses gunnysacking and starts to unload all sorts of grievances, such as Erin's money and time management, and lack of cooking skills, as reasons he is not ready to discuss the future of their relationship. Erin is caught off guard and is curious why she hasn't been made aware of these issues before this time. Another conflict behavior that is closely related to gunnysacking is known as kitchen sinking.

Kitchen Sinking

Whereas with gunnysacking people store up their grievances to unload them at a later date, kitchen sinking refers to bringing up past conflicts, even those resolved, to gain leverage in the conflict. The challenge created by kitchen sinking is that it can distract from the conflict at hand by bringing up the past.

Blame

Some conflicts have a clearly identifiable source, but often there are multiple causes for the conflicts we experience. Blame, or trying to place responsibility for the conflict on another person, is primarily only effective in making the other party feel defensive. In the landmark book *Getting to yes* the authors recommend separating people from the issues. In other words, rather than blaming the other person, recognize that we all play a part in the conflict process and that we must isolate the conflict as the source of the problem, not the other party (Fisher et al., 2011).

Beltlining

This refers to a boxing move that means to hit below the belt. In terms of conflict, this metaphor refers to using intimate information against each other to cause hurt and anger. For example, Annabelle and Ariana are having a conflict over their

friendship and Ariana beltlines Annabelle with this comment: “You have often wondered why you don’t have more friends. Based on how you are acting right now, I don’t need to wonder anymore.”

Force

In January of 2021, Kanye West made headlines when he dropped a new song with the lyrics “God saved me from that crash / just so I can beat Pete Davidson’s a**.” We live in a society where images of force are often glorified not only in song lyrics, but also in movies, gaming, and professional fighting. Unfortunately, the use of force to control conflict is too common in interpersonal relationships. Force refers to using physical pressure to exert control in conflict exchanges and can include both exertions directed at inanimate objects, such as throwing and breaking a vase, or physical assault against another person. Of all the unproductive conflict behaviors listed here, this one is the most harmful and dangerous. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Statistics (2015), 21% of college students report dating violence by a current partner, and 32% of college students have experienced dating violence from a previous romantic partner.

Manipulation

This unproductive conflict strategy includes one party being extremely charming and even generous to help sway the conflict outcome in their direction. For example, Ian wants to buy a new surfboard. To soften up his wife, Lily, for the big purchase, he makes favorite dinner and brings home a bouquet of roses, thinking that she won’t say no after he was so “considerate.” However, if Lily finds out that Ian was merely being nice to gain an advantage, this may harm the trust in their relationship over the long run.

Personal Rejection

This occurs when one party in the conflict withholds love, affection, and attention from the other party. The strategy is designed to reject the other person in hopes that they will give in to the other person and come back to reconcile. For example, after a family conflict with his parents, Darren refuses to accept holiday gifts from his parents for his kids and sends them back, unopened.

Counterpunch

This is a defensive response to conflict whereby rather than responding to the initial topic of conflict, the other person reacts by sharing their own, often unrelated criticism. For example, Sara asks Ethan to make a better effort cleaning up after himself in the kitchen. Rather than responding to Sara’s request, Ethan responds with, “If you were a better cook, it might motivate me to clean up my dishes.”

Labeling

This occurs when you assign negative terms to the other person’s behavior. We can do this internally by just thinking about it in our heads, or externally by sharing our labels with others, or by labeling the other person during our interaction. Not only can labels be extremely hurtful, but when we use labels to assign meaning to the behavior of other people, we begin to view those people through the labels. For example, Mason works up the courage to tell their father that they do not want to go into the family business, but instead would like to go to college. His father, who is extremely disappointed, responds by telling Mason that they are “ungrateful,” “selfish,” and a “bad son.”

Silencers

These behaviors can stifle and silence the conflict, such as crying, yelling, and heavy breathing. When conflict escalates quickly, parties may use silencers to deflect attention away from the conflict issue and instead make the conflict about the silencers. For example, let’s say that friends Jasmine and Sam are having a conflict over money. Jasmine assertively tells Sam that she expects to be repaid for the money she lent them. Rather than responding to Jasmine’s request, Sam begins crying and suggests that Jasmine is a bully for bringing up the topic. The conflict now becomes about Jasmine’s approach and Sam’s crying; the money problem is left without being addressed.

As we can see, there are a variety of ways we can worsen conflict, hurt the other person, and hurt our relationships. It is now time to turn our attention to positive communication behaviors that you can use to resolve your differences.

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10.6: Interpersonal Conflict and Social Media

Interpersonal Conflict, Technology-Mediated Communication, and Social Media

In 2016, a private disagreement between Taylor Swift and Kanye West erupted into one of the most visible social media conflicts of the decade. After West released the song *Famous*—claiming Swift had approved a controversial lyric—Swift publicly denied ever giving permission. The conflict escalated when Kim Kardashian posted an illegally recorded phone call she said proved Swift agreed. What could have remained a private dispute became a global spectacle, unfolding across Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat as millions watched, commented, and took sides.

Most of us don't have a social media presence anywhere near Swift or West, but we can't deny that **technology-mediated communication (TMC)** and social media have transformed how we experience conflict. Today, conflict doesn't just happen face-to-face—it happens through texts, posts, comments, screenshots, and notifications.

How Technology-Mediated Communication Shapes Conflict

Over the past two decades, technology-mediated communication has fundamentally reshaped how we interact with one another. Because texting, messaging apps, social media, and smartphones give us constant access to each other, they also create new openings for misunderstanding and tension. In many relationships, conflict now begins not with a face-to-face conversation but with a notification, a post, or a message that feels ambiguous or emotionally charged. Social media, in particular, can become a source of conflict when partners monitor each other's posts, comments, or tagged locations. Research on romantic relationships shows that this kind of digital surveillance can heighten jealousy and insecurity, creating conflict that simply didn't exist twenty years ago.

At the same time, technology-mediated communication can help us manage conflict more effectively. Instead of confronting someone in person when emotions are running high, we might send a text to apologize, clarify a misunderstanding, or ask to meet and talk. Digital channels can give us space to think, regulate our emotions, and craft messages more intentionally. They can also expose us to new ways of navigating conflict. Social media platforms are filled with communication coaches, therapists, and influencers—like trial lawyer Jefferson Fisher, known for the motto "I help people argue less so they can talk more"—who offer strategies for staying calm, listening better, and communicating more clearly.

Technology also plays a role in how relationships are defined and displayed. People use social media to announce relationship status, celebrate milestones, or—sometimes—publicly air grievances. These posts can escalate conflict, invite commentary from others, or shape how the relationship is perceived by a wider audience. In short, technology doesn't just give us more ways to communicate; it gives us more ways to experience conflict. It increases the number of conflict triggers, speeds up how quickly conflict unfolds, and provides both healthy and unhealthy models of how people argue. Understanding these dynamics helps us see how deeply technology has become woven into the fabric of modern interpersonal conflict.

Why People Go Public With Relationship Problems on Social Media

If you've ever scrolled through Instagram or TikTok and seen someone airing relationship drama, you're witnessing a growing communication pattern. Public posts about breakups, fights, or vague emotional messages aren't random—they reflect deeper emotional and relational motivations.

Social Media as an Emotional Outlet

When people feel hurt or overwhelmed, posting can feel like the fastest way to release those emotions. It becomes a coping strategy—an immediate way to feel seen or heard when face-to-face communication feels too difficult.

Seeking Support and Validation

Public posts invite sympathy, encouragement, and reassurance. When someone feels dismissed or misunderstood in private, the online audience becomes a source of comfort.

Indirect Communication and Avoidance

A sad quote, a pointed meme, or a vague "I deserve better" post can communicate dissatisfaction without confronting a partner directly. This indirect conflict behavior often appears when people feel anxious or unsure how to express their needs.

Identity Work and Storytelling

Posting helps people shape a narrative—"I'm strong," "I was mistreated," "I'm moving on." Social media becomes a stage for managing self-image during emotionally charged moments.

Attachment Patterns and Learned Habits

People with anxious or avoidant attachment styles may use social media to seek reassurance or express distress. Others post because it's a familiar habit—something they've learned to do during conflict.

Drama, Attention, and Emotional Intensity

Likes, comments, and reactions activate reward pathways in the brain. For some individuals, the intensity of public drama becomes reinforcing, even if it complicates the relationship further.

The Bottom Line

Going public with relationship problems isn't just "being dramatic." It's often a mix of emotional regulation, identity protection, indirect communication, and the search for support. Understanding these motivations helps us see social media conflict not as random chaos, but as a meaningful—though sometimes unhealthy—way people try to manage relational stress.

Reflections on Research

🔍 **Research Reflection: When Technology Shows Up in Our Conflicts**

Ever notice how your phone suddenly feels *way* more interesting when a conflict gets uncomfortable? Researchers Roaché and Caughlin studied exactly that—how college students use communication technologies during relational conflict and what those choices reveal about their goals. In their study, 64 students described how they used tools like texting, social media, and internet searches both **during** face-to-face conflict and **to avoid** it. Students reported using technology to regulate emotions, gather information, distance themselves, or carefully craft messages. Others felt that using technology during conflict was inappropriate and preferred to handle disagreements in person. The researchers found that technology use wasn't random—it reflected students' attempts to manage competing goals like protecting identity, maintaining the relationship, and accomplishing the task of resolving the conflict.

The study also showed that communication modes—face-to-face and digital—don't always work smoothly together. When students could move easily between texting and in-person talk, they felt closer and more satisfied. When those modes clashed or created confusion, satisfaction dropped. In other words, technology can either help or interfere with conflict depending on how intentionally it's used. This research reminds us that conflict today isn't just about what we say—it's also about *how* we choose to say it and the tools we use to manage our emotions, goals, and relationships.

Caughlin, J. P., Basinger, E. D., & Sharabi, L. L. (2017). The connections between communication technologies and relational conflict: A multiple goals and communication interdependence perspective. In J. A. Samp (Ed.), Communicating interpersonal conflict in close relationships: Contexts, challenges and opportunities (pp. 57-72). New York: NY: Routledge

Reflection Questions

1. How do *you* use communication technologies during face-to-face conflict—and how do you use them to avoid face-to-face conflict?
2. Think about a recent disagreement: Did technology help you manage your goals (identity, relational, task), or did it get in the way?
3. When does texting or messaging make conflict easier for you—and when does it make things harder?

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10.7: Conflict Resolution

Using Conflict as an Opportunity



Figure 10.7.1: This fortune says, “The purpose of argument should not be victory, but progress.”The Purpose of Argument is Progress by Jon Collier from Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0

As we have learned so far, interpersonal conflict can be a complicated, emotional, and frustrating experience. It is equally important to recognize that conflict is normal and can be an opportunity to bring people together. Thankfully, there are several helpful communication strategies available to you for conflict resolution. In this section, you will review communication skills that help promote peaceful conflict resolution, learn a model of conflict resolution, and learn about alternative options for conflict management.

Communication Skills for Effective Conflict Resolution

As previously noted, communication and conflict are closely woven together. Thus, communication behaviors can both serve as a source of conflict and as the key to resolving interpersonal conflict. Throughout this text, you have learned a variety of interpersonal communication skills that will come in handy when trying to resolve conflict. This section will provide an overview of key communication skills for effective conflict resolution and provide additional tips to help in the process.

Mindfulness

Approach conflict with mindfulness. Mindfulness refers to being present in the moment, with increased awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and communication behaviors. To approach conflict mindfully, consider your conflict opening, including your tone of voice and tone of the message. For example, Liana is aware that she is an assertive communicator who at times can be very passionate about her views. When addressing conflicts with her friends or family she makes a conscious effort to use a considerate tone and to find the right words to start the discussion. A gentle start to the conflict can help make the other person more willing to listen.

Perception Checking

When negotiating conflict, it is important to understand the source of the conflict and the perspective of the other parties. Take the time to check your perceptions about the cause of the conflict and how the other person is feeling.

Being Unconditionally Constructive

Regardless of the approach used by the other party in the conflict, commit to being unconditionally constructive, which means adhering to the principles of ethical communication by honoring yourself, the other person, and the relationship, and not engaging in communication behaviors that will harm the other party or the relationship. We cannot change how others will respond to us, but we can choose to control our own communication behaviors (Fisher et al., 2011).

The 5 to 1 Rule

People in satisfying and stable relationships share more positive than negative messages about their relationships and each other. Even during an argument, it is worthwhile to take the time to appreciate the other person. This phenomenon, which is called the 5 to 1 Rule, is particularly important when trying to resolve conflicts (Gottman, 1994). To practice the 5 to 1 Rule, include positive communication behaviors such as empathy, making respectful jokes, expressing appreciation for the other person (even for trivial things like taking out the trash), apologizing, trying to find areas of agreement, expressing both physical and verbal affection, and demonstrating that you are interested in the other person.

Bracketing

This refers to breaking down the conflict into smaller and more manageable parts. Sometimes during a conflict, individuals will bring a large variety of topics to the table, including old issues. It can be helpful to say “What is the most pressing issue for you (or us) right now? We can deal with the other issues, but let’s try to focus on one right now.” Separating conflict issues into smaller parts increases the chances of successfully resolving problems.

Mindful Listening

Family therapists stress that mindful listening is one of the most important communication skills to use to promote harmonious relationships and to help manage conflicts. When you find yourself in a conflict situation, whenever possible, be the first to listen by encouraging the other party to speak and then take time to paraphrase their messages. This helps to slow the pace of conflicts and encourages mutual understanding. Now, in some situations, you may find yourself initiating a discussion of the conflict. If that is the case, you will likely speak first, and then request feedback from the other party.

Assertiveness

In terms of conflict management, being assertive with our communication helps us stand up for ourselves while at the same time respecting the needs of the other person. If you decide to address a conflict with another party, review tips for assertive communication, such as relying on communication that is respectful, honest, and maintains a focus on the needs of both parties.

Empathy

To take a collaborative approach to conflict, actively try to put yourself in the other party's position to understand the conflict from their point of view. How would you feel if you were in their shoes? Empathy is essential to achieving a collaborative outcome to the conflict. Taking the time to verbally express that you empathize with the other person can encourage them to also empathize with you, building a connection that may help lead to resolution.

Emotional Intelligence

This is a key component of successful conflict negotiation. When preparing to engage in conflict, check in with your emotional intelligence. How are you and the other party feeling emotionally and physically? Is it the right time to discuss a conflict? Are you able to empathize with the other party? Are you in control of your communication behavior? Practicing emotional intelligence while engaging in conflict resolution will contribute to maintaining and strengthening the relationship rather than solely focusing on winning the argument.

You have now reviewed several communication tools that can help you improve your conflict negotiation experiences. In the next section, let’s examine a step-by-step model for creating a collaborative and peaceful conflict negotiation.

Conflict Letter

Now that you have familiarized yourself with conflict management styles, unproductive conflict, and communication strategies for conflict resolution, it is time to reflect on what you have learned.

Think about an important relationship you have with a friend, family member, romantic partner, or co-worker, and how you would like to improve problem-solving in the relationship. Take a few minutes to write this person a letter or email that reflects on what you have learned about your approach to conflict. Your letter should be about addressing *your* conflict style, not the other person's.

- In the letter, identify your preferred conflict management style and explain what it means. Briefly discuss how your conflict style may impact the other person. You can begin with: "I hope this letter finds you doing well. I am currently taking an interpersonal communication class and have been learning about my communication style when trying to solve problems. I find that I approach conflict as an avoider/obliger/compromiser/etc." Take the time to mention a strength and a drawback of your approach.
- Review the list of unproductive conflict management strategies, and identify at least one unproductive strategy you use that you would like to try to minimize.
- Review tips throughout the book and explain how you will try to improve how you manage conflicts in your relationship. You can share at least two new communication tools you plan to try to use the next time you encounter a conflict with this person.
- Talk about your role and what *you* plan to do, not focusing on what the other person should be doing. You can make one request, but the focus should be on improving your own conflict communication.
- You can share this letter with the person you wrote it to, or keep it for yourself as motivation to work towards peaceful conflict resolution.

Integrative Conflict Resolution Model

Conflict negotiation refers to a formal or informal process that individuals use to find a mutually agreeable solution to a problem. When sorting through the complexity of conflict, it can help to have a model to guide the process. Before you choose to try and solve a problem, it can be helpful to ask yourself a few guiding questions first:

- Will this subject bother me tomorrow, next week, next month, etc.? If the answer is yes, give yourself some time to cool off and plan to address the issue. If the answer is no, you may choose not to deal with the situation.
- Is this the right time to address the problem? Do you and the other person have the time and emotional bandwidth to tackle the conflict? If not now, schedule a time to talk later.
- Are you addressing the conflict with the correct person? All too often, we complain to friends and family members about a problem we have experienced with someone else. This allows us to release a little emotional frustration, but if the problem continues you will need to address it with the involved parties.

The integrative conflict resolution model presented below is appropriate to use for issues that are important to you and/or the other person, ongoing conflicts, or conflicts that may significantly impact you.

1. **Define the conflict:** To successfully negotiate conflict, all parties in the conflict must identify the issues. You can begin by describing the central concerns and identifying different conflict goals (content, relational, identity, process). There may be multiple issues at play, and this is a good time to practice bracketing, or breaking the conflict into smaller parts, to determine what issues you would like to focus on.
2. **Use "I" statements:** Use "I" statements instead of "you" language to avoid triggering defensiveness and to demonstrate that you are taking responsibility for your own feelings.
3. **Empathize with the other person:** When possible and appropriate, take the time to acknowledge how the other person is feeling and their perspective on the conflict.
4. **Brainstorm solutions:** Once both parties have identified the conflict and shared their personal perspectives, jointly brainstorm solutions to the problem. Brainstorm multiple solutions together. Refrain from judging solutions during this step.
5. **Test a solution:** Jointly select a solution to the conflict that you are willing to put into practice. Agree to a timeline to test the solution, whether it be in days, weeks, or months.
6. **Adopt or reject the solution:** After the agreed-upon time has passed, meet up to discuss the solution to the conflict. Did the solution solve the problem? Did it make it worse? You may need to revisit the conflict and test a new solution.

Using the integrative conflict resolution model can take time and practice. When you first use the model, it can feel a bit stiff and artificial, as though you are following a script for a play. However, over time, using an approach like this can help you slow down and think through the best options for conflict resolution. If you are facing a significant area of conflict with a friend, family member, or co-worker, it may help to sit down and think through in advance what you would like to say and accomplish.

Some conflicts can be too big for individuals to resolve on their own. In these cases, it can help to seek out a third party. There are many options available. Conflict mediation is where individuals seek help resolving a conflict with the aid of a trained mediator. Many cities offer free or low-cost conflict mediation services for families, couples, and communities. In other situations, particularly when conflict is creating a painful emotional experience, or is multi-layered, therapy or counseling may be a beneficial option. Therapy or counseling can provide individuals and families with training, problem-solving, and coping strategies for managing conflict. Colleges frequently offer free therapy sessions and/or referrals for low-cost options within the community. If you experience conflict at work, you may want to turn to your Human Resources department for help in resolving the issue. It is worthwhile to develop skills in peaceful conflict resolution, but it is also helpful to recognize times when you may need professional assistance to aid you in solving your conflict.

Building Bridges Through Apology and Forgiveness



Figure 10.7.1: Forgiveness by scem.info from Flickr CC-BY-SA-2.0.

As we have learned throughout this book, our personal relationships with family, friends and romantic partners are essential for our physical and psychological well-being. However, despite our best intentions, conflict can arise in these relationships, creating emotionally charged situations and often resulting in hurt feelings and misunderstandings.

Offering an **apology** to another is a signal that you recognize the impact of your actions and that you would like to make amends. Granting **forgiveness** is the process of fostering personal healing by offering grace to the party who has hurt us. To forgive does not mean to excuse or forget that you have been harmed. Rather, the aim of forgiveness is to bring peace that allows both parties to move forward.

Learning to apologize effectively may be one of the most powerful communication tools we can use to respond when things go wrong in our relationships. In the book *A good apology: Four steps to make things right* (2020), psychologist Molly Howes outlines four steps for a meaningful apology:

1. First, you must come to understand the other person's injury, including the effects of your actions. This usually involves asking questions and listening.
2. Second, you must articulate a sincere statement of regret. You must acknowledge what you did and how it affected the other person. This is no small feat for most of us, especially when we didn't intend to hurt someone.
3. Third, you must make reparations. This can include material restitution, although in relationships that's less likely to occur.
4. Fourth, you must make a convincing plan to prevent the problem from happening again (Howes, 2020, p. 73).

As with the other communication skills you have learned throughout this book, apology and forgiveness take practice and patience.

When should you forgive? One of my favorite sayings is from 18th-century poet Alexander Pope, who wrote, "To err is human, to

forgive is divine." This line reminds us that it is human nature to make mistakes, and it is a gracious act to grant forgiveness. Granting forgiveness does not mean releasing the other person from responsibility, but can allow us to move forward with our lives by releasing us from pain and from any control that a situation or other person may have over us.

Consider This: To Apologize and Forgive, That Is the Question

Jake and Dana have been friends since elementary school. After high school, Jake became heavily involved in the drug scene. Unfortunately, Jake developed a drug addiction. As a result of the addiction, Jake alienated friends and family, stole money from Dana, and as a breaking point, endangered Dana's life. As a result, Dana cut off all contact with Jake. After hitting rock bottom, Jake completed two rounds of rehab. Upon completion of the last round of treatment, Jake reached out to Dana through text, and apologized for their previous behavior, acknowledging the theft and the danger caused as a result of the addiction.

1. Based on Howes' (2020) four steps for a meaningful apology (understand, articulate, repair, and prevention, how would you apologize to Dana if you were in Jake's position?
2. If you were in Dana's position, would you be able to forgive Jake? Why or why not? Explain how you might respond to a sincere apology from Jake.

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10.8: Summary and Review

Summary

In this chapter, we explored conflict and communication in personal relationships. We learned that conflict is based on interdependent relationships, competing goals, limited resources, and interference from others, and that culture can add a significant dimension to how we perceive and resolve conflict.

It is important to recognize that we approach conflict situations with distinctive styles, including integrating, dominating, avoiding, competing, and obliging preferences. These styles will in turn impact how the conflict is resolved, including win-win, win-lose, and lose-lose outcomes. Conflict can be further complicated by the use of unproductive conflict behaviors, such as gunnysacking, kitchen sinking, blame, beltlining, force, manipulation, personal rejection, counterpunch, labels, and silencers. The use of unproductive conflict behaviors may lead to short-term win-lose outcomes, but over time they can cause conflict to spiral out of control, hurt the relationship, and hurt the self-concepts of the people on the receiving end.

To close the chapter, we explored specific communication tools to help enhance successful conflict management, as well as an integrative model of conflict negotiation. There are a variety of communication tools that can encourage the peaceful resolution of conflict, including mindfulness, being unconditionally constructive, practicing the 5 to 1 Rule, bracketing, perception checking, active listening and mirroring, assertiveness, empathy, and emotional intelligence. For conflicts that are ongoing and have a significant impact, practicing the integrative conflict resolution model may help to solve the conflict. Last, it is important to recognize when conflict may benefit from the help of a third party, such as a conflict mediator or therapist.

Interpersonal conflict, when managed with empathy and grace, can lead to a variety of benefits. It is important to remember to commit to honoring yourself, the other person, and the relationship. In doing so, you may experience greater personal awareness, understanding of the other person, and relationship growth.

Discussion Questions

1. Think of a recent situation in which you experienced a conflict or a problem in a relationship with a friend, family member, romantic partner, or co-worker. What type of conflict goal is at the heart of the problem? If you could go back and renegotiate the conflict, what are three conflict management skills you learned in this chapter that you would apply for peaceful problem resolution? How might the context of the situation influence your choice of conflict management style?
2. Reflect on your own style of conflict management (avoidance, dominating, integrating, obliging, compromising). Do you try to jump right in and solve the problem, or would you rather not deal with issues? Do you try and protect the relationship first, or do you try to win and get your way? What is the benefit of your approach? What is the downside to your approach? Based on what you have learned in this chapter, how might you adapt your conflict management approach in the future?
3. In your family, what are the expectations for handling conflict? (Consider cultural factors such as race and ethnicity, gender, age, individualism/collectivism, and sexual orientation.) How do these expectations impact your relationships with others?

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11: BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

Learning Objectives

- Identify and understand different types of interpersonal relationships, needs, roles, and norms
- Discuss how interpersonal communication changes as we move through various relationship stages
- Explain the influence that context, identity, and culture have on our interpersonal communication interactions and relationships
- Apply interpersonal communication theories and strategies when discussing and analyzing relationships

Interpersonal communication is vital to building, maintaining, and even ending our relationships. In this chapter, we discuss the foundations of relationships, relational stages, and the tools and strategies to achieve the relational outcomes we desire. We talk about healthy and unhealthy communication in relationships, and how to deal with relationship termination.

11.1: Introduction to Building and Maintaining Relationships

11.2: Foundations of Relationships

11.3: What Brings Us Together

11.3.1: Family

11.3.2: Friendship

11.3.3: Romantic

11.3.3.1: Couple Communication

11.4: Relationship Stages

11.5: The Role of Self-Disclosure

11.6: Summary and Review

11.7: References

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11.1: Introduction to Building and Maintaining Relationships

Introduction

Yasmeen is visiting with her in-law's family for Thanksgiving. Her partner is currently deployed in the armed forces, so she is there for the first time on her own. Yasmeen and her husband do not practice any religion at home, as they come from different cultural and religious backgrounds. As the family sits down for the meal, everyone holds hands and Yasmeen is asked to say a prayer. She is unsure what to do. She does not want to alienate or offend her husband's family. At the same time, she does not want to say something disingenuous, or that goes against her own practices.

Questions

1. What options would you offer to Yasmeen in this situation, in order to both maintain her relationship with her in-laws and stay true to herself?
2. In this situation, how does the context (Thanksgiving at her in-laws, while her husband is deployed) contribute to her interpersonal considerations?
3. Have you ever had a situation like this, where differences in cultural or religious backgrounds led to challenges with interpersonal communication?

The vignette you just read exemplifies how challenging interpersonal communication can be, even within close relationships. Interpersonal relationships vary from surface conversations to friendships to romantic partnerships. The same issues we find in this example are applicable in many different situations. Can you remember meeting your best friend for the first time? Do you think about how you are presenting yourself when you interview for a job or go on a first date? These are the complexities we all have to navigate in new relationships. Interpersonal Communication is vital to building, maintaining, and even ending our relationships. In this chapter, we will discuss the foundations of relationships, relational stages, and the tools and strategies we have to achieve the relational outcomes we desire. This chapter introduces couples' communication and weaves in how identity and culture affect our interactions and relationships.

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11.2: Foundations of Relationships

Types of Relationships: Personal versus Social

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 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 co-workers, we may have more surface relationships. We call these social relationships.

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 love relationship.

It is important to note that relationships can change over time. While we may start out in a social relationship with our exercise buddy, 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 Janice. On this particular hike, Janice notices you seem different and asks you what's going on. When you disclose to Janice that you are grieving a family member, she listens and supports you. Perhaps she also tells you about someone she lost recently. In this scenario, the relationship you previously considered social with Janice is quickly developing into a personal relationship.

Types of Relationships: Voluntary versus Involuntary

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.

Voluntary Relationship

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 Relationship

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.

Relationship Typology Spectrums

As we have discussed, relationships can exist in a range of ways. Let's go a bit deeper. Figure 11.2.1 refers to **relationship typologies**. We previously discussed the differences between social and personal relationships, as well as voluntary and involuntary. When these two relationship categories are further broken down and combined, they describe four distinct and specific typologies: **voluntary personal, voluntary social, involuntary personal,** and **involuntary social**. Let's take a closer look at each of the four relationship typologies.

Voluntary Personal Partners/Spouses and Best Friends	Voluntary Social Acquaintances and Activity Partners (for example: Workout buddies)
Involuntary Personal Parent-Child, Siblings, Grandparent/Godparent-Child, and Colleagues	Involuntary Social Distant Relatives, Co-Workers, Neighbors, Classmates, and Teacher-Student relationships

Relationship Typology

Figure 11.2.1: Relationship Typologies adapted from C. Arthur VanLear, Ascan Koerner, and Donna M. Allen is licensed as CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Voluntary Personal Relationships

An example of a **voluntary personal** relationship could be romantic partners. Typically romantic partners know each other well and self-disclose with intimacy. Additionally, we will assume the individuals in this relationship chose to be with the other. Another example of a voluntary personal relationship would be members of Drama Club. Students choose to join Drama Club voluntarily, based on their interest in watching, reading, and creating and performing plays and musicals. Furthermore, members of the Drama Club can quit at any time, so the relationships they engage in are voluntary.

Voluntary Social Relationships

An example of a **voluntary social** relationship could be the relationship you have with your gym partner, whom you have chosen to work out with, but your conversation lives more on the surface.

Involuntary Personal Relationships

An example of an **involuntary personal** relationship could be the relationship you have with a sibling, with whom you had no choice in being in a family. However, you know your sibling rather intimately.

Involuntary Social Relationships

An example of an **involuntary social** relationship could be the relationship you have with your neighbors. You might have chosen to live in a certain location but it is likely you didn't know your neighbors until after you moved in. You probably don't have an incredibly close relationship with them just because they live next door, and you likely don't share a close bond.

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 in one quadrant of this table, 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.

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 can feel unnecessary in certain relationships. For example, the relationship between a mother and her young child is based on their biological roles. There are some obvious norms, such as the mother being in charge because she is her child's caretaker, which creates an inherent power discrepancy. This suggests that most boundaries will be set by the mother in that relationships. Power dynamics will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 12. One thing to note now is that power can be **symmetrical**, where each person has the same amount of power, or it can be **asymmetrical**, or uneven. Generally speaking, the more symmetrical the power dynamic, the more necessary it is to define relationship boundaries because the roles and norms are less obvious. That is not to say you should assume boundaries in asymmetrical relationships. It is always beneficial to discuss relational boundaries, even if they are more obvious.

Siblings of a similar age, who get along well and try to share responsibilities, are an example of a **symmetrical power relationship**. This is because both siblings have approximately the same amount of power. In an **asymmetrical relationship**, one person has more power than the other, as is the case between a parent and child. (Note: many collectivistic cultures specifically set norms around honoring and respecting elders, including siblings.) At times, a relationship that is initially symmetrical may become asymmetrical, or vice versa. For example, let's say as the two siblings reach adolescence, one child enjoys conversational and decision-making control more than the other. In this case, the relationship might become asymmetrical, with one sibling exhibiting higher control.

Another interesting change that can occur, with respect to control, is when an asymmetrical relationship stays uneven, but the power dynamic shifts. For example, when adopted twins Janice and David were young children, they were cared for by their parents. When their parents became elderly, Janice invited them to move into her home. Janice and her partner now help her parents with food preparation, laundry, and cleaning. David comes to visit twice per week and drives both of his parents to doctors' appointments. In this example, the parents initially had more power than the children. However, as the children matured and took on caretaking roles for their elderly parents, the power in the relationship shifted. When power shifts occur, our relationships inevitably change. Using effective interpersonal communication to clarify or renegotiate boundaries may help to facilitate this transition to new roles and norms.

Roles and Norms

Roles are the specific parts we play in our relationships. At times, our role is similar or synonymous with our title in that relationship. For example, Grandma Anita enjoys playing the role of a stereotypical "grandparent," perhaps providing love and gifts, but not necessarily engaging in setting rules or providing discipline. However, it is not uncommon for grandparents to take on a major parenting role, either part-time while parents are at work, or full-time if parents are not part of their children's lives. The real key to understanding our roles in relationships is to examine the norms.

Norms are the behaviors and acts we perform in relationships. Some norms are mutual, meaning each person performs them. For example, it might be typical in your love relationship for you and your romantic partner to take turns cooking dinner. Other norms might be more individual, for example perhaps only one of you likes to drive when you go out together. Most norms can change over time, but it is wise to establish norms that feel healthy and agreeable early in your relationships.

You might be thinking to yourself, "I have never discussed boundaries, roles, or norms, and I have great relationships!" That is very fortunate! But remember, communication is not just about what you say, it is about what you do and other nonverbal messages. So, perhaps you have set very clear boundaries through your actions. Or perhaps some of your relationships follow the expected norms and roles we have been socialized to agree upon and perform.

Reflection Questions

Take a moment to reflect on the boundaries, roles, and norms you have established in various relationships.

- Are there relationships where the roles and norms seem unclear?
- Do these need to be renegotiated or clarified?
- How might you use effective interpersonal communication to clarify these roles and norms and improve the relationship moving forward

Thoughs on Theory: Dialectical Perspective

Relationships feel rewarding, complicated, and sometimes confusing because we're always navigating **two needs at the same time**. Communication scholars call these push-and-pull forces **dialectical tensions**. They show up inside our own thoughts and in our interactions with others. Baxter (2011) explains that these tensions come from competing needs and messages we hear in society—like "be independent" and "stay close to people"—and we try to honor both.

Three common tensions shape how we relate to others:

- **Independence–Connection:** We want closeness, but we also want our own space. Maybe you love hanging out with your best friend but also need time alone to recharge. Healthy relationships find a rhythm between "together" and "apart."
- **Novelty–Predictability:** We like routines because they feel safe, but we also need surprises to keep things interesting. Knowing your roommate will always remind you about your dentist appointment is comforting, but trying a new coffee shop together keeps the relationship fresh.
- **Openness–Closedness:** We want to share openly and honestly, yet we also want privacy and to not make ourselves vulnerable. Even in close relationships, we don't reveal everything at once. Like an onion, we open up layer by layer. Keeping some things private doesn't mean you're shutting people out—it means you're human.

These tensions never disappear; we simply **manage** them. You can experience the tensions on your own, but you can also experience them in the context of a relationship. Learning to recognize them helps us communicate more intentionally and build relationships that feel balanced and healthy.

Discussion Questions

1. Identify a relationship in your life where you're experiencing one of the dialectical tensions. How do you manage it?
2. Create a metaphor to describe each tension. For example, openness–closedness is like eating ice cream: a little at a time feels good, but eating a whole gallon at once is overwhelming.
3. Think of a moment when one of these tensions caused conflict. What communication choices could have helped ease that tension?

Culture and Intercultural Communication in Relationships

As if relationships weren't complicated enough, culture also plays a big role in how we experience interpersonal relationships. **Culture** is a shared set of values, beliefs, and behaviors among a common group of people. In most cases, people enter relationships with at least slight variations in their cultural background, and quite likely they differ from one another based on multiple parts of their identities, including race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, and age (to name a few). Even when two people in an interpersonal relationship consider themselves similar in terms of their cultural background, there may be elements of intercultural communication at play, because no two people are exactly the same.

Fortunately, there are many theories and strategies that can help us maintain our relationships, not only in spite of these differences but in celebration of these differences. In the next section, we will explore some of the most common relationship types where we experience interpersonal communication frequently, specifically family, friendship, romantic partnerships, and workplace relationships.



Figure 11.2.2: Loving Glance by Alex Lujan on Unsplash

Student Voice: Dialectical Tensions

One relational dialectic that creates tension in one of my relationships is when I'm open versus when I'm closed. The biggest issue is that I tend to keep things to myself when I'm stressed or dealing with something personal; it's really hard for me to open up, and I'm not sure why. I usually like to figure things out on my own before talking about them.

My partner Emile is the opposite and likes to talk about things right away. Sometimes this creates tension because he thinks I'm being distant when really I just need time to process things first, but, unfortunately,ately like to give the silent treatment when I think I'm wronged. It confuses him because he doesn't know if I'm silently punishing him or silently digesting the situation. I can see why it can be confusing.

I think the best way to manage the tension we have sometimes is by communicating better. Instead of completely shutting down, I can let him know that I'm okay and just need some time before I'm ready to talk. At least then he can understand where the silence is coming from, and that I'm not just punishing him. This way, I still get the space I need and he can better understand why I'm alone.

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11.3: WHAT BRINGS US TOGETHER

Understanding Attraction

Researchers have identified three primary types of attraction: physical, social, and task. **Physical attraction** refers to the degree to which you find another person aesthetically pleasing. What is deemed aesthetically pleasing can alter from one culture to the next. We also know that pop culture can significantly influence what is considered physically appealing from one era to the next. Think of the curvaceous ideal of Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor in the 1950s as compared to the thin Jenna Ortega, Marsai Martin, or Millie Bobby Brown. Although discussions of male physical attraction occur less often, they are equally impacted by pop culture. In the 1950s, you had solid men like Robert Mitchum and Marlon Brando, compared to the lean, athletic leading men of today (e.g., Jacob Elordi, Tom Holland, and Timothée Chalamet).

The second type of attraction is **social attraction**, or the degree to which an individual sees another person as entertaining, intriguing, and fun to be around. We all have finite resources when it comes to the amount of time we have in a given day. We prefer to socialize with people who we think are fun. These people may entertain us or they may fascinate us. Regardless of the reason, we tend to find some people more socially desirable than others. Social attraction can also be a factor in power dynamics. For example, in situations where there are kids in the "in-group" and those who are not. Here, those who are considered popular hold more power and are perceived as being more socially desirable to associate with. This relationship becomes problematic when these individuals decide to use this social desirability as a tool or weapon against others.

The last type of attraction is **task attraction**, or people we are attracted to because they possess specific knowledge and/or skills that help us accomplish specific goals. The first part of this definition requires that the target of task attraction possess specific knowledge and/or skills. Perhaps you have a friend who is skilled with computers and is always willing to help you fix your computer when something goes wrong. Maybe you have a friend who is good in math and can tutor you. Of course, these relationships help you accomplish your own goals. In the first case, your goal is to avoid a broken-down computer. In the second case, your goal is to pass math. This is not to say that an individual may only be viewed as task attractive, but many relationships we form are because of task attraction in our lives.

Social Media, Gaming, and the Meet Cute



Riot Games, the creator of *League of Legends* and *Valorant*, maintains a large U.S. headquarters and campus in Santa Monica, California. The space functions not only as an office but as a celebration of the company's creativity—part museum, part storytelling hub—featuring artwork, character models, lore installations, and interactive displays from across the Riot

universe. One of the most striking features is the **Match Found Wall**, which highlights couples who met through Riot's games. It's a playful, heartfelt reminder that technology continues to reshape how people form relationships, and that meeting through an online game represents a modern twist on the classic "meet-cute."

According to Gaming by the Numbers, this phenomenon is part of a much larger cultural shift: **more than 3.32 billion people worldwide play video games**, and **2.82 billion of them engage in online play**. With so many people connecting in virtual worlds, it's no surprise that friendships, communities, and even romantic relationships emerge from shared gameplay.

Figure 11.3.1: Match Found by Angela Hoppe-Nagao

Discussion Questions for Interpersonal Communication

1. **How does meeting someone through an online game challenge or expand traditional definitions of interpersonal attraction and relationship formation?**
2. **In what ways might shared gameplay create relational closeness differently than face-to-face first encounters?**

   What interpersonal skills are emphasized or diminished in these digital meet-cutes?

Reasons for Attraction

Now that we've looked at the basics of what attraction is. Let's switch gears and talk about why we are attracted to each other. There are several reasons researchers have found for our attraction to others, including proximity, physicality, perceived gain, similarities and differences, and disclosure.

Physical Proximity

When you ask people how they met their significant other, you often hear that proximity played a role in their meeting. Perhaps they were taking the same class, attend the same church, were employed at the same organization or their families went to the same grocery store. These commonplaces create opportunities for others to meet and mingle. We are more likely to talk to people whom we see frequently.

Physical Attractiveness

In day-to-day interactions, you are more likely to pay attention to someone you find more attractive than others. Research indicates that males place more emphasis on physical attractiveness than females.[5] Appearance is very important at the beginning of a relationship.

Perceived Gain

This type of relationship might appear to be like an economic model and can be explained by exchange theory.[6] We will form relationships with people who can offer us rewards that outweigh the costs. Rewards are the things we want to acquire. They could be tangible (e.g., food, money, clothes) or intangible (support, admiration, status). Costs are undesirable things that we don't want to expend a lot of energy on. For instance, we don't want to have to constantly nag the other person to call us or spend a lot of time arguing about past items. A good relationship will have lower costs and more rewards. A poor relationship will have more costs and fewer rewards. Often, when people decide to stay in or leave a relationship, they consider the costs and benefits of the relationship.

Costs and rewards are not the only factors in a relationship. Partners also consider alternatives in the relationship. For instance, Becky and Alan have been together for a few years. Becky adores Alan and wants to marry him, but she feels that there are some problems in the relationship. Alan has a horrible temper; he is pessimistic; and he is critical of her. Becky has gained some weight, and Alan has said some hurtful things to her. Becky knows that every relationship will have issues. She doesn't know whether to continue this relationship or end it.

Her first alternative is called the **comparison level (CL), which represents the minimum standard** she will tolerate. If Becky

believes it is okay for a person to say hurtful things to her or get angry, then Alan is meeting or exceeding her CL. However, if past romantic partners have said nothing hurtful toward her, then she would have a lower CL.

Becky will also consider another alternative, which is the **comparison level of alternatives** (CL_{alt}), or the comparison between current relationship rewards and what she might get in another relationship. If she doesn't want to be single, then she might have a lower CL of alternatives. If she has another potential mate who would probably treat her better, then she would have a higher level of alternatives. We often use this calculation in relationships. Often, when people consider the possibility of ending a relationship, they consider all alternatives rather than just focusing on costs and benefits.

Similarities and Differences

It feels comforting when someone who appears to like the same things you like also has other similarities to you. Thus, you don't have to explain yourself or give reasons for doing things a certain way. People with similar cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds are typically drawn to each other for this reason. It is also known as **similarity thesis**. The similarity thesis essentially posits that we are drawn to and tend to form relationships with others who are similar to us.[7] There are three reasons why the similarity thesis works: validation, predictability, and affiliation. First, it's validating to know that someone likes the same things we do. It confirms and endorses what we believe. In turn, it increases support and affection. Second, when we are similar to another person, we can make predictions about what they will like and not like. We can make better estimations and expectations about what the person will do and how they will behave. The third reason is that we tend to like others who are similar to us, and thus we expect them to like us because we are alike. Hence, it creates an affiliation or connection with that other person.

However, some people are attracted to someone opposite to who they are. This is where differences come into play. Differences can make a relationship stronger, especially when you have a relationship that is **complementary**. In complementary relationships, each person can help satisfy the other's needs. For instance, one person likes to talk, and the other person likes to listen. They get along great because they can be comfortable in their communication behaviors and roles. Additionally, they don't have to argue over who needs to talk. Another example might be that one person enjoys cooking, while the other prefers to eat. This is a great relationship because both people are getting what they like to do, and it complements each other's talents. Typically, friction arises when there are differences of opinion or control issues. For example, if you have someone who loves to spend money and another who loves to save money, it can be very challenging to decide how to handle financial issues.

Disclosure

Sometimes we form relationships with others after we have disclosed something about ourselves to them. Disclosure increases liking because it creates support and trust between you and the other person. We rarely disclose our most intimate thoughts to strangers. We exhibit this behavior with people we are close to because it creates a bond with the other person.

Disclosure is not the only factor that can lead to forming relationships. Disclosure needs to be appropriate and reciprocal.[8] If you provide information, it must be mutual. If you reveal too much or too little, it might be inappropriate and can create tension. Additionally, disclosing information too soon or too quickly in the relationship can lead to negative outcomes.

Thoughts on Theory: Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory helps us understand why we stay in some relationships and step away from others (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). At its core, the theory says we make choices based on a simple idea: **we want relationships where the rewards outweigh the costs**. This doesn't mean we calculate every interaction like a math problem, but we do pay attention to how a relationship feels over time.

Three key parts shape this process:

- **Rewards:** These are the positive outcomes we get from a relationship—support, fun, affection, trust, shared experiences, or even practical help like rides or study sessions. Rewards make the relationship feel worthwhile.
- **Costs:** These are the challenges or negatives—conflict, stress, time demands, misunderstandings, or feeling unsupported. Costs don't automatically make a relationship bad, but too many can make it feel draining.
- **Investments:** These are the things we put into a relationship that we don't want to lose—time, emotional energy, shared memories, or even future plans. Investments make us more likely to stay, even when costs show up.

We constantly (and often unconsciously) compare these three elements. When rewards feel high, costs feel manageable, and investments feel meaningful, the relationship feels satisfying. When the balance shifts—too many costs, too few rewards, or investments that no longer feel valued—we may rethink the relationship.

Understanding this theory helps us reflect on what we're giving, what we're receiving, and what truly matters to us as we build healthy connections.

Discussion Questions

1. Think of a relationship in your life. What are the main rewards, costs, and investments you notice?
2. Create a metaphor that captures how Social Exchange Theory works. For example, a relationship might feel like a bank account—you want more deposits (rewards) than withdrawals (costs), and your savings (investments) keep you committed.
3. Describe a time when the balance between rewards and costs shifted in a relationship. How did that change the way you communicated or behaved?

Thibaut, J. W., & Kelley, H. H. (1959). *The social psychology of groups*. New York, NY: Wiley.

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11.3.1: Family

11.3.2: Friendship

11.3.3: Romantic

11.3.3.1: Couple Communication

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11.3.1: Family



Figure 1: Family by Syuhada Faizal is licensed as CC BY NC 2.0

Family

How do you define family? There is no right or wrong answer! Families are traditionally defined as the people with whom you are connected by blood, however, that is not a required characteristic. How we define family changes over our lifetimes. For many people, the first understanding of family starts off as the people who raised us or those who were raised among us, which could include biological parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, cousins, foster parents, adoptive parents, extended relatives, close friends, in-laws, and step-family members. As we age, who we identify as a family member continues to evolve as we experience new phases of life. We may move around, grow and mature, live with friends, date, marry, adopt or foster a child, divorce, and remarry. As adults, many people start to look at family membership as less of an involuntary relationship, and more of a voluntary choice.

To begin our discussion, let's frame family as the people who raised you from childhood through adolescence, whether there is a biological connection or not. In either case, the bonds, experiences, and communication patterns you develop with the people who make up this type of relationship lays a foundation for all your relationships thereafter. This is because they model communication for us, and we learn from their example. The communication skills, norms, and expectations we learn from our families of origin become our starting point for interacting with the world. Let's examine some common communication patterns within family relationships.

Think about how often you talk to your family. What do you talk about? Do you feel free to speak your mind? Now consider the table below, which again offers two different categories that intersect along two different spectrums.

In Figure 11.3.1.2, two different communication orientations are represented. Figure 11.3.1.2 refers to the degree to which family members interact and communicate about various topics. Conformity orientation refers to the degree to which a family expects uniformity of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Conversation and conformity orientations intersect to create the following family climates: **consensual, pluralistic, protective**, and l**aissez-faire**. In Figure 11.3.1.2 we see a square, divided into four boxes by two axes. Descriptions of the four types of families follow.

Pluralistic = High Conversation and Low Conformity	Consensual = High Conversation and High Conformity
Laissez-Faire = Low Conversation and Low Conformity	Protective = Low Conversation and High Conformity

Family Types

Figure 11.3.1.2: Family Types Based on Conversation and Conformity Orientations by Koerner, A. F. and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick is licensed as CC BY -NC-SA 4.0

Pluralistic

Pluralistic families talk a lot (**high conversation**) but do not expect to agree (**low conformity**). Many families might see themselves fitting into this category in general, or on specific topics. For example, topics like the sports or movie genres you each like could be in the pluralistic quadrant, meaning you all share your thoughts on films and games, but disagreement doesn't ruffle anyone's feathers.

Consensual

Consensual families talk a lot (**high conversation**) and expect to agree (**high conformity**). One topic that might fit here is how a family celebrates any fun family holidays that the entire family looks forward to and enjoys. Other topics might be what religion is observed in the home, or children's plans after college— and in this type of family, despite your personal feelings, you are expected to do what your parents say, with little room for negotiation.

Laissez-Faire

Laissez-faire families talk less (**low conversation**) and do not expect to agree (**low conformity**). A common topic here could be what you like to order from your family's favorite take-out spot. It only comes up when it's time to order, and everyone gets what they want.

Protective

In the **protective** quadrant families talk less (**low conversation**) and do expect to agree (**high conformity**). A possible topic here could be going to your younger siblings' dance recital. You are just expected to show up, right?

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11.3.2: Friendship

Friendships

How do you define friendship? There is no right or wrong answer. Friendship, like family, is in the eye of the beholder. In essence, friendship is often thought of as a close relationship with a person with whom you have a common interest or connection. Friendship is often considered a voluntary social relationship, but it can become voluntary personal if there is a large amount of contact and self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is when you purposefully share personal information with another individual. It includes the expression of your observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs.

Chosen Family



Figure 11.3.2.3: Just Chillin' by Michael Poley licensed by AllGo

The term **chosen families** (Weston, 1991) originally referred to families that members of the LGBTQIA+ community formed with friends, community members, and others, when their families of origin excluded them, due to their sexuality or gender expression. In modern times, many of us have formed small groups of intimate friends and neighbors who act as our most trusted companions, essentially like family. The term **friendsgiving** has become commonplace, indicating that we are sharing Thanksgiving with non-family members, whom we consider close friends (Fetters, 2018).

Reflection Questions

1. Do you have a group of close friends you consider to be your chosen family?
2. What are the advantages of having non-family members in your intimate group for celebrations, discussions of difficult issues, and support?
3. If you do not have a “chosen family,” who would you include in this group?

Common Friendship Types

As with all relationships, friendships look different over time, and as we get older. For adults, in particular, there are three common types of friendships: **reciprocal**, **associative**, and **receptive**.

Reciprocal Friendships

Reciprocal friendships involve people who are equally invested in the relationship. They share a similar appreciation for each other's company, and a desire to maintain a connection throughout changing circumstances. Perhaps you have a friend whom you have known for a long time, maybe since childhood, to whom you are still connected despite having grown in different ways. This person might even be your "best friend"—someone you feel you can talk to about anything without judgment, and vice versa.

Associative Friendships

Associative friendships are a lighter version of reciprocal friendship. They include people who have the same level of respect and fondness for one another, but they connect less frequently with less depth. In these relationships, the two people involved are more like close acquaintances. They may connect over specific shared interests. For example, maybe you volunteer somewhere and work with the same community of people every week or month. You have likely bonded and grown relatively close within a specific area; however, it is not clear that this relationship extends beyond the boundaries of your specific common interest area.

Receptive Friendships

Receptive friendships tend to have some imbalance of power. Common examples include when you have a friendly relationship with your boss or yoga instructor. These relationships can be very meaningful, however, they can be tricky if the power imbalance gets in the way. When participating in a receptive friendship, it is important to be aware of the possibility that the person who is the supervisor or mentor could take advantage of the power differential in the relationship. This would be an abuse of power.

Reflecting on Friendships

After reading the section on different types of friendships, could you think of examples from your own life that fit within the three categories?

1. Take a moment to name a reciprocal friend. How long have you known this person? What is special about this relationship?
2. Can you discuss an associative friend? Where did you meet? Do you ever hang out or talk outside of the place where you have a common interest?
3. Is there anyone in your life with whom you have a large power differential, but you would still consider this person your friend? Discuss this receptive friendship and whether you have ever been in a situation where someone with power abused their position within your relationship.
4. When you think of these different types of friendships, what norms come to mind? What communication tactics work best to sustain them? Would you call them voluntary, or involuntary? Social, or personal?
5. Are friendships free from structure and rules? If not, what rules or norms have you set with your friends?

No matter the circumstance, friendships are a valuable part of our lives. Friendships are often safe spaces for us to be ourselves, to practice having healthy boundaries and experiment with other parts of our personalities. Another type of relationship that can also feel both fulfilling and challenging is a romantic partnership. Let's examine some nuances and dynamics that may be in place when someone becomes more than a friend.

Friendships Across the Life Span

Adolescence

Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty and lasts through the teen years. We typically make our first voluntary close social relationships during adolescence as cognitive and emotional skills develop. At this time, our friendships are usually with others of the same age/grade in school, gender, and race, and friends typically have similar attitudes about academics and similar values (Rawlins, 1992). These early friendships allow us to test our interpersonal skills, which affects the relationships we will have later in life. For example, emotional processing, empathy, self-disclosure, and conflict become features of adolescent friendships in new ways and must be managed (Collins & Madsen, 2006). Adolescents begin to see friends rather than parents as providers of social support, as friends help negotiate the various emotional problems often experienced for the first time (Collins & Madsen,

2006).



Friendships in adolescence become important as we begin to create an identity that is separate from our family. Japharl – Family – CC BY 2.0.

This new dependence on friendships can also create problems. For example, as adolescents progress through puberty and forward on their identity search, they may experience some jealousy and possessiveness in their friendships as they attempt to balance the tensions between their dependence on and independence from friends. Additionally, as adolescents articulate their identities, they look for acceptance and validation of self in their friends, especially given the increase in self-consciousness experienced by most adolescents (Rawlins, 1992). Those who do not form satisfying relationships during this time may miss out on opportunities for developing communication competence, leading to lower performance at work or school and higher rates of depression (Collins & Madsen, 2006). The transition to college marks a move from adolescence to early adulthood and opens new opportunities for friendship and challenges in dealing with the separation from hometown friends.

Early Adulthood

Early adulthood encompasses the time from around eighteen to twenty-nine years of age, and although not every person in this age group goes to college, most of the research on early adult friendships focuses on college students. Those who have the opportunity to head to college will likely find a canvas for exploration and experimentation with various life and relational choices relatively free from the emotional, time, and financial constraints of starting their own family that may come later in life (Rawlins, 1992).

As we transition from adolescence to early adulthood, we are still formulating our understanding of relational processes, but people report that their friendships are more intimate than the ones they had in adolescence. During this time, friends provide important feedback on self-concept, careers, romantic and/or sexual relationships, and civic, social, political, and extracurricular activities. It is inevitable that young adults will lose some ties to their friends from adolescence during this transition, which has positive and negative consequences. Investment in friendships from adolescence provides a sense of continuity during the often rough transition to college. These friendships may also help set standards for future friendships, meaning the old friendships are a base for comparison for new friends. Obviously, this is a beneficial situation relative to the quality of the old friendship. If the old friendship was not a healthy one, using it as the standard for new friendships is a bad idea. Additionally, nurturing older friendships at the expense of meeting new people and experiencing new social situations may impede personal growth during this period.

Adulthood

Adult friendships span a larger period of time than the previous life stages discussed, as adulthood encompasses the period from thirty to sixty-five years old (Rawlins, 1992). The exploration that occurs for most middle-class people in early adulthood gives

way to less opportunity for friendships in adulthood, as many in this period settle into careers, nourish long-term relationships, and have children of their own. These new aspects of life bring more time constraints and interpersonal and task obligations, and with these obligations comes an increased desire for stability and continuity. Adult friendships tend to occur between people who are similar in terms of career position, race, age, partner status, class, and education level. This is partly due to the narrowed social networks people join as they become more educated and attain higher career positions. Therefore, finding friends through religious affiliation, neighborhood, work, or civic engagement is likely to result in similarity between friends (Bleiszner & Adams, 1992).

Even as social networks narrow, adults are also more likely than young adults to rely on their friends to help them process thoughts and emotions related to their partnerships or other interpersonal relationships (Bleiszner & Adams, 1992). For example, a person may rely on a romantic partner to help process through work relationships and close coworkers to help process through family relationships. Work life and home life become connected in important ways, as career (money making) intersects with and supports the desires for stability (home making) (Rawlins, 1992). Since home and career are primary focuses, socializing outside of those areas may be limited to interactions with family (parents, siblings, and in-laws) if they are geographically close. In situations where family isn't close by, adults' close or best friends may adopt kinship roles, and a child may call a parent's close friend "Uncle Andy" even if they are not related. Spouses or partners are expected to be friends; it is often expressed that the best partner is one who can also serve as best friend, and having a partner as a best friend can be convenient if time outside the home is limited by parental responsibilities. There is not much research on friendships in late middle age (ages fifty to sixty-five), but it has been noted that relationships with partners may become even more important during this time, as parenting responsibilities diminish with grown children and careers and finances stabilize. Partners who have successfully navigated their middle age may feel a bonding sense of accomplishment with each other and with any close friends with whom they shared these experiences (Rawlins, 1992).

Later Life

Friendships in later-life adulthood, which begins in one's sixties, are often remnants of previous friends and friendship patterns. Those who have typically had a gregarious social life will continue to associate with friends if physically and mentally able, and those who relied primarily on a partner, family, or limited close friends will have more limited, but perhaps equally rewarding, interactions. Friendships that have extended from adulthood or earlier are often "old" or "best" friendships that offer a look into a dyad's shared past. Given that geographic relocation is common in early adulthood, these friends may be physically distant, but if investment in occasional contact or visits preserves the friendship, these friends are likely able to pick up where they left off (Rawlins, 1992). However, biological aging and the social stereotypes and stigma associated with later life and aging begin to affect communication patterns.



Figure: Although stereotypes of the elderly often present them as slow or out of touch, many people in later life enjoy the company of friends and maintain active social lives. Felipe Neves – 3 old friends(opens in new window) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Obviously, our physical and mental abilities affect our socializing and activities and vary widely from person to person and age to age. Mobility may be limited due to declining health, and retiring limits the social interactions one had at work and work-related

events (Bleiszner & Adams, 1992). People may continue to work and lead physically and socially active lives decades past the marker of later life, which occurs around age sixty-five. Regardless of when these changes begin, it is common and normal for our opportunities to interact with wide friendship circles to diminish as our abilities decline. Early later life may be marked by a transition to partial or full retirement if a person is socioeconomically privileged enough to do so. For some, retirement is a time to settle into a quiet routine in the same geographic place, perhaps becoming even more involved in hobbies and civic organizations, which may increase social interaction and the potential for friendships. Others may move to a more desirable place or climate and go through the process of starting over with new friends. For health or personal reasons, some in later life live in assisted-living facilities. Later-life adults in these facilities may make friends based primarily on proximity, just as many college students in early adulthood do in the similarly age-segregated environment of a residence hall (Rawlins, 1992).

Friendships in later life provide emotional support that is often only applicable during this life stage. For example, given the general stigma against aging and illness, friends may be able to shield each other from negative judgments from others and help each other maintain a positive self-concept (Rawlins, 1992). Friends can also be instrumental in providing support after the death of a partner. Men, especially, may need this type of support, as men are more likely than women to consider their spouse their sole confidante, which means the death of the wife may end a later-life man's most important friendship. Women who lose a partner also go through considerable life changes, and in general more women are left single after the death of a spouse than men due to men's shorter life span and the tendency for men to be a few years older than their wives. Given this fact, it is not surprising that widows in particular may turn to other single women for support. Overall, providing support in later life is important given the likelihood of declining health. In the case of declining health, some may turn to family instead of friends for support to avoid overburdening friends with requests for assistance. However, turning to a friend for support is not completely burdensome, as research shows that feeling needed helps older people maintain a positive well-being (Rawlins, 1992).

Reflections on Research

What do you actually expect from a "good friend"? Science says it boils down to six things.

In *Friendship Standards: The Dimensions of Ideal Expectations*, researcher Jeffrey Hall ran **three linked studies with a combined total of over 1,300 participants** to figure out what people really mean when they picture their ideal friend. Starting with 181 items pulled from decades of past friendship research — everything from loyalty and self-disclosure to wealth and athletic ability — Hall used statistical factor analysis to whittle these down to a clean structure. **Six core dimensions emerged: symmetrical reciprocity (loyalty, honesty, mutual support), communion (intimacy and self-disclosure), enjoyment (humor, fun, good personality), instrumental aid (favors and practical help), similarity (shared interests and attitudes), and agency (wealth, attractiveness, connections, fitness).** This six-factor structure held up consistently whether participants were male or female, younger or older, and whether they came from a university sample or a broader international internet sample — meaning these aren't just quirks of one particular group, but something close to a universal template people use to judge their friendships. Interestingly, **participants rated symmetrical reciprocity and communion as far more important than "agency" traits like wealth or attractiveness**, even though those resource-related qualities still formed their own distinct, meaningful category. The study also found modest gender differences echoing prior research: women tended to place higher value on reciprocity, communion, enjoyment, and similarity, while men placed relatively more value on agency.

Discussion Questions

1. Of the six dimensions identified — symmetrical reciprocity, communion, enjoyment, instrumental aid, similarity, and agency — which one do you personally weigh most heavily when you think about what makes someone a good friend? Has that changed for you over time?
2. This study measured expectations for same-sex friendships only, since that's where most prior research had focused. How do you think these six dimensions might shift for cross-sex friendships, where things like "similarity" or "communion" could carry different social meanings or risks?
3. Do you think the relative weight of these six dimensions shifts as people move from adolescence, to early adulthood, to adulthood, to later life? For example, would agency (status, connections, resources) matter more when people are first building their social and professional lives, and matter less once those things feel more settled? Which dimension do you think would rise or fall the most across the lifespan, and why?

Hall, J. A. (2012). Friendship standards: The dimensions of ideal expectations. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 29*(7), 884–907.

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11.3.3: ROMANTIC

Romantic Partnerships and Communication

Romantic relationships, like families and friendships, come in different combinations, shapes, and sizes. They may involve two people, or more for **polyamorous** relationships (which involve multiple partners). Romantic partners spend time in various ways, depending on the people involved. Often, romantic partners share deep conversations, affection and sexual intimacy, mutual interests, tenderness, and caring. In romantic relationships, there are many different arrangements.

Two people who engage in an interpersonal (or two-person) romantic relationship may identify as any gender or sexuality. For example, one individual in a romantic relationship may identify as **gender-fluid** (gender identity may change over time and in different situations) and **pansexual** (attraction to people regardless of their gender or sexual identity), while another may identify as **nonbinary** and **queer**. Each of us determines our own gender identity and sexuality. Our sexual identity indicates who we are romantically and sexually drawn to. Discovering your own sexuality is often considered a journey, and you may experience many different types of romantic relationships along that journey.

Dating Terminology

From "Going Steady" to "Talking"

In the 1980s, people were *dating*. In the 2020s, they're *talking*. Back then, you might have said you were "seeing someone." Today, you might say you're "in a situationship." In the 1980s, you waited by the phone for a call. In the 2020s, you wait to see if someone left you on read. Where couples once defined relationships through face-to-face conversations, today's relationships are shaped by DMs, streaks, algorithmic matches, and the ever-present question: *Are we exclusive, or just vibing?*

Dating terminology doesn't just describe relationships—it reflects the culture that creates it. As our attitudes toward connection, commitment, identity, and communication shift, our language shifts with them. The words people use today reveal changing norms around intimacy, ambiguity, independence, and digital interaction. In other words, dating vocabulary is a living example of how interpersonal communication evolves alongside society. As you explore the terms below, think about what they say about our current cultural moment—and what new terms might emerge next.

21st-Century Dating Terms

Delusionship

When someone builds an imagined relationship in their head, often after minimal interaction. A delusionship grows from hopes, assumptions, and digital breadcrumbs (likes, DMs, brief conversations) rather than an actual shared commitment.

Beige Flag

A mildly odd or amusing trait that isn't a dealbreaker or a sign of compatibility—just something quirky that makes a person uniquely themselves. Beige flags are the "huh, that's interesting" moments of dating.

Throning

Dating someone primarily because of their social status, popularity, or influence. The appeal isn't emotional closeness—it's the social boost that comes from being associated with them.

Textpectations

The unwritten rules and assumptions people have about texting in relationships: how fast someone should reply, how long messages should be, whether emojis matter, and what silence means. Textpectations often shape how people interpret interest and commitment.

Cannonballing

Diving headfirst into a relationship with intense speed—skipping the slow build and jumping straight into deep emotional connection, future plans, or commitment before a foundation is fully formed.

Orbiting

When someone stops communicating directly but continues to hover around your digital life—watching stories, liking posts, or staying present online without engaging in actual conversation.

Zombieing

When a person who previously disappeared (ghosted) suddenly reappears in your messages or social media activity, acting as though the disappearance never happened.

Reflection

- Think back to what you learned in the **language chapter**: How does changing dating terminology reflect shifts in culture, technology, and interpersonal norms?
- What do these terms suggest about how people navigate ambiguity, commitment, and identity today?
- What dating terms have you heard that aren't listed here? What do they reveal about your generation's communication patterns?

Every romantic relationship has its own unique communication style based on the people involved. There is no one-size-fits-all relationship. However, there are some common stages experienced in romantic partnerships. Later in this chapter, you will learn about some of the ways in which communication looks differently as romantic partnerships evolve. You will also learn more about communication red flags that might indicate the relationship is no longer serving a healthy purpose in your life.

Dating Relationships

We often discuss dating as a single construct without really considering how it has developed over time. In the twentieth 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.[30] 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 this change, how does one even know if someone is on a date in the first place? Thankfully, Paul Mongeau, Janet Jacobsen, and Carolyn Donnerstein have attempted to answer this question for us.[31] The researchers found that there are five 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 a certain level of self-disclosure on a date. Furthermore, people expect their dating partner to be polite, relaxed, and sociable. Second, dating involves specific date goals, or people on dates have specific objectives (e.g., future romantic relationships, reducing uncertainty, having fun, etc.). 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 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)."[32]

Dating Scripts

We will all spend a portion of our lives in some form of romantic 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. According to data from 2018,[33] 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, etc.) or more formal (21%, e.g., dinner, brunch, etc.).
- 38.1% had been 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.[34] He defined a script as a "coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him as either a participant or an observer."[35] According to script theory, people tend to pattern their responses and behaviors during different social interactions to take control of that situation. This requires an individual to be able to imagine their past, present, and future behavior in order to create this script.[36] In 1993, Suzanna Rose and Irene Frieze applied Abelson's notions of script theory to dating. They had college students keep records of their activities on a specific 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):[37]

- Picked up date
- Met parents/roommates
- Left
- Picked up friends
- Confirm plans
- Talked, joked, laughed
- Went to movies, show, party
- Ate
- Drank alcohol
- Initiated sexual contact
- Made out
- Took date home
- Asked for another date
- Kissed goodnight
- 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: [38]

- Groomed and dressed
- Was nervous
- Picked up date (male)
- Introduced to parents, etc.
- Courtly behavior (open doors–male)
- Left
- Confirmed plans
- Got to know & evaluate date

- Talked, joked, laughed
- Enjoyed date
- Went to movies, show, party
- Ate
- Drank alcohol
- Talked to friends
- Had something go wrong
- Took date home (male)
- Asked for another date (male)
- Told date will call her (male)
- Kissed date goodnight (male)

Take a moment to review these two lists. Do you think they still apply today? How do you think these scripts differ? Once again, these dating scripts were created using only heterosexual college students. Do you think these scripts change if people are dating in their late 20s or 30s? What about people who date in their 70s, 80s, or 90s?

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.

Another important aspect of script theory to consider is how we learn these scripts in the first place. As you read through both the male and female dating scripts, did you consciously think about how you learned to date? Of course not! However, we've been conditioned to date since we were very young. 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 contribute to the dating scripts 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 are presented with these cultural images of dating, we also know that our dating partner (as long as they are from a similar cultural background) will likely have similar dating scripts.

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11.3.3.1: Couple Communication

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11.3.3.1: Couple Communication

Interpersonal Communication in Romantic Relationships



Figure 11.3.3.1.1: Prepping Dinner by Michael Poley on Unsplash

Although there are many types of relationships, including polyamorous, this book is about interpersonal communication. Therefore, we will focus on couples' communication within two-person love relationships. This section discusses research-based models of effective couples' communication. To that end, we will start by examining two well-known couples therapy models: The Gottman method and emotionally focused therapy (EFT). Each of these evidence-based models has shown both short- and long-term effectiveness in improving love relationships, with over 30 years of practice and research. Both the Gottman method and EFT emphasize how improvements in couple communication are essential to marital satisfaction.

Every therapy (individual, couple, or family) starts with either a cognitive, emotional, or behavioral approach. No matter whether therapy begins with behavior, feelings, or thoughts, changes in one of these internal systems inevitably lead to changes in the other two. In order to create real change, whether in a person's thought process, actions, or emotions, there must be a change to their core beliefs. At the end of the day the goal is to positively change all three of these areas. However, different therapies start at different places. Cognitive behavioral therapy begins with cognition, while emotionally focused therapy starts with emotions. The Gottman method is unique, in that couples are asked to begin by changing their behaviors (how they communicate with each other).



Figure 11.3.3.1.2: Love Lights by Sharon McCutcheon on Unsplash

Sexual Communication

Defined as a combination of interpersonal disclosure, quality, and frequency of communication around and about sex (Metts & Cumpach, 1989), **sexual communication** is not often discussed in the Interpersonal Communication classroom. Sexual communication is unique and different from other types of intimate communication, as many couples find it difficult to express themselves for fear of threatening the relationship. We know that sexual communication is highly correlated with relational and marital satisfaction (Montesi, et al., 2011). Every couple—and for that matter, every person—is different in terms of the frequency and types of sexual interactions they desire. The common thread, however, is that the quality of sexual communication, both verbal and nonverbal, has a strong effect on overall happiness.



Figure 11.3.3.1.3: Wrist Hold by Priscilla Du Preez on Unsplash

Some of our understanding of sexual communication may feel like common sense, but we also know from both Gottman and Johnson's research that trust, connectedness, and security are important themes for marital success. Sexual communication affects a couple's ability to feel safe, express vulnerability, and experience joy with each other. Furthermore, emotional intimacy and sexual communication are closely related. Interestingly, there is a predictable trend in couple satisfaction with sexual communication. We know that in long-term committed relationships, the peak of satisfaction with sexual communication occurs as the couple establishes their commitment to each other (Wheeless et al., 1984). We also know that couple's desires for sexual

interaction change over time. Effective sexual communication is key to couple satisfaction during these times of transition.

Unfortunately, there is limited research into sexual communication for couples in the LGBTQIA+ community. Education that may occur in high schools or colleges likely assumes a heteronormative society and lacks representation from LGBTQIA+ participants and instructors. There is a gap in published research and academic literature regarding the sexual health of couples where at least one identifies as a sexual minority (Greene et al, 2015). If information about sexual communication is hard to find for heterosexual couples, it is many times more difficult for those who identify as LGBTQIA+. A search of reliably pro-LGBTQIA+ organizations, such as the Trevor Project and the GSA Network reveal a lack of networks, information, or education on sexual communication as well. This is an area that desperately deserves attention moving forward.

Love Languages

How we express and receive love and care from others varies from person to person. In 1992, Gary Chapman published his book *The Five Love Languages,* which posits that humans have five major ways or categories for giving and receiving love.

1. **Words of Affirmation** include saying or hearing the words “I love you.”
2. **Quality Time** involves spending time with another person doing what they love.
3. **Gifts** include providing the other person with candy, flowers, jewelry, or other items that make them feel special.
4. **Acts of Service** are when you support the other person by taking responsibility off of their plate (for example, cleaning the kitchen or washing the car).
5. **Physical Touch** involves holding hands, hugging, and other acts of physical affection.

Student Voices: Learning to Speak Your Partner's Love Language



Affirmation came up as my primary love language, which doesn't quite satisfy me, because I believe my first love language is Quality Time. Although it came in second this time, that doesn't mean I'm focusing more on words of affirmation.

I've always identified with Quality Time because it's rewarding to spend more time with my wife. Of course, words of affirmation are also an important pillar of the love language, and I appreciate them when my wife compliments me. The third language is Physical Touch, which usually comes in third. These three always appear almost consecutively. Quality Time, Words of Affirmation, and Physical Touch. Now, only the order has changed.

But I'm going to focus on the one I've always identified with. Quality Time. I enjoy going out for coffee with my wife. We don't travel far, but we go to Tijuana every month, and it's something we really enjoy. We also like watching movies, and now we've decided to watch the series Lie to Me: one episode on Saturday and another on Sunday.

For my wife, Affirmation is her dominant love language, followed by Quality Time. So we're on the same page. Knowing her love language helps me express my love to her through words of affirmation. For example, Your food was delicious, or when we go to a party, I tell her, You're the prettiest girl there. I know it's very simple, but that's how love languages work to foster better communication.

At least for my wife and me, knowing our dominant love language has been very helpful.

Gabriel Gomez

Cerritos College, Technology Architect Major

Figure: Original Photo by Gabriel Juan Gomez

Since individuals have different preferences and ways of receiving expressions of love, it is helpful to have a conversation with others you care about, if you want to demonstrate your love for them in a way they will truly appreciate. For example, on a date night, you could say to your romantic partner, “I want you to feel loved and cared for. Of these five love languages, which one or two most appeals to you?” Of course, it is also helpful to clarify your preferred love language(s) for the people in your life who care about you.

If we do not check in with our loved ones regarding our preferred love languages, we can miscommunicate, which could lead to negative feelings in the relationship. For example, let’s say your best friend’s preferred love language is quality time. This friend simply wants to hang out and talk. Not understanding your friend’s preference for quality time, you may have provided the friend with a gift to show your appreciation in the past. Perhaps your friend seemed confused or unappreciative of the gift, and this led to hurt feelings. Simply having a conversation about love languages could clear up this confusion.

Advocacy as a Love Language?



Figure 11.3.3.1.5: Black Lives Matter by D. Idowu Olutosin licensed as CC0 1.0

In a *New York Times* article, Brianna Holt (2020) explored the importance of advocacy as a love language for interracial couples. According to the Pew Research Center (Livingston & Brown, 2018), one in six newlywed couples considers themselves interethnic or interracial. Support, listening, and the ability to hear the other person’s perspective are important components in a successful committed partnership no matter what, but especially when there are ethnic or cultural differences.

Where does advocacy fit into the partnership and, is it a love language, as Holt suggests?

Questions for Discussion:

1. If one person experiences bias or discrimination due to their race or ethnic background, how can their partner demonstrate advocacy?
2. How important is it for couples from different ethnic and/or racial backgrounds to openly discuss their culture?
3. What are the best ways for couples with different cultural practices to negotiate holiday celebrations, family get-togethers, and even what food to prepare for specific occasions?

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11.4: Relationship Stages

Process and Stages Common to Relationships

We have many relationships throughout our lives, and every one of those relationships starts somewhere. The relationship begins and develops, and then sooner or later, it eventually ends. Take into consideration one of your closest friends. Do you remember when you first met them or how your relationship even started? Think even further as to how you two became closer?

Mark Knapp and Anita Vangelisti (2009) looked at how relationships come together, how they are maintained, and how they come apart. They divided relationships into 10 stages, to help us better identify and understand how interpersonal relationships form and dissolve. In this section, we will discuss each of the stages in greater detail. Although the model shown in Table 11.4.1 lists the stages in a specific order, they are not always experienced in such a linear way.

Moreover, relationships are dynamic and constantly changing. Therefore, we may not experience all of the stages. Alternately, we may experience the stages multiple times, or more than one stage may occur at any given time. In short, this model is a starting point. As you read through the various stages, ask yourself what stages you experienced in a recent relationship. Which did you skip? You might consider how culture and identity may influence the relationship stages.

Table 11.4.1: Knapp's Model of Relationship Stages

Process	Stage
Coming together	• Initiating • Experimenting • Intensifying • Integrating • Bonding
Coming apart	• Differentiating • Circumscribing • Stagnating • Avoiding • Terminating

Coming Together

Knapp and Vangelisti's (2009) model separates relationship stages into two distinct phases: coming together and coming apart. We will start by going through the first five stages, grouped under the **coming together** phase in the model: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding.

Initiating

When we first encounter a new person, we decide if we want to put in the energy and effort to make contact or start a conversation. This first contact happens in the **initiating** stage. There are different ways to initiate. Someone may approach you in a store to say “hello, what’s up?” In a different initiation example, a person could smile at you. At the initiation stage, we are primarily interested in making contact with the other person.

Experimenting

After the initiation stage, we move forward to the **experimenting** stage. At this stage, you are figuring out if you want to continue the relationship and want to get to know the other person. This is where you begin to start to peel back the layers of the onion to

learn more about the person on a deeper, more personal level.

Let's say two people meet on the first day of work. On the second day, during lunch, they talk about their favorite movies and notice they share some interests. In the experimenting stage, interactions tend to be casual. We ask reciprocal questions to look for common ground or similarities, to further build the relationship. Just like the name of the stage, we are experimenting and trying to figure out if we should move towards the next stage.

Intensifying

If after the experimenting stage, we decide to continue the relationship, we typically move to the **intensifying** stage. During this stage, we share more intimate and personal information about ourselves with the other person. For example, the co-workers who previously discussed common interests may dive deeper to talk about their childhoods, long-term goals, dreams, fears, and desires. Conversations at the intensifying stage become more serious, and the interactions are more meaningful and deep, as the layers of the onion peel away.

Integrating

The **integrating** stage is where two people truly become a couple and are viewed as a unit. In this stage, they let others know they are dating exclusively. Once a couple enters the integrating stage, friends are more likely to invite both people over for any dinners or events, rather than one or the other.

Bonding

The final stage of the coming together phase is called **bonding**, where people reveal their relationship to the world. This could be as simple as an Instagram or TikTok post declaring the relationship officially or sending a holiday card together. The bonding stage may include a formal engagement announcement and/or a wedding ceremony. In every case, the couple makes a public announcement of their relationship, to let others know their relationship is real and meaningful.

Coming Apart

The second distinct phase in Knapp and Vangelisti's (2009) model is called **coming apart**. This phase details the stages that occur as a relationship becomes increasingly distant. In terms of communication, there may be increased conflict or decreased use of positive words in the couple's relationship. The five relationship stages in the coming apart phase include differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating.



Figure 11.4.1: Disagreeing by Jim George licensed as CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Differentiating

Differentiating is a process of disengaging or uncoupling. In other words, differentiating is the opposite of integrating. This is

where we use communication to purposely divide the relationship or bond. Part of this may involve reclaiming or splitting up friendships that were once mutual. For example, Mark may say to Tarek, “My friends and I are going out for beers tonight, and we would like to have privacy for the evening once we come back to the apartment.”

Circumscribing

To circumscribe means to limit something (Cambridge Dictionary Online, 2021). When people **circumscribe** in a relationship, communication decreases and certain areas or subjects become restricted as individuals verbally close themselves off from each other. This could be in the form of silence or passive-aggressive behavior. For example, Tarek used to walk with Mark to work each morning, but lately Mark has been leaving the apartment without him.

Stagnating

When a relationship has **stagnated**, it feels like it is not moving forward any longer or has come to a halt. In some cases, verbal communication slows or may be avoided and the relationship feels strained. For example, Mark and Tarek now have limited communication around the apartment, and barely talk at work anymore.

Avoiding

In the **avoidance** stage, people stay out of each other’s physical space. For example, you may decide not to go to a specific social gathering when you know that other person will be there. However, when actual physical avoidance cannot take place, people will simply avoid each other while they’re together and treat the other as if they don’t exist. When avoiding, the individuals in the relationship become separate from one another physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Terminating

There are many reasons why a relationship may terminate. **Termination** can result from outside circumstances, such as geographic separation or internal factors, such as changing values or personalities that lead to a weakening of the bond. Termination may occur through the exchange of verbal or nonverbal messages. One example of nonverbal termination is called **ghosting**, where one person disappears unexpectedly and never communicates with the other again. In this final stage, Mark and Tarek both move out of the apartment and into separate homes. They stop making plans to see each other. Of course, if one person dies, the relationship, by default, also terminates.

Attributions

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11.5: The Role of Self-Disclosure

Initiating and Forming Romantic Relationships



Figure Figure 11.5.1: GenderSpectrum-Day1-0344 by Zackary Ducker licensed CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

Think about the last time that you were messaging someone on a dating site like Tinder, OkCupid, Bumble, or Grindr, or perhaps the last time you were talking with a new person you met in a class, or even at an event, or maybe work? When we engage with other people and share information about ourselves, we are self-disclosing. **Self-disclosure** is the process of voluntarily revealing information about yourself to another person, not already known by them.

Getting Plugged In

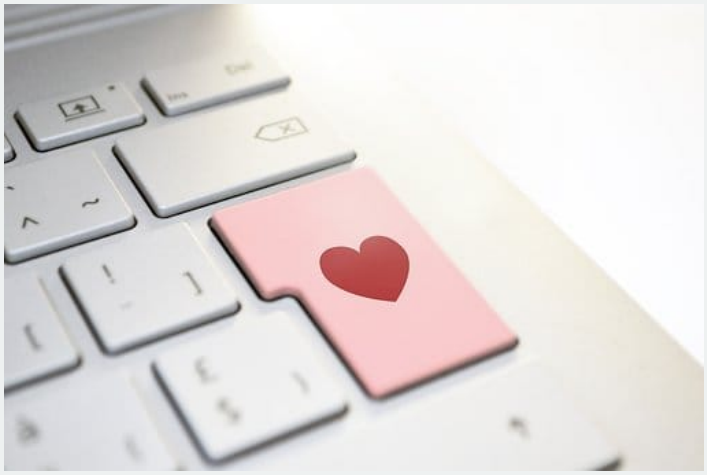


Figure 11.5.2: Heart Love Keyboard Enter Button by Athree23 on Pixabay

Self-Disclosure, Social Media, Identity, and Online Dating

Social platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter, are undoubtedly prevalent in the world of online social networking. Many users self-disclose personal information on these sites, ranging from moods to religious affiliation, relationship status, style, food, travel, and personal contact information. Social platforms offer convenient opportunities to stay in touch with friends, family, classmates, and coworkers. We also have apps designed for dating, and meeting potential romantic or sexual partners. Dating services and apps like Grindr, Tinder, Hinge, Bumble, Scruff, Christian Mingle, Black People Meet, Plenty of Fish, Match, EHarmony, OkCupid, and more were created to bring people together.

Social media and self-disclosure create a dialectic tension between openness and closedness of one's self. What do you share about yourself online and what don't you share? What aspects of your identity do you put on your profile and what aspects of your identity do you hide or not place at the forefront? It's interesting and quite eye opening when we take a step back to look at what we self-disclose about ourselves online.

Reflection Questions

- What do you self-disclose online? What do you usually disclose in your biography or profile summary section of the dating apps or services you're on?
- Based on your online identity and profile, are you comfortable disclosing your age, religious affiliations, ability, sexuality, and other aspects of your identity?
- What aspects of your identity and culture do you freely disclose online? What aspects of your identity are you more likely to protect or delay disclosing?
- Do you target certain apps based on your identity and culture?

Johari Window

The Johari window can help us examine self-disclosure in relationships. Displayed in Figure \(\PageIndex{3\), the Johari window examines what information we have about ourselves, as well as the information others know about us (an accessible text description is linked in the figure caption). Based on the combination of our self-knowledge and others' knowledge about us, there are four types of selves: Open Self, Closed Self, Blind Self, and Unknown Self. Let's examine each of these.

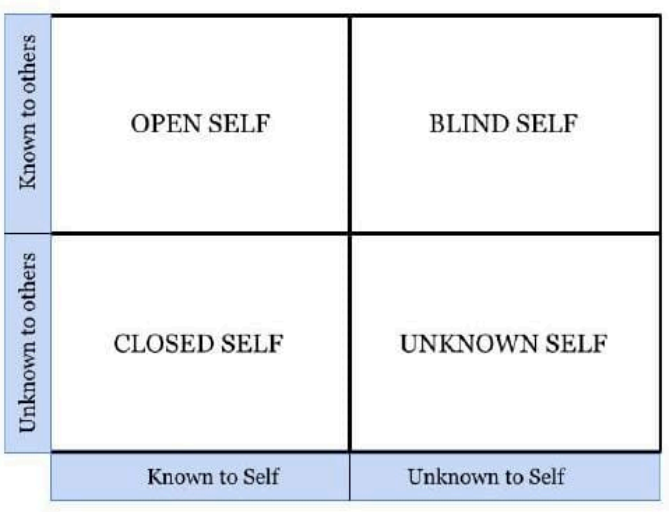


Figure \(\PageIndex{3\): Johari Window by Hilary Altman adapted from Johari Window by Spaynton on Wikipedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0A longer description of the Johari Window

Open Self

The **Open Self** represents the parts of ourselves we know well, and that we choose to share or self-disclose to others. This typically includes items like our name, hobbies, likes, and dislikes. The amount of information that is openly known to others varies,

based on the relationship. Imagine you are on a first date. You have just met this person. What information about yourself are you willing to share? As we get to know someone, we tend to self-disclose more information. As we self-disclose more information, the size of our Open Self increases. Each person gets to choose the size of their Open Self, and this can be different in distinct relationships.

One of our authors shares this example:

> When I was in college, I shared mostly surface information with most of my classmates, keeping the size of my Open Self small. As a work-study student, I cleaned dishes at one of the campus dining halls to help pay my tuition. I became very close with another work-study student in dining, as we felt more comfortable sharing about the challenges of balancing work and school, as well as dealing with financial aid and student loans. When I self-disclosed more personal information to my work-study friend, my Open Self became larger.

Closed Self

The **Closed Self** (also sometimes called the **Private Self**) represents the parts of ourselves we know well, but that we choose to keep secret or not tell others. With someone we know well and trust, we tend to have a larger Open Self and a smaller Closed Self. Let's say Jean has known her girlfriend Kennedy for three years. They get along well, have high trust in their relationship, and also live together. In this situation, Jean is likely to self-disclose more freely with Kennedy, and due to this, her Closed Self would be smaller. However, Jean shares only surface information with her colleagues at work. In her work relationships, Jean's Closed Self or Private Self is much larger.

We keep information about ourselves from others in order to protect ourselves. For example, when Jean gets a phone call from Tom, someone trying to sell her a magazine subscription, she would be hesitant to provide information about herself other than her name. When Tom asks Jean to talk about how many magazines she subscribes to, she may or may not provide this information. If she chooses not to self-disclose, Jean keeps this part of herself within the Closed Self. The size of the Open Self is directly proportional to the size of the Closed Self. In other words, people with a large Open Self have a small Closed Self or Private Self. Individuals with a large Private Self or Closed Self have a small Open Self.

Blind Self

The **Blind Self** may be the most interesting quadrant on the Johari window. The Blind Self represents the parts of ourselves that other people know well, yet we are unaware of this information about ourselves. How can this happen? Imagine that Antony has a check-in meeting with his supervisor. In this meeting, Elena (Antony's supervisor) praises him for his work ethic. Antony says "Thank you, I value your opinion." In the next sentence, however, Elena states, "that is why I need to talk with you about lowering your voice in the office. It has come to my attention that when you speak on the phone at your desk, everyone else in the office can hear everything you say. It has become an issue for other employees, who also need to make phone calls and perform in a relatively quiet environment." Antony is shocked. No one in the office, up until this point, has said anything to him about his loud voice, yet it seems many people know this about him. In this example, Antony's loud voice had been part of his Blind Self until his supervisor brought it up. He was unaware that his voice is so loud that it disrupts other people's work in his office space.

As in the example with Antony, information may be part of our Blind Selves when others are reluctant to share this information with us. Perhaps others are afraid to share this information because they do not want to damage the relationship or they believe they will hurt the other person's feelings. Information may also be part of the Blind Self due to a person's ineffective listening skills or low self-monitoring. Perhaps other people have asked Antony to lower his voice or used nonverbal communication to indicate to him that he should quiet down. For some reason, Antony never got the message until today. Once Antony finds out this piece of information about himself, it is no longer part of his Blind Self. Now it is part of his Open Self, since the information is known both by others and himself.

Unknown Self

The **Unknown Self** represents the parts of our selves that no one knows. It is difficult to think about what the Unknown Self may include, since neither we nor others are aware of this information. Sometimes this information is buried deep in our subconscious, due to trauma or because there was an event that happened when we were young, and we cannot remember. For example, when JD was less than 2 years old, his family was awakened in the middle of the night by a fire alarm. JD's parents grabbed them from bed, rushed them out of the house, and had to stand outside in below freezing temperatures until the fire department could put a small fire out in the garage. Although JD has no memory of this incident, any time they hear a fire or car alarm or smell smoke,

their heart races, their blood pressure increases, and they get very emotionally upset. Without a memory of this event, JD cannot explain this strong reaction to alarms or the smell of smoke. That part of themselves would be considered the Unknown Self.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

The second theory we will discuss as we explore self-disclosure is the **uncertainty reduction theory** (**URT**). URT helps us to understand why we initiate communication with people, as well as why we continue to build and maintain relationships with them. Uncertainty reduction theory states that we pursue knowledge about others in order to reduce or resolve anxiety associated with the unknown. According to URT, humans use three basic strategies: **passive**, **active**, and **interactive**, to reduce uncertainty and increase predictability and the feeling of safety when interacting with others. Let's start with an example: Keisha saw a photo of Lidia on a dating app, and she is interested in her. Let's look at how the three strategies of URT might help Keisha to feel safe moving forward with getting to know this potential romantic partner.

Passive, Active, and Interactive Strategies

The **passive strategy** refers to observing someone from afar, sort of like being a fly on the wall. In this case, Keisha did a Google search on Lidia before moving forward with requesting a date. The Google search revealed that Lidia worked at a local nonprofit organization. This information encouraged Keisha to move forward with the active strategy.

The **active strategy** involves getting information about the person from another source, generally a friend, family member, or co-worker. Keisha has a friend who works at the same nonprofit as Lidia, so was able to ask this person questions about Lidia's interests and personality.

Finally, the **interactive strategy** focuses on a direct exchange of information with the other person. After using the passive and active strategies to find out more information about Lidia, Keisha messaged Lidia directly and engaged in a conversation with mutual self-disclosure. The interactive strategy allows for the most in-depth and direct exchange of information. Thus, Keisha used all three strategies to gain information about Lidia. These three strategies help us not only to reduce uncertainty about others but also to more accurately predict future behavior.

Now that we have explored many of the theories associated with the formation of love relationships, we will discuss strategies for maintaining romantic relationships.

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11.6: Summary and Review

Summary

Relationships are complex, and getting what you want out of them can be tricky. In this chapter, we have discussed how interpersonal communication contributes to coming together, maintaining relationships, and coming apart. No matter what type of relationship we are dealing with, interpersonal communication is the critical tool that allows us to navigate all the ups, downs, and in-betweens in our families, friendships, work relationships, and romantic partnerships.

As you read in this chapter, one of the most important strategies for building relationships is self-disclosure. Knowing how to follow the unwritten rules of early relationship development, without over or under self-disclosing, helps us build trust with a new relationship, whether platonic, work-related, or romantic. Long-term relationships benefit from healthy, positive communication. As described both in Gottman's work and emotionally focused therapy, the way that we communicate with our romantic partners determines relational satisfaction, and ultimately the fate of the relationship.

Remember Yasmeen from our introduction? We left her at the Thanksgiving table, with the decision of how to proceed when asked to say a prayer in a home that practices a different religion than her own. Yasmeen has many options. She could say a non-denominational prayer or self-disclose that she does not know a prayer appropriate for Thanksgiving. She could ask for support and have another person at the table start the prayer and she could add something of her own. She could also ask the family to say a prayer for her partner, who is currently deployed with the armed forces. This is something everyone at the table can agree with.

What advice would you give to Yasmeen? In your own life, you will encounter many situations like this, especially as you are meeting new people from diverse backgrounds. Also, as you build your lifelong relationships with friends and loved ones, we hope that this chapter has provided some guidance, strategies, and tools to support healthy communication.

Discussion Questions

1. Considering a past relationship, did you experience all of Knapp and Vangelisti's relationship stages? Did you skip some, or stay in one stage longer than others?
2. When it comes to terminating relationships, do you believe relationships can end in a positive way? If so, what are effective and positive ways to end a relationship?
3. As you reflect on the relationships covered in this chapter (family, friends, romantic partners, and work), which category do you find the most challenging? Why? What communication tools from this chapter might help you to improve your satisfaction in these relationships? How will you apply them?

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12: DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

- Explain the dark side of relationships.
- Define the various types of secret tests.
- Describe the phenomena of gaslighting and examine different forms of deception.
- Describe types of verbal abuse.
- Identify the dark side of social media and its relational impacts.
- Develop interpersonally competent skills and strategies for responding to the dark side of communication.

In this chapter we deal with topics around deception, jealousy, social media, bullying, intimate partner violence, emotional abuse, and secret tests. We will end with a review of the communication skills you have learned throughout this text to help you respond effectively to the dark side. We want to acknowledge that some of the content may be difficult to process; your safety and well-being is our primary concern. In this chapter we share resources to support your emotional and physical well-being.

12.1: Introduction to the Dark Side of Communication

12.2: Deception and Gaslighting

12.3: Jealousy, Secret Tests, and Gossip

12.4: Communication as a Weapon—Aggression in Relationships

12.5: The Dark Side of Social Media

12.6: Summary and Review

12.7: References

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12.1: Introduction to the Dark Side of Communication

Overview of Negative Relational 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 our communication may involve both positive and negative exchanges. In their landmark book *The Dark Side of Communication*, Spitzberg and Cupach (1997) looked at parts of interpersonal communication that were often considered undesirable and thus were not widely studied. In recent years, research on the dark side of communication has grown, largely due to acknowledgment that not all aspects of interpersonal communication are positive, and due to changing social norms where people are simply "meaner and nastier" to their relational partners than in the past (Kowalski, 2019, p. 6).



Figure 12.1.1 Ghosting by Juliana A. Reviczky, Original Student Artwork

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 tied to each other as acceptable behaviors can lead to negative outcomes and unacceptable behaviors can lead to positive outcomes. Awareness of the negative side of relational communication is an essential step in preventing these problems from occurring in the first place. In this chapter, we pull back the veil on the dark side of communication to reveal deception, jealousy, social media, bullying, intimate partner violence, emotional abuse, secret tests, and other potentially harmful aspects of relationships. We will close with a review of the communication skills you have learned throughout this text to help you respond effectively to the dark side. We want to acknowledge that some of the content may be emotionally challenging and difficult to process and that your safety and well-being is our primary concern. In this chapter we also share resources to support your emotional and physical well-being.

Perception Is Key

Whether you believe a communication behavior falls on the light or the dark side, may in large part be determined by how you perceive the situation, type of relationship, and the other person's intentions to be. Numerous factors can determine whether someone perceives a communication behavior to be aversive or not (Kowalski, 2019). Inspired by Kowalski's 2019 book, *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, we have created a set of questions to ask yourself to help understand if communication in your relationships falls on the dark side:

- Do certain people in your life leave you feeling like you doubt yourself and questioning your perceptions? Certain

communication behaviors from the dark side can negatively impact our self-concept and self-esteem.
- Is there a power imbalance in the relationship? Relationships with power imbalances, such as between a boss and employee or parent and child, are 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 experience pain when faced with communication from the dark side.
- How frequent is the questionable communication behavior? A one-time transgression can be forgiven, but negative repeated behaviors are more likely to fall into the dark side.
- How severe is the communication behavior? Mild behavior may be accepted, but even a one-time severe occurrence can derail a relationship.
- Does the behavior interfere with your basic psychological needs, such as the need to belong, have a sense of control, and experience self-esteem?

As you reflect on your answers to these questions, you may notice that there are a variety of communication behaviors that fall into both the light and dark sides of communication. In the rest of this chapter we review some of the most common forms of communication that cast a shadow on relationships, including deception, secret tests, jealousy, gaslighting, verbal aggression abuse, and social media.

Reflections on Research: The Dark Side of Instructor Communication

Ever had a class where the instructor's behavior made your stomach drop, your face flush, or your brain check out entirely? You're not alone. Communication scholars study these moments to understand how instructor communication can unintentionally create negative emotional experiences for students.

A quantitative study by Mottet, Frymier, and Beebe (2014) explored how certain instructor behaviors—like low nonverbal immediacy, unclear explanations, or poor communication competence—predict student emotions such as anger, anxiety, shame, hopelessness, and boredom. Using surveys from 753 students across three large universities, the researchers tested how these behaviors influenced emotions through two key processes: students' perceived emotional support and their need to manage emotions during class.

The findings were striking, but not surprising: when instructors were distant, unclear, or perceived ineffective communicators, students reported significantly higher negative emotions. Communication competence was especially important—it strongly predicted whether students felt emotionally supported. Overall, the study shows that instructor communication doesn't just shape learning; it shapes how students *feel* in the classroom, sometimes in ways that fall squarely on the "dark side."

Reflection Questions

1. Think of a class where you felt frustrated, anxious, or bored. Which instructor communication behaviors might have contributed to those emotions.
2. What other types of instructor communication might fall on the "dark side"? (For example, excessive self-disclosure, sarcasm, favoritism, or public criticism.)
3. How might stronger emotional support from an instructor reduce negative emotions in a challenging class.

APA Source

Mottet, T. P., Frymier, A. B., & Beebe, S. A. (2014). *The dark side of emotion in the classroom: Emotional processes as mediators of teacher communication behaviors and student negative emotions*. Communication Education, 63(3), 149–168.

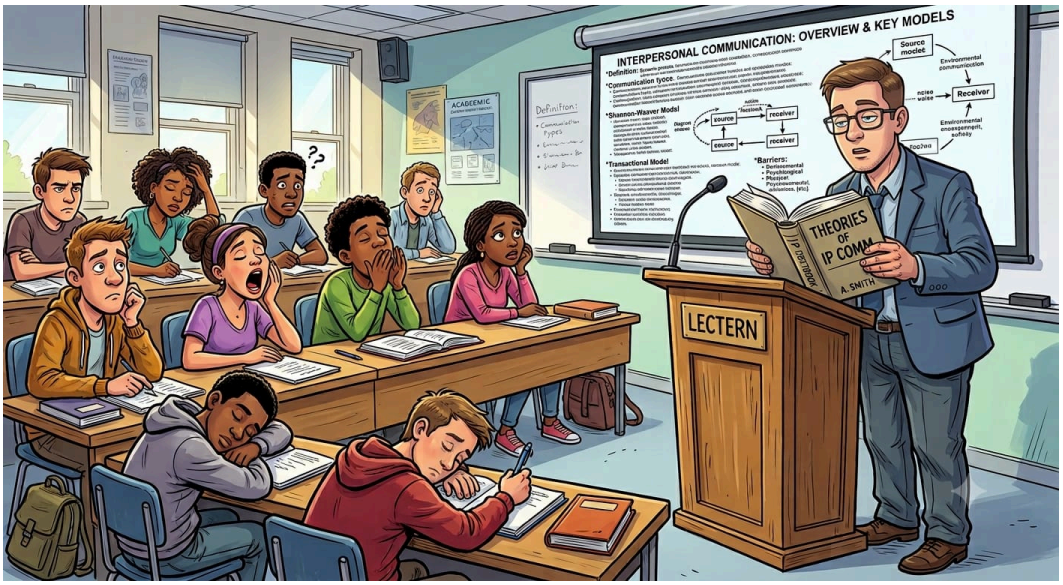


Figure 12.1.2: The Dark Side of the Classroom. Image generated by Google Gemini.

Thoughts on Theory

Thoughts on Theory: Expectancy Violations & the Dark Side of Communication

We all carry expectations into our relationships — expectations about how people *should* speak to us, treat us, show affection, handle conflict, or respect boundaries. **Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT)**, developed by Judee Burgoon, explains what happens when someone behaves in a way that surprises us, whether positively or negatively. In healthy relationships, positive violations (unexpected kindness, support, or vulnerability) can strengthen connection. But in the **dark side of communication**, violations often take the form of broken trust, deception, aggression, ghosting, boundary-crossing, or emotional withdrawal.

EVT helps us understand *why* dark-side behaviors feel so destabilizing: they don't just break rules — they disrupt our sense of safety, predictability, and relational identity. When someone violates expectations in harmful ways, we experience uncertainty, threat, and confusion, which can escalate conflict or damage the relationship. Studying EVT gives us a framework for recognizing these moments, understanding their impact, and responding with greater awareness.

Discussion Questions

1. Think of a time when someone violated your expectations in a *negative* way. How did that violation affect your trust or sense of safety in the relationship?
2. Can you think of a "dark side" behavior (e.g., ghosting, stonewalling, jealousy, manipulation) that is especially damaging because it violates an important relational expectation?
3. How do cultural backgrounds shape what people consider a "violation"?
4. When might a *positive* expectancy violation help repair or soften the effects of a negative one?
5. Which dark-side behaviors do you think are most likely to be misinterpreted — and how might EVT help us understand those misunderstandings?

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12.2: Deception and Gaslighting

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 really you just didn't get ready in time. Maybe you found yourself telling someone they looked nice in an outfit even though you thought the outfit wasn't suitable for them. Or perhaps you decide it is OK to disclose to a partner about your past relationships, but you decide to leave out key details. In what contexts do you feel it is acceptable to tell someone something other than the truth?

The first concept we will explore in the dark side of communication is the idea of **deception**. Whether or not you think it is OK to deceive someone probably includes consideration of what is at stake to you in terms of the risk to your relationship. This will determine whether or not you see any level of deception as acceptable to engage in for that particular relationship.

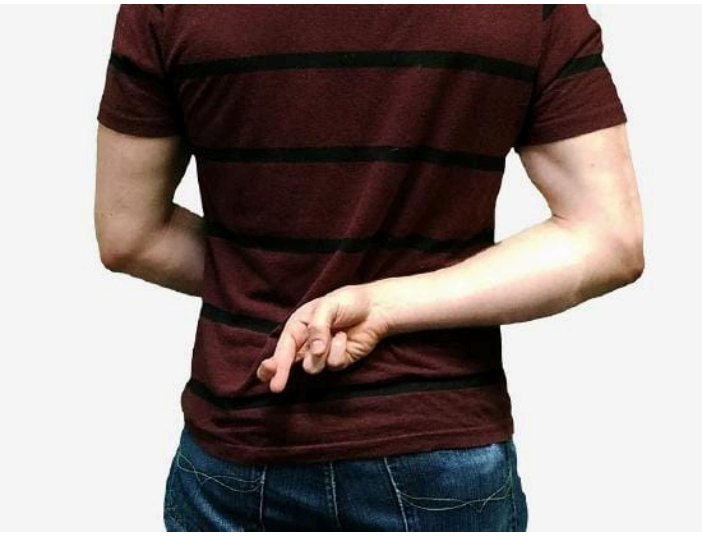


Figure 12.2 12.2.1: Lying by Tswedensky from Pixabay

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 impacting the dynamic nature of one's relationship.

What do you think this means in a relationship when a relational partner decides to deceive someone? This theory focuses on how and why people engage in deception and try to get away with it and how the other person tries to figure out whether or not to believe it. Recall a time when you lied and 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 they respond back to you? Usually, when someone tries to deceive us and we are trying to figure out what is going on, we monitor our responses to figure out what to do next.

Whether or not a relationship can overcome deception really depends on that interplay between how someone responds when faced with deception and how the deceiver responds back in order to repair the relationship. In this next section, we will overview the types of deception.

Types of Deception

Let's identify the different types of deception that might occur in a relationship: **deception by omission (concealment)** and **deception by commission (lying)**. These two types of deception differ according to the level of distortion that is involved and how much potential impact there is on a relationship because of how this deception is perceived.

Deception by Omission

Concealment, or **deception by omission**, involves intentionally holding back some of the information another person has requested, or you are expected to share. For example, a relational partner might ask why you didn't respond to their text last night and you could say 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 you have held back some information? Omitting information can violate relational expectations and can have an impact on the trust and intimacy that was already built in the relationship. As discussed in the chapter on building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, building trust is an important aspect of our relationships and we engage in self-disclosure and communication behaviors that help to build such trust. If our relational partners find out that we have violated their expectations of trust and undermined it through deception by omission, the trust in the relationship will automatically decline. You will then have to spend some time determining how to repair such a relationship.

Deception by Commission

Simply put, this is **lying**. When we commit **deception by commission**, we deliberately communicate false information. This type of deception goes beyond just a strategic withholding of information. When there is deception by commission, there is an intentional level of control of 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)**: This is when information is presented as slightly false and there may be minimal consequence to presenting the information as such. Oftentimes these white lies are communicated to enable one to feel less guilty or to ensure that someone's feelings are not hurt. When one of the authors of this chapter was pregnant, they asked their husband if they looked OK in an outfit. Sometimes he said "yes." Once, when they were wearing an orange maternity dress, he said "You look like a pumpkin" and the author immediately started to cry. Would it have been better for him, in that case, to tell a white lie and just 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 the embellishing of facts or the stretching of the truth (which can get 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 given 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 exists an *intent* to truly deceive someone. With a bald-faced lie, there is going to be a greater emotional impact or consequence to the relationship if the lie is discovered as the risk of destroying trust in a relationship is greater.

Why Do We Deceive?

If we know that deception in a relationship carries with it the risk of destroying the trust we have built in our relationships, 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 OK to engage in any act of deception.

- Altruistic, or to protect and avoid hurting someone (their resources, self-image, or safety)
- Self-serving and for personal gain; to avoid undesirable consequences (negative consequences)
- To gain resources such as time, money, affection, and status
- To avoid harm or loss of resources
- To protect one's self-image and save face
- For entertainment

Reflect on your 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 we can justify reasons (big or small) on why we might need to deceive in a relationship, but 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, as indicated earlier, if our relational partners find out we have withheld any information and they 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 on whether to completely trust us in future

interactions. There may also be collateral damage or harm to others who aren't directly involved simply because they are in your orbit and may peripherally experience an after effect of the deception. Finally, deception can bring on other relational consequences such as punishment, damage to your reputation, or even a lingering guilty conscience that can get in the way of future carefree and open conversations.

Given these reasons/effects, do you advocate that deception or lying is necessary to some extent in a relationship?

The novel *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty (and the subsequent mini-series that stemmed from it) depicts five main characters who are each faced with keeping secrets. These secrets vary in their depth and degree and the characters are seen grappling with how to best navigate keeping these secrets and to who they deceive versus disclose the truth too. Each of the women has different motivations for why they choose to deceive and each ends up having to deal with the different impacts and affects their deception has on their relationships with each other and others around them.

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. When **gaslighting**, the abuser twists and exploits their victim's words, emotions, and experiences to make them feel like they're imagining or exaggerating what happened. For gaslighting to take place, it takes two people: the **gaslighter**, who creates doubt and confusion; and a **receiver**, who questions their perceptions as a result.

If you are on the receiving end of gaslighting, you may find yourself manipulated to the point where you begin to doubt your thoughts and perceptions of events, your emotions, and even your self-concept. To illustrate, if a wife tells her husband that she is overwhelmed with housekeeping and needs more support from him, and he responds that he does 90% of the cleaning (when he does not), and doesn't know what she's talking about, he gaslighted her. 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 impact 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)

Gaslighting can be used in a variety of interpersonal relationships for a variety of reasons. Gaslighting can occur in romantic partnerships, with family, friends, and even with co-workers 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 to diffuse tension and conflict, attempt to control the situation, and to ease anxiety (Stern, 2007). Although gaslighting techniques can be a strategic approach used by a person or group, often people who use gaslighting techniques are unaware of what they are doing.



Figure 12.2.2: Gaslight 3 by WadeB from Flickr licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Common Forms of Gaslighting

- 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
- denial 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 claiming that 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? Chances are most people have experienced some form of gaslighting at some point in their lives (Stern, 2019). If you are a victim of gaslighting you may:

- Constantly second-guess yourself
- Have difficulties 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’re not happier when you have so many good things in your life
- Feel as if you can’t do anything right
- Wonder if you’re a “good enough” spouse/employee/friend/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, it is worthwhile to develop a communication response strategy:

- Learn to recognize gaslighting when it is happening.
- Practice assertive communication to stand up for yourself, without engaging in an argument over the issue.
- Check your perceptions with yourself and the other person. For example, if your partner criticizes you, rather than becoming defensive, use perception checking to try and get to the heart of the issue.
- 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* “It may not be your goal to criticize me, but I feel hurt, and I do not want to continue this conversation right now” *or* “I know you see the situation one way, but I don’t agree with you.”
- Seek feedback and support from people outside of your relationship.
- Consider consulting a therapist or counselor. If the gaslighting occurs at work, contact Human Resources.

Consider This: Communication Skills of Sociopaths

According to Harvard psychologist Martha Stout (2006), one in 25 “ordinary” people are remorseless and exhibit no conscience. These are clear signs of a sociopath. Ultius (2015) defines **sociopaths** as “people who display anti-social behavior characterized by a lack of empathy towards others coupled with abnormal moral conduct and an inability to conform to societal norms.”



Figure 12.2.3: I’m a high functioning sociopath by Irina Duarte on Flickr is licensed CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

While sociopaths may be antisocial and lack empathy for others, they can also come across as charismatic and interpersonally charming. Some verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors to look for in sociopaths include the following (Ultius, 2015).

- Even though sociopaths lack empathy, they appear interested in their victims by asking lots of questions in an attempt to gain information for manipulation.
- As a method of manipulation, they will often attempt to assert control with intense eye contact to present themselves as "sincere and captivating." However, if they've deemed a target is no longer useful, they immediately break eye contact and any further attempts to connect.
- Sociopaths tend to exhibit behaviors of grandiosity and blaming. In other words, they have an inflated ego that refuses to take responsibility and insists on blaming others.
- Compulsively lying is another key characteristic of sociopaths. Their superficially charming personality along with their lies help them to build the facade behind which they hide to carry out their manipulations.

So what's the difference between sociopathy and psychopathy? While both are disturbing antisocial personality disorders, some psychologists believe sociopaths are more impulsive, whereas psychopaths rely on carefully and thoroughly calculating and planning their crimes. Joe Exotic, John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, Diane Downs, Billy McFarland, and Bernie Madoff are a few names that popped up from a quick Google search of *sociopaths* (also see Practical Psychology, 2022).

To summarize, at first glance sociopaths appear to be interpersonally skilled. However, "their main trait is presenting themselves as having the same empathy feelings and emotions as others when in fact they lack this emotional capacity. They are thus cold and manipulative and rarely see any problem with their actions" (Loewen, 2020).

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12.3: Jealousy, Secret Tests, and Gossip

Jealousy: The Green-Eyed Monster

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** 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, co-workers, 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 our personality, culture, attachment styles, and the unique characteristics of the relationship.

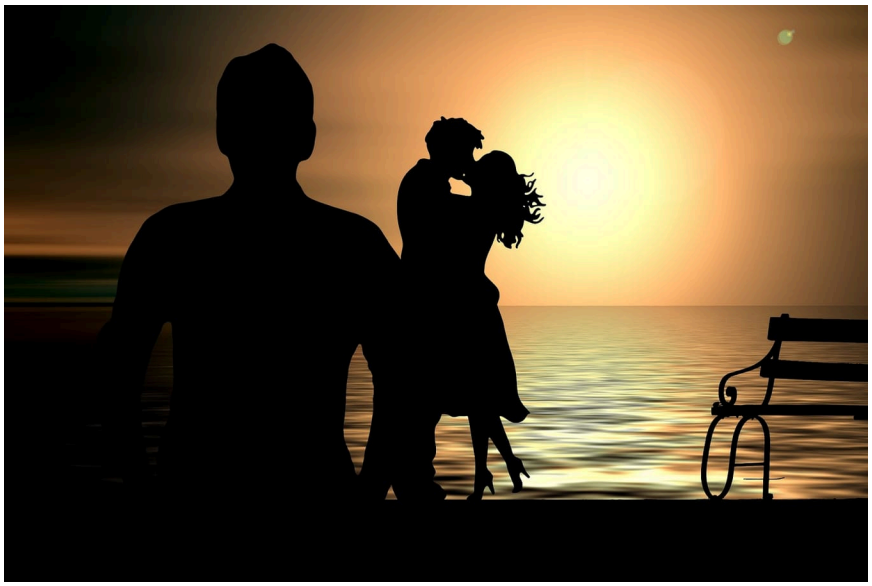


Figure 12.3.1: Jealousy by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

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 (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. Nonetheless, jealousy has been linked to relationship dissatisfaction, and increases in deception and relationship violence (Elphinston, et al., 2013; Guerrero, et al., 2005).

The green-eyed monster of 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, 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. Last, **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.

What is the best way to manage feelings of jealousy when they arise? Think back through your own life and consider what you find to be the healthiest response to jealousy. Research has shown that using a "self-reliance" strategy may work the 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 the triggering event with calm discussions about jealous feelings (self-disclosure) and demonstrating increased affection toward partners lead to the most positive outcomes in these

situations (Kennedy-Lightsey, 2018).

Secret Tests

In the classic teen movie *Mean Girls,* a tale 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 iconic 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 the relationship or when the 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.



Figure 12.3.2: Girls Whispering by Olya Adamovich from Pixaby.

Research has largely examined the use of secret tests in romantic relationships, but these strategies to reduce uncertainty can also be found in family, friend, and work relationships. Secret tests are included as a type of communication from the dark side because they can be manipulative, hurtful, and negative. There are several types of secret tests.

Student Voice: Secret Tests and First Loves

I chose to include a painting of my high school self and my first love. This was a formative experience that was full of "sec



ret tests" due to immaturity and lack of communication skills. One that was especially important at the time was "triangle tests," which was a cruel form of triangulation. The objects in this painting are minimal, except for the butterfly. The butterfly represents youth and how, when you are young and experiencing love for the first time, it can be both beautiful and toxic. I chose green, overgrown hair to show how "wild" and out of control poor communication can become, also hinting at the "green-eyed monster" jealousy, which is prevalent in young and immature love. The colors and textures are bright and "Van Gogh" adjacent. This is because I (as the artist) like to adopt a positive point of view on this formative learning experience. There are heavy textures and grains, as well as whirling shapes to show stark and melancholic moods.

I chose secret tests because I think this is a very unconscious behavior or half-conscious behavior that people do, which isn't fully addressed. Secret tests are tests that people do with the expectation of receiving a desired answer from someone of interest. It is important to recognize that secret tests can break down trust in relationships. I chose secret tests because I found this to be one of the more relevant topics in my life, as I think I and others try to attain insight on others through these “tests”. I think for some, testing can be a habit that is hard to break, but that does not have to be the case. Surrounding yourself with mature individuals can help negate instincts to do secret tests and communicate more openly.”

Loves Overgrowth by Nataly Michelle Ellias, Creative Writing Major

Figure: Love's Overgrowth by Nataly Elias Original Artwork

Types of Secret Tests

- **Third-party tests**: The third-party technique involves going through the other party's friends or family to learn their feelings. For example, imagine that AJ has a crush on Sophia. Rather than reaching out to Sophia, AJ connects with Sophia’s friends through social media to find out if she is single and if she might be interested in talking.
- **Triangle tests**: Triangle tests involve using a third party to make your partner jealous. For example, Layla and Aaron go to a party and Aaron talks to other girls to try and make Layla jealous.
- **Fidelity tests**: Fidelity tests involve whether or not your partner remains faithful. For example, Jada leaves her partner alone with someone very attractive to see how they respond.
- **Directness tests**: Directness tests involve making specific statements or self-disclosures in the hope that the other person will reciprocate. For example, Mateo tells Elena “I think I am falling in love with you” in hopes that Elena will confess to the same feelings.
- **Separation tests**: Separation tests involve increasing the physical distance between partners (such as geographically) to see if the relationship can withstand the distance. For example, Belle and James go away to school on opposite sides of the country to see if their relationship can withstand being apart.

- **Endurance tests**: 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 put up with the behavior. **Self-criticism** entails criticizing oneself, so much that it is 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**: Public presentation occurs when individuals test their relationship status through public declarations about the relationship status, such as introducing someone as their significant other or changing their relationship status on social media.
- **Indirect suggestion tests**: Indirect suggestion tests include roundabout strategies like joking about the relationship status and nonverbal indicators such as increasing touch through hand-holding and hugs. For example, Kaia frequently jokes with Jamie, calling them "girlfriend" to see how they react.

As you review secret tests in relationships, you may recognize occasions where other people used this form of communication with you, or that you used these techniques on others. It can be helpful to develop competent communication strategies to respond to secret tests.

Student Voices: Endurance Tests and Social Media

The Dark Side of Communication had a lot of content for me to look at when recognizing the toxic parts of a relationship. Specifically, the one that stood out to me was the Secret Tests part of the chapter. For a lot of my relationships past Covid, I was really insecure on how my friends thought of me, and I thought about it constantly. I would constantly do, according to the module, "endurance tests", where I would willingly put myself down and distance myself from my friends to see if they cared. I would even make alternate accounts online to see and ask what they thought of me. That was years ago, and now, I realize how insecure and unhealthy that was, and I'm extraordinarily grateful that it never harmed our friendship in the long term. Learning about it in class was an eye-opener on how I viewed myself and how I treated my friends, even though I knew I was very unconfident in comparison to everyone else. Therefore, now that I know how and what these secret tests are, I promise to myself that if I would ever feel insecure about a relationship with someone, I would straight up ask (without fishing for compliments or anything like that).

Marion

Student, Cerritos College

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 out the answers to your questions in a more direct manner with the other party. 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 to 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 Good, the Bad, the Ugly

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 so sinister, but it’s 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).

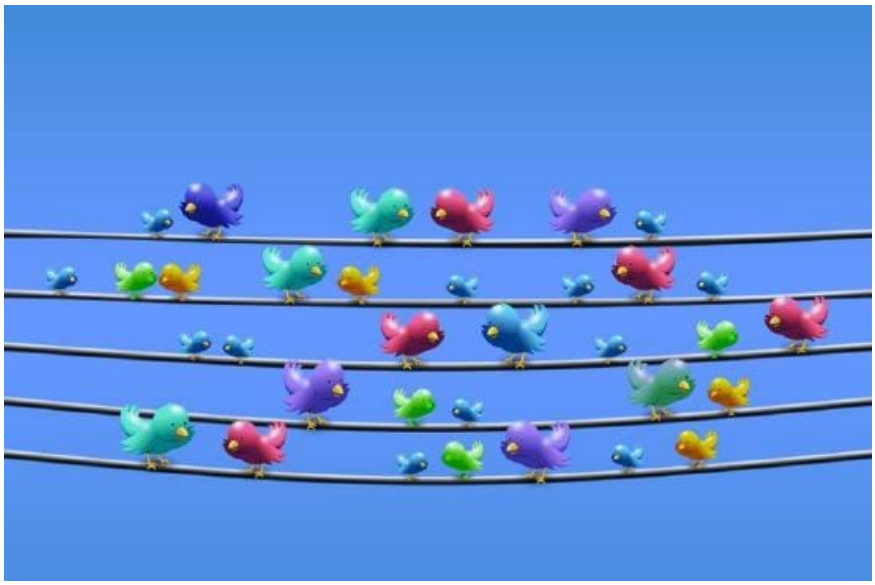


Figure 12.3.3: Twitter Management by geralt from Pixaby

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 the expected negatives. 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 stuck with the gossiping reputation, they found that men gossip just as much as women.

Dunbar (2004) believes that without gossip, society would not exist. She argues gossiping is a way to stay informed when our network/society becomes too big 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 of what society finds socially acceptable and not acceptable. For example, parents 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 learn that gossip serves "to keep people in check, morally speaking" (Robbins & Karan, 2019).

The usefulness of gossip doesn't come without a dark side. Perhaps that is why we are quick to associate gossip with being 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).

Reflection Questions

1. How do you define/see gossip? (Positive, Negative, Neutral?) What contributed to your perception of gossip?
2. How does gossip function in the developing and maintaining of relationships in your life?

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12.4: Communication as a Weapon—Aggression in Relationships

Types of Verbal and Physical Aggression

Christine showed up to school on Monday with a split lip and laughingly told her friends that her dog head-butted her while they were playing. It was not until several months later that she confided in her best friend that her boyfriend has been criticizing her over every little thing, picking fights, and belittling her and that he was the one who caused her split lip. Unfortunately, aggressive occurrences such as this are not uncommon in personal relationships. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2021), almost 49% of adults have experienced some kind of aggressive behavior from an intimate partner. Our personal relationships with friends, family and romantic partners are supposed to be our safe haven, a place of security that enhances our well-being. However, as we have seen previously in this chapter, every light side can be accompanied by a dark side, and in this case, the relationships that should keep us safe may also cause us harm when they are plagued by aggression. In this section, we focus on several different types of aggression, including verbal aggression, physical aggression, bullying, psychological abuse, and intimate partner violence. We wrap the section up with resources for help if you or someone you know is being harmed.



Figure 12.4.1: Verbal Abuse by The Lamp from Flickr is licensed CC BY-ND 2.0

Verbal Aggression and Abuse

Emma is a member of her school's soccer team. After one particularly competitive game, she came home in tears. Her mother asked about her tears and Emma shared that the coach screamed at her in a profanity-laced rant, humiliating her in front of her teammates. Emma's mother responded with appropriate empathy and concern, and told Emma that she thought the coach was being verbally abusive. **Verbal abuse** is a pattern of speaking that includes a specific intent to demean, humiliate, blame or threaten the relational partner. **Verbal aggression** involves attacking the self-concepts of the other party using insults, character attacks, harsh teasing, and profanity (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). According to the book *The Verbally Abusive Relationship* (Evans, 2010), many victims of verbal abuse do not realize that it is harmful, and a form of abuse. It is important to learn recognize verbal abuse and aggression and recognize that ongoing verbal aggression and abuse can lead to psychological trauma (NCADV, 2015).



Figure 12.4.2: Women/MentalHealth/Yelling from Max Pixel is licensed CC0

According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence (WomensLaw.org, 2021), some examples of verbal and emotional abuse may include an individual

- Acting jealous and constantly accusing you of cheating.
- Getting angry in a way that scares you.
- Calling you insulting names like “stupid,” “worthless,” and “disgusting.”
- Threatening to call authorities to report you for wrongdoings.
- Deciding things for you that you should decide (like what to wear or eat).
- Humiliating you in front of others.
- Continually pretending to not understand what you are saying, making you feel stupid, or refusing to listen to your thoughts and opinions.

Types of Verbal Abuse

Patricia Evans (2010), author of the book *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, found through her research and conversations that many different types of verbal abuse can exist in a relationship. The following are the most commonly identified types of verbal abuse:

- **Hostile withholding**: Abusers may refuse to acknowledge the partner’s existence for hours, days, and sometimes longer, which can lead to a partner feeling isolated and desperate for the abuser’s approval and acknowledgment. For example, Jun is frustrated when her best friend Jasmin starts to give her the silent treatment, leaving her text messages unread, and ignoring her at school, even though they have an important project to finish.
- **Countering:** When the abuser tries to convince their partner that their feelings about anything and everything are wrong. Although it is normal for people to disagree at times, countering occurs when the abuser responds with hostility to your opinions and ideas, even if they agree with you. To illustrate, while Rosario is helping her dad wash the family car, she comments on a beautiful car that drove by. Her father responds with hostility, accusing her of being materialistic, saying that he would never be caught dead in such a car. Rosario is left in tears and bewildered by the attack.
- **Discounting or jokes**: Telling a partner that their emotions are wrong, denying them the right to simply feel what they feel, or indicating it was “just a joke” to discount the other person’s feelings. For example, if you find yourself feeling hurt as a result

of your partner's comment, and then your partner says "I was just joking."

- **Blocking**. The abuser will prevent the partner from talking at all, cutting them off or accusing them of talking out of turn so they are effectively silenced.
- **Blame**. The abuser will blame the other person as a degradation or humiliation tactic, such as telling their partner they're not able to make friends because they're a bad person or bad things happen to them because that's what they deserve.
- **Judging and criticizing**. Similar to blame, the abuser will judge the partner unfairly for just about everything which impacts their self-esteem. For example, the abuser may frequently say something like, "Why are you so slow? You always ruin it for us when we go anywhere."
- **Trivializing**. An abuser will minimize a partner's accomplishments. For example, the abuser may trivialize an award received by their partner by saying, "Wow, the competition must have been bad this year."
- **Undermining**. An abuser will make sure to question a partner at every turn in a conversation. This can lead to the partner not lacking confidence in any accomplishments. For example, if your boss publicly questions every decision you make on a project, while privately telling you they want you to take more initiative, they may be undermining you.
- **Name calling**: This can be blatant or in terms of subtle references in conversations such as "Of course, only a loser would do something like that" or "Hey idiot—take a look at this."

In the 2018 movie *I, Tonya*, which is a dark biographical reveal about Tonya Harding, a polarizing US figure skater in the early 1980s, we see many depictions of Tonya with two abusers in her life: her mother and her husband. Tonya's mother is both physically and verbally abusive to her. In many situations, she engages in hostile withholding (where she withholds affection from Tonya as a way to manipulate her) or judges and criticizes before her competitions (under the delusion that Tonya will skate better this way if she is angered prior to taking the ice), or trivializes her accomplishments in order to make Tonya feel less than—all of which significantly impact Tonya Harding's self-esteem and ultimately contribute to her downfall in the figure skating world.

Be Aware of DARVO

In situations involving communication abuse, such as gaslighting or verbal aggression, it is common for the abuser to respond in a way that tries to deny or evade accountability and flip the responsibility back to the victim. As listed in Figure 12.4.3, DARVO is used by people who cause harm to minimize and effectively silence those who have experienced harm. These tactics, known as **DARVO**, are used by people who cause harm to minimize and effectively silence those who have experienced harm (Freyd, 1997). According to Jennifer Freyd, "The perpetrator or offender may Deny the behavior, Attack the individual doing the confronting, and Reverse the roles of Victim and Offender such that the perpetrator assumes the victim role and turns the true victim into an alleged offender" (1997). Defensiveness and denial are key aspects of how an abuser or perpetrator will use DARVO to escape being held accountable for their communicative actions. Unfortunately, the use of DARVO as a way of victim-blaming can serve to further silence relational partners and undermine their credibility when speaking out against an abuser (Harsey, et al., 2017). It is important to be aware of DARVO, as these common response tactics can cause relational partners to doubt their own perception of what is occurring in the relationship, which can enable the verbal abuse cycle to continue.



Figure 12.4.3: DARVO explanation and elements by Anu Khanna is licensed CC BY 4.0

Verbal abuse and aggression can be very subtle and rarely leave signs of visible damage, nonetheless, the harm to an individual's self-esteem and overall well-being can be severe. Communication aggression can go beyond close relationships and take on a social element when teams or groups attack individuals.

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). At its core, social aggression is an attempt to hurt someone by inflicting harm on their friendships and social status, and can include behaviors such as malicious gossip, manipulation, and exclusion from social groups (Underwood, 2004). *A Girl Like Her* is a 2015 movie about a high school student who uses a hidden camera to document her own bullying by her former best friend. The storyline is based on the phenomena of social aggression, where a character used threats, intimidation, gossip, and slander to retaliate against a former best friend. Furthermore, like the characters in the movie, research suggests that although boys and girls participate in social aggression, males are more likely to use physical aggression

and females are more likely to use social aggression (Lansford, et al., 2012).

Social aggression exhibits aspects of both the dark and light sides of communication. Some of the harm caused by social aggression includes increased social isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, loss of performance in school, and increased suicide. Although it is easy to see the harm caused by social aggression, particularly during the adolescent and teen years, it is important to understand that social aggression may also serve some beneficial functions. It serves to promote individual identity formation (such as the establishment of a group leader), group identity (Dodger fans versus San Francisco Giants) and can be used to enforce cultural and peer values and norms (such as making fun of a friend who has not taken a shower in a little too long).

Bullying, a form of aggression among peers, can encompass the previously mentioned physical, verbal and social aggression, in addition to cyberbullying. However, what sets bullying apart from other forms of aggression is that it represents a pattern of aggressive attacks over time toward a targeted individual. Bullying includes physical and psychological harassment and is initiated by an individual toward someone with less power, whether it be physical strength or social status. Bullying can be one on one, or in some cases, many individuals can be responsible for harassment, known as mobbing (Hoover & Oliver, 2008).

Actor Josh Gad, of *Frozen,* shared his experiences of being bullied in high school:

> I realized early on [that] I was the absolute poster boy for bullying because I struggled with being overweight from a very early age, but I also discovered that comedy was a weapon that I was able to employ," he said on Off Camera with Sam Jones. "I remember one time a kid calling me fat in front of, like, a group of people. And, instead of kowtowing and giving him the opportunity to sort of, you know, leave, I started reciting that monologue from My Cousin Vinny, where he walks in the bar and he sees the guy in the arm sling. And I just literally started reciting to the point that the guy's like, 'What the f--- is happening right now?' And everybody is laughing at him.

Anyone can be bullied. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CDC, 2019), more than 30% of US high school students report being bullied in school. Transgender students report bullying in schools at even higher rates, up to 43%. Bullying of these individuals occurs due to a lack of tolerance and understanding for those who are perceived as different. It is easy to exclude and bully someone who can be “othered.” In the movie *The Social Network,* which depicts Mark Zuckerberg's rise with Facebook, there is a scene that talks about the impact of bullying, especially via social media platforms. In this scene, Zuckerberg’s friend describes how being cruel to a person’s face is like using a pencil, but saying something online is being cruel with a pen. They were emphasizing the permanency and impact of the dark side of bullying behavior, especially in the online space. Later on in this chapter, we will go into more depth about the dark side of social media's influences on communicative behavior.

The rise of anti-Asian sentiment and bullying increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2021 report by the STOP AAPI Hate Youth Campaign found that almost 75% of the 1100 students they interviewed about their experiences indicated cyberbullying and verbal harassment as forms of anti-Asian sentiment they had recently experienced. This increase has been greatly influenced by the coronavirus-related racism toward Asians that has been facilitated through the media and in communities where anxiety and fear have led to such stereotypical views about Asians.

Now that we have examined different types of social aggression and bullying, take a moment to read about **cancel culture**. Next, we will to turn our attention to intimate partner violence (IPV). Verbal aggression, psychological abuse, and social aggression often occur before the first incident of IPV.

Consider This: Food for Thought: Accountability or a Form of Bullying?

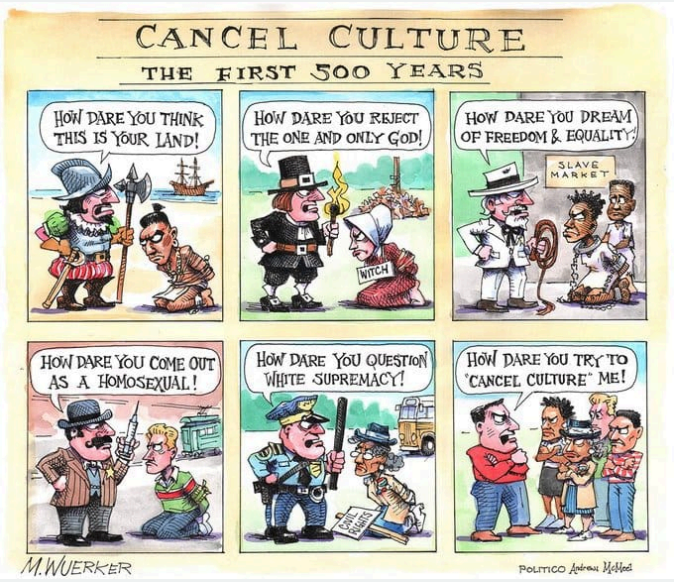


Figure 12.4.4: Cancel Culture - The First 500 Years by Matt Wuerker, Image from Politico is licensed CC BY-NC 4.0

Cancel culture isn't a new concept, but it has taken on a much more prominent role in our culture as technology and the internet have opened the floodgates for the public to express opinions and challenge each other's views. The debates and discussions over what exactly is "cancel culture" was the focus of a survey conducted by Pew Research Center. The survey involved 10,093 US adults and was conducted in September 2020. The results found "a public deeply divided, including over the very meaning of the phrase" (Vogels et al., 2021).

The original idea of "canceling" had to do with marginalized communities asserting their values to hold public figures accountable (Romano, 2021). While most in the Pew survey described "cancel culture" as "actions people take to hold others accountable" (Vogels et al, 2021), it has evolved to include public shaming, callouts, and other forms of public backlash that attempt to seek social justice against anyone in disagreement via the many social media platforms accessible 24/7. For some, canceling others seems to address a power imbalance between people with money (celebrities, politicians) and the general public. Anne Harper Charity-Hudley, chair of linguistics of African America at the University of California, Santa Barbara explains,

> When you see people canceling Kanye, canceling other people, it's a collective way of saying, "We elevated your social status, your economic prowess, [and] we're not going to pay attention to you in a way that we once did.... I may have no power, but the power I have is to [ignore] you." (Romano, 2020)

Thanks to social media, many in the public have gained the power to voice their opinions and boycott or refuse to participate. "Canceling is a way to acknowledge that you don't have to have the power to change structural inequity," Charity-Hudley said. "You don't even have to have the power to change all of the public sentiment. But as an individual, you can still have power beyond measure" (Romano, 2020).

Discussion Questions

1. How does social media fuel cancel culture?
2. How have perpetrators become "victims" in the cancel culture environment?
3. How is cancel culture itself a target in the cancel culture environment?
4. What are some examples of cancel culture you're aware of? What "woke" your awareness of this person/issue?
5. LeVar Burton argues that cancel culture is misnamed. Although he believes people should be held accountable, he argues it should be re-named as "consequence culture." If you were working for a marketing agency tasked to rebrand the concept of cancel culture, what would you rebrand it as and why?

Physical Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence

In the spring of 2022, the world was captivated by Johnny Depp and Amber Heard's defamation trial. Detailed accounts of physical abuse and photographic evidence captured the brutality of the relationship of the Hollywood couple. This violent exchange shed light on the often untold story of **intimate partner violence (IPV).** IPV is often considered a subset of aggression but goes beyond verbal acts of aggression to include behavior where one person in a close relationship purposefully inflicts physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual harm on another person (Spitzberg, 2011; Evans, et al., 2020). Abuse can occur in many types of close relationships, such as between parent and child, siblings, and friends; however, IPV is distinguished by its occurrence in romantic relationships. Here is where the light versus dark side comes into view, as intimate relationships are supposed to be our most cherished, protected, and safe relationships, yet they can also be relationships that put us in the most danger. Although IPV impacts people of all races, cultures, genders, sexual orientations, socio-economic groups, and religious groups, it has a "disproportionate effect on communities of color and other marginalized groups. Economic instability, unsafe housing, neighborhood violence, and lack of safe and stable childcare and social support can worsen already tenuous situations" (Evans, et al., 2020).

A wide range of studies have examined the prevalence of IPV in romantic partner relationships. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey estimate that greater than 35% of women and 28% of men experience IPV in their lifetimes (Black, et al., 2011). A large-scale study asked 14,965 high school students. "During the past 12 months, did your boyfriend or girlfriend ever hit, slap, or physically hurt you on purpose?" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). Of the participants, 8.8% of females and 8.9% of males replied yes. Research has found that emotional abuse, such as insults, swearing, and humiliation, are the most common forms of IPV across couples of various ages and that there is a direct link between the quality of communication and rates of IPV (Rada, 2020). When couples rate their communication quality as low or very low, all forms of IPV were higher, especially emotional abuse. Not surprisingly, married and romantic couples in early adulthood (ages 24–32) who rate their relationships as less satisfying also are more likely to indicate that their relationship is characterized by some forms of IPV (Ackerman & Field, 2011).

IPV includes a wide variety of physically aggressive and/or violent behaviors, including pushing, grabbing, slapping, and throwing items, to the more violent, such as choking, threatening or using a weapon such as a gun or a knife, hitting with an object, or beating. Although physical aggression is not as common as verbal or psychological aggression, research suggests that it occurs in one-quarter to one-half of all intimate partner relationships, including dating and marriage (Lawrence & Bradbury, 2007). It is important to note that the most violent acts are extremely rare in teen romantic relationships (Munoz-Rivas, et al., 2007).

There are several common myths about IPV. To better understand the role of violence in relationships, it is worthwhile to examine these misconceptions. Based on a review of research about IPV, Spitzberg (2011) highlights some important findings:

- Men are more likely to be victims of violence, usually at the hands of other men.
- Females use approximately equal or greater amounts of violence in their relationships than men.
- Women are more likely to be physically and psychologically injured.
- Self-defense accounts for a minimal amount of IPV.
- Men and women initiate relatively equal amounts of IPV.
- IPV tends to be reciprocal, meaning that when one person is physically abusive it can trigger a physically abusive response.
- IPV is rarely about power. In a review of the literature, Spitzberg and Cupach (2011) point out that IPV may be due to other factors, such as anger, jealousy, lack of control over emotions, and to get attention.

Being a victim of IPV, as well as verbal and emotional abuse, can have long-term consequences on both physical and psychological health including depression, anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder. While support for victims is still limited in the workplace and public settings, there are lots of resources available for people who have experienced verbal and psychological abuse in domestic settings. If you or someone you care about is being impacted by verbal aggression or IPV please consider reaching out for help.

Have you ever witnessed or found yourself to be on the receiving end of the types of the communication behavior that we described in this section? These behaviors may be signs that someone is being verbally abusive and should be considered as red flags. In a later section in this chapter, we provide some resources you can seek out that help IPV (which includes both physical and verbal abuse). In the meantime, what can you do if you find yourself recognizing such behaviors and seeing a pattern of these occurring in your own relationship?

- The first step is to acknowledge to yourself that these behaviors are harmful and that they are signs of a dysfunctional relationship.
- Consider seeking help from a trusted adult, instructor, or the health center at your college.

- Set boundaries of what is acceptable communication between you and the abuser.

Intimate Partner Violence Resources for Help

If you or someone you know is being impacted by IPV or other forms of abuse, please consider reaching out to one of these resources:

- California Partnership to End Domestic Violence (visit CPEDV.org or call 916-444-7163)
- Child National Abuse Hotline (800-4-A-Child)
- Futures Without Violence
- National Domestic Violence Hotline (visit TheHotline.org, text LOVEIS to 22522, or call 800-799-7233)
- National Parent Hotline (855-4A-Parent)

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12.5: The Dark Side of Social Media

The Risks of Social Media and Social Networking



Figure 12.5.1: Hand on MacBook by Nenad Stojkovic is licensed CC BY 2.0

Do you belong to a social network? Do you recall the first social media site you joined? Or do you choose to not participate in social media? If anything is clear, since the introduction of the first social media sites in the late 1990s, social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat have integrated themselves into all forms of life, in particular, interpersonal relationships. Interestingly, approximately 70% of adults report using social media sites daily, yet most of the same people report holding negative beliefs about the effects of social media (McKinnon & Dougherty, 2019). In this section, we first by exploring some of social media's benefits, then examine social media from the dark side of communication by revealing how social media is linked to mental health concerns, cyberbullying, stalking and sexting, hyperpersonal communication, and the spread of disinformation.

Some of the earliest social networking sites, like 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 we can reach out to family and friends (Instagram, Facebook). We can also use social media for networking purposes (LinkedIn), and even to connect through online dating (Match.com, Bumble, and Tinder). Due to targeted platforms, we are witnessing increased social involvement, in particular people using social media to connect over common interests, whether it be to commiserate over gaming (Twitch), find the best local restaurants (Yelp), or join an online hiking club. One of the most influential aspects of social media sites is that they have increased our access to information. The Pew Research Center has found that over 40% of 18–29 year olds get their news from social media sites (Shearer, 2021). Not only that, but largely due to our access to digital media, students were able to continue with their education despite restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, social media sites provide a great source of entertainment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, at least one author of this chapter found herself addicted to YouTube, subscribing to a variety of different channels, including Yoga by Adrienne and Hoopla Doodle (a site that teaches you how to draw cartoon animals). Through subscribing to these sites for entertainment, we join communities of like-minded individuals.

Although social media has fulfilled many of its earliest promises for increased opportunities for connection, these opportunities have been met with many risks, such as psychological isolation, exposure to harmful materials, social risk, and loss of time (Linvill, 2019). As parents, both authors of this chapter have often grappled with setting appropriate boundaries while trying to teach our children responsible social media use. However, as anyone with a cell phone and social media account can tell you, the temptation to look at social media accounts can be a bit overwhelming, and the access is not without risks.

Time Risk

Social media provides a variety of entertaining and possibly addictive activities that can suck up the time of users. For example, research by Common Sense Media (2019) shows that the average person checks their cell phone more than 100 times a day (whether they receive a notification or not) and that approximately two-thirds of teens report accessing on-screen media up to 4 hours a day. Recent research indicates that the average person spends 145 minutes a day monitoring and posting in their social media accounts (Statista, 2021). This represents a major shift in how we use our time in a day.

Mental Health Concerns

In the fall of 2021, a former Facebook employee turned whistleblower revealed company documents showing that the social media giant was aware that Instagram can harm the mental health of children and teens (Romo, 2021). Although the revelation shocked many, research has identified a link between our mental health and the use of social media. First, 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, researchers have found that self-reported rates of depression, anxiety, isolation, and suicidal thoughts have increased, leading many scholars to suggest that there may be a relationship to 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 be linked to well-being and happiness (Davis, 2012). The mixed results of the research may indicate it is not social media per se, but how people use social media that impacts mental health. The increase in cyberbullying is just one way that social media may negatively impact 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 such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and TikTok, but it also occurs 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 for younger adults (48% of adults aged 29 and younger), significantly more common for LGBTQIA+ adults than their straight peers (51% report being targeted), and as compared to other groups, Black and Hispanic adults are more likely report being harassed for 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 location and company by someone other than a guardian), and personal explicit sharing without permission (i.e., 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. It is likely, if you are regularly on social media, that you have encountered racist and or sexist messages. Often racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice are presented using covert tactics to mask the underlying hostility in the message, such as using memes, emojis, and GIFs as weapons (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2018; Jackson, 2017; Lamerichs, et al. 2018). For example, in November 2021, US 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 removing him from his committee posts. After receiving widespread criticism for the posting, he tried to defend himself by saying "Relax, it is a cartoon." Most people who post messages of hate are not famous, like Gosar, giving 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. Just 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, the exchanges are mutual and welcome, but in many cases, sexting takes on a 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 a growth in **cyberstalking,**

since these websites enable surveillance and voyeurism of often unwitting victims who provide a treasure-trove of personal information online. In the cases of 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

As discussed in Chapter 10, self-disclosure is an important aspect of developing and maintaining our interpersonal relationships. Social media use can influence the trajectory of self-disclosure that occurs in a relationship, which can veer into the dark side. Have you ever found yourself writing a text, sending a Snap, or communicating on a Discord channel something that you have regretted because it was TMI (too much information) and you didn't want to put it out there? It's likely that at that moment (because you were behind a keyboard), it seemed easier and not that risky to reveal all that information. In contrast to the type of self-disclosure risks we might engage in while face to face, in a mediated context, via social media, we may engage in more hyperpersonal communication (Walther, 1997). With **hyperpersonal communication**, in online interactions, self-disclosure can go from surface-level to intimate and in-depth very quickly without the benefit of mutual reciprocity or establishing of trust. Lack of nonverbal cues as well as the desire to promote self-presentation and receive online validation results in hyperpersonal communication (Walther, 2007). For some, this can be very emotionally satisfying; but for others, it can result in misperceptions and misunderstandings leading to increased relational conflict and a decrease in trust and intimacy between relational partners.

Also impacting relationships and levels of self-disclosure in a relationship is the concept of **disinhibition,** which occurs via social media in online interactions. **Disinhibition** refers to the freedom (without discretion) or lack of restraint one might show when communicating online (Joinson, 2007). Joinson found that self-disclosure levels were much higher when communicating online versus in face-to-face interactions, and that there was an increase in the more intimate levels of self-disclosure in these online contexts. Have you heard about "keyboard warriors"? These are persons online who make abusive or aggressive posts on social media platforms often while concealing their real identities. Frequently, these keyboard warriors will post comments they would never say in a face-to-face situation. The anonymity of online interactions and lack of accountability creates enough disinhibition that toxic communicative behavior becomes normalized.

Consider This: The Evolution of Modern Catfishing



Figure 12.5.2: Virus Criminal from Max Pixel CC0

Before the 2010 documentary *Catfish*, we only understood "catfish" to mean a hearty freshwater fish with long feelers that look like cat whiskers. Since Nev Schulman's documentary aired, we've discovered a whole new meaning of *catfish* that has nothing to do with fish. Shulman has turned his documentary into a popular reality TV series on MTV. According to Urbandictionary.com, a **catfish** (*Urban Dictionary: Catfish*, 2017) is someone who makes a fake account on social media to lure people into a deceptive relationship. This modern definition has taken on quite a sinister connotation.

Since *Catfish: The TV Show* premiered on MTV in 2012, almost 200 episodes have been produced and aired. In each episode, the hosts try to unveil the identities of people involved in these mysterious online relationships. According to Social Catfish (a website that helps to identify and verify people), there are five basic reasons that people catfish others (Santiago, 2018).

1. **Revenge**: Someone you know fakes an identity to lure you into a relationship only to reveal their identity, once they've gained your trust, for the purpose of hurting you.
2. **Catch a cheater**: If someone suspects their significant other of cheating, they might set up a fake identity to try and prove unfaithfulness.
3. **Money**: Scammers set up fake profiles with sob stories to try and defraud vulnerable people of money.
4. **Boredom**: Some people are bored and catfish to entertain themselves.
5. **Insecure about themselves**: Lots of catfishers lack the confidence to meet people and develop relationships in person, so they idealize themselves and hide behind a computer to pursue romanticized relationships.

So, how common is "catfishing?" Here are some interesting yet disturbing statistics:

- According to the FBI's Internet Crime Report (Internet Crime Complaint Center, 2020), IC3 logged 23,751 cases of confidence fraud/romance scams in 2020. This resulted in the second largest financial loss due to internet crimes in 2020 at a cost of $600,249,821 to the victims. These numbers do not reflect the numerous catfishing scams that are unreported because victims are too ashamed to report the crime.
- By Facebook's own reporting on its Transparency Center (Meta, 2021), they took down 1.8 *billion* fake accounts in the 3rd quarter of 2021 alone (July–September). Clearly, setting up a fake account to prey on others is quite simple to accomplish on social media and dating sites.
- Women and people over the age of 60 are more likely to be victims of confidence fraud/romance scams (Better Business Bureau, 2020).
- Ryan Anderson (2016) cited a study completed by OpinionMatters, a global research agency. The study found 53% of online daters in the United States and the United Kingdom admitted to lying on their dating profiles. Over 20% of women misrepresented themselves by posting younger photos. This study revealed that men tended to lie about their financial situation, and women were more likely to lie about their age or appearance.

If you've ever watched *Catfish: The TV Show* you would take note of patterns of glaring red flags that signal someone is being catfished:

- The relationship moves very quickly. They refer to their victim as "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" and talk about "love" and their future together. This is all an effort to build and gain trust quickly to manipulate victims for what they want.

- Catfishers avoid showing their faces. There's always a convenient excuse why they cannot FaceTime or video chat (camera is broken, bad internet connection, not a good time...)
- Their story is too good to be true. Two of the most common professions catfishers use on the TV show indicate they are models or rappers. They have internet stalked people and "borrowed" their photos to help enhance their lies. One episode of *Catfish* even had the victim convinced he was in a relationship with Katy Perry (Season 5, Episode 15, 2016).
- They ask for money. You barely know this person, they won't meet you in person, they are a good-looking model or a successful rapper, but they need money.

These four signs stood out as the most obvious from a survey of the TV show. If you do an internet search on "Signs you're being catfished," lots of websites have written about this. Bottom line, trust your gut instincts. If something doesn't seem right, ask questions, and do some research. There are several resources out there to help, including *Catfish: The TV Show.*

Responding to the Dark Side of Social Media

As we can see, like other forms of communication, social media has both a light and a dark side. Because the dark side of social media is so prevalent in our lives, it is important to set healthy boundaries for yourself and to develop a response plan that is based on competent communication.

1. Set time limits for yourself in terms of how much of your day you are willing to spend on social media.
2. Set limits on who you add to your social media accounts. You do not need to add everyone.
3. Be thoughtful and respectful in your communication exchanges, committing to positive exchanges.

4. Check your 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.
5. Commit to refraining from posting, sharing, or liking racist, sexist, agist, or other discriminatory messages.
6. If necessary, use your voice to be an advocate to stop the spread of hurtful messages.
7. If you experience bullying or other problems, reach out to someone you trust for help.
8. Block offensive content and the people who send offensive messages. Consider reporting abuse to the platform, such as Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram.

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12.6: Summary and Review

Summary

In this chapter, we shed light on the dark side of communication. We live in a world where the quality of our interpersonal relationships can be directly linked to our personal well-being and happiness. Ironically, these same relationships can be the source of some of our greatest misery. Thus, it is important to study not only aspects of communication that can improve our interpersonal relationships, but also to develop an understanding of types of communication that may harm our well-being.

In this chapter we explored various communication aspects of the dark side of communication in interpersonal relationships, including deception, secret tests, jealousy, gaslighting, verbal abuse, intimate partner violence, and social media. We learned that communication can have both positive and negative effects on our relationships and personal well-being, but that some types of communication clearly fall solely on the dark side.

In addition, we highlighted specific communication techniques you can use to lighten the burden on the dark side. Throughout the chapter, we explored specific communication tools to help respond appropriately and effectively to the dark side of communication. Techniques such as perception checking, assertiveness, and setting boundaries can help you maintain open channels of communication while maintaining healthy boundaries. In addition, in this chapter we discussed several techniques for responding to the dark side of communication on social media, including setting appropriate boundaries for your own posts, as well as developing an effective response plan to negative messaging. Through examining the dark side of communication, we can hopefully learn to understand communication patterns and behaviors that both enhance and harm our relationships, and in turn, we can reveal the light and bright side of our partnerships.

As we develop our skills in interpersonal communication, it is important to be aware of how the light and dark sides of communication interact with one another. The light and dark sides of communication are interwoven, such that some unappealing behaviors (i.e., white lies) can lead to positive outcomes, and some desirable behaviors can lead to negative outcomes (i.e., self-disclosure on social media). It is important to remember to commit to honoring yourself, the other person, and the relationship. In doing so, you may lead to greater personal awareness, understanding of the other person, and relationship growth.

Discussion Questions

1. Now that you are familiar with the dark side of communication, what areas of the dark side of communication do you believe to be most harmful to relationships?
2. What areas of the dark side do you feel are impacting your current relationships? What communication strategies do you use to manage these challenges?
3. Identity three communication strategies you have learned throughout this text that can help you respond to different areas of the dark side of communication.
4. What communication behavior from the dark side have you witnessed or experienced on social media platforms? Are there any communication behaviors you have seen or experienced that are not included in the discussion of social media and the dark side that you believe should be included?
5. Have you used or been on the receiving end of secret tests? How have you responded to secret tests in the past?
6. Cultures have different views and expectations regarding deception. Under what circumstances do you believe it is appropriate to tell a lie?

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INDEX

A

active listening
7: Listening

B

barriers to communication
5: Verbal Elements of Communication
barriers to listening
7: Listening
behaviors
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication
biases
4: Perception and Communication
bullying
12: Dark Side of Communication

C

chronemics
6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication
climate
9: Communication Climate
communication
10: Interpersonal Conflict
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication
4: Perception and Communication
7: Listening
9: Communication Climate
communication competence
1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
5: Verbal Elements of Communication
8: Emotions
communication practices
5: Verbal Elements of Communication
communication skills
1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
10: Interpersonal Conflict
5: Verbal Elements of Communication
communication strategies
11: Building and Maintaining Relationships
communication theory
1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
conflict dynamics
10: Interpersonal Conflict
conflict goals
10: Interpersonal Conflict
conflict management
10: Interpersonal Conflict
conflict outcomes
10: Interpersonal Conflict
conflict resolution
10: Interpersonal Conflict
cultural context
1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
cultural intelligence
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication
culture
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication

D

dark side of communication
12: Dark Side of Communication
deception
12: Dark Side of Communication

E

effective communication
1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
5: Verbal Elements of Communication
7: Listening
emotional
9: Communication Climate
emotional abuse
12: Dark Side of Communication
emotional awareness
8: Emotions
emotional contagion
8: Emotions
emotional expression
8: Emotions
emotional intelligence
8: Emotions
emotional regulation
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication
emotions
8: Emotions
ethical communication
1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication

F

family relationships
11: Building and Maintaining Relationships
feedback
9: Communication Climate
friendships
11: Building and Maintaining Relationships
functions of listening
7: Listening

G

gaslighting
12: Dark Side of Communication
globalized world
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication
growth
9: Communication Climate

H

haptics
6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication
health
4: Perception and Communication
healthy communication
11: Building and Maintaining Relationships

I

improvement tips
7: Listening
intercultural communication
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication
interpersonal
4: Perception and Communication
9: Communication Climate
interpersonal communication
1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
11: Building and Maintaining Relationships
8: Emotions
interpersonal conflict
10: Interpersonal Conflict
Interpersonal Relationships
5: Verbal Elements of Communication
intimate partner violence
12: Dark Side of Communication

J

jealousy
12: Dark Side of Communication

K

kinesics
6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication

L

language
5: Verbal Elements of Communication
language proficiency
5: Verbal Elements of Communication
learning
4: Perception and Communication
listening
7: Listening
listening process
7: Listening
listening styles
7: Listening

M

managing emotions
8: Emotions
mental health
12: Dark Side of Communication

N

negotiation
10: Interpersonal Conflict
norms
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication

O

objectives
4: Perception and Communication

olfactics
6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication

P

perception
4: Perception and Communication
personal growth
1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
productive
9: Communication Climate
proxemics
6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication
psychological
4: Perception and Communication

R

relational theories
11: Building and Maintaining Relationships
relationship enhancement
1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
relationships
11: Building and Maintaining Relationships
4: Perception and Communication
8: Emotions
9: Communication Climate
romantic relationships
11: Building and Maintaining Relationships

S

skills
9: Communication Climate
social interactions
8: Emotions
social media
12: Dark Side of Communication
stages of listening
7: Listening
stereotypes
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication
strategies
4: Perception and Communication
9: Communication Climate
symbolic language
5: Verbal Elements of Communication

U

unhealthy communication
11: Building and Maintaining Relationships
unproductive conflict
10: Interpersonal Conflict

V

values
2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication
verbal abuse
12: Dark Side of Communication
verbal communication
5: Verbal Elements of Communication
vocalics
6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication

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    - About the Book - *Undeclared*
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    - 1.14: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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    - 3.4: Communicating the Self - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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    - 3.6: Changing the Self - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.7: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.8: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 4: Perception and Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.1: Introduction to Perception and Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.2: Perception Process—Parts 1 and 2 (Selection and Organization) - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.3: Perception Process - Part 3 (Interpretation) - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.4: Influences on Perception - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.5: Stereotyping, Microaggressions, and Bias - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.6: Guidelines for Effective Perception - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.7: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.8: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 5: Verbal Elements of Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 5.1: Introduction to Verbal Elements of

Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.2: The Nature of Language - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.3: Language Barriers - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.4: Improving Verbal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.5: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.6: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

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- 6.1: Introduction to Nonverbal Elements of Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.2: Definitions - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.3: The Roles of Nonverbal Communication in Interpersonal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.4: The Six Functions of Nonverbal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.6: Case Study - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.7: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.8: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

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- 7.1: Introduction to Listening - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.2: Stages of the Listening Process - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.3: Functions of Listening - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.4: Listening Styles - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.5: Barriers to Listening - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.6: Ineffective Listening Practices - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.7: Becoming a Mindful Listener - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.8: Listening Responses - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.9: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.10: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

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- 8.1: Introduction to Emotions - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.2: What Are Emotions? - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.3: Influences on Emotional Expression - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.4: Emotions in Relationships - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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- 8.6: Guidelines for Communicating Emotions Effectively - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.7: Coping with Challenging Emotions - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.8: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.9: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

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- 9.1: Introduction to Communication Climate - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.2: Confirming and Disconfirming Climates - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 9.2.1: Confirming and Disconfirming Responses- Well, It Depends! - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.3: Context Can Play a Role in Identifying Confirming and Disconfirming Responses - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.4: Supportive versus Defensive Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.5: Skills to Support Confirming Communication Climates - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.6: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.7: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 10: Interpersonal Conflict - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.1: Introduction to Interpersonal Conflict - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.2: Interpersonal Conflict Defined - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.3: Conflict Goals and Outcomes - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.4: Conflict Management Style - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.5: Unproductive Conflict - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.6: Interpersonal Conflict and Social Media - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.7: Conflict Resolution - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.8: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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- 11.1: Introduction to Building and Maintaining Relationships - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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- 11.5: The Role of Self-Disclosure - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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- 11.7: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

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    - About the Authors - *Undeclared*
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    - 1.3: Communication Principals - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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    - 1.5: Models of Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.6: Interpersonal Communication Theory - *CC BY 4.0*
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    - 1.8: Interpersonal Communication Research - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 1.9: Communication and Careers - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 1.10: Interpersonal Communication Competence - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 1.11: Ethical Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.12: Tools of Interpersonal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.13: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 1.14: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 2: Culture and Environmental Factors in Interpersonal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.1: What is Culture? - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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    - 2.3: Cultural Characteristics and Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
      - 2.3.1: Edward T. Hall - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
      - 2.3.2: Geert Hofstede - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
      - 2.3.3: Stella Ting-Toomey - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.4: Culturally Intelligent Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.5: Intercultural Communication Skills - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 2.6: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 3: Communication and Self - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.1: Introduction to Communication and Self - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.2: Understanding the Self—Who You Are - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.3: Forming the Self - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.4: Communicating the Self - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.5: Communication Styles - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.6: Changing the Self - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.7: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 3.8: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 4: Perception and Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.1: Introduction to Perception and Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.2: Perception Process—Parts 1 and 2 (Selection and Organization) - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.3: Perception Process - Part 3 (Interpretation) - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.4: Influences on Perception - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.5: Stereotyping, Microaggressions, and Bias - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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    - 4.7: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 4.8: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 5: Verbal Elements of Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 5.1: Introduction to Verbal Elements of

Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.2: The Nature of Language - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.3: Language Barriers - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.4: Improving Verbal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.5: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 5.6: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 6: Nonverbal Elements of Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.1: Introduction to Nonverbal Elements of Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.2: Definitions - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.3: The Roles of Nonverbal Communication in Interpersonal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.4: The Six Functions of Nonverbal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.5: The Channels of Nonverbal Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.6: Case Study - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.7: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 6.8: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 7: Listening - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.1: Introduction to Listening - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.2: Stages of the Listening Process - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.3: Functions of Listening - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.4: Listening Styles - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.5: Barriers to Listening - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.6: Ineffective Listening Practices - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.7: Becoming a Mindful Listener - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.8: Listening Responses - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.9: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 7.10: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 8: Emotions - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.1: Introduction to Emotions - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.2: What Are Emotions? - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.3: Influences on Emotional Expression - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.4: Emotions in Relationships - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.5: Managing Emotions - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.6: Guidelines for Communicating Emotions Effectively - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.7: Coping with Challenging Emotions - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.8: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 8.9: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 9: Communication Climate - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.1: Introduction to Communication Climate - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.2: Confirming and Disconfirming Climates - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 9.2.1: Confirming and Disconfirming Responses- Well, It Depends! - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.3: Context Can Play a Role in Identifying Confirming and Disconfirming Responses - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.4: Supportive versus Defensive Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.5: Skills to Support Confirming Communication Climates - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.6: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 9.7: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

◦ 10: Interpersonal Conflict - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.1: Introduction to Interpersonal Conflict - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.2: Interpersonal Conflict Defined - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.3: Conflict Goals and Outcomes - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.4: Conflict Management Style - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.5: Unproductive Conflict - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.6: Interpersonal Conflict and Social Media - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.7: Conflict Resolution - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.8: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 10.9: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

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- 11.1: Introduction to Building and Maintaining Relationships - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
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- 11.3: What Brings Us Together - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 11.3.1: Family - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 11.3.2: Friendship - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 11.3.3: Romantic - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
    - 11.3.3.1: Couple Communication - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.4: Relationship Stages - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.5: The Role of Self-Disclosure - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.6: Summary and Review - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
- 11.7: References - *CC BY-SA 4.0*

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- 12.7: References - *CC BY 4.0*

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