THE INTERPERSONAL TOOLKIT

Rob Lightfoot
Shasta College

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The Interpersonal Toolkit

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Written, Edited & Compiled

by Robb Lightfoot

based on the work

of

Pamela J. Gerber & Heidi Murphy

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1.1: Method and Madness or "How We'll Learn This Stuff"

Welcome to our together journey through interpersonal communication!

Let's touch on a few things that will help you navigate this book and the class it underpins.

First, many of the initial chapters are often found much later in other books. I do this because, frankly, why save the best for last? Seriously. There are ideas is this book that will improve your life, and let's get to some of those right off the top.

But then... why the rest?

I'm probably the wrong person to ask. I find this all interesting. But when we look at the "how," the practical, actionable behaviors we can change, we also must know the "why." Why do these changes matter? And that takes us back to the theories that ground all this.

Interpersonal communication can and often is explained in a number of ways, including game theory, systems theory, and tons of other that touch on a bit or piece of this amazing process we call communication. Some of these theories mesh nicely--don't you love it when that happens--others, sigh, do not. There are various reasons, sometimes a theory was made back in the stone-age when there was more conjecture than data. Others come from a desire to focus on different ways of approaching communication. For example, there are cultural ways that look at social groups and demographics, then there are historical approaches, and there also are insights to be gained through treating relationships with a political framework, specifically power relationships.

What I suspect you'll find is that some of these ideas resonate deeply and others will be interesting and useful, but to your go-to "way in" to this material. That's all right. The goal here is to provide you with tools (where have we heard that before?) and solid explanations of why these approaches are vetted, verified, and worthy of taking up space in your over-packed cranium.

As to my approach. I tend to use competency-based instruction, meaning you can demonstrate understanding and move on, and I realize people learn in different ways. Some like to watch videos, others read and retain better, still others want an audio-book format. No worries, you'll find some of all that here. I also like include student-centered projects where you get to dream up something that interests them and then focus on that.

My background in communications covers a wide swath of the field. I started as a newspaper reporter--if you don't know that this is, ask a grandparent--and I had to entertain and get right to the point. I then did public relations for a museum, and had to learn how to think about demographics and crafting different messages to different groups. Eventually, I was able to move into higher education as a director of forensics--which has nothing to do with dead bodies--preparing students to stand and deliver in competition. Since then, I've enjoyed many years of instruction at Shasta Community College. In addition to teaching interpersonal and intercultural communication, I taught public speaking, literature in performance, debate, and media classes. I was part of a team of educators who went overseas and assisted students in creating a video that interviewed world leaders. So, I love to make teaching materials, and I've even been known to do a bit of stand-up. My goal is to be substantial but to have fun.

Finally, this book is the compilation of the work and words of many others that have gone before and written portions of this book. Some of this material has been updated, condensed, and "punched up" by me, other parts remain largely in the words of others--until get a chance to rework them. So, you may notice differences in style and formality. But everything here is college-level and backed by current research. Each chapter has notations at the end crediting the various contributors, and I am grateful to them all for their work and their generosity in letting it be used in a free-for-students format.

This book is being continually revised, and I'm eager to get feedback from my students and colleagues as to what works and what needs to be updated or removed. You can reach me by contacting the book's web page, www.interpersonaltoolkit.com.

Robb Lightfoot

Shasta College,

Spring 2026

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SECTION OVERVIEW

1.2: Introduction to Communication

Learning Objectives

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

Successful students will be able to:

- define communication
- recognize components of the interpersonal communication process
- recognize how context can affect shared meaning
- explain seven principles of interpersonal communication
- explain three interrelated types of interpersonal competence
- identify three ways to grow interpersonal competence

You will never be the same after reading this book.

About 70% of our days are spent communicating (Alberts, Martin, & Nakayama, 2016), either face-to-face or through mediated platforms, such as email or text message.

Impressive? Yes, but, alas we often overestimate how well others understand us and how well we understand others. Bummer, yes, but take heart.

The purpose of this book is to give you proven tools and techniques to improve your odds of being understood. It's up to you to use them of course. And in addition to simple how-to advice, we ground all this with some pretty fascinating research.

Interested? Read on. It gets even better.

Even though you've communicating your entire life, you could do better. You know this in your bones. But how? All will be revealed in time.

In this chapter, we will begin our journey by studying the communication process. Context counts, and the principles of communication will guide us. The goal of this and all succeeding chapters is to have you succeed in becoming a competent communicator.

You're welcome.

1.2.1: Communication- Definition and The Communication Process

1.2.2: Shared Meaning and Context

1.2.3: Principles of Communication

1.2.4: Communication Competence

Contributors and Attributions

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1.2.1: Communication- Definition and The Communication Process

In this section, we will define communication and discuss the components of the communication process.

Definition of Communication

In this text, we define communication as symbol using and meaning making. Communicators exchange two types of symbols, verbal and/or nonverbal, and attach meaning to said symbols. For example, the meaning attached to the verbal symbol “hello” is a greeting. You can also convey this greeting by using a nonverbal symbol, such as a hand wave. However, it is important note that the meanings we attach to symbols can vary from person to person. For example, another communicator might instead interpret a hand wave as trying to get their attention.

The Communication Process

In order to better understand how verbal and nonverbal symbols are produced, interpreted, and coordinated in interactions, it is necessary to understand the components of the communication process.

Communicators:

Senders and receivers of messages in a communicative interaction. Because we are continuously sending and receiving verbal and/or nonverbal messages, we are simultaneously both a sender and receiver in interactions. For example, in a face-to-face interaction, the other communicator may be recounting an experience verbally with words and nonverbally with hand gestures, while we are sending our own nonverbal messages via eye contact, facial expressions, posture, etc.

Encoding:

The process of turning our thoughts, ideas, and feelings into verbal and/or nonverbal messages.

Decoding:

The process of interpreting and adding meaning to the verbal and/or nonverbal messages we receive.

Symbol:

A thing that represents or stands for something else. In communication, symbols can be verbal, such as words, or nonverbal, such as the ‘okay’ hand symbol.

Message:

Verbal and nonverbal symbols that represent thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Messages can be both intentional (conscious) and unintentional (unconscious). For example, we may intentionally smile at a friend but unintentionally fidget with our hands when nervous.

Channel:

The means through which the message is sent from one communicator to the other, such spoken words, a text message, or our hands to make a gesture.

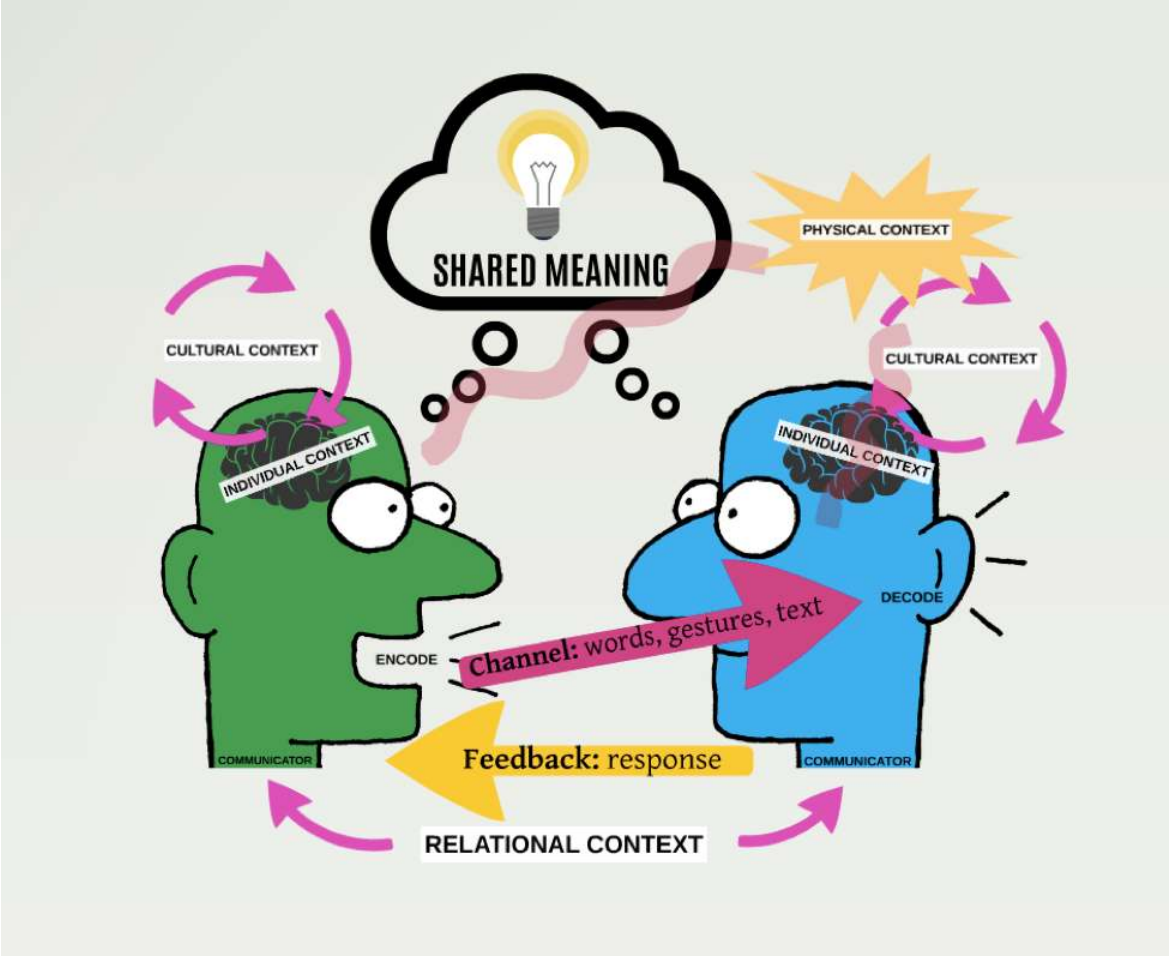
Feedback:

The verbal and nonverbal messages sent by one communicator in response to the other communicator’s message(s). For example, if someone says a word we are unfamiliar with, we may frown in response or give them a confused look to let them know we do not

understand.

Noise:

Noise is a type of interference in the communication process that results from the physical, relational, individual, and/or cultural context. Noise can occur in various places in the process, such as in the people, in the channel, in the message, and even outside the interaction.



(Image: The Communication Model. Pamela J. Gerber, CC BY NC SA 4.0)

In any interpersonal interaction, there are at least two *communicators* and both communicators are generating and creating meaning by simultaneously sending and receiving *messages*. For example, in a face-to-face interaction, we may be telling a story about our horrible day and the other person may be listening. While we are telling our story, we are *encoding* our thoughts and feelings and considering which details to leave out and which ones to talk about. Think about the last time you recapped your experience at a social gathering for a friend and then again for a family member. Did you focus on different details with each person? That's encoding. While telling the story, we may use both verbal and nonverbal *symbols* to create the content of our message. The *channel* we send our message through can be spoken words (for verbal symbols) or hand gestures (for nonverbal symbols). The other communicator, who is listening, *decodes* the message by interpreting and adding meaning to it. In addition, the listener is also simultaneously communicating messages back to us. This is called *feedback*. They may be nonverbally establishing eye contact (or not), yawning, or verbally interrupting or asking questions.

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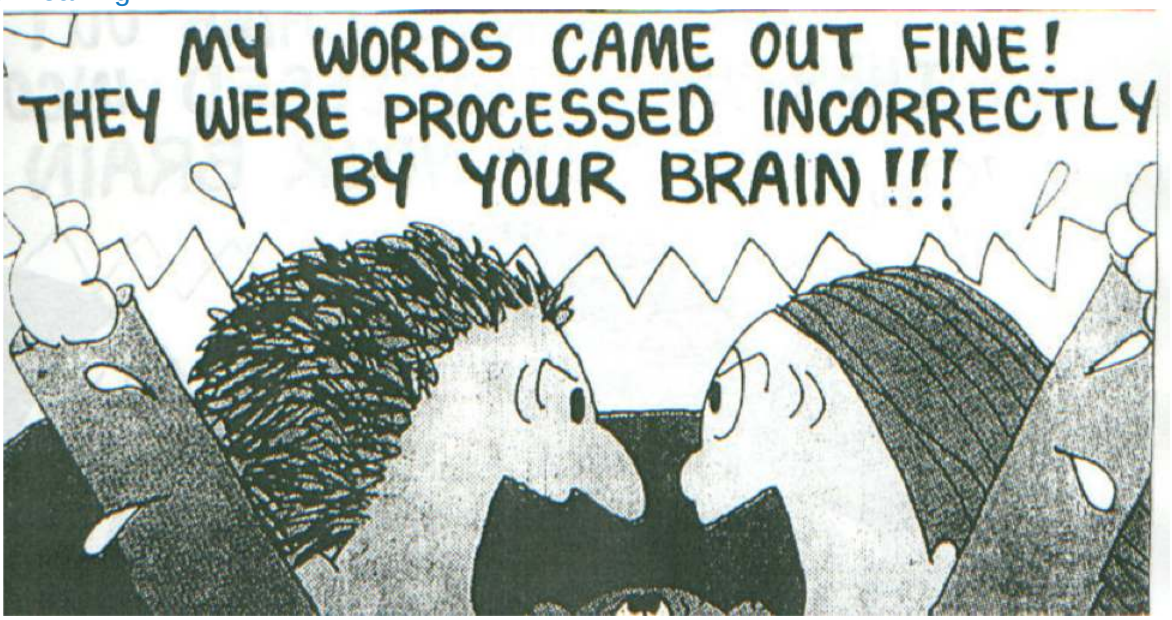
1.2.2: Shared Meaning and Context

In this section, we will discuss how we use communication to create shared meaning and how the meaning created is influenced by four types of context: physical, relational, individual, and cultural.

Shared Meaning



Shared Meaning: *While what we mean is usually very clear to us, others may decode/interpret our messages differently from what we intended resulting in a lack of shared meaning.* *(Image: © Cathy Guisewite; reprinted with permission for use in I.C.A.T)*

In communicative interactions, the goal is usually to create shared meaning. Shared meaning is achieved when the receiver attaches a similar meaning to the message that the sender meant to convey. In other words, shared meaning occurs when what was intended by one was similarly interpreted by the other, and/or what was interpreted by one was what was intended by the other. For example, let's say we were at a bar and winked at someone to express interest in them. If they likewise interpreted our wink as interest, then shared meaning has been created. However, if they interpret our wink as an eye twitch, then shared meaning has not occurred. As we know from our experiences, shared meaning is not always achieved in interactions or may require additional clarification. That is because the various factors, or context, surrounding our messages can influence how those messages are produced, interpreted and coordination. There are four main types of context to take into consideration in interpersonal interactions- physical, relational, individual, and cultural- which are discussed in the following subsections.

Physical Context

The physical context is the environment where the communication takes place, such as a bedroom, hallway, or bar. Within the environment, factors like the size of the space, the temperature, and number of other people present will shape the communication that occurs (DeVito, 2014). For example, a noisy, crowded-bar might limit communication or create external noise that interferes with your ability to hear the message. On the other hand, a quiet coffee shop with a fire might encourage communication. Physical space even operates in what we typically think of as virtual spaces, like social media. For example, Twitter limits the amount of characters in a tweet, thus messages communicated via this platform are often concise and abbreviated (DeVito, 2014).

<a href="https://unsplash.com/photos/g1Kr4Ozfoac?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText"Brooke Cagle, Unsplash" class="internal default" style="width: 725px; height: 483px;" width="725px" height="483px" src="/@api/deki/files/84679/1.2.2.png">

Physical Context: *The physical context is the environment where the communication takes place. Think about how a coffee shop or bar might encourage communication, whereas a loud concert might prevent it. Also, think about the objects present in the physical environment. Do you think technology, such as a phone or computer, could be a barrier or distraction?* *(Image: Brooke Cagle, Unsplash)*

Relational Context

The relational context pertains to both the type of relationship that we have with a person and our previous history of interactions with them. Communication norms and rules vary based on the type of relationship people have, such as whether they are a friend, family member, supervisor, significant other, etc. For example, communication norms and rules that apply to a supervisor-supervisee relationship are different from a romantic relationship. In addition, we also share a communication history consisting of previous interactions we have had with a particular person and this will influence the meaning behind messages. For example, let's say we asked our partner to pick up milk on the way home from work. When they arrive home, we might say "Did you get it?" While this might not make sense to another person viewing the interaction, "it" is understood as "the milk" based on our previous communications (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016).

Individual Context

The individual context refers to characteristics that are specifically related to us, such as our cognitive and physical abilities, personality, emotional state, internalized biases/prejudices, past experiences, and/or internal motivations. Individual characteristics are unique for every person and influence how we communicate with others (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016) and we interpret another communicator's message. For example, if we are feeling stressed and angry from a long day at work (emotional state), we might interpret someone's one-word replies as a form of intentional disrespect. When feeling calm and rested, though, we might interpret these same types of replies as a sign that they may be suffering from emotional upset.

The Individual context can also create noise that interferes with the production, reception, and interpretation of a message. For example, physiological processes, such as stuttering, can interfere with message production. Hearing problems may interfere with the reception of the message, as well as our mental state, such as being preoccupied or daydreaming. Individual conceptions of a word also create a type of semantic noise which will influence its interpretation. For example, while you innocently referred to your date's spending habits as "frugal," he was offended because he thought you meant he was "cheap."

Cultural Context

"Culture refers to the learned patterns of perceptions, values, and behaviors shared by a group of people" (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016). While culture is often used to refer to large groups of people by country (U.S. Mexico, China, etc.), we also belong to many overlapping co-cultures based on facets of our identity such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, generation, religion, etc. Communication is embedded in culture and co-culture because they dictate rules and norms for behavior in interactions. For example, take a co-cultural category such as gender identity, and think about norms for how females and males should (or should not) sit. Females will often try to take up as little space as possible when sitting and will cross their legs, whereas males will typically spread out- a phenomenon that has recently been dubbed 'manspreading.'). The reason why females sit one way and males another is because we learn norms and rules for behaviors, like sitting, walking, etc. Growing up, females are often explicitly told "cross your legs" and "don't sit with your legs open."

Often times, behaviors we think are normal are actually not innate, rather we have learned them explicitly or implicitly via the culture and co-cultures we belong to. Culture and communication are inseparably intertwined as our various co-cultural identities influence how we communicate and how others communicate with us (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016). Culture and co-culture may also create semantic noise due to variations in a particular group's use and understanding of a word or phrase. For example, take the word 'cool', one generation may use it in reference to temperature while another may use as a synonym for awesome. Co-cultures also attach experiences and emotions to particular words that another group may not, such as derogatory terms.

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1.2.3: Principles of Communication

In this section, we will be discussing how communication is used to meet needs; exists on multiple levels; is a transactional process; is situated; can be either face-to-face, mediated, or both; is continuous, intentional, and unintentional; and is irreversible.

1.2.3.1: Communication Meets Needs

In addition to using communication to exchange messages and create shared meaning, we also use it to meet the various needs we have as human beings. Communication meets four needs: physical, instrumental, relational, and identity.

Physical needs include needs that keep our bodies and minds functioning. Communication, which we most often associate with our brain, mouth, eyes, and ears, actually has many more connections to and effects on our physical body and well-being. At the most basic level, communication can alert others that our physical needs are not being met. Human beings are social creatures, which makes communication important for our survival.

Instrumental needs include needs that help us ‘get things done’ in our day-to-day lives and achieve short- and long-term goals. We all work towards short- and long-term goals every day. Fulfilling these goals is an ongoing communicative task, which means we spend much of our time communicating for instrumental needs. Some common instrumental needs include influencing others, getting information we need, or getting support (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000).

Communication meets our relational needs because it is through communication that we begin, develop, maintain, and end relationships. In order to develop a relationship, we may use nonverbal communication to assess whether someone is interested in talking to us or not, then use verbal communication to strike up a conversation. Then, through the mutual process of self-disclosure, a relationship forms over time. Once formed, we need to maintain a relationship, so we use communication to express our continued liking of someone. We can verbally say things like “You’re such a great friend.” Finally, communication or the lack of it helps us end relationships. We may communicate our deteriorating commitment to a relationship by avoiding communication with someone, verbally criticizing him or her, or explicitly ending a relationship. From checking in with relational partners by text, social media, or face-to-face, to celebrating accomplishments, communication forms the building blocks of our relationships.

Identity needs include our need to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular ways. Our identity changes as we progress through life, but communication is the primary means of establishing our identity and fulfilling our identity needs. Communication allows us to present ourselves to others in particular ways. Just as many companies, celebrities, and politicians create a public image, we present different faces in different contexts. The influential scholar Erving Goffman compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts (Goffman, 1959). For example, you may perform the role of a parent when at home with your child, but the role of supervisor when at work.

Communicating Identity: Communication allows us to express our identities, both verbally and nonverbally. Our physical appearance, such as clothing choices, grooming, accessories, and body art, enables us to present an image of ourselves to others. (Image: Timothy Paul Smith, Unsplash)

1.2.3.2: Communication Exists on Multiple Levels

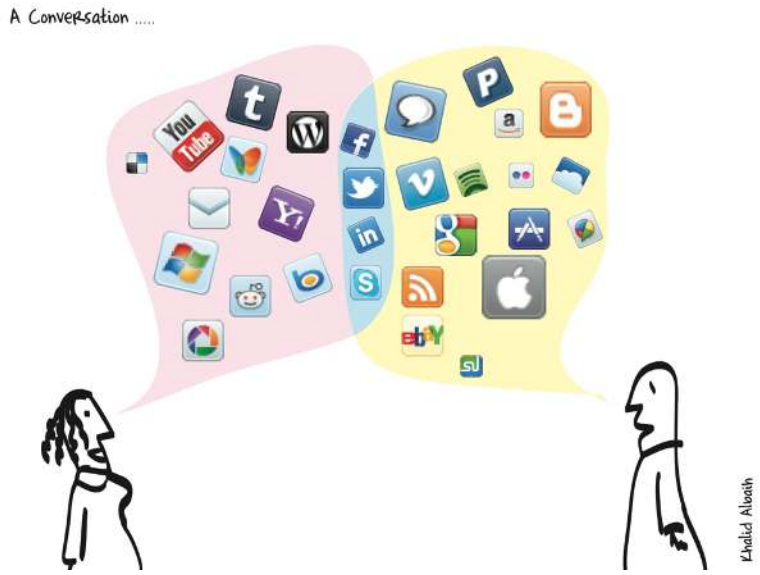
Communication operates on two distinct levels: there is a content dimension and a relational dimension. The content dimension is the meaning of the actual message itself, whereas the relational dimension expresses "how you feel about the other person: whether you like or dislike the other person, feel in control or subordinate, feel comfortable or anxious, and so on" (Adler, 2017, p. 18). For example, consider the difference between someone saying "I'm busy tonight" in an annoyed tone versus "Sorry babe, I'm busy tonight" in an apologetic tone. Both messages mean the same thing on the content dimension, but express different feelings on the relational dimension. There may be times when the content dimension is all that matters; likewise, there are other times where more importance is placed on the relational dimension (Adler & Proctor, 2017).

1.2.3.3: Communication is Transactional

Communication is also a transactional process, this means that: 1) Each communicator is simultaneously a sender and receiver of messages. 2) Meaning is co-created in the interaction by both communicators. 3) Communication is an ongoing process and previous interactions between communicators influence current interactions. And since communication is ongoing, 4) current interactions likewise will influence future interactions and will either affirm or modify perceptions of the other and the relationship (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016).

1.2.3.4: Communication can be Face-to-Face, Mediated, or Both

Communicative interactions can take place face-to-face using verbal symbols, such as words, and nonverbal symbols, such as gestures. They can also take place through a mediated platform, such as a smoke signal, email, or text message. Sometimes, it can even be a combination of face-to-face and mediated, such as when a speaker is presenting to an audience with a microphone. How the interaction takes place will affect how messages are produced, interpreted, and coordinated.



Communication Channel: Our communicative interactions can take place face-to-face and through mediated-platforms, such as text message or social media. The channel we use to communicate is important as there are nuances that coincide with each which influence meaning. (Image: Khalid Albaih,CC BY 2.0)

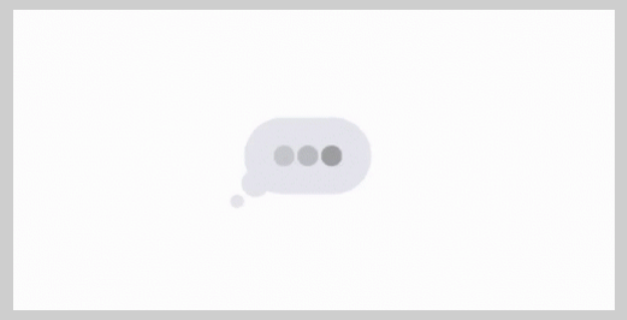
1.2.3.5: Communication is Situated

All communication is situated, which means that communication occurs within a specific setting "that affects how the messages are produced, interpreted, and coordinated" (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016, p. 16). Not only do the contextual factors mentioned in Section 2 influence communication, but communication is also situated historically, economically, socially, and politically. For example, some current political rhetoric surrounding Mexican immigrants paints them as criminals and rapists; this can affect how others perceive and communicate (or avoid communicating) with people that fall into this group.

1.2.3.6: Communication is Continuous, Intentional, & Unintentional

In all communicative interactions, we are continuously sending messages, whether they are verbal or nonverbal, and whether it is intentional (conscious), or unintentional (unconscious). Although communication may seem like a perceptible and deliberate process, we often send messages without conscious thought. In fact, there are so many messages being sent at one time that many of them may not even be received.

Additionally, not all behavior is consciously encoded. For example, we might have had a rough night with little sleep, which us yawn more often than we normally would. We are not deliberately and consciously encoding the yawn, rather our body does it without forethought. However, our yawn may unintentionally communicate "boredom" to the other person in the interaction. In contrast, a we may consciously decide to communicate a particular message (encoding) to another person if their story has gone on a very long time and we have somewhere else to go. We may decide in our heads that we need a way out of the conversation and consider a yawn and a glance toward the door to be an effective way to hint that we have to leave.



Mediated-Communication: In mediated communication interactions, such as those that take place through text message, we are still simultaneously senders and receivers of messages- even when we don't respond to a message. Through this channel, a lack of response still can be interpreted a variety of ways by the other communicator. They may think we are busy or intentionally ignoring their texts.

1.2.3.7: Communication is Irreversible

Once something is communicated, it is irreversible and cannot be un-communicated. While we "may try to qualify, negate, or somehow reduce the effects… once it has been sent and received, the message itself cannot be reversed" (DeVito, 2014, p. 25). Have you ever put your foot in your mouth and said something you wish you could take back? You may have even quickly said "I take it back," but the impression created in the mind of the other cannot be erased. While we can apologize, there can still be consequences of the original message. This principle is also important to note in mediated-communication that takes place through platforms such as email or a text message, as your interactions can also be saved and shared with others.

Communication is Irreversible: The principle communication is irreversible reminds us that there are no 'take backs' when it comes to what we say and do. This is important to keep in mind when communicating through technology, such as phones, as what we say can be saved and easily shared with others. (Image: Derick Anies, Unsplash)

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1.2.4: Communication Competence

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this text is to increase communication competence. Although the word ‘competent’ is somewhat subjective and the definition can vary from person to person, we conceptualize communication competence as being comprised of three interrelated components. In order to be a competent communicator, our communication needs to be effective, contextual, and reflective. In this section, we discuss each one of these components and how we can improve communication competence.

Effective Communication

Effective communication pertains to two things: achieving our goals and creating (or not creating) shared meaning in interactions. As communicators, we have a variety of goals in interactions, ranging from trivial to important. Goals may include things like passing time, entertainment, getting or giving information, persuading another person, etc. (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016). Usually, it can be pretty easy to measure whether or not we have effectively achieved our goal(s). For example, let’s say our goal is to persuade our roommate to do the dishes. If they do the dishes, then we have achieved our goal. If they do not do the dishes, then we have not achieved our goal.

Effective communication also includes creating shared meaning in interactions by encoding our messages in a way that will enable them to be easily understood by the other communicator. For example, we may use concrete phrases such as “the blue book on the counter” versus “that thing over there.” Although, sometimes we may purposely choose to use messages that are ambiguous. For example, if a friend were to ask us, “What do you think of this dress?” we may respond by saying “interesting” to avoid giving a direct answer. Because we are not always conscious of encoding and decoding, and because others can decode both our intentional and unintentional messages in a variety of ways (which we may not mean), in this text we will draw more attention to our cognitive processes in the interest of improving shared meaning and communication effectiveness.

Contextual Communication

Context and communication are inseparably intertwined. In order for our communication to be effective, it must take context into consideration. As previously mentioned, context plays an important role in how messages are produced, interpreted, and coordinated. Different contexts have different norms and rules for what is considered acceptable (or unacceptable) and appropriate (or inappropriate) behavior. In other words, norms and rules exists for what we should or can do, and what we shouldn’t or can’t do. A bar (physical context) has different norms and rules for communication than a classroom. The norms and rules for interacting with a stranger versus a close friend (relational context) are vastly different. Contexts overlap, so the norms and rules are dynamic, constantly shifting, and may be hard for us to discern at times. For example, it may be acceptable to kiss someone we are romantically involved with, but not a stranger (relational context). It may be acceptable to kiss we are dating at the park, but not in the workplace (physical context). And depending on our (co)culture (cultural context), it may not be considered acceptable to be affectionate with someone we are dating in any public place. Because communication contexts are intertwined, it is important for us to be aware of the ways contextual nuances influence and shape interactions.

In addition, contexts are also embedded with ethics, or what is considered right or wrong in terms of actions and behaviors. Ethics exists on individual, co-cultural, and cultural levels. For example, we may be part of a religion (co-culture) that considers lying, regardless of the context, to be wrong. However, as an individual we may think it is okay to lie in certain situations, such as for safety reasons or to protect our privacy. As competent communicators, we must become adept at identifying contextual nuances and adapting our behavior to the context. We will cover the specifics of contextual influences throughout the book. Adding this knowledge to your understanding of interpersonal communication will help you make mindful choices that work for you and your relationships.

Reflective Communication

The final component of a communication competence is reflective communication, which means becoming more consciously aware and mindful. Being reflective means actively considering our own communication and analyzing the long and short-term effects of our behavior(s) on our identity, other people, and our relationships.

Identity:

Since communication meets identity needs, both verbal and nonverbal communication is used to manage our identity and present an image of ourselves based on how we want others to perceive us. Identity is contextual and fluid and can be communicated intentionally and unintentionally. For example, let's say in a professional context we want others to perceive us as being confident and intelligent. We might intentionally communicate this nonverbally by looking at people in the eye and verbally by using big words. However, we may also unintentionally engage in behaviors that communicate a different identity to others than the one we what. For example, a brief interaction in the workplace in which we yell angrily at a colleague may cause those who witness this interaction to perceive us as being immature or difficult to work with. Because of this, it is important to analyze how even small interactions contribute to other's perceptions of who they think we are.

Others:

Since interpersonal communication involves at least two people, the way we communicate impacts those around us, whether it be a stranger, friend, or partner. Even a brief encounter with store clerk could have the potential to impact that person positively or negatively. For example, if we were to give a grocery cashier a compliment by saying that we like their haircut, that might make them feel good. Likewise, if we were to insult them by saying their haircut is unflattering, it could have the opposite effect. While some may argue that people are ultimately accountable for their own feelings and should take responsibility for them, competent communicators engage in perspective-taking and are cognizant of the potential interpretations of messages and the effects of these messages on others.

Relationships:

Finally, the way we communicate can have both short-term and long-terms effects on our relationships, both personal and professional. Getting into a superficial argument in an intimate relationship may have the short-term effect that other person not talking to us for the rest of the day. However, if in that argument we said something extremely hurtful, even if we apologized later, that other person may never forget what we said, and it may come up over and over again and cause long-term issues in the relationship. In relationships, our immediate communication and how we communicate with others over periods of time can be key to building healthy and mutually satisfactory relationships or unhealthy relationships that eventually dissolve.

Improving Communication Competence

Three key things can help improve communication competence: **knowledge**, **skills**, and **motivation**.

Knowledge

We can improve our communication competence by learning communication concepts, principles, characteristics, and theories. This knowledge enables us to better understand ourselves and others. Specifically, knowledge of communication processes helps us develop self-awareness of our goals and abilities; investigate the whys behind the choices we make and the way we interact with others, consider how our experiences and expectations influence the meaning we assign to a given situation, event, person, comment, behavior, etc., and consider how others' experiences and expectations influence the meaning they assign to situations, events, person, comments, behaviors, etc.

Skills

In addition to increasing our knowledge of communication, in this text we will learn concrete skills and techniques to improve communication effectiveness. Stewart (2012) uses the metaphor of inhaling and exhaling to describe the interpersonal communication process. Skills such as listening will fall under the inhaling category. We can consciously improve our inner cognitive processing by taking in information from others and the outside world. Skills such as assertiveness will fall under the exhale category as we consciously strategize about what messages we want to put out in the world, paying attention to how they might be perceived.

The skills we learn can be thought of as 'communication tools.' Communication tools are a lot like carpenters' tools. We all have different levels of skill ability and a different range of tool usage. Some of us may have fairly full toolbox of tools that we already are able to skillfully use, while others don't. A skilled carpenter is able to purposefully select from a variety of different tools and use them skillfully to build, maintain and repair structures. A skilled communicator is able to purposefully select from a variety of different tools and use them skillfully to build, maintain and repair relationships.

(Image: used according to Pixabay license)

Communication skills are a lot like carpenter's tools. We can select which ones we want to use, depending on the situation and our goals.

Note that both the carpenter and communicator are able to choose purposefully. Purposeful choices require a key cognitive skill—that of awareness. Improved awareness is the key to increasing any type of competence. Awareness involves being conscious of our own current strengths and limitations, bringing directed attention to the contextual knowledge we gain throughout through studying communication, and being mindful of our interpersonal communication goals. With such an awareness we can ultimately direct ourselves to make effective choices that benefit our lives. The skill of awareness can be developed, practiced, and improved. Our journey to improve awareness can begin with a better understanding of motivation.

Motivation

Finally, in order to increase our communication competence, we have to want to become a better communicator. It is not enough to learn knowledge and skills, we have to see a reason to apply them as well. Seeing this reason requires not only awareness but a certain type of mindset. This mindset requires a couple of considerations. First, it is helpful for us to realize that things such as our emotional intelligence and communication abilities are not fixed. Dweck (2007) reminds us that people who have a "growth" mindset (rather than a "fixed" mindset) believe they can learn, change, and grow. Neuroscience studies show that if we believe we can improve, motivation is likely to follow, as well as increased achievement.

A similar concept is called locus of control. Your locus of control is the extent to which you believe you have power over the events in your life. Those people with an internal locus of control believe that success or failure is related to their own doing. Those with an external locus of control are less clear about their own role in the way their lives play out, and are more likely to chalk outcomes up to luck or chance. You can work to shape your internal locus in a way that affects your motivation. We don't need to stay stuck in automatic scripts, routine patterns, and the same old outcomes. We are humans and thus have "agency," which is the ability to act with free will. We have the capacity to exercise control over our own thought processes, emotions and behaviors, an understanding of which will likely increase our motivation to improve competence.

Sometimes reflecting on who we are, how we communicate, and why we engage in certain behaviors can make us feel uncomfortable. Other times, because certain new skills may differ from how we normally communicate, they can seem disingenuous or feel awkward to use. We may also fear how the new communication patterns will be interpreted by others. However, learning knowledge and skills will enable us to better understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. We can maintain and increase our motivation by considering this potential and periodically reflecting on positive effects that result from

improved communication. For example, by improving our communication we may increase our relationship satisfaction, become more successful in the workplace, and better accomplish our goals across a variety of contexts.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

1.3: Culture and Communication

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

Learning Objectives

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

Successful students will be able to

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

1.3.1: Defining Culture and Intercultural Communication

1.3.2: Eight Cultural Variables

1.3.3: Culture and Communication- A Dialectical Approach and Five Dialectics

1.3.4: Communication Competence

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1.3.1: Defining Culture and Intercultural Communication

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

Definition of Culture

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

For the purposes of exploring the communicative aspects of culture, we will define culture as the ongoing negotiation of learned and patterned beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors among members of a group. Unpacking the definition, we can see that culture shouldn't be conceptualized as stable and unchanging. Culture is "negotiated," because it is dynamic, and cultural changes can be traced and analyzed to better understand why our society is the way it is. The definition also points out that culture is learned, which accounts for the importance of socializing institutions like family, school, peers, and the media.

Culture is patterned in that there are recognizable widespread similarities among people within a cultural group. There is also deviation from and resistance to those patterns by individuals and subgroups within a culture, which is why cultural patterns change over time. Lastly, this definition acknowledges that culture influences our beliefs about what is true and false, our attitudes including our likes and dislikes, our values regarding what is right and wrong, and our behaviors.

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

Culture, Co-culture, and Intercultural Communication

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

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

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

(Image: Piers NYE, CC BY NC ND 2.0)

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

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1.3.2: Eight Cultural Variables

In this section, we will address eight cultural variables: human nature, time, action, communication, space, power, individualism/collectivism, and competitiveness/cooperativeness. These major variables offer a simple frame of reference for examining culture and understanding its major characteristics.

Human Nature

Cultures may also hold one of three beliefs pertaining to human nature. The first is the belief that people are basically “good”. In these cultures, people will generally believe that you can put the right person in the right position and empower him/ her to perform. The second belief is that people are basically “bad.” These types of cultures put an emphasis on control and monitoring of people. The final belief is that people are a mixture of “good” and “bad.” In these cultures, people believe personal development is possible, and investment in training and professional development is highly desirable.

Time

A culture’s use of time can communicate differences more profoundly than words. Three orientations to time can be seen across cultures. The first is past-orientation, where high value is placed on continuance of traditions. In these cultures, changes and plans are judged according to their fit with history and customs. The second is present-orientation, which is a short-term orientation aimed at quick results. In these cultures, changes and plans are judged on fast pay-off. Finally, future-orientation includes a willingness to trade short-term gains for long-term results. In these cultures, changes and plans are judged on expected future benefit.

In addition, we also see differences in terms of single-focused and multi-focused views of on how time is used and adhered to. Single-focused, also referred to monochronic, uses of time place high concentration on one task or issue and people are committed to schedules. Multiple-focused, or polychronic, uses of time emphasize on multiple tasks, with a priority on relationship building rather than on meeting deadlines.

Action

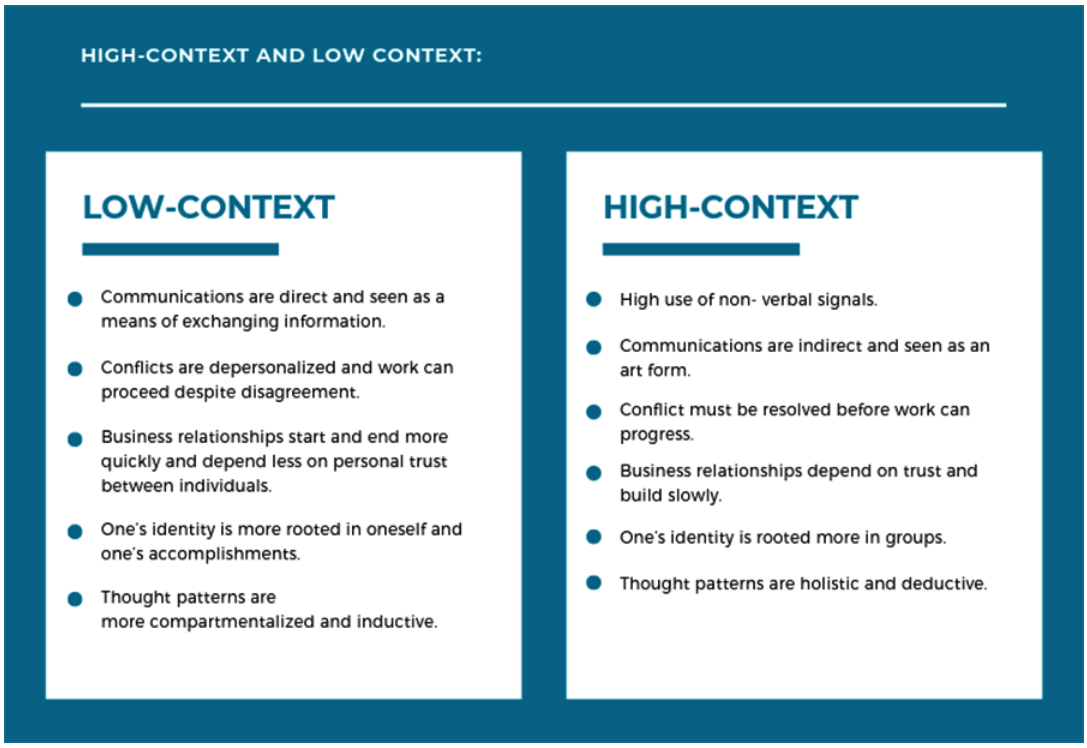
Cultures, like individuals, can be oriented towards activity or passivity. The first type is a doing culture, where value is placed on action, accomplishments, achieving personal goals and improving one’s standard of living. These cultures follow external standards of measurement and are motivated by promotions, raises, bonuses and recognition.

Conversely, in being cultures, value is placed on working for the moment, release from stress, and experience rather than accomplishment. These cultures put emphasis on job satisfaction and are not motivated by promises of future rewards.

Context and Formality

There are two variables that exist across cultures- high-context/low-context and formal/informal- that deal more directly with the way we send messages back and forth when we interact. The first variable pertains to how much meaning is conveyed through the context surrounding verbal communication. In low-context cultures, information is given primarily in words and meaning is expressed explicitly. In other words, you are expected to say what you mean and mean what you say. Conversely in high-context cultures, information is transmitted not just in words but also through a variety of contexts, such as voice tone, body language, facial expressions, eye contact, speech patterns, use of silence, past interactions, status, common friends, etc. Members of high-context cultures might not say something directly as they may assume other group members will understand the indirect meaning.

The second pertains to how important it is to formally or informally follow rules for self-presentation and for behavior in organizations and social situations. In formal-communication cultures, importance is given to following protocol and social customs. In informal-communication cultures, people feel more comfortable doing business in a more casual way without lots of rituals and ceremonies.



Space

Cultures also differ in regard to how they perceive and use physical spaces, specifically private and public space. In private-space cultures, personal space is valued, and clear borders and boundaries exist between one space and another. Ownership of space is important. Doors are to be closed, and knocking before entering is expected. In public-space cultures, the boundaries between personal and public spaces are weaker and more flexible. Space is shared rather than owned. Doors are to be kept open, and access is free.

Power Distance

The power variable pertains to how much the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. In high-power distance cultures, also referred to as hierarchy cultures, inequality is accepted. Structures are defined and differences in status are seen as normal. This type of culture satisfies a need for dependence and security. In professional settings, members of high-power distance cultures usually prefer groups where clear roles are assigned and there is a designated leader.

In low-power distance cultures, also referred to as equality cultures, inequality is thought to be unsatisfactory. While it may be unavoidable, it is considered correct to minimize it through legal, political, and economic means. In professional settings, members of low-power distance cultures do not accept that a manager has a given right to greater power and all member can participate in decision making.

(Image: CCO 1.0)

Individualism vs Collectivism: *The slogan "If my smoking bothers you- don't breathe" highlights the difference between individualistic and collectivist orientations. Individualistic cultures place a high concern on the self, whereas collectivist cultures are concerned about the group. In a collectivist cultures, people usually do not engage in behaviors that would bother others, such as smoking or playing loud disruptive music.*

Individualism and collectivism pertain to the extent to which countries elevate the role of the individual over the group. In individualistic cultures, the bonds between individual members are relatively loose. People are independent and expected to take care of themselves, or at most, the nuclear family. Guilt and fear of loss of self-respect are central to social control. The "I" predominates over the "We." Individual identity is key, and speaking one's mind is a sign of honesty. Individualist cultures emphasize individual expression and personal responsibility.

In collectivist cultures, individual interests are placed second to group interests. Groups protect their members in exchange for loyalty and obedience. Social control is based on the fear of losing face and the possibility of shame. Identity is therefore based on the social network to which a person belongs. Harmony, rather than speaking one's mind, is a key value. Laws and rights differ from group to group, and political power is held by interest groups.

Competitiveness and Cooperativeness

Competitiveness pertains to how much achievement and success dominate over caring for others and quality of life. In competitive cultures, achievement, assertiveness and competition are reinforced. In these cultures, social and gender roles also tend to be distinct. Men are expected to be assertive, tough, and driven by material success. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be modest, nurturing, and concerned mainly with the quality of life. When competitiveness is valued, the culture is predominantly materialistic, with an emphasis on assertiveness and acquisition of money, property, goods, etc. High value is placed on ambition, decisiveness, performance, speed and size.

Cooperativeness characterizes cultures in which social and gender roles overlap. Everyone is expected to demonstrate modesty, nurturing, and a concern for the quality of life. Being sympathetic to one's fellow human beings is important with an emphasis on relationships. High value is placed on consensus and intuition. In a competitive culture, people live to work. In a cooperative culture, people work to live.

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1.3.3: Culture and Communication- A Dialectical Approach and Five Dialectics

In this section, we will discuss what a dialectical approach entails and examine five dialectics to help us better understand the link between culture and communication: Cultural-Individual, Personal-Contextual, Differences-Similarities, Static-Dynamic, and Privileges/Disadvantages.

A Dialectical Approach

Communication across cultures and co-cultures is complicated, messy, and at times contradictory. Therefore, it is not always easy to conceptualize or study. Taking a dialectical approach allows us to capture the dynamism of intercultural communication. A dialectic is a relationship between two opposing concepts that constantly push and pull one another (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). To put it another way, thinking dialectically helps us realize that our experiences often occur in between two different phenomena. This perspective is especially useful for communication because—when we think dialectically—we think relationally. This means we look at the relationship between aspects of communication rather than viewing them in isolation. Intercultural communication occurs as a dynamic in-betweenness that, while connected to the individuals in an encounter, goes beyond the individuals, creating something unique.

Holding a dialectical perspective may be challenging for some Westerners, as it asks us to hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously, which goes against much of what we are taught in our formal education. Thinking dialectically helps us see the complexity in culture and identity because it doesn't allow for dichotomies. Dichotomies are dualistic ways of thinking that highlight opposites, reducing the ability to see gradations that exist in between concepts. Dichotomies such as good/evil, wrong/right, objective/subjective, male/female, in-group/out-group, black/white, and so on form the basis of much of our thoughts on ethics, culture, and general philosophy, but this isn't the only way of thinking (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Many Eastern cultures acknowledge that the world isn't dualistic. Rather, they accept as part of their reality that things that seem opposite are actually interdependent and complement each other.

A dialectical approach is useful in studying communication because it gets us out of our comfortable and familiar ways of thinking. Since so much of understanding culture and identity is understanding ourselves, having an unfamiliar lens through which to view culture can offer us insights that our familiar lenses will not. Also, as these dialectics will iterate, culture and communication are complex systems that intersect with and diverge from many contexts. A better understanding of all these dialectics helps us think more critically and communicate more competently in and with the world around us.

Cultural-Individual Dialectic

The cultural-individual dialectic captures the interplay between patterned behaviors learned from a cultural group and individual behaviors that may be variations on or counter to those of the larger culture. This dialectic is useful because it helps us account for exceptions to cultural norms. For example, the United States is said to be a low-context culture, which means that we value verbal communication as our primary, meaning-rich form of communication. Conversely, Japan is said to be a high-context culture, which means they often look for nonverbal clues like tone, silence, or what is not said for meaning.

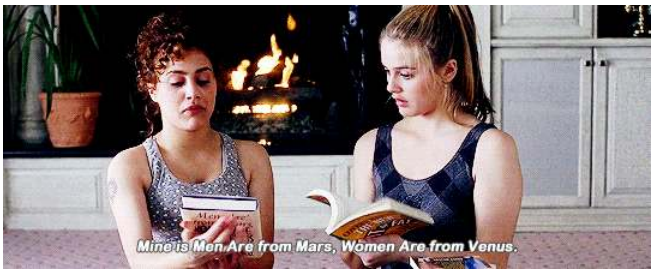
However, you can find people in the United States who intentionally put more meaning into how they say things rather than what they say, perhaps because they are not as comfortable speaking directly what's on their mind. We often do this in situations where we may hurt someone's feelings or damage a relationship. Does that mean we come from a high-context culture? Does the Japanese man who speaks more than is socially acceptable come from a low-context culture? The answer to both questions is no. Neither the behaviors of a small percentage of individuals nor occasional situational choices constitute a cultural pattern.

Personal-Contextual Dialectic

The personal-contextual dialectic highlights the connection between our personal patterns of and preferences for communicating and how various contexts influence the personal. In some cases, our communication patterns and preferences will stay the same across many contexts. In other cases, a context shift may lead us to alter our communication and adapt. For example, an American businessperson may prefer to communicate with their employees in an informal and laid-back manner. When they are promoted to manage a department in their company's office in Malaysia, they may again prefer to communicate with their new Malaysian employees the same way they did with those in the United States.

In the United States, the accepted norm is that communication in work contexts is more formal than in personal contexts. However, we also know that individual managers often adapt these expectations to suit their own personal tastes. This type of managerial discretion would likely not go over as well in Malaysia where there is a greater emphasis put on power distance (Hofstede, 1991). So, while the American manager may not know to adapt to the new context unless they have a high degree of intercultural communication competence, Malaysian managers would realize that this is an instance where the context likely influences communication more than personal preferences.

Differences-Similarities Dialectic



Differences/Similarities: Statements like "men are from Mars and women are from Venus" create group differences by stereotyping. In addition, these socially and culturally constructed categories ignore and silence those whose body, identity, and/or performance do not align with their assigned gender.

The differences-similarities dialectic allows us to examine how we are simultaneously similar to and different from others. It's easy to fall into a view of intercultural communication as "other oriented" and set up dichotomies between "us" and "them." When we over focus on differences, we can end up polarizing groups that actually have commonalities. When we over focus on similarities, we essentialize, or reduce/ overlook important variations within a group. This tendency is evident in most of the popular, and some of the academic, conversations regarding "gender differences." The book *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus* makes it seem like men and women aren't even species that hail from the same planet. The media is quick to include a blurb from a research study indicating again how men and women are "wired" to communicate differently. However, gender is a social and cultural construction in which groups of people are categorized as either being a man or women. This essentializes and stereotypes people by focusing on the ways in which they are different, rather than similar, and ignores and silences those whose body, identity, and/or performance do not align with their assigned gender.

Static-Dynamic Dialectic

The static-dynamic dialectic suggests that culture and communication change over time yet often appear to be and are experienced as stable. Although it is true that our cultural beliefs and practices are rooted in the past, cultural categories that most of us assume to be stable, like race and gender, have changed dramatically in just the past fifty years. Some cultural values remain relatively consistent over time, which allows us to make some generalizations about a culture. For example, cultures have different orientations to time. The Chinese have a longer-term orientation to time than do Europeans (Lustig & Koester, 2006). This is evidenced in something that dates back as far as astrology. The Chinese zodiac is done annually (The Year of the Monkey, etc.), while European astrology was organized by month (Taurus, etc.). While this cultural orientation to time has been around for generations, as China becomes more Westernized in terms of technology, business, and commerce, it could also adopt some views on time that are more short term.

Privileges-Disadvantages Dialectic

The privileges-disadvantages dialectic captures the complex interrelation of unearned, systemic advantages and disadvantages that operate among our various co-cultural identities. As was discussed earlier, there exists both the dominant culture and co-cultures; our co-cultural groups have certain privileges and/or disadvantages. To understand this dialectic, we must view these identities through a lens of intersectionality, which asks us to acknowledge that we each have multiple cultural and co-cultural memberships that intersect with each other. Because our co-cultural memberships are complex, no one is completely privileged and no one is completely disadvantaged. For example, while we may think of a white, heterosexual man as being very privileged, they may also have a disability that leaves them without the able-bodied privilege that a Latina woman has. This is often a difficult dialectic for many to understand, because we are quick to point out exceptions that we think challenge this notion. For example, many people

like to point out Oprah Winfrey as a powerful black woman. While she is definitely now quite privileged despite her disadvantaged identities, her trajectory isn't the norm. When we view privilege and disadvantage at the cultural level, we cannot let individual exceptions distract from the systemic and institutionalized ways in which some people are disadvantaged while others are privileged.

Group Privilege

Depending on the co-culture you belong to, you may benefit from certain privileges or advantages. According to Peggy McIntosh, privilege is like an invisible knapsack of advantages that some people carry around. They are invisible because they are often not recognized, seen as normative (i.e., "that's just the way things are"), seen as universal (i.e., "everyone has them"), or used unconsciously. Below is a list of some of the privileges McIntosh identifies associated with white skin color. Can you think of others that are associated with other positions of privilege (such as gender, sexual orientation, or ableness)?

- When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color, who constitute the world's majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
- If a traffic cop pulls me over, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race
- I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color that more or less match my skin.

Full article: Peggy McIntosh's **"White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack."**

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1.3.4: Communication Competence

In this section, we address how to improve intercultural communication competence, discuss the value of switching your communication code based on context, and reflect on intercultural relationships.

Effective Communication: Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) pertains to your ability to appropriately and effectively communicate in cultural and co-cultural contexts. Below are five key guidelines for improving your ICC.

1. Observe the situation without making judgments. When communicating with other (co)cultures, our first judgment about ”those people” is often mistaken and/or based on stereotypes. Observing, non-judgmentally, can help us to understand others’ mindset and minimize biases and preconceptions.
2. Tolerate ambiguity. When communicating across (co)cultures, there are many situations that are ambiguous and make us feel uncomfortable. Patience and perseverance are very important qualities of the competent communicator.
3. Practice perception-flipping. All of us behave as we do because we believe our ways are valid and, often, superior. Before criticizing someone else’s behavior, we should try flipping our perception to see the other person’s point of view. In other words, put yourself in their shoes.
4. Reframe our questions. If we ask ourselves ”How can they be so rude?” or ”Why are they so insensitive?!” we are expressing a negative assumption about the other person. Reframing these questions to, ”What is the reason behind their behavior?” prevents us from getting trapped in our own assumptions and allows us to explore the other’s frame of reference without bias.
5. Cultivate motivation and view communication as an opportunity for personal growth and development. This is especially important for members of dominant groups who often have more power and privilege in situations. This power creates an imbalance and it is often the members of nondominant groups who are expected to conform and adapt to the behaviors of the dominant group. Regardless of our co-cultural groups and identities, we should all develop motivation to be more competent communicators.

Contextual Communication: Communication Codes

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Communication Codes: *Communication codes are guidelines, rules, and norms for how to interact and behave in communicative interactions, based on context. For example, think about what is considered the 'norm' in U.S. America for greeting someone. A handshake? A hug? How does the type of greeting change based on context? For example, if you are greeting a friend you might hug them or do a fist bump. But if you were at a business meeting, you would likely give someone a handshake. Think about all of the 'rules' for handshakes: How long do you shake someone's hand? How far apart should you stand? Where should look? Does the picture above seem to be following these rules- why or why not?*

Remember that communication is contextual, and the cultural context is an important aspect of communicative interactions. Differences in culture and co-culture inform beliefs, values, attitudes, and thinking, and likewise inform behaviors and 'norms' in our communicative interactions. Because of this, it is important to understand that there are communication codes operating in any given interaction. A code is a socially constructed, historically transmitted, system of symbols, premises, rules, and meanings pertaining to communicative conduct (Covarrubias, 2002). In other words, a code is a set of rules associated with conduct, a guideline for what is acceptable (or not acceptable) in particular situations, and for what a person should (or should not) do.

The purpose of a code is for members and individuals in a cultural/co-cultural group to communicate effectively so that they understand one another and behave in appropriate ways. Culture and co-culture inform the communicative system—or communication code—that is operating in a given interaction. Since one group may have a set of shared symbols that differs from another group, the groups may attribute different meanings to the codes. To be a competent communicator, we need to observe the cultural and co-cultural context to determine what codes should be employed to create shared meaning in an interaction.

Reflective Communication: Intercultural Relationships

Relationships are frequently formed between people with different cultural identities, and may include friends, romantic partners, family, and coworkers. These relationships have both benefits and challenges. For example, some of the benefits include increasing cultural knowledge, challenging previously held stereotypes, and learning new skills (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Intercultural relationships also present challenges, however. The dialectics discussed earlier affect our relationships. The similarities-differences dialectic in particular may present challenges to relationship formation (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). While differences between

people's cultural identities may be obvious, it takes some effort and reflection to uncover commonalities that can form the basis of a relationship. Perceived differences in general also create anxiety and uncertainty. Negative stereotypes may also hinder progress toward relational development, especially if the individuals are not open to adjusting their preexisting beliefs. However, by reflecting on similarities and differences, and understanding the values and dialectics mentioned in this chapter, tensions can begin to balance out, and uncertainty and anxiety can lessen.

Ethnocentrism

When engaging in intercultural communication, it is important to avoid ethnocentrism, which is the belief that your culture and your way of doing things is superior. When we do this, we view our position as normal and right and evaluate all other cultural systems against our own. Ethnocentrism shows up in small and large ways: the WWII Nazi's elevation of the Aryan race and the corresponding killing of Jews, Gypsies, gays and lesbians, and other non-Aryan groups is one of the most horrific ethnocentric acts in history. However, ethnocentrism shows up in small and seemingly unconscious ways as well. In U.S. American culture, if you decided to serve dog meat as an appetizer at your cocktail party you would probable disgust your guests and the police might even arrest you because the consumption of dog meat is not culturally acceptable. However, in China "it is neither rare nor unusual" to consume dog meat (Wingfield-Hayes). In the Czech Republic, the traditional Christmas dinner is carp and potato salad. Imagine how your U.S. family might react if you told them you were serving carp and potato salad for Christmas. In the Czech Republic, it is a beautiful tradition, but in America, it might not receive a warm welcome. Our cultural background influences every aspect of our lives from the food we consume to which classroom curriculum is emphasized over others.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Interpersonal Relationships

The English Poet, John Donne, once stated "No man is an island (Donne, 1964)," which is an apt statement when applied to communication, as interacting with others is an important (and inevitable) part of our existence. In our lives, we will be a part of thousands of relationships, both in personal and professional contexts, ranging from superficial to intimate. While it takes between 90 seconds and 4 minutes for someone to decide if they like another person (BBC, 2014), developing and maintaining relationships is more complicated and time consuming. In this chapter, we will cover four stages of relationships, from beginning to end, and provide communication theories that address the how, why, and who of relationship formation. We will also provide strategies for repairing relationships, discuss the contextual nuances of self-disclosure, and reflect on ways to manage tensions that arise in our relationships.

Learning Objectives

- What is the nature of the different types and stages of interpersonal relationships, and why are they important?
- How can we work to maintain interpersonal relationships in increase satisfaction?

Successful students will be able to:

- define interpersonal relationship
- identify characteristics of interpersonal relationships
- describe four stages of intimate relationships
- recognize and differentiate between various communication theories that help to explain relational stages
- identify relational dialectic maintenance strategies
- recognize contextual influences on self-disclosure
- recognize the influence of technology use on relational satisfaction

2.1: Definition and Characteristics of Relationships
2.2: Stages of Relationships
2.3: Communication Competence

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2.1: Definition and Characteristics of Relationships

In this section, we will define what a relationship is and describe three important characteristics.

Defining 'Relationship'

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A relationship can be defined as the expectations that two people have for each other based on their previous pattern of interactions (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Throughout our lives, we will be involved in a variety of relationships ranging from superficial to intimate. Intimate relationships involve physical and/or emotional intimacy and are characterized by friendship, trust, and love (platonic or romantic). Intimate relationships can include friendships, romantic relationships, and/or familial relationships.

Characteristics of Relationships

In addition to ranging from intimate to superficial, relationships can be characterized as impersonal or personal, voluntary or involuntary, and platonic or romantic (Verderber & Verderber, 2013).

- **Impersonal and Personal:**
  An impersonal relationship is formed with another person in order to satisfy a need or goal. For example, when we interact with a cashier at a grocery store, we are typically engaging in an impersonal relationship. Conversely, a personal relationship "is one in which people care about each other, share at least some personal information, and meet at least some of each other's interpersonal needs. (Verderber & Verderber, 2013, p. 163)."
- **Voluntary and Involuntary:**
  A voluntary relationship is one in which we choose the person who we interact with, such as in the case of friendships. Conversely, involuntary relationships are imposed upon us and we do not have the choice of whether or not to interact with that person (Jackson-Dwyer, 2014). For example, when we are paired up with a stranger in class to complete a project, then we would be in an involuntary relationship with them.

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The relationships we form can be voluntary or involuntary. This means sometimes we choose who we interact with, while others times we don't, such as in the case of doing small work for a class, training, or seminar.

- **Platonic and Romantic:**
  A platonic relationship is a 'friendly' relationship where there is an absence of romance and sex. A romantic relationship occurs when people act on said sexual attraction and/or form a mutual emotional romantic attachment.

When describing relationships, it is important to note that relationships are dynamic, and that these characterizations can and do change. For example, we might initially be in an involuntary relationship with someone because we were paired up to work on a project, but then find out we share similar interests and form a voluntary friendship after the project ends. Or two people may start off as platonic and then become involved in a romantic relationship (or vice versa).

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2.2: Stages of Relationships

In intimate relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, communication is key, as it is through communication that we begin, develop, maintain, and dissolve relationships. In this section, we will describe four stages of intimate relationships and present communication theories that help us better understand our communicative interactions during these stages.

Beginning Stage

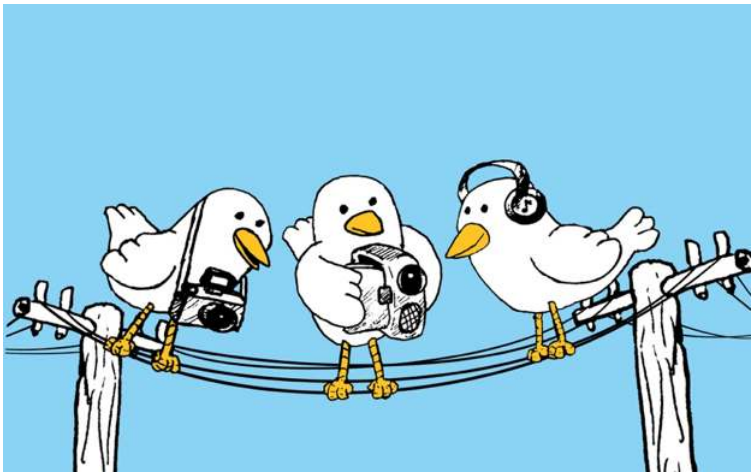
In order to form a relationship with another person, we first must come into contact with them, whether it be face-to-face or through a mediated platform, such as a social networking site, dating site, or an app. In the beginning stage of the relationships, we interact with the other person to increase our knowledge about them and decide if we want to continue forming the relationship. During this stage, two communication theories can help us understand why we form relationships: Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Attraction Theory.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Uncertainty Reduction Theory, also known as Initial Interaction Theory, can help us better understand the communicative behaviors involved in first interactions. The theory posits that, when interacting, people need information about the other party in order to reduce their uncertainty. Uncertainty is a sense of "not knowing" that people find to be unpleasant and seek to reduce through interpersonal communication. The theory identifies two types of uncertainty: cognitive and behavioral. Cognitive uncertainty pertains to the level of uncertainty associated with our thoughts (beliefs and attitudes) of each other in the situation.[4] Behavioral uncertainty is related to people's actions and whether or not they fit our expectations for what we consider to be "normal" or not. Behavior that is outside of acceptable norms may increase uncertainty and reduce the chances for future interaction.

There are three types of strategies people may use to seek information about someone: passive (observing from afar), active (indirectly seeking information about the other), and interactive (seeking a direct exchange with the other). In gaining this information people are better able to predict the other's behavior and resulting actions, all of which are crucial in the development of any relationship. The initial interaction of strangers can also be broken down into individual stages—the entry stage (when people engage in behavioral norms), the personal stage (when people tend to explore the other's beliefs, attitudes, morals, etc.), and the exit stage

Attraction Theory



(Image: James Nash, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Attraction Theory posits that three factors influence our attraction to others: their similarity to us, their proximity, and their interpersonal attractiveness (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016).

- **Similarity:**
  Have you ever heard the phrase 'birds of a feather flock together'? Similarity is often an important determinant in whether or not we find someone else attractive. Research has shown that people are more strongly attracted to others who are similar in physical appearance, beliefs, attitudes, and who share similar co-cultural identities and backgrounds. Conversely, differences in

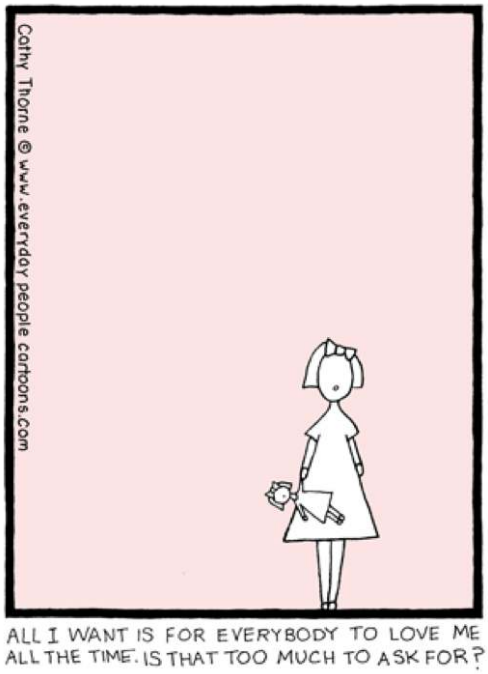
these categories can lead to dislike or avoidance of others (Berkowitz, 1974; Singh & Ho, 2000; Bryne, London, & Reeves, 1968).

- **Proximity:**
  Proximity, how geographically and physically close we are to another person, also plays a role in relationship formation (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016). In order to form a relationship with someone, we first have to come into contact with them. Historically, it was difficult to meet others outside of our geographical area. However, technology has transformed how we meet and carry out relationships since we are no longer constrained by geographic barriers. From social networking sites to mobile apps, we now have the ability to connect with anyone, anytime, anywhere. Mediated platforms have become a way to connect to others to start both romantic and platonic relationships because it is easier to connect with those who share similar interests and have similar relationship goals (such as hooking up, long-term relationship, non-monogamous relationship, etc). Still, when it comes to relationships, such as friendships, proximity is still one of the biggest determinants. Generally speaking, we are more likely to form relationships with people we actually meet face-to-face through, for example, being in the same class or working at the same place.
- **Interpersonal Attractiveness:**
  We communicate more with people we are attracted to (McCroskey & McCain, 1974, p. 261). Interpersonal attractiveness encompasses three components: physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and task attractiveness (MrCroskey, McCrowskey, & Richmond, 2006). Physical attractiveness is the degree to which we find another person's physical features to be pleasing. Social attractiveness encompasses characteristics such as friendliness, charisma, and warmth; whereas task attractiveness pertains to attraction based on another's abilities, skills, and/or talents. (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016, p. 192).

Developing Stage

The next stage of relationships is the development stage during which our communication and interactions with the other person increases. To help us better understand this stage, four communication theories explain the who, why, and how of relationship development, as well as some differences between face-to-face and mediated-communication relationship development. The theories are: Interpersonal Needs Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Social Penetration Theory, and Hyperpersonal Communication Theory.

Interpersonal Needs Theory



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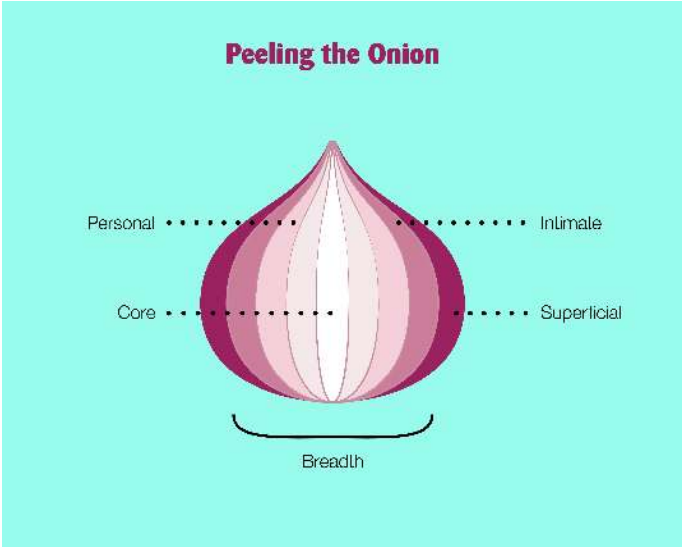
Interpersonal Needs Theory posits that we are likely to develop relationships with other people if they meet one or more of three basic interpersonal need. These three need operate on a continuum and are influenced by context (Schutz, W., 1966).

- **Affection:**
  People have a need for affection and appreciation. This need can be fulfilled through family, friendships, and romantic relationships. and Some people may crave many intimate relationships while other may choose to limit them.
- **Control:**
  The need for control pertains to our ability to influence people, events, and their environments. Just like with affection, some people crave less control of people, events, and their environments while others crave more. For example, in a friendship, one person may want to be the one who always decides where to hang out and the other may be okay with that. However, the need for control can also vary by individual levels of motivation and context. For example, in a friendship we may place less importance on who calls the shots, while in the workplace we may seek greater influence on others and events.
- **Belonging:**
  Finally, people desire to be around other people. Similar to our other two needs, the need for belonging exists on a continuum, can vary between individuals and is based on context. Some people may limit their interactions or choose smaller groups while others may crave more frequent interactions and attention.

Social Penetration Theory



Social Penetration Theory uses an onion as an analogy to highlight that self-disclosure is a gradual process, similar to peeling away the layers from an onion.

A key to understanding Social Penetration Theory is to first understand self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is the process of revealing information about yourself to others that is not readily known by them, and it plays a key role in the formation of relationships. As we get to know someone we engage in a reciprocal process of self-disclosure. The amount of self-disclosure changes in breadth and depth as the relationship develops. Depth pertains to how personal the information is where as breath refers to the range of topics that are discussed. Degrees of self-disclosure range from relatively safe (revealing your hobbies or musical preferences) to more personal topics (illuminating fears, dreams for the future, or fantasies). Typically, as relationships deepen and trust is established, self-disclosure increases in both breadth and depth. We tend to disclose facts about ourselves first (I am a Biology major), then move towards opinions (I feel the war is wrong), and finally disclose feelings (I'm sad that you said that).

An important aspect of self-disclosure is the rule of reciprocity. This rule states that self-disclosure between two people works best in a back and forth fashion. When you tell someone something personal, you probably expect them to do the same. When one person reveals more than another, there can be an imbalance in the relationship because the one who self discloses more may feel vulnerable as a result of sharing more personal information.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory essentially entails a weighing of the costs and rewards in a given relationship (Harvey & Wenzel, 2006). Rewards are outcomes that we get from a relationship that benefit us in some way, such as companionship and/or social support. Costs can range from granting favors to providing emotional support. When we do not receive the outcomes or rewards that we think we deserve, then we may negatively evaluate the relationship, or at least a given exchange or moment in the relationship, and view ourselves as being under-benefited, which could lead to the eventual termination of the relationship. In an equitable relationship, costs and rewards are balanced, which usually leads to a positive evaluation of the relationship and satisfaction. Ultimately, relationships are more likely to succeed when there is satisfaction and commitment, meaning that we are pleased in a relationship intrinsically or by the rewards we receive.

Hyperpersonal Communication Theory

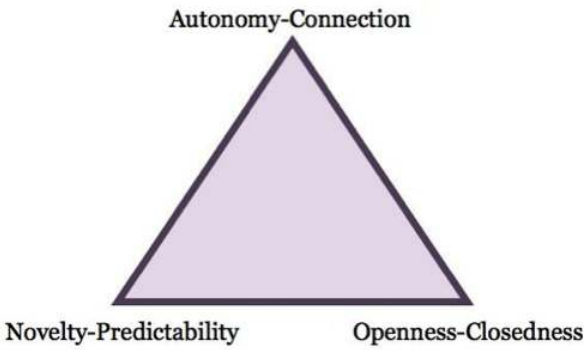
Hyperpersonal Communication Theory examines how mediated-communication enables communicative advantages and how this can lead to intense, overly intimate, and idealized relationships. People who meet online have a better opportunity to make a favorable impression on the other. This is because we can decide which information we would like to share about ourselves by controlling our self-presentations online (O'Sullivan, 2002), giving us the power to disclose only our 'good' traits. According to Walther, we have the ability to present ourselves in highly strategic and highly positive ways. The asynchronous nature of mediated-communication also allows us to think about texts or emails before sending them. Further, prior to sending messages, we can rewrite them for clarity, sense, and relevancy. Online asynchronous experiences allow for "optimal and desirable" communication, ensuring that the messages are of high quality.

Additionally, because mediated communication enables us to selectively present ourselves, the exchange lacks 'contrary cues,'. In face-to-face interactions, we would pay attention to not just what the person says, but also what they do. For example, the other person interacting rudely with a server over dinner would influence our overall impression of that person. However, we don't necessarily get to see how a person acts with others and the world around them in mediated-communication relationships, which can lead to an idealized view of that other person that may not live up to reality.

Maintaining Stage

The next stage of relationships is the maintaining stage where the relationship is in a prolonged or continued state of relatively mutual satisfaction for both parties. During this stage, Relational Dialectics Theory can help us better understand how relationships are sustained.

Relational Dialectics



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Three relational dialectics influence our interpersonal relationships and understanding their role is key to maintaining healthy relationships.

One way we can better understand our personal relationships is by understanding the notion of relational dialectics. Baxter (1988) describes three relational dialectics that are constantly at play in interpersonal relationships: autonomy-connection, novelty-predictability, and openness-closedness. Essentially, they are a continuum of needs for each participant in a relationship that must be negotiated by those involved.

- **Autonomy-Connection:**
  refers to our need to have close connection with others as well as our need to have our own space and identity. We may miss our romantic partner when they are away but simultaneously enjoy and cherish that alone time. When you first enter a romantic relationship, you probably want to be around the other person as much as possible. As the relationship grows, you likely begin to desire fulfilling your need for autonomy, or alone time. In every relationship, each person must balance how much time to spend with the other, versus how much time to spend alone.
- **Novelty-Predictability:**
  is the idea that we desire predictability as well as spontaneity in our relationships. In every relationship, we take comfort in a certain level of routine as a way of knowing what we can count on the other person in the relationship. Such predictability provides a sense of comfort and security. However, it requires balance with novelty to avoid boredom. An example of balance might be friends who get together every Saturday for brunch, but make a commitment to always try new restaurants each week.
- **Openness-Closedness:**
  refers to the desire to be open and honest with others while at the same time not wanting to reveal everything about yourself to someone else. One's desire for privacy does not mean they are shutting out others. It is a normal human need. We tend to disclose the most personal information to those with whom we have the closest relationships. However, even these people do not know everything about us. As the old saying goes, "We all have skeletons in our closet," and that's okay.

It's important to note that these dialectics are dynamic and that our needs change over time. At times, we may even hold what appear to be contradictory needs. Relationship dissatisfaction is caused when our needs are not being met in a relationship, or when the other person falls on the opposite end of the continuum. For example, if you fall higher on the autonomy end of the continuum and your romantic partner falls higher on the connection end, you may end up feeling smothered or think that the other person is 'clingy.' Conversely, the other person may feel like you never want to spend time with them and thus are not as interested in the relationship as they are. Because negative feelings and miscommunication can arise as a result of dialectical imbalances, managing dialectics in a relationship is key. In the Communication Competence section of this chapter, we will discuss some techniques for how to better manage dialectics in relationships to increase relationship satisfaction.

Deteriorating Stage

In the deteriorating stage, relationships start to decline and may eventually be terminated. Typically, in this stage, people may start to avoid the other person, decrease communication with them, or engage in increased conflict (Verderber & Verderber, 2013). During this stage, Knapp's Stages of Relational Interaction can help us better understand how relationships deteriorate and/or terminate. While the theory covers both stages of coming together and stages of coming apart, we only focus here on the latter: Differentiating, Circumscribing, Stagnating, Avoiding, and Terminating.

Differentiating

Differentiating is a process of disengaging or uncoupling; differences between the relationship partners are emphasized, and what was thought to be similar begins to disintegrate. Instead of working together, partners quickly begin to become more individualistic in their attitudes. Conflict is a common form of communication during this stage and oftentimes it acts as a way to test how much the other can tolerate something that may threaten the relationship.

Circumscribing

To circumscribe means to draw a line around something or put a boundary around it (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2011). So when someone circumscribes, communication decreases and certain areas or subjects become restricted as individuals verbally close themselves off from each other. They may say things like "I don't want to talk about that anymore" or "You mind your business and I'll mind mine."

Stagnating

When a relationship has stagnated, it has come to a standstill, as individuals basically wait for the relationship to end. Outward communication may be avoided, but internal communication may be frequent. The relational conflict flaw of mindreading takes place as a person's internal thoughts lead them to avoid communication. For example, a person may think, "There's no need to bring this up again, because I know exactly how he'll react!" This stage can be prolonged in some relationships, and some people

may linger here because they don't know how to end the relationship, want to avoid potential pain from termination, or may still hope to rekindle the spark that started the relationship.

Avoiding

In this stage, as the name implies, when people engage in avoidance, they try to physically avoid each other. 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. When there is communication, it is often marked by antagonism or unfriendliness ("I just don't want to see or talk to you").[4] In addition to not spending time with one another, they both begin to avoid the other person's needs and start to focus solely on themselves.

Terminating

The terminating of a relationship can occur shortly after a relationship begins or after twenty-year relational history has been established. Termination can result from outside circumstances such as geographic separation or internal factors such as changing values or personalities that lead to a weakening of the bond. Termination exchanges involve some typical communicative elements and may begin with a summary message that recaps the relationship and provides a reason for the termination (e.g., "We've had some ups and downs over our three years together, but I'm getting ready to go to college, and I want to be free to explore who I am."). The summary message may be followed by a distance message that further communicates the relational drift that has occurred (e.g., "We've really grown apart over the past year"), which may be followed by a disassociation message that prepares people to be apart by projecting what happens after the relationship ends (e.g., "I know you'll do fine without me. You can use this time to explore your options and figure out if you want to go to college too or not.").

Finally, there is often a message regarding the possibility for future communication in the relationship (e.g., "I think it would be best if we don't see each other for the first few months, but text me if you want to.") (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). However, people also often engage in negative termination strategies such as yelling, blaming the other person, or ghosting, which is "the practice of suddenly ending all contact with a person without explanation (Dictionary.com)."

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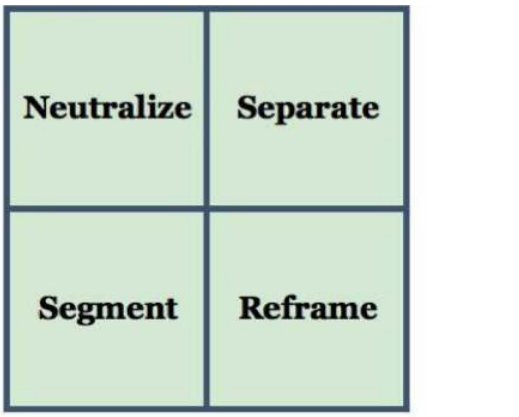
2.3: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover techniques for managing relational dialectics, address contextual nuances surrounding self-disclosure, and discuss the importance of reflecting on how technology impacts others and our relationships

Effective Communication: Managing Relational Dialectics



4 Ways to Handle Dialectical Tension

(Image: Spaynton, CC BY-SA 4.0)

In section 8.2.3.1, we discussed the three dialectics that influence relationship dynamics: autonomy-connection, novelty-predictability, and openness-closedness. Understanding that these three dialectical tensions are at play in all relationships is a first step in understanding how our relationships work. Since the way we communicate our needs (or don't communicate them) and respond to the needs of others can have both a short and long-term impact on our relationships, we need to learn how to manage dialectics to enhance relationship satisfaction. Depending on the relational context (the nature of the relationship between two people), couples, friends, or family members may have different strategies for managing these tensions in an attempt to meet the needs of each person. Baxter (1988) identifies four ways we can handle dialectical tensions.

- **Neutralize:**
  The first option is to neutralize the extremes of the dialectical tensions. Here, individuals compromise, creating a solution where neither person's need (such as novelty or predictability) is fully satisfied. Individual needs may be different and never fully realized. For example, if one person seeks a great deal of autonomy, and the other person in the relationship seeks a great deal of connection, neutralization would not make it possible for either person to have their desires met. Instead, each person might feel like they are not getting quite enough of their particular need met.
- **Separation:**
  The second option is separation. This is when someone favors one end of the dialectical continuum and ignores the other, or alternates between the extremes. For example, a couple in a long-distance relationship in which each person works in a different city may decide to live apart during the week (autonomy) and be together on the weekends (connection). In this sense, they are alternating between the extremes by being completely alone during the week, yet completely together on the weekends.
- **Segmentation:**
  When people decide to divide their lives into spheres they are practicing segmentation. For example, your extended family may be very close and choose to spend religious holidays together. However, members of your extended family might reserve other special days such as birthdays for celebrating with friends. This approach divides needs according to the different segments of your life.
- **Reframing:**
  The final option for dealing with these tensions is a creative technique called reframing. This strategy requires creativity not only in managing the tensions, but also in understanding how they work in the relationship. For example, the two ends of the dialectic are not viewed as opposing or contradictory at all. Instead, they are understood as supporting the other need, as well as

the relationship itself. A couple who does not live together, for example, may agree to spend two nights of the week alone or with friends as a sign of their autonomy. The time spent alone or with others may be viewed less as a compromise and more as an opportunity to develop themselves and their own interests so that they are better able to share themselves with their partner and enhance their connection.

Relational dialectics are a natural part of our relationships, and there is no one right way to understand and manage dialectical tensions since every relationship is unique. However, to always satisfy one need and ignore the other may be a sign of trouble in the relationship (Baxter, 1988). Therefore it is important to reflect on both our dialectics needs and that of the other and to remember that we have a lot of choice, freedom, and creativity in how we work them out with our relational partners. It is also important to remember that dialectical tensions are negotiated differently in each relationship. The ways we manage dialectical tensions contributes greatly to the communication climate in relationships.

Contextual Communication: Self-Disclosure and Context

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It's important to pay attention to contextual nuances when disclosing information to others. For example, the physical context- where an interaction takes place- can either facilitate or hinder disclosure.

While the mutual disclosure of information can bring people together and strengthen a relationship, inappropriately disclosing information—either to the wrong person, at the wrong place, or at the wrong time—can have negative effects. Below we discuss some contextual nuances to keep in mind when disclosing (or not disclosing) to others.

- **Physical Context:**
  The physical context in which an interaction takes places can influence the types of disclosure. A quiet coffee shop or the privacy of a home may facilitate disclosure while crowded, public places may not. Disclosing sensitive information in the wrong place can have negative results. For example, disclosing to your long-time romantic partner in a public place (such as a dinner party) that you cheated on them may not go over so well. However, other times you may elect to disclosure in a public place, such as when you fear a violent reaction. Physical context can also encompass virtual spaces, such as social networking sites. Some sites, such as Facebook or Twitter encourage the disclosing of private and personal information. However, if using a social networking site like LinkedIn, you should keep your disclosures professional. When disclosing in online platforms, also keep in mind that what you disclose can never be reversed and may be shared with others.

- **Relational Context:**
  The relational context, or the relationship between two people, is important to consider when deciding what we should or should not disclose. Generally speaking, personal and private matters are appropriate to discuss in ongoing intimate personal relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships. However, if you are in a professional relationship, such as those that take place in the workplace, you should typically avoid disclosing overly personal information (unless you are also in an intimate relationship with that individual). When in professional contexts, avoid discussing overly personal information and/or

asking others to disclose overly personal information about themselves. When choosing to disclose information to another, consider both the potential positive and negative effects of said disclosure. If you are in an intimate personal relationship, disclosure can enhance the relationship and bring people closer. However, when you disclose information to another, it can potentially have negative repercussions if that person shares your private information, thoughts, or feelings with others. For example, if you disclose to a coworker that you dislike another coworker, they may tell that person, which could in turn cause unwanted workplace conflict.

- **Individual Context:**
  Individual context and internal motivations will also influence self-disclosure. Some people may disclose more information than others or do so more quickly while others may take more time or be more hesitant. Some people may be motivated to get something off their chest or be seeking advice, support, or validation. However, others may feel vulnerable in disclosing information or fear of a negative reaction and/or rejection. Our past experiences may also influence how much we disclose and who we disclose to. For example, if you have had negative experiences in the past with friends sharing your private information with others, you may be more hesitant to disclose in the future.

- **Cultural/Co-Cultural Context:**
  Cultural rules and norms exist for disclosure in terms of the privacy and openness surrounding particular topics and what is considered acceptable to disclose (or not), depending on other contextual nuances such as physical location and/or the type of relationship. For example, some cultures value directness and openness while others value privacy. Co-cultural factors also influence disclosures. In particular, gender differences for males and females exist in terms of topics considered okay to talk about and amount of disclosure. Females are typically socialized to disclose more than males, especially when it comes to topics such as feelings and emotions.

Reflective Communication: Technology and Relationships

Technology has vastly reshaped how we form relationships and communicate with others, whether it be strangers, friends, family, or romantic partners. Reflecting on how we use technology is important, as it may affect others and contribute to relationship satisfaction (or dissatisfaction).

- **Others:**
  Technology enables anonymity and provides a screen for us to ‘hide’ behind, which can be both good and bad. One advantage is that we may be able to say and communicate things to others that we might not otherwise be able to in face-to-face interactions because of anxiety, fear, and/or vulnerability. However, the disadvantage is that when we can’t see the other person immediately in front of us, we may have less empathy and may say things that we would never say face-to-face. Anonymity can make people less accountable and responsible for their actions. Bullying and flaming (verbally attacking others) are common online and can have adverse effects on others. Taken to the extreme, cyber-bullying has even impacted others to the point where they have attempted suicide or taken their own lives. So, while technology may empower us in some ways, we should keep in mind the famous quote “With great power comes great responsibility.”

- **Relationships:**
  Finally, technology can both positively and negatively affect the satisfaction of relationships during the beginning, developing, and maintaining stages. As an advantage, we can use technology to begin, develop, and maintain relationships with those who are not in our geographic location. This is beneficial for families, friendships, and romantic relationships where people are separated by distance. For example, if you are in a romantic relationship with a member of the military who gets stationed for three months overseas, you can stay in contact and still maintain a level of closeness that may have been more difficult to achieve in the past. Even little text messages asking about someone’s day or saying “I love you” can help increase overall relationship satisfaction by letting others know we are thinking of them. However, if used too much in relationships, technology may have a negative impact. It’s common to go out to restaurant or bar and observe couples or groups staring at their phone screens versus interacting with each other. Over time, these types of behaviors may lead to people not feeling as close in a relationship and/or relationship deterioration. In addition, the things we post online may impact a relationship. For example, let’s say you told a friend you were staying in for the night but then ended up going to a party. While at the party another friend takes and posts a photo of you on Facebook. When your other friend sees this, it may result in hurt feelings and/or a fight.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Communication Climate

Do you feel organized or chaotic in a small workspace? Are you more productive when the sun is shining than when it's gray and cloudy outside? Just as factors like physical space and the weather impact us, communication climate can influence our interpersonal interactions. In this chapter, we will define and explore the basic principles of communication climate. Then, we will lay out some strategies for identifying, achieving and responding to communication climate. Lastly, we will explore how context influences perceptions of climate, and address reasons communication climate is important in interpersonal relationships and in society.

Learning Objectives

- How does communication shape the relational and emotional tone of a relationship or interaction?
- How do we communicate in ways that effectively achieve a desired climate?
- How can we effectively respond to climate behaviors that are undesirable?

Successful students will be able to:

- define communication climate.
- identify five principles of communication climate.
- recognize examples of messages that contribute to warm and cold climates.
- demonstrate three skills that help improve climate effectiveness
- recognize how three types of contextual nuances influence our needs
- explain how mindfulness plays a role in helping us achieve a desired climate

3.1: Defining Communication Climate
3.2: Principles of Communication Climate
3.3: Frameworks for Identifying Types of Climate Messages
3.4: Communication Competence

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3.1: Defining Communication Climate

In this section, we will define what communication climate is.

Communication Climate

Communication climate is the “overall feeling or emotional mood between people” (Wood, 2018). For example, you may prefer hanging out with one of your friends because they make you laugh and dread hanging out with another because they constantly criticize you. The first friend may create a positive, or warm climate, whereas the other friend may create a negative, or cold climate. The communication climate is created because of other people and the type of communication that takes place during an interaction. You probably have relationships or interpersonal interactions that feel cloudy, stormy, calm, sunny, warm, or cold. Throughout this chapter, we will focus on the latter two as an overarching analogy for understanding communication climate and look at how the emotional “temperature” of relationships or interactions is affected by behaviors that are often perceived (and felt) as “warm” and “cold.” For example, messages that convey respect and acceptance tend to feel warm and those that convey hostility and judgment tend to feel cold. Warm behaviors tend to meet human social needs, and cold behaviors do not. The knowledge we gain in this chapter will help us better understand why some relationships and interactions feel warmer than others. Understanding climate also helps us communicate more purposefully in order to better meet our interpersonal goals.

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3.2: Principles of Communication Climate

In this section we will discuss the five principles of communication climate: messages contain relational subtexts that can be felt; climate is conveyed through words, action, and non-action; climate is perceived; climate is determined by social and relational needs; and relational messages are multi-leveled.

Messages contain relational subtexts that can be felt

In addition to generating and perceiving meaning in communicative interactions, we also subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) convey and perceive the way we feel about each other. As we discussed in Chapter 1: Introduction to Communication, almost all messages operate on two levels: content and relational. As a reminder, the content is the substance of what's being communicated (the what of the message). The relational dimension isn't the actual thing being discussed and instead can reveal something about the relational dynamic existing between you and the other person (the who of the message). We can think of it as a kind of subtext, an underlying (or hidden) message that says something about how the parties feel toward one another. For example, when deciding on a TV program, your partner might politely suggest, "I'd like to watch this show, how about you?" The content of the message is about what they want to watch. The relational subtext is subtle but suggests your partner values your input and wants to share decision-making control. The climate of this interaction is likely to be neutral or warm. However, consider how the relational subtext changes if your partners insists (with a raised voice and a glare): "We are WATCHING THIS SHOW tonight!" The content is still about what they want to watch. But what is the subtext now? In addition to what your partner wants to watch, they seem to be sending a relational message of dominance, control and potential disrespect for your needs and wants. You might be hearing an additional message of "I don't care about you," which is likely to feel cold, eliciting a negative emotional reaction such as defensiveness or sadness.

Climate is conveyed through words, action, and non-action

Relational subtexts can be conveyed through direct words and actions. A student making a complaint to an instructor can be worded with respect, as in "Would you have a few minutes after class to discuss my grade?" or without, as in "I can't believe you gave me such a crappy grade, and we need to talk about it right after class!" We can often find more of the relational meaning in the accompanying and more indirect nonverbals—in the way something is said or done. For example, two of your coworkers might use the exact same words to make a request of you, but the tone, emphasis, and facial expression will change the relational meaning, which influences the way you feel. The words "can you get this done by Friday" will convey different levels of respect and control depending upon the nonverbal emphasis, tone, and facial expressions paired with the verbal message. For example, the request can be made in a questioning tone versus a frustrated or condescending one. Additionally, a relational subtext might also be perceived by what is NOT said or done. For example, one coworker adds a "thanks" or a "please" and the other doesn't. Or, one coworker shows up to your birthday coffee meetup and the other doesn't. What do these non-actions suggest to you about the other person's feelings or attitude towards you? Consider for a moment some past messages (and non-messages) that felt warm or cold to you.

Climate is perceived

Relational meanings are not inherent in the messages themselves. They are not literal, and they are not facts. The subtext of any communicative message is in the eye of the beholder. The relational meaning can be received in ways that were unintentional. Additionally, like content messages, relational messages can be influenced by what we attend to and by our expectations (as discussed in Chapter 3: The Perception Process and Perception of Others). They also stand out more if they contrast with what you normally expect or prefer.

You might interpret your partner's insistence on watching a certain show to mean they are bossy. However, your partner might have perceived you to be the bossy one and is attempting to regain loss of decision control. Control could be exerted because doing so is the accepted relational dynamic between you, or it could be a frustrated reaction to a frequent loss of decision control, which they want to regain. Here, it needs to be noted that the relational message someone hears at any given time is a perception and doesn't necessarily mean the message received was the message intended. Meanings will depend on who is delivering it and in what context. Cultural and co-cultural context will also impact the way a message is interpreted, which we will discuss later in the Communication Competence section of this chapter. In addition, later in this chapter we will discuss metacommunication, a way to address climate and relational subtexts in interactions in order to clarify intent and increase shared meaning.

Climate is determined by social and relational needs

While relational messages can potentially show up in dozens of different communicative forms, they generally fall into categories that align with specific types of human social needs that vary from person to person and situation to situation. In addition to physical needs, such as food and water, human beings have social and relational needs that can have negative consequences if ignored. Negative consequences can range from frustrating work days to actual death (in cases of infants not getting human touch and attention and the elderly who suffer in isolation). Scholars categorize social needs in many different ways. Recall the discussion of Interpersonal Needs Theory from Chapter 8: Interpersonal Relationships, which explained that we are more likely to develop relationships with people who meet one or more of three basic interpersonal needs: affection, control, and belonging. We want to be liked or loved. We want to be able to influence others and our own environments (at least somewhat). We want to feel included. Each need exists on a continuum from low to high, with some people needing only a little of one and more of another. The level of need also varies by context, with some situations calling for more affection (e.g., romantic relationships) and others calling for less (e.g., workplace).

Another framework for categorizing needs comes from a nonviolent communication approach used by mediators, negotiators, therapists, and businesses across the world. This approach focuses on compassion and collaboration and categorizes human needs with more detail and scope. For example, categories include freedom, connection, community, play, integrity, honesty, peace, and the needs to matter and be understood. When people from all cultures and all walks of life all over the world are asked “Do you need these to thrive?” the answer—with small nuances—is always “yes” (Sofer, 2018).

During interactions, we detect on some level whether the person with whom we are communicating is meeting a particular need, such as the need for respect. We may not really be aware, on a conscious level, of why we feel cold toward a coworker. But, it is likely that the coworker’s jokes, eyerolls, and criticisms toward you feel like a relational message of inferiority or disrespect. In this case, your unmet need for dignity, competence, respect or belonging may be contributing to your cold reaction toward this person. When other people’s messages don’t meet our needs in whole or in part, we tend to have an emotionally cold reaction. When messages do meet our needs, we tend to feel warm.

Consider how needs may be met (or not met) in when you are in a disagreement of opinion with someone else. For example, needs may be met if we feel heard by the other and not met if we feel disrespected when we present our opinion. In a different example, consider all the different ways you could request that someone turn the music down. You could do both of these things with undertones (relational subtexts) of superiority, anger, dominance, ridicule, coldness, distance, etc. Or you could do them with warmth, equality, playfulness, shared control, respect, trust, etc.

Relational messages are multi-leveled

On one level, we want to feel that our social needs are met and we hope that others in our lives will meet them through their communication, at least in part. On another level, though, we are concerned with how we are perceived; the self-image we convey to others is important to us. We want it to be apparent to others that we belong, matter, are respected, understood, competent, and in control of ourselves. Some messages carry relational subtexts that harm or threaten our self-image, while others confirm and validate it.

To help better understand this second level of relational subtexts, let’s discuss the concept of “face needs.” Face refers to our self-image when communicating with others (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Lim and Bowers, 1991). It does not refer to our physical face, but more of an unsaid portrayal of the image that we want to project to others, and sometimes even to ourselves. Most of us are probably unaware of the fact that we are frequently negotiating this face as we interact with others. However, on some level, whether we are aware of it or not, many of our social needs relate to the way we want to be perceived by others. Specifically, we not only want to feel included in particular groups, we also want to be seen as someone who belongs. We want to feel capable and competent, but we also want others to think we are capable and competent. We want to experience a certain level of autonomy, but we also want to be seen as free from the imposition of others. Communication subtexts such as disrespect tend to threaten our face needs, while other behaviors such as the right amount of recognition support them. Once again, we can apply the temperature analogy here. When we perceive our “face” to be threatened, we may feel cold. When our face needs are honored, we may feel warm. Effective communication sometimes requires a delicate dance that involves addressing, maintaining, and restoring our own face and that of others simultaneously.

Because both our own needs and the needs of others play an important role in communication climate, throughout the rest of this chapter we will utilize the following three general categories when we refer to social needs that can be addressed through communication:

- Need for Connection: belonging, inclusion, acceptance, warmth, kindness
- Need for Freedom: autonomy, control, freedom from imposition by others, space, privacy
- Need for Meaning: competence, capability, dignity, worthiness, respect, to matter, to be understood

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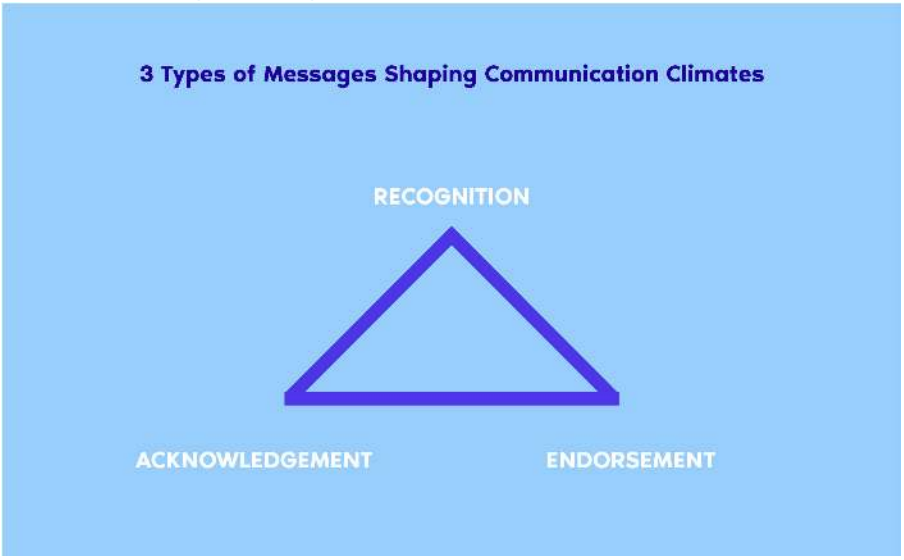
3.3: Frameworks for Identifying Types of Climate Messages

In this section, we will examine two frameworks for understanding and identifying relational messages that contribute to communication climate: confirming versus disconfirming messages and supportive versus defensive messages. Many of the common behaviors that can lead to a cold climate are performed in an automatic state of mind, without forethought or strategy. Exploring these types of messages in pairs helps us be better able to mindfully recognize warm climate alternatives that might be better received.

Confirming verses Disconfirming Messages



Confirming messages convey another person's value and worthwhile disconfirming messages may suggest someone is devalued and unimportant. Obviously, most of us like to receive warm confirming messages because they foster emotional safety as well as personal and relational growth. However, it is likely that many of the messages you receive and give are somewhere between the two extremes. Let's look at three specific types of confirming and disconfirming messages. Consider how each may meet or not meet our social needs.

- **Recognition Messages**: Recognition messages either confirm or deny another person's existence. For example, if a friend enters your home and you smile, hug them, and say, "I'm so glad to see you" you are confirming their existence. If you say "good morning" to a colleague and they ignore you by walking out of the room without saying anything, then they are creating a disconfirming climate by not recognizing you.
- **Acknowledgement Messages**: Acknowledgement messages go beyond recognizing another's existence by confirming what they say or how they feel. Nodding our head while listening or laughing appropriately at a funny story are nonverbal acknowledgement messages. When a friend tells you they had a really bad day at work and you respond with, "Yeah, that does sound hard, do you want to go somewhere quiet and talk?" you are acknowledging and responding to their feelings. In contrast, if you were to respond to your friend's frustrations with a comment like, "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me today…" you would be ignoring their experience and presenting yours as more important.
- **Endorsement Messages**: Endorsement messages go one step further by recognizing a person's feelings as valid. Suppose a friend comes to you upset after a fight with their partner. If you respond with, "Yeah, I can see why you would be upset" you are endorsing their right to feel upset. However, if you said, "Get over it" you would be sending messages that deny their right to feel frustrated in that moment. When we let people own their emotions and do not tell them how to feel, we are creating supportive climates that provide a safe environment for them to work though their problems.

Supportive verses Defensive Messages

Another useful framework for understanding communication climate can be found in the six defensive and supportive behavior pairs proposed by psychologist Jack Gibb in 1965, adapted here with some pairs re-named for clarity. These six behaviors are, on

the one hand, likely to generate an emotional climate of defensiveness (cold) and are, on the other, likely generate a supportive climate (warm).

In the box below, we define and give examples of each of the six pairs: evaluation/description, manipulation/straightforwardness, control/collaboration, indifference/empathy, superiority/equality, certainty/flexibility. In addition, we propose some possibilities for how climate might be perceived by the recipients of such behavior and why it might be perceived that way.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Evaluation	**Description**
Vague, abstract, blaming, inflammatory and judgmental language that indicates lack of regard for other. "You" statements.	Neutral, factual, concrete, precise descriptions of what something looks or sounds like, and of your own reactions to it. Ownership of thoughts, feelings and observations. "I" language. No judgment(s).
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
"You're such a slob! Sheesh! [eye roll]	"I get frustrated when I see your socks on the floor."
Recipient's Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel attacked, judged, disrespected, and/or defensive, in addition to possible confusion over what the complaint is specifically addressing.	Recipient has more clarity about what's specifically bothering the other and why. They may not like something negative being pointed out, but they may not feel as judged, attacked, or put down as with the opposing example.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Control	**Collaboration**
Speaker forces solutions with little regard for receiver's needs or interests. Message seems to suggest that speaker knows better than listener, and/or that listener is not capable of finding solution.	Focus is on finding a win-win solution that meets the needs of all parties involved. Conveys respect for the other person. Makes decisions "with" rather than "for." Asks rather than tells.
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
"No! You do it this way!"	"Since you actually work the floor, what are your thoughts about the best way to set this up?"
Recipient's Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel controlled, disrespected, or that their expertise/effort isn't acknowledged or respected. They may feel hostile towards the speaker and competitive rather than collaborative.	Recipient feels needs and wants are seen, respected, and honored. They will likely want to work collaboratively with the other person.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Manipulation	**Straightforwardness**
Dishonesty, manipulation, hidden agendas, passive- aggressiveness, guilt-making, score-keeping, tit-for-tat	Honesty, respect, directness, openness
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
"&$#@! Can't you EVER do what you promised?! I've been watching you do this all week, and I'm fed up! [after observing from a silent pedestal and keeping score all week]"	"Honey, please wake up and let the dogs out."
Recipient's Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel attacked, judged, and controlled. They may feel distrustful or confused as to why the message was held back so long and not addressed.	Recipient may feel annoyed but appreciative that no judgment, extraneous complaints, or appeals to guilt were thrown in with the main point.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Indifference	**Empathy**
Indifference to a person's plight, impersonal response, lack of concern and care, indicating the person or person's issue has little value	Attempting to put yourself in the other's shoes, see what is seen, feel what is felt, acceptance, support and care of person, feelings and issues
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
"Um. Yeah. It doesn't really matter what the reason is. The policy is the policy. No late papers."	"I'm so sorry for what you're going through. That's a tough situation. Let's talk about specific ways you might be able to keep up."
Recipient's Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel unworthy and inferior, that their needs aren't important or are being ignored. They may feel a lack of connection and belonging.	Recipient may feel acknowledged, respected, and/or worthy of compassion.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Superiority	**Equality**
Condescending and superior attitude, ridicule, eye-rolls, huffs and puffs, patronizing, one-up approach, conveys perceived "greater-than- you" status	Sees equal worth in all human beings, recognizes that all people have strengths and weaknesses, respectful, honors and values people as capable beings
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
"Move over! I'LL fix this! Sheesh!" [eye rolls]	"Hey, no worries. I struggled with this too when I first learned. I'll show you some strategies and you'll get it soon."
Recipient's Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel defensive, angry, or hurt.	Recipient may feel respected and thought of as capable.

DEFENSIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Certainty	**Flexibility**
It's "my way or the highway," already certain of being right, needs no additional input, one-track mind, lack or regard and respect for others' ideas	Acknowledges others' views, willingness to hear input, open-door policy, no corner on truth, open-mindedness, willing to change stance if reasonable
Examples of Messages & Behaviors	
"I don't want to hear it It's NOT going to work!"	"I'm not familiar with that idea. Can you tell me more about it?"
Recipient's Potential Perception	
Recipient may feel devalued, defensive, or hostile. May feel unworthy or unaccepted.	Recipient may feel valued, recognized, capable, or worthy.

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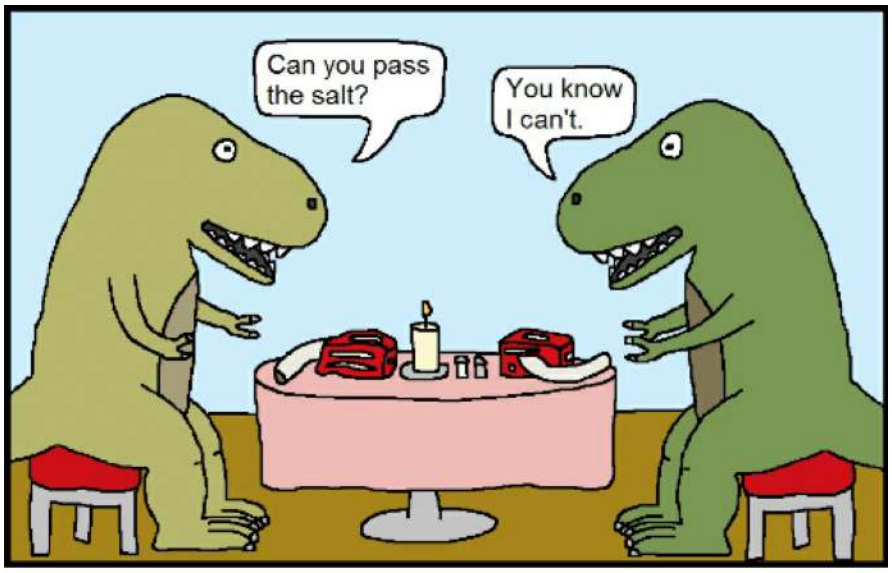
3.4: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover cognitive and behavioral skills to help us more effectively create the communication climate we want to experience, contextual nuances in interpersonal needs, and discuss the importance mindfulness and awareness.

Effective Communication: Cognitive and Behavioral Skills

Cognitive skills involve thinking about others and behavioral skills involve actionable things we can actually say and do. Specifically, we will cover three skills for more effective climate messages: empathy, quadruple thinking, and metacommunication.



Empathy

You may have heard empathy defined as the ability to (metaphorically) “put yourself in someone else’s shoes,” to feel what another may be feeling. This description is technically accurate on one level, but empathy is actually more complex. Our human capacity for empathy has three levels: cognitive, affective, and compassionate.

The first is cognitive and involves more thinking than feeling. A more appropriate metaphor for this level is “putting on someone else’s perception glasses,” to attempt to view a situation in the way someone else might view it. It requires thinking about someone else’s thinking, considering factors that make up someone’s unique perceptual schema, and trying to view a situation through that lens. For example, employees don’t always view things the way managers do. A good manager can see through employee glasses and anticipate how workplace actions, decisions, and/or messages may be interpreted.

The second level is affective, or emotional, and involves attempting to feel the emotions of others. The “shoes” metaphor fits best for this level. Attempting to truly feel what other humans feel requires envisioning exactly what they might be going through in their lives. Doing so effectively might even require “taking off your own shoes.” For example, to empathize with a complaining customer, we can temporarily put our own needs aside, and really picture what it would feel like to be the customer experiencing the problem situation. Your own need might be to take care of the complaint quickly so you can go to lunch. Yet, if it were you in the problem situation, you would likely want someone to be warm, attentive, and supportive, and take the time needed to solve the problem.

This level of empathy is often confused with sympathy, something with which you are probably already very familiar. The two are related but are not the same. Feeling sympathy means feeling bad for or sorry about something another person might be going through, but understanding and feeling it from your own perspective, through your own perception glasses, and in your own shoes. We all recognize that losing a pet is likely to be devastating for someone. We therefore feel sympathy for our friend because their dog died. However, feeling empathy requires making an effort to see the situation through their glasses and shoes. What this means is that we consider how they may see and feel the situation differently from us. For instance, we may have experienced many pet losses and even human losses in your life, so yet another pet loss may not feel that significant to us. But, if this is your friend’s first

significant loss, they may likely feel more devastation than we would. We can respond more appropriately and with more warmth by letting go of our own perspective and attempting to see and feel the situation as they might. Another way to distinguish between sympathy and empathy is by seeing sympathy as "feeling for…" (as in feeling sorry for or feeling compassion for another person) and empathy as "feeling with…" as in actually feeling the emotions of another person.

The third level of empathy is the compassionate concern for the well-being of our fellow humans (Goleman, 2006). Feeling empathy at this level motivates us to act compassionately in the interest of others. Examples may include dropping off a casserole for a grieving friend, taking some of your coworker's calls when they are especially busy or stressed, or organizing a neighborhood clean-up. With this level of empathy, we sense what people need and feel compelled to help. Most of us are usually able to empathize at this level with people who are important to us.

Strategies for building empathy: While empathy comes more naturally for some people than others, it is a skill that can be developed (Goleman, 2006) with a greater awareness of and attention to the perception process. Remember that perception is unique to each person. We all interpret and judge the world through our own set of perception glasses that are framed by factors such as upbringing, family background, ethnicity, age, attitude, knowledge of person and situation, past experiences, amount of exposure to others, social roles, etc.

Below addresses specific ways to build our empathy muscles. The strategies fall into two categories: adding information to the rims of our perception glasses and bringing attention to the perception process itself.

Add more information to our perception glasses. In order to add more information to our perception glasses, we need to find out what we can about a situation or person with whom we are seeking to understanding and empathize. We can do this by:

- Taking in information: When we observe, listen, question, perception check, paraphrase, pay attention to nonverbals and feelings, we take information in rather than putting information out (e.g., listening more and talking less).
- Broaden or narrow our perspective: Sometimes we feel stuck, allowing one interaction with one person to become all-consuming. If we remember how big the world is and how many people are dealing with similar situations right now, we gain perspective that helps us see the situation in a different way. On the other hand, sometimes we generalize too broadly, seeing an entire group of people in one way, or assuming all things are bad at our workplace. Focusing on one person or one situation a time is another way to helpfully shift perspectives.
- Imagine or seek stories and info (through books, films, articles, technology): We can learn and imagine what people's lives are really like by reading, watching, or listening to the stories of others.
- Seek out actual experiences to help us understand what it's like to be in others' shoes: We can do something experiential like a ride-along with a police officer or spend a day on the streets to really try to feel what it's like to be in a situation in which we are not familiar.

Bring attention to the perception process. Pull down our own perception glasses and try on a pair of someone else's. Thinking about our thinking is a process called metacognition. By turning our attention toward the way we perceive information and how that perception makes us feel. What factors make up the rims of our glasses and how do these factors shape our perspectives, thoughts, feelings, and actions? Consider what makes another person unique, and what rim factors may influence the person's perspectives and feelings. We should try to see the situation through those glasses, inferring how unique perceptual schemas might shape the others person's emotions and actions too. Remember, though, we can never be certain how or why people do what they do. Only they know for sure. But communication can be more effective if we at least give some type of speculative forethought before we act or react. And when in doubt, we can always ask.

Climate-Centered Message Planning

Our second mindful competence skill is called Climate-Centered Message Planning (CCMP), which is a term coined by Gerber and Murphy (2019). CCMP refers to the conscious encoding (planning and forethought) involved in meeting communication goals. CCMP requires two steps and takes the basics of empathy a bit further into message construction. The steps include: 1. Think about what we want to say or do. What is our goal? What outcome(s) do we hope to achieve? What message or behaviors are we considering? What needs do we hope to fulfill? What emotional temperature do we hope to create? Which behaviors or message strategies will help us achieve it? 2. Think about how the other person (or persons) might hear (or perceive) what we say. Here, we should put on their perception glasses and consider as many factors as possible that affect how the person might see and feel our message. We should think about whether the message is likely to be perceived and received as intended. If not, rethink what we

want to say so that they will be more likely hear what you want them to hear (so a person is more likely to interpret your messages as you intend it to be interpreted). Remember once again, we can never completely ensure that someone "hears what we want them to hear" (interprets what we intended). However, with some awareness and forethought, we can ensure there's a better chance of it. CCMP also helps us with better awareness of how what we say and how we say it may impact another person's relational or face needs. Our consideration of what human beings "need" will help us infer how they might react to messages emotionally, intellectually, or relationally. Doing so helps us communicate more effectively and appropriately whatever our goal may be.

Metacommunication

Our third skill is an action skill: the skill of metacommunication. It, too, requires mindfully elevating awareness beyond the content level of communication, but also requires us to actually discuss things such as needs and relational messages aloud. Metacommunication literally means communicating about communication, and occurs when we talk to each other about any part of the communication process, including what is said or done, how it is interpreted, how we feel, what we wish had been said or done, etc. For example, metacommunication occurs anytime you say "It's frustrating when you interrupt me," or "I wish you'd have asked me before you made that decision." Other forms of metacommunication bring relational messages and social needs right to the surface level for discussion. For example, if you said "when you brought that up in front of my friends, I felt embarrassed and undignified," or "when I don't hear from you, I feel less connected to you." Metacommunication can involve any of the skills we've learned so far ("I" messages, perception checking, etc.) and can be used deliberately to address our own wants, needs, or to clarify our intentions when something we've expressed may have been ill-received. Scholar and speaker Brene Brown recommends using phrases such as "the story I'm making up about this is…" to explain the way we perceived something and "help me better understand" as a form of listening to understand how another person may have perceived something. Metacommunication can help us in the middle of interactions to clarify and prevent misunderstandings as we both send and receive messages. For example, if you notice someone reacting in a way you didn't intend, you can ask about it ("how are you feeling right now? What are you hearing me say?") or you can clarify your intent and adjust ("My intent was not for you to feel disrespected. How can I say this differently so that you hear my respect for you?"). We can also respond to the cold relational messages of others with "When you say it that way, I hear not only what you're saying but an extra message that you don't think I'm capable" or "not giving me options leaves me feeling boxed in and I really want to feel more freedom in this relationship."

Contextual Communication: Context and Needs

Context influences all of our communication, but it also has important implications when it comes to the interpersonal needs we have discussed throughout this chapter. Below we discuss how three types of contextual nuances that influence our needs: relational, individual, and co-cultural.

- **Relational Context:**
  Based on the relational context, the relationship we have with others (friend, colleague, etc.), different people will meet different needs. We may expect a specific type of relationship to meet one need (but not the other) or place more or less importance on that relationship meeting a particular need. For example, in workplace relationships with colleagues, managers, or people we manage we may expect these people, and place higher value on these people meeting needs pertaining to competence, capability, control, etc. We may not expect these relationships to, or place lesser importance on them, meeting needs such as warmth and kindness. Conversely, we may expect intimate relationships with friends and romantic partners to satisfy needs related to connection, and not expect them to, or place less importance, on them meeting needs like control.
- **Individual Context:**
  Individuals tend to vary in the level of desire for certain needs to be met. We may have low needs in one area and medium or high needs in another. For example, we may have a high need for connection and a low need for freedom. Conversely, another individual may have a low need for connection and high need for freedom. We also see a difference between how much needs are wanted (we want our needs met from others) and expressed (how much we want and do work toward meeting these needs in others). For example, we may have a need to feel respected but do little to show respect to another to meet their respect need.
- **Co-Cultural Context:**
  Group membership and identity based on factors like gender, generation, social class, etc. can influence the value placed on a particular need. For example, men are often taught (through socialization) to strongly value the needs of autonomy, control, freedom from imposition by others, space, and privacy. Conversely, women are often taught to place higher value on needs of

belonging, inclusion, warmth, and kindness. Because of this, it is important to recognize what we genuinely want in terms of needs- not just what we think we should want or were told we should value.

Reflective Communication: Mindfulness

The word mindfulness refers to "paying attention on purpose," and has many uses in personal and work life. For interpersonal communication purposes, mindfulness relates to becoming more conscious of how we encode and decode messages. We can better meet our communication goals with increased awareness of how communication carries relational subtexts, how those subtexts may be perceived to meet (or not meet) social needs, and how those perceptions might result in a warm or cold emotional temperature. As with all communication competence skills, awareness helps us shift from a habitual or automatic state of being and thinking to a mindful and thoughtful state where we put more effort, attention and forethought into what we hope to accomplish and why.

Becoming mindful of climate means increasing awareness of the needs of self and others before, during, and after interactions. It requires reflecting on of our own desires, thought processes and emotional reactions, and with applied forethought, thinking about and speculating about those of others. Learning about relational messages and social needs gives us access to a greater variety of perceptual frameworks through which to view communication (e.g., how might this message be received by others?). It also requires that during interactions we observe, reflect on, and attend to others' emotional reactions and shift gears midstream if necessary. For example, if mid-interaction we observe a person's outward response that seems to indicate embarrassment, shame, agitation or defensiveness, we can adjust our behavior or discuss and clarify our intent. We may even take notice of an interaction after it occurred, reviewing it and considering how well it went or how we might do better next time. Through awareness, reflection, mindfulness we can build a cognitively complex repertoire of skill, knowledge, and motivation that helps us engage in a skillful dance of communication that attempts to honor social needs.

Practice

Consider what you might say and do to convey the given relational subtext.

1. How might you decline a friend's invitation to coffee with respect and affection?
2. How could you address an employee's need for autonomy when telling her she is needed to work this weekend? The need for dignity?
3. How might you disagree with a classmate's politics by recognizing their need for inclusion? Respect? The need to matter?
4. How might you address the autonomy or affection needs of your significant other when you request that they come home on time tonight?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Power and Communication

What comes to mind when you think of power? Is having power over others a good or a bad thing? What about others having power over you? Like most people, your answer is likely influenced by the amount of power you personally perceive yourself to have and the ways in which the power others possess has affected your life. While power isn't inherently good or evil, it is important to understand and recognize how power dynamics shape our life choices, interactions, and relationships with others in significant ways. In this chapter, we will define what power is, describe its principles, and discuss various types of individual and persuasive power. We will also address communication competence and strategies for communicating effectively in situations where we feel less powerful, examine the link between co-culture, culture, and power, and reflect on some common ways in which power is misused in relationships.

Learning Objectives

- What is power and how does it operate in communication and interpersonal relationships?
- How can we ethically influence others?
- How do we use our knowledge of power to recognize unethical influence and/or control?

Successful students will be able to:

- define power
- identify five principles of power
- recognize six types of power
- explain three modes of persuasion
- identify five strategies for communicating opinions, rights, expectations, and boundaries
- explain the relationships between power, culture, co-culture and ideologies
- recognize eight types of abusive power tactics used in interpersonal relationships

4.1: Defining Power

4.2: Principles of Power

4.3: Individual and Persuasive Power

4.4: Communication Competence

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4.1: Defining Power

In this section, we will explain what power is.

Defining Power

Power is the capacity of an individual, group, or social structure to direct, influence, or control the behaviors, thoughts, and/or feelings of others. The use of power can involve ideology, persuasion, intimidation, coercion, or force and it can be tied to resources, money, institutions, positions, or co-cultural membership (such as gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) Power operates on individual, cultural, and structural levels as well as in our interpersonal relationships. It also generates privilege for individuals and groups of people that hold it and likewise causes disadvantages and oppression for groups who don't. However, we also have the capacity to empower ourselves and others.

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4.2: Principles of Power

In this section, we address five principles of power: power is a both a perception and fact, is relative and contextual, is influenced by dependence and investment, is prerogative, and generates privilege.

Power is Both a Perception and a Fact

Power is a perception in the sense that we may think we have power over another person or that they have power over us, when we or they do not. For example, if you were the lead on a project at work, you may think that particular position gives you control and/or influence over the other group members. However, if they don't perceive you to have any power over them and don't listen to what you tell them to do and you have no way to enforce consequences, then you really don't. In addition, if we admire, respect or love others, we may give them power over us they otherwise wouldn't have. Conversely, power is also a fact, as there are individuals, groups, and social structures—such as institutions—who can and do direct and control our actions. For example, police officers have the authority to physically restrain people and the legal system has the power to incarcerate.

Power is Relative and Contextual

Power exists in all relationships, both personal and professional. How much power we have in comparison to another person may be symmetrical or asymmetrical. In some relationships we may have more, while in others we may have less. For example, you may have equal power in your romantic relationship, more power over your child, but less power at your job. Power can increase and decrease, based on context, and over time. For example, the physical context can influence how much power we have in a particular location. We may have more power in our homes, but less power in other locations, such as a classroom. Culture and co-culture also influence power, as some groups hold more power than others. Since culture and coculture play an important role in power dynamics, this subject is addressed more in-depth in section 12.4.2: Contextual Communication: Culture, Co-culture, and Power.

(Image: CCO)

Power is relative and contextual, meaning that amount of power we have can be equal or unequal in some relationships and can increase and decrease based on the context. For example, you may have relatively equal power in an intimate relationship, but have less (or more) power than others in your workplace.

Power is Influenced by Dependence and Investment

Power is influenced by our level of dependence and investment in a particular relationship, position, or resource. Generally speaking, those who have more dependence or investment are less powerful, while those with less dependence or investment have greater power. For example, someone who is economically dependent on their job but disagrees with a co-worker would be less likely to confront them out of fear of the consequences. As another example, if someone has more emotional investment in a romantic relationship than the other has, then they will have less relational power.

Power is Prerogative

The prerogative principle states that the person with more power can make and break the rules. Powerful people can violate norms, break relational rules, and manage interactions without as much penalty as powerless people. These actions may reinforce the dependence power someone holds over another. In addition, the more powerful person has the prerogative to manage both verbal and nonverbal interactions. They can initiate conversations, change topics, interrupt others, initiate touch, and end discussions more easily than less powerful people.

Power Generates Privilege

Power, whether it is held by an individual or group, grants certain privileges. Often those with privilege do not realize they hold it because it seems normal and natural, and people usually only focus on the way in which they are disadvantaged. For example, someone who is white but of lower-socioeconomic status may not recognize the privileges they have based on skin color and instead focus on the ways in which they are disadvantaged due to social class. It is also important to note that because of our unique positionalities and intersecting identities we are often simultaneously privileged in some ways and disadvantaged in others.

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4.3: Individual and Persuasive Power

In this section, we will discuss six types of power individuals possess and ways messages can be used to influence the thoughts, behaviors, and actions of others through the use of persuasive tactics.

Individual Power

Individuals possess six types of power: coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, expert, and informational. These types of power may overlap, differ according to the manner in which they are implemented, and differ in the ways each type of power is established and maintained.[3]

- **Coercive power:**
  Coercive power uses the threat of force to gain compliance from another. Force may include physical, social, emotional, political, or economic means. This type of power is based upon the idea of coercion, and common tactics include threats and punishment. For example, coercion occurs when we imply or threaten that someone will be fired, demoted, or given undesirable assignments.
- **Reward power:**
  Reward power is based on the right of some to offer or deny tangible, social, emotional, or spiritual rewards to others for doing what is wanted or expected of them. If others expect to be rewarded for doing what someone wants, there's a high probability that they'll do it. Reward power (positive reward) is seen when a child is given money for earning better grades or a student is admitted into an honor society for excellent effort.
- **Legitimate power:**
  Legitimate power comes from an elected, selected, or appointed position of authority. Legitimate power is formal authority delegated to the holder of the position. It is usually accompanied by various attributes of power such as a uniform, a title, or an imposing physical office. People traditionally obey the person with this power solely based on their role, position, or title rather than someone's personal leadership characteristics. A police officer is an example of someone who has legitimate power.
- **Referent power:**
  Referent power is the power or ability of individuals to attract others and build loyalty. It is based on the charisma and interpersonal skills of the power holder. This power is often regarded as admiration, or charm. A person may be admired because of specific personal trait, and this admiration creates the opportunity for interpersonal influence. Referent power acts a little like role model power and depends on respecting, liking, and holding another individual in high esteem. We can increase our level of referent power as we build up our interpersonal skills. Communicators that meets others' social needs are often perceived as possessing referent power.
- **Expert power:**
  Expert power is based on what we know, what we experience, and on our special skills or talents.[8] Expertise can be demonstrated by reputation, credentials, and actions. Unlike the others, this type of power is usually highly specific and limited to the particular area in which the expert is trained and qualified. People tend to trust and respect individuals who demonstrate expertise. The expertise does not have to be genuine – it is the perception of expertise that provides the power base.
- **Informational power:**
  Information power comes as a result of possessing knowledge that others need or want.[8] Information possessed that no one needs or wants is powerless. Information power extends to the ability to get information based on a position held. Not all information is readily available; some information is closely controlled by a few people, such as national security data. Information power is a form of personal or collective power that is based on controlling information needed by others in order to reach an important goal. Our society is reliant on information power as knowledge for influence, decision making, credibility, and control. How information is used—sharing it with others, limiting it to key people, keeping it secret from key people, organizing it, increasing it, or even falsifying it—can generate power.[1]

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Doctors are an example of expert power- the power someone has based on what they know, their skills, credentials, expertise, or experience in a specific area.

Persuasive Power

Regardless of the types of individual power we may (or may not) hold, we also have the ability to empower ourselves and influence others through our communicative messages and the use of persuasion. Persuasion has the ability to change the way people think and feel and act. Persuasion is comprised of three interrelated components: ethos, logos, and pathos.

- **Ethos:**
  Ethos refers to the credibility of a communicator and includes three dimensions: competence, trustworthiness, and dynamism. Competence refers to the perception of a communicator's expertise in relation to the topic being discussed. Trustworthiness refers to the degree that others perceive a communicator as accurate, honest, and unbiased. Perceptions of trustworthiness come from the content of the message as well as the personality of the communicator. Dynamism refers to the degree to which others perceive a communicator to be outgoing and animated (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003). Two components of dynamism are charisma and energy. Charisma refers to a mixture of abstract and concrete qualities that make a communicator attractive to others.

  Charismatic people usually know they are charismatic because they've been told and people have been attracted to them because of it. Unfortunately, charisma is difficult to intentionally develop, and some people seem to have a naturally charismatic personality, while others do not. Even though everyone can't embody the charismatic aspect of dynamism, the other component of dynamism, energy, is something that everyone can tap into. Communicating enthusiastically and using engaging nonverbals such as vocal variety and eye contact can increase your dynamism.

- **Logos:**
  Logos refers to the reasoning or logic of an argument. Communicators employ logos by presenting credible information, facts, and statistics. Presenting a rational and logical argument is also an important component of persuasion. When a communicator uses logic, they make a claim, which is a statement of belief or opinion. They then provide good reasons to support their claims. For example, I could make the claim that cats are the best pets and attempt to support this with reasons such as they are cute and like to cuddle. In order to persuade another with logic, the reasons presented should be relevant to the claim, well-supported, and meaningful to the listener.

- **Pathos:**
  Pathos refers to the use of emotional appeals in messages. Stirring emotions in others is a way to get them involved and can

create more opportunities for persuasion and action. Learning that homes in your city are being burglarized may get your attention, but think about how different your reaction would be if you found out it was a home in your neighborhood. Communicators have taken advantage of people's emotions to get them to support causes, buy products, or engage in behaviors that they might not otherwise if given the chance to see the faulty logic of a message. For example, a politician may try to get your vote by posing for pictures near flags, using patriotic music in their ads, or holding babies at campaign events. None of these actions hold any logical appeal, but they stir up emotions that can make us feel favorable about the politician. Emotional appeals are effective when you are trying to influence a behavior or you want the other to take immediate action (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003). However, emotions lose their persuasive effect more quickly than other types of persuasive appeals. Since emotions are often reactionary, they fade relatively quickly when a person is removed from the provoking situation (Fletcher, 2001).

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Ethos, Logos, and Pathos are rhetorical proofs used to persuade people.

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4.4: Communication Competence

In this section, we will address techniques you can use to communicate your opinions, rights, expectations and boundaries. We will also look at the relationship between culture, co-culture, and power, and at some ways in which power is often misused in intimate relationships.

Effective Communication: Communicating Opinions, Rights, Expectations, and Boundaries

Since power dynamics influence our interactions and relationships, we may find ourselves in positions where we have less power or perceive we have less power. In these situations, it is important to know how to effectively communicate our opinions, rights, expectations, and boundaries. Below we provide some strategies you can use:

Be assertive, not passive or aggressive.
Passive behaviors include concealing rather than communicating our feelings, thoughts, rights, and expectations. Often times, people engage in passive behaviors when they perceive they have little power, or they fear damaging a relationship. Aggressive behaviors include yelling, threatening, name calling, etc.

Assertive communication carries respect for the feelings, needs, wants, and opinions of others. An assertive communicator avoids infringing upon the rights of others, while asserting their own, and seeking compromise or collaboration in the process. Assertive communication utilizes actions and words to express opinions, rights, expectations, and boundaries in a calm fashion, while conveying a message of confidence and respect.[1] When communicating assertively, you should not make sarcastic or condescending remarks, blame the other, shout, threat, or name call.

Don't be silent if you have something to say.
When you have an opinion or feel your rights or expectations are being violated in some way, voice it. Just make sure you pick the right moment and use assertive—not aggressive—communication. Also, make it clear that what you have to say is important, valid, and/or should be noticed.

Identify what your needs are.
Identify your own needs and what makes you happy. This will help you develop a set of expectations that you wish others would follow as to how you would like to be treated. To help with identifying your needs, situations- past or present-where you don't feel like you're being treated with mutual respect or situations where you sense your feelings weren't considered. Then speculate about what might make you feel more respected.[27]

Say "no" when appropriate.
It's okay to reject someone, to say no, or to not do something that is desired of you. Saying no can be difficult for many people. However, saying "yes" when you need to say "no" can lead to unnecessary stress, resentment, and anger toward others. When saying no, it can be helpful to keep in mind a useful set of guidelines:[13]

- Keep it brief.
- Be clear.
- Be honest.

For example, if you don't have time to do a favor, you can simply say, "I can't this time. Sorry to disappoint you, but I have too many things to do that day, and there's no room in my schedule." Also, if someone asks you a question that you don't want to answer, it okay to say something like "I don't really feel comfortable answering that."

Have confident body language.
The way you hold yourself speaks volumes about you—long before you even get a chance to open your mouth. Keep your shoulders squared and your chin up. Avoid fidgeting (put your hands in your pockets if you must) or covering your mouth when you speak. Look people in the eye when you speak to indicate that you don't intend to be brushed off.

Contextual Communication: Culture, Co-Culture, and Power

Power is also influenced by culture and co-culture. As mentioned in Chapter 2: Culture and Communication, all cultures consist of a dominant group and nondominant group. Group memberships and identities, such as gender and race, can work to advantage one particular group of people while simultaneously disadvantaging another to create unequal power dynamics and oppression. Such

actions are accomplished, as discussed below, through labeling, othering, and stereotyping. Also covered below is ways in which ideologies operate to mask these inequalities.

Labeling, Othering, and Stereotyping

The dominant group engages in exercises of power that reflect their interests and help to perpetuate inequalities in power and status. Systems of power and domination are maintained at a cultural and co-cultural level through labeling, othering, and stereotyping. The labels attached to people seen as 'minorities' have always been defined by the white majority—that is, by those with power. Defining an individual primarily in terms of their apparent racial or ethnic identity—for example, with labels such as black or Asian—is a way of defining them as 'different' from a supposed white 'norm.' Othering is accomplished by creating an insider/outsider narrative where whiteness is the criteria for normal; you are either white or non-white. The same can be said of attaching labels to people on the basis of a supposed disability, sexual preference, or age. In addition, stereotyping makes broad generalizations about groups and people based on their co-cultural membership and identities. Often, these stereotypes are negative, since they reflect the differential power between those in the 'majority' and those categorized as 'minorities' or 'different.' So, for example, women may be defined as less rational than men, or black people as less intelligent than white people; in these instances, men and white people respectively are characterized as the 'norm.' These negative stereotypes both reflect and perpetuate existing inequalities—patterns of sexism and racism in society. An example would be denying women and people of color access to jobs that require a 'cool head' or complex intellectual skills. In other words, stereotyping people as 'different' often leads to prejudice and discrimination. Attributing these fixed 'differences' to people is not a neutral process, but is one that both reflects and reproduces inequalities of power and status.

Ideologies

Another way we see power maintained and normalized at a cultural level is through the use of ideologies and values. In the United States, there are many overlapping ideologies that create the illusion that inequality linked to co-cultural categories, such as race or social class, do not exist. For example, a prevalent U.S. American ideology is the Achievement Ideology which is the belief that any person can be successful through hard work and education and that disadvantaged individuals need to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." This ideology disadvantages particular groups by placing the blame of success or failure on the individual rather than looking at institutional and systemic inequality—or, "lack of bootstraps." For example, K-12 educational institutions have become increasingly segregated by race and social class, and, as such, students who attend certain schools don't have access to the same quality of educational resources as another group may have. Unequal access impacts academic performance and makes some students more likely to attain high grades or perform well on the college admissions tests necessary to get into universities (Orfield and Frankenberg's, 2014). In addition, inside the classroom, it is the dominant group's behaviors and values that have been normalized. These norms determine what a successful student looks and acts like, as well as how they are evaluated in assessments like tests and papers (Bennett & Lecompte, 1990; Lesdesma & Caldera, 2005). Students who violate teacher expectations for "normal" behavior face consequences and are "judged by teachers to be less academically able (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990, p. 16)." Such treatment disadvantages low income and students of color who may have different, conflicting, or even contradictory cultural norms and values. People of color and ESL students are also more likely than their white counterparts to be tracked into remedial courses and thus they do not receive the same quality of education. These types of systemic inequalities in K-12 education hold long-term implications for the success of these groups

Reflective Communication: Misuses of Power in Intimate Relationships

Generally, healthy relationships contain a relative balance of power between participants. Unhealthy relationships occur when there are imbalances of power and one participant tries to control or take advantage of the other. This is accomplished by using abusive power to gain and maintain control and subject that person to psychological, physical, sexual, or financial abuse. The goal of the abuser is to control and intimidate the victim or to influence them to feel that they do not have an equal voice in the relationship[2] and abusers usually to try normalize, legitimize, rationalize, deny, minimize the abusive behavior, or blame the victim for it.[7][8][9] Controlling abusers use multiple tactics to exert power and control over their partners. Because each of the tactics are used to maintain power in the relationship, it is important to become familiar with the tactics below in order to avoid being part of an unhealthy relationship, or to help and educate others.

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- **Coercion and Threats:**
  Threats and coercion are tools for exerting control and power. Abusers may threaten to leave, hurt others, or even threaten suicide. They may also coerce others to perform illegal actions or to drop charges against their abusers. [36] At its most powerful, the abuser creates intimidation and fear through unpredictable and inconsistent behavior.[6]
- **Intimidation:**
  Abused individuals may be intimidated by the brandishing of weapons—for example, threatening to use a gun or simply displaying the weapon. Other forms of intimidation include destruction of property or other things, or use of gestures or looks to create fear.[36]
- **Economic Abuse:**
  Controlling someone's access to money is another means of ensuring control and power over another. One method is to prevent the other from getting or retaining a job. Other ways to control access to money are: withholding information and access to family income, taking a person's money, requiring the person to ask for money, giving someone an allowance, or filing a power of attorney or conservatorship—particularly in the case of economic abuse of the elderly.[36]
- **Emotional Abuse:**
  Emotional abuse includes name-calling, mind games, putting the victim down, or humiliating the individual. The goals are to make the person feel bad about themselves, feel guilty or think that they are crazy.[36]
- **Isolation:**
  Another element of psychological control is the isolation of the victim from the outside world.[33] Isolation includes controlling a person's social activity—who they see, who they talk to, where they go, and any other method that limits access to others. It may include limiting what material is read, insisting on knowing where the victim is at all times, and requiring permission for medical care. The abuser might also exhibit hypersensitive and reactive jealousy.[33]
- **Minimizing, Denying, and Blaming:**
  An abuser may deny that any abuse occurred in order to place the responsibility for their behavior on the victim. Another example of this type of control is when the abuser minimizes the victim's concerns or denies the degree of abuse. [36]
- **Using Children and Pets:**
  Children may be also be used to exert control. Abusers threaten to take the children or make the other feel guilty about the children. Abusers may harass children during visitation or use the children to relay messages. Abusing pets is another controlling tactic. [36]

- **Using Privilege:**
  Using “privilege” means that the abuser defines the roles in the relationship, makes the important decisions, treats the individual like a servant, and acts like the “master of the castle”.[36]

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Listening

In this section, we will explain the importance of listening.

The Importance of Listening

If you were to break up the various types of communication you use throughout your day, listening would make up about 42 – 60 percent. Problematically, many people engage in passive versus active listening, which can cause miscommunication and have a negative effect on relationships. Listening is an important skill to cultivate, both personally and professionally. In this chapter, we will explain the importance of listening, the stages of the listening process, listening styles, some common listening barriers, and ways to improve our listening skills.

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Learning Objectives

- How does the listening process work?
- What are some of the challenges to effective listening?
- How can we improve our listening, and why might it be important to do so?

Successful students will be able to:

- explain the importance of listening
- differentiate between five stages of the listening process
- identify four listening styles
- describe six barriers to effective listening
- demonstrate ways to improve listening in all stages of the process
- recognize contextual influences on listening
- recognize the value of reflection on listening and relationships

5.1: The Importance of Listening
5.2: The Stages of the Listening Process
5.3: Listening Styles
5.4: Barriers to Listening
5.5: Communication Competence

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5.1: The Importance of Listening

Listening is the learned process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. We begin to engage in the listening process from infancy, long before we engage in any recognizable verbal or nonverbal communication. In general, listening helps us achieve all the communication goals (physical, instrumental, relational, and identity) that we learned about in Chapter 1. Listening is also important in academic, professional, and personal contexts. In terms of academics, students with high scores for listening ability have greater academic achievement. Listening skills are highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2010). Listening also has implications for our personal lives and relationships. We shouldn't underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information. Listening can also help us expand our self and social awareness by learning from other people's experiences and by helping us take on different perspectives.

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Listening is an important part of both our personal and professional relationships.

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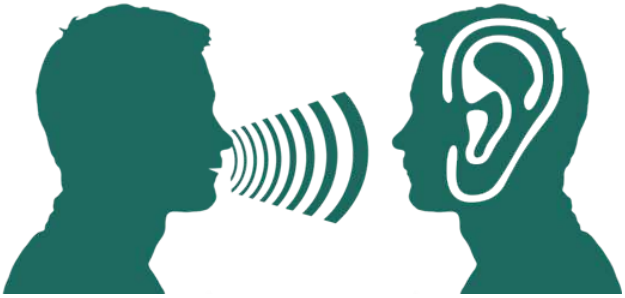
5.2: The Stages of the Listening Process

Listening is a process and as such it doesn't unfold in a linear, step-by-step fashion with a defined start and finish. Listening in action is a fast, complex process, with many overlapping components. However, in order to aid in your understanding of listening, we will break the process into five stages and cover each stage in this section: receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding.



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Receiving

Before we can engage other steps in the listening process, we must take in stimuli through our senses. In any given communication encounter, it is likely that we will return to the receiving stage many times as we process incoming feedback and new messages. We primarily take in information needed for listening through auditory and visual channels. Although we don't often think about visual cues as a part of listening, they influence how we interpret messages. For example, seeing a person's face when we hear their voice allows us to take in nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and eye contact.

Chapter 3, The Perception Process and Perception of Others, discussed some of the ways in which incoming stimuli are filtered. These perceptual filters also play a role in listening. Some stimuli never make it in, some are filtered into subconsciousness, and others are filtered into various levels of consciousness based on their salience. Salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. We tend to find salient those things that are visually or audibly stimulating and those that meet our needs or interests. Think about how it's much easier to listen to a lecture on a subject that you find very interesting.

It is important to consider noise as a factor that influences how we receive messages. Some noise interferes primarily with hearing, which is the physical process of receiving stimuli through internal and external components of the ears and eyes, and some interferes with listening, which is the cognitive process of processing the stimuli taken in during hearing. While hearing leads to listening, they are not the same thing. Noise resulting from the physical context, such as other people talking, the sounds of traffic, and music interfere with the physiological aspects of hearing. Noise resulting from the individual context like stress and anger interfere primarily with the cognitive processes of listening.

To improve listening at the receiving stage

- prepare yourself to listen, both physically and mentally
- concentrate on stimuli most relevant to your listening purpose(s) or goal(s)
- pay attention to turn-taking signals so you can follow the conversational flow
- stay tuned in and avoid interrupting someone while they are speaking

Interpreting

During the interpreting stage of listening, we combine the visual and auditory information we receive and try to make meaning out of that information using schemata. The interpreting stage engages cognitive and relational processing as we take in informational, contextual, and relational cues and try to connect them in meaningful ways to previous experiences. It is through the interpreting

stage that we may begin to understand the stimuli we have received. When we understand something, we are able to attach meaning by connecting information to previous experiences. If we have difficulty interpreting information, meaning we don't have previous experience or information in our existing schemata to make sense of it, then it is difficult to transfer the information into our long-term memory for later recall. In situations where understanding the information we receive isn't important or isn't a goal, this stage may be fairly short or even skipped. After all, we can move something to our long-term memory by repetition and then later recall it without ever having understood it.

To improve listening at the interpreting stage

- identify main points
- avoid assuming and try to see from the speaker's perspective
- be aware of how context can influence meaning
- pay attention to nonverbal cues, such as facial expression tones, tone of voice, and the use of silence

Recalling

Our ability to recall information is dependent on some of the physiological limits of how memory works. Overall, our memories are known to be fallible. We forget about half of what we hear immediately after hearing it, recall 35 percent after eight hours, and recall 20 percent after a day (Hargie, 2011). Our memory consists of multiple "storage units," including sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory (Hargie, 2011).

Our sensory storage is very large in terms of capacity but limited in terms of length of storage. We can hold large amounts of unsorted visual information but only for about a tenth of a second. By comparison, we can hold large amounts of unsorted auditory information for longer—up to four seconds.

As stimuli are organized and interpreted, they make their way to short-term memory where they either expire and are forgotten or are transferred to long-term memory. Short-term memory is a mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for twenty seconds to one minute. Long-term memory is a mental storage capability to which stimuli in short-term memory can be transferred if they are connected to existing schema and in which information can be stored indefinitely (Hargie, 2011). Working memory is a temporarily accessed memory storage space that is activated during times of high cognitive demand. When using working memory, we can temporarily store information and process and use it at the same time.

To improve listening at the recalling stage

- use multiple sensory channels to decode messages and make more complete memories
- repeat, rephrase, and reorganize information to fit your cognitive preferences
- make connections between what you hear and what you already know
- use mnemonic devices as a gimmick to help with recall

Evaluating

When we evaluate something, we make judgments about its credibility, completeness, and worth. In terms of credibility, we try to determine the degree to which we believe a speaker's statements are correct and/or true. In terms of completeness, we try to "read between the lines" and evaluate the message in relation to what we know about the topic or situation being discussed. We evaluate the worth of a message by making a value judgment about whether we think the message or idea is good/bad, right/wrong, or desirable/undesirable. All these aspects of evaluating require critical thinking skills, which we aren't born with but must develop over time through our own personal and intellectual development. One danger within the evaluation stage of listening is to focus your evaluative lenses more on the communicator than the message. This can quickly become a barrier to effective listening if we begin to prejudge a communicator based on their identity or characteristics rather than on the content of their message.

To improve listening at the evaluating stage

- separate facts, inferences, and opinions
- be familiar with and able to identify persuasive strategies and fallacies of reasoning

- assess the credibility of the speaker and the message
- be aware of your own biases and how your perceptual filters can create barriers to effective listening

Responding

Responding entails sending verbal and nonverbal messages that indicate attentiveness and understanding or a lack thereof. From our earlier discussion of the communication model, you may be able to connect this part of the listening process to feedback. Back-channel cues are the verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking and can consist of verbal cues like “uh-huh,” “oh,” and “right,” and/or nonverbal cues like direct eye contact, head nods, and leaning forward. Backchannel cues are generally a form of positive feedback that indicates others are actively listening. People also send cues intentionally and unintentionally that indicate they aren’t listening. If another person is looking away, fidgeting, texting, or turned away, we will likely interpret those responses negatively. Paraphrasing, which we will discuss in the Communication Competence section of this chapter, is a responding behavior that can also show that you understand what was communicated.

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To improve listening at the responding stage

- ask appropriate clarifying and follow-up questions and paraphrase information to check understanding,
- give responses that are relevant
- adapt your response to the communicator and the context
- use back-channel cues to show you are listening

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5.3: Listening Styles

Research finds that 40 percent of people have more than one preferred listening style, and that they choose a style based on the listening situation (Bodie & Villaume, 2003). Other research finds that people often still revert back to a single preferred style in times of emotional or cognitive stress, even if they know a different style of listening would be better (Worthington, 2003). In this section, we will cover the four types of listening styles: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented.

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People-Oriented Listeners

People-oriented listeners are concerned about the needs and feelings of others and may get distracted from a specific task or the content of a message in order to address feelings.

People-oriented listeners are concerned about the emotional states of others and listen with the purpose of offering support in interpersonal relationships. People-oriented listeners can be characterized as "supporters" who are caring and understanding. These listeners are sought out because they are known as people who will "lend an ear." They may or may not be valued for the advice they give, but what people often want is a good listener. This type of listening may be especially valuable in interpersonal communication involving emotional exchanges, as a person-oriented listener can create a space where people can make themselves vulnerable without fear of being cut off or judged.

Action-Oriented Listeners

Action-oriented listeners prefer well-organized, precise, and accurate information. They can become frustrated when they perceive messages to be unorganized or inconsistent, or a speaker to be "longwinded."

Action-oriented listeners focus on what action needs to take place in regards to a received message and try to formulate an organized way to initiate that action. These listeners are frustrated by disorganization, because it detracts from the possibility of actually doing something. Action-oriented listeners are problem solvers. This style of listening can be very effective when a task needs to be completed under time, budgetary, or other logistical constraints. One research study found that people prefer an action-oriented style of listening in professional contexts (Imhof, 2004). In other situations, such as interpersonal communication, action-oriented listening may be frustrating to the speaker as it comes off as the listener trying to "fix" or "solve" the other persons problems when all the speaker wants is someone to understand and/or validate what they are saying.

Content-Oriented Listeners

Content-oriented listeners are analytic and enjoy processing complex messages. They like in-depth information and like to learn about multiple sides of a topic or hear multiple perspectives on an issue. Their thoroughness can be difficult to manage if there are time constraints.

Content-oriented listeners like to listen to complex information and evaluate the content of a message, often from multiple perspectives, before drawing conclusions. These listeners can be thought of as "learners," and they also ask questions to solicit

more information to fill out their understanding of an issue. Content-oriented listeners often enjoy high perceived credibility because of their thorough, balanced, and objective approach to engaging with information.

Time-Oriented Listeners

Time-oriented listeners are concerned with completing tasks and achieving goals. They do not like information perceived as irrelevant and like to stick to a timeline. They may cut people off and make quick decisions (taking short cuts or cutting corners) when they think they have enough information.

Time-oriented listeners are more concerned about time limits and timelines than they are with the content or senders of a message. These listeners tend to actually verbalize the time constraints under which they are operating. For example, a time-oriented supervisor may say the following to an employee who has just entered his office and asked to talk: “Sure, I can talk, but I only have about five minutes.” These listeners may also exhibit nonverbal cues that indicate time and/or attention shortages, such as looking at a clock, phone, avoiding eye contact, or nonverbally trying to close down an interaction. Time-oriented listeners are also more likely to interrupt others, which may make them seem insensitive to emotional/personal needs.

People often get action-oriented and time-oriented listeners confused. Action-oriented listeners would be happy to get to a conclusion or decision quickly if they perceive that they are acting on well-organized and accurate information. They would, however, not mind taking longer to reach a conclusion when dealing with a complex topic, and they would delay making a decision if the information presented to them didn’t meet their standards of organization.

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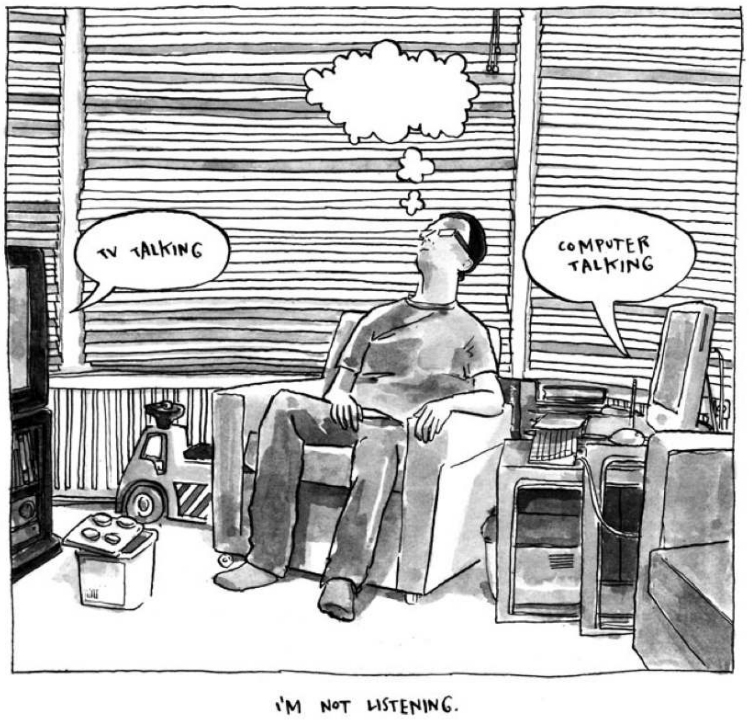
5.4: Barriers to Listening

Barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process (Hargie, 2011). In this section, we will explore how environmental and physical factors, cognitive and personal factors, prejudices, and bad listening practices present barriers to effective listening.

Environmental and Physical Barriers to Listening



(

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Environmental factors linked to the physical context, such as lighting, temperature, and furniture, affect our ability to listen. A room that is too dark can make us sleepy, just as a room that is too warm or cool can raise awareness of our physical discomfort to a point that it is distracting. Some seating arrangements facilitate listening, while others separate people. In general, listening is easier when listeners can make direct eye contact with and are in close physical proximity to a speaker. The ability to effectively see and hear a person increases people's confidence in their abilities to receive and process information. Eye contact and physical proximity can still be affected by noise. Environmental noises such as a whirring air conditioner, barking dogs, or a ringing fire alarm can obviously interfere with listening despite direct lines of sight and well-placed furniture.

Cognitive and Personal Barriers to Listening

Physiological noise linked to the individual context, can also interfere with our ability to process incoming information. This is considered a physical barrier to effective listening because it emanates from our physical body. Physiological noise is noise stemming from a physical illness or injury.

Another type of noise that is part of the individual context, psychological noise, bridges physical and cognitive barriers to effective listening. Psychological noise, or noise stemming from our psychological states including moods and level of arousal, can facilitate or impede listening. Any mood or state of arousal, positive or negative, that is too far above or below our regular baseline creates a barrier to message reception and processing. The generally positive emotional state of being in love can be just as much of a barrier as feeling hatred.

Cognitive limits and personal concerns can interfere with our ability to listen. Whether you call it multitasking, daydreaming, glazing over, or drifting off, we all cognitively process other things while receiving messages. If you think of your listening mind as

a wall of ten televisions, you may notice that in some situations five of the ten televisions are tuned into one channel. If that one channel is a lecture being given by your professor, then you are exerting about half of your cognitive processing abilities on one message. In another situation, all ten televisions may be on different channels.

Personal concerns are often the focus of competing thoughts that can take us away from listening and challenge our ability to concentrate on others' messages. Two common barriers to concentration are self-centeredness and lack of motivation (Brownell, 1993). For example, when our self-consciousness is raised, we may be too busy thinking about how we look, how we're sitting, or what others think of us to be attentive to an incoming message. Additionally, we are often challenged when presented with messages that we do not find personally relevant. In general, we employ selective attention, which refers to our tendency to pay attention to the messages that benefit us in some way and filter others out.

Bad Messages and/or Speakers

Bad messages also present a barrier to effective listening. Sometimes our trouble listening originates in the sender. In terms of message construction, poorly structured messages or messages that are too vague, too jargon filled, or too simple can present listening difficulties. In terms of speakers' delivery, verbal fillers, monotone voices, distracting movements, or a disheveled appearance can inhibit our ability to cognitively process a message (Hargie, 2011). Listening also becomes difficult when a speaker tries to present too much information.

Prejudice

Unfortunately, some of our default ways of processing information and perceiving others lead us to rigid ways of thinking. When we engage in prejudiced listening, we are usually trying to preserve our ways of thinking and avoid being convinced of something different. This type of prejudice is a barrier to effective listening, because when we prejudge a person based on their identity or ideas, we usually stop listening in an active and/or ethical way. We exhibit prejudice in our listening in several ways, some of which are more obvious than others. For example, we may claim to be in a hurry and only selectively address the parts of a message that we agree with or that aren't controversial. We can also operate from a state of denial where we avoid a subject or person altogether so that our views are not challenged. Prejudices that are based on a person's identity, such as race, age, occupation, or appearance, may lead us to assume that we know what they will say, essentially closing down the listening process.

Bad Listening Practices

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

- **Interrupting:**
  Conversations unfold as a series of turns and turn taking is negotiated through a complex set of verbal and nonverbal signals that are consciously and subconsciously received. In this sense, conversational turn taking has been likened to a dance where communicators try to avoid stepping on each other's toes. One of the most frequent glitches in the turn-taking process is interruption, but not all interruptions are considered "bad listening." Sometimes interruptions are more like overlapping statements that show support (e.g., "I think so, too.") or excitement about the conversation (e.g., "That's so cool!"). Back-channel cues like "uh-huh" also overlap with a speaker's message. We may also interrupt out of necessity if we're engaged in a task with the other person and need to offer directions (e.g., "Turn left here."), instructions (e.g., "Will you whisk the eggs?"), or warnings (e.g., "Look out behind you!"). All these interruptions are not typically thought of as evidence of bad listening unless they become distracting for the speaker or are unnecessary.
- **Distorted Listening:**
  Distorted listening occurs in many ways. Sometimes we just get the order of information wrong, which can have relatively little negative effects if we are casually recounting a story, annoying effects if we forget the order of turns (left, right, left or right, left, right?) in our driving directions, or very negative effects if we recount the events of a crime out of order, which leads to faulty testimony at a criminal trial. Rationalization is another form of distorted listening through which we adapt, edit, or skew incoming information to fit our existing schemata. We may, for example, reattribute the cause of something to better suit our own beliefs. If a professor is explaining to a student why he earned a "D" on his final paper, the student could reattribute the cause from "I didn't follow the paper guidelines" to "this professor is an unfair grader." Sometimes we actually change the words we hear to make them better fit what we are thinking. This can easily happen if we join a conversation late, overhear part of a conversation, or are being a lazy listener and miss important setup and context.
- **Response Preparation:**
  Response preparation refers to our tendency to rehearse what we are going to say next while a speaker is still talking. Rehearsal of what we will say once a speaker's turn is over is an important part of the listening process that takes place between the recalling and evaluation and/or the evaluation and responding stage. Rehearsal becomes problematic when response preparation begins as someone is receiving a message and hasn't had time to engage in interpretation or recall. In this sense, we are listening with the goal of responding instead of with the goal of understanding, which can lead us to miss important information that could influence our response.

- **Pseudo-listening:**
  Pseudo-listening is behaving as if you're paying attention to a speaker when you're actually not (McCornack, 2007). Outwardly visible signals of attentiveness are an important part of the listening process, but when they are just an "act," the pseudo-listener is engaging in bad listening behaviors. They are not actually going through the stages of the listening process and will likely not be able to recall the speaker's message or offer a competent and relevant response. Although it is a bad listening practice, we all understandably engage in pseudo-listening from time to time. If a friend needs to talk but you're really tired or experiencing some other barrier to effective listening, it may be worth engaging in pseudo-listening as a relational maintenance strategy, especially if the friend just needs a sounding board and isn't expecting advice or guidance. We may also pseudo-listen to a romantic partner or grandfather's story for the fifteenth time to prevent hurting their feelings.

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Do you think having technology present in your interactions affects your ability to fully listen to others?

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5.5: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover techniques for better listening, address cultural and co-co-cultural influences on our listening, and discuss the importance of listening in our relationships.

Effective Communication: Paraphrasing

One way to help you become a more effective listener is to paraphrase what the other person is saying. When you paraphrase information, you rephrase the message into your own words. Paraphrasing is a useful communication skill for a variety of reasons. It helps verify your understanding of the speaker's message which aids in creating shared meaning, forces you to actively listen to others, and likewise demonstrates that you are listening. We can paraphrase in three different ways: by rephrasing and reflecting back the content/denotative meaning of the message, the feelings behind the message, or both.

To paraphrase you need to:

1. Listen to what the speaker is saying
2. Pay attention to the speaker's nonverbal cues and the emotion(s) you think they are conveying
3. Determine what both the verbal and nonverbal message(s) mean to you
4. Rephrase the meaning verbal and/or nonverbal message in your own words

Lead ins to start a paraphrase

- It sounds like…
- It seems like…
- My interpretation of…
- So what you're saying…
- Are you saying…
- So you think that…
- What I'm hearing is…

Avoid stating your paraphrase like a fact or putting words in the speaker's mouth. Instead, use a questioning tone of voice and a lead-in statement. For example, you might say the following to start off a paraphrased response: "What I heard you say was…" or "It seems like you're saying…" You can also ask clarifying questions to get more information. It is often a good idea to pair a paraphrase with a question to keep a conversation flowing. For example, you might pose the following paraphrase and question pair: "It seems like you believe you were treated unfairly. Is that right?" Or you might ask a standalone question like "What did your boss do that made you think he was 'playing favorites?'" Make sure to paraphrase and/or ask questions after a person's turn is over, because interrupting can also be interpreted as a sign of not listening. Paraphrasing is also a good tool to use in computer-mediated communication, especially since miscommunication can occur due to a lack of nonverbal and other contextual cues.

Paraphrasing Example:

Other's Message: "So I've been working hard on revising my English paper. I spent an entire week working on it and thought the changes I made really improved my explanations. Well, yesterday I stopped by and got the paper back from my professor, they told me they didn't really see much of an improvement from the original version."

Content Paraphrase	Feelings Paraphrase	Combination Paraphrase
"So it sounds like thought you had provided more depth and detail to your explanations, but your professor didn't notice?"	"You seem really frustrated that your professor didn't notice the changes you made?"	"So your professor told you that they didn't notice the work you had done? No wonder you sound so frustrated!"

Contextual Communication: Cultural and Co-cultural Influence on Listening

Understanding some contextual variations in listening can help us become more competent communicators. In particular, contextual nuances due to culture and co-culture can influence the importance placed on listening and how people listen.

- **Listening and Culture:**

Some cultures place more importance on listening than other cultures. In general, collectivistic cultures tend to value listening more than individualistic cultures that are more speaker oriented. The value placed on verbal and nonverbal meaning also varies by culture and influences how we communicate and listen. A low-context communication style is one in which much of the meaning generated within an interaction comes from verbal communication rather than nonverbal or contextual cues. Conversely, much of the meaning generated by a high-context communication style comes from nonverbal and contextual cues (Lustig & Koester, 2006). For example, U.S. Americans of European descent generally use a low-context communication style, while people in East Asian and Latin American cultures use a high-context communication style. Contextual communication styles affect listening in many ways. Cultures with a high-context orientation generally use less verbal communication and value silence as a form of communication, which requires listeners to pay close attention to nonverbal signals and consider contextual influences on a message. Cultures with a low-context orientation must use more verbal communication and provide explicit details, since listeners aren't expected to derive meaning from the context. Note that people from low-context cultures may feel frustrated by the ambiguity of speakers from high-context cultures, while speakers from high-context cultures may feel overwhelmed or even insulted by the level of detail used by low-context communicators.

- **Listening and Co-culture:**

Much of the research on listening focuses on co-cultural identities based on gender, and this research has produced mixed results. As we've already learned, much of the research on gender differences and communication has been influenced by gender stereotypes and falsely connected to biological differences. More recent research has found that people communicate in ways that conform to gender stereotypes in some situations and not in others, which shows that our communication is more influenced by societal expectations than by innate or gendered "hard-wiring." For example, through socialization, men are generally discouraged from expressing emotions in public. A woman sharing an emotional experience with a man may perceive the man's lack of emotional reaction as a sign of inattentiveness, especially if he typically shows more emotion during private interactions. The man, however, may be listening but withholding nonverbal expressiveness because of social norms. He may not realize that withholding those expressions could be seen as a lack of empathetic or active listening.

Reflective Communication: Listening and Relationships

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Our ability to listen to others, or not, has implications for the overall relationship satisfaction.

It's important to reflect on how you listen to others as it plays a central role in maintaining our relationships (Nelson-Jones, 2006), can influence relationship satisfaction, and impacts self-esteem. Listening to others provides a psychological reward, through the simple act of recognition that helps maintain our relationships. Listening to our relational partners and being listened to in return is part of the give-and-take of any interpersonal relationship. Our thoughts and experiences "back up" inside of us and getting them out helps us maintain a positive balance (Nelson, Jones, 2006). Something as routine and seemingly pointless as listening to our romantic partner debrief the events of their day or our roommate recount their weekend back home shows that we are taking an interest in their lives and are willing to put our own needs and concerns aside for a moment to attend to their needs. Listening also plays an important role in conflict. A lack of listening can often create or intensify conflict while effective listening helps us resolve it.

Listening has relational implications throughout our lives, too. Parents who engage in competent listening behaviors with their children from a very young age make their children feel worthwhile and appreciated, which affects their development in terms of personality and character (Nichols, 1995). A lack of listening leads to feelings of loneliness, which results in lower self-esteem and higher degrees of anxiety. In fact, by the age of four or five years old, the empathy and recognition shown by the presence or lack of listening has molded children's personalities in noticeable ways (Nichols, 1995). Children who have been listened to grow up expecting that others will be available and receptive to them. These children are therefore more likely to interact confidently with teachers, parents, and peers in ways that help develop communication competence that will be built on throughout their lives. Children who have not been listened to may come to expect that others will not want to listen to them, which leads to a lack of opportunities to practice, develop, and hone foundational communication skills.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Emotions

Have you ever been at a movie and let out a bellowing laugh and snort only to realize no one else is laughing? Have you ever gotten uncomfortable when someone cries in class or in a public place? Emotions are clearly personal because they often project what we're feeling on the inside to those around us, whether we want it to show or not. Emotions are also interpersonal in that another person's show of emotion usually triggers a reaction from us—perhaps support if the person is a close friend or awkwardness if the person is a stranger. Emotions are central to any interpersonal relationship, and it's important to know what causes and influences emotions so we can better understand and express our own emotions and better respond to others when they display emotions. In this chapter, we will discuss the dimensions of emotions, perspectives on emotions, and ways to more effectively understand, express, and respond to emotions. We will also explore some contextual considerations, and reflect on the impact of our own emotional expression.

Learning Objectives

- What is the relationship between emotions and interpersonal communication?
- How can we express and respond to emotions effectively?

Successful students will be able to:

- recognize dimensions of emotions
- identify perspective on emotions
- demonstrate skills of understanding, expressing and responding to emotions
- explain how culture influences emotional expressions
- recognize several ways emotional expression affects us, others and our relationships

6.1: Communication Competence
6.2: Defining Emotions
6.3: Perspective on Emotions

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6.1: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover techniques for understanding, expressing, and validating emotions, address contextual nuances surrounding emotional expression, and discuss ways in which our emotional expressions affect us and our relationships with others.

Effective Communication: Understanding, Expressing, and Validating Emotions

The notion of emotional intelligence emerged in the early 1990s and has received much attention in academic scholarship, business, education, and the popular press. Emotional intelligence "involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action" (Salovey, Woolery, & Mayer, 2001). As the definition of emotional intelligence states, we must then use the results of that cognitive process to guide our thoughts and actions. Just as we are likely to engage in emotion-sharing following an emotional event, we are also likely to be on the receiving end of that sharing. In order to better achieve your communication goals, it's important to cultivate emotional intelligence. In the following subsections, we will provide strategies that will enable you to better understand and express your own emotions, as well as respond to the emotions of others

Understanding Emotions

Before we can communicate our emotions to others, we first need to understand what we are feeling and why we are feeling that way. Here are some suggestions we can use to better understand our emotions:

Accept your feelings.
Before we can do anything else, we have to recognize and accept that we are going to have a wide range of feelings throughout our lives, and that there is nothing wrong with this. At their outset, feelings are not right or wrong; they just exist. When we feel something, we need not be angry or worried. Instead, we can think, "I am feeling this way, and that is acceptable."

Recognize how the body is reacting to your feelings.
Feelings are driven by emotions, which are controlled by our brain. We need to take note of our physiological responses when we feel something as this will help us to better cultivate emotional intelligence. For example, we might sweat when we feel scared, our face might become warm when we are embarrassed, and our heart might race when we are angry. Keying into our bodily responses will help us recognize feelings as they come.[1]

Understand the basic emotions and learn the vocabulary of feelings.
There are eight basic human emotions: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy. It is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary as it can be hard to understand and likewise express what we are feeling when we do not have the words to do so. Consider consulting an emotional vocabulary chart, such as the one provided in section 9.1.1, to get a sense of the wide variety of things we might be feeling. Attending to a wide range of possible labels for emotion actually lends nuance and richness to our understanding of the feelings we experience in a given situation (Lindquist, MacCormack, & Shablack, 2015). Using nuanced labels can also influence the way our emotions are perceived by others when we communicate them.

Ask yourself what you are feeling and why you are feeling a certain way.
Cognitive psychologists assert that our feelings are caused by our thoughts or beliefs. It's not often we examine and bring attention to these beliefs. Doing so can help us better understand ourselves, and later generate more productive expressions of feeling. Here is a series of questions we can ask ourselves to get at the root of what we are feeling: What am I feeling? Why am I feeling this way? If the feeling is in response to another's behavior(s)- how do I interpret that behavior and/or why does it bother me? For example, What? "I feel like I am going to cry. Why? Because I am mad at my boss. Why? Because he offended me. Why? Because he does not respect me." We need to keep going with the series of "why" questions until we reach the bottom-line thoughts that underlie our feelings.[4]

Look for irrational or distorted thoughts.
Before expressing your emotions to others, and in the interest of better managing negative emotions, you might consider examining them for rationality. Doing so will help you put another rung in your ladder of emotional intelligence. Psychologist Albert Ellis identified a number of dysfunctional beliefs people hold that can lead to unnecessary suffering. Therapists all over the world help their patients identify and work with these beliefs to decrease distress. Among these are the following:
• "I must have the approval of others in order to feel good."

• “Other people must behave the way I want them to.”
• “Life should be easy and free of suffering.”

Ellis posited that these thoughts are unrealistic and can lead to struggle, making us feel “stuck.” With awareness, though, the thoughts can–over time—be replaced with more rational beliefs that lead to healthy functioning. Ask yourself if your negative emotions fit with any of these irrational beliefs. If so, try to reframe the beliefs and repeat them to yourself frequently. Such a practice can help you process and own your emotions before you blame them on others, which could end up having an unintentional but negative (and sometimes even irreversible) effect on your relationships.

Expressing Emotions:

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Understanding our emotions is a key component of emotional intelligence. However, it is also important to know how to effectively communicate those emotions with others. Effectively communicating our emotions has two parts: planning and expressing:

PLANNING

Identify what emotion(s) you want to communicate.
In some situations, we may be feeling several different emotions. Communicating a certain emotion could have either a positive or negative effect on the relationship, so it’s helpful to put some forethought into which ones you want to share. Take some time to consider what you type of conversation you want to have, and what you might hope to get out of it. For example, if your partner has recently been spending time with another person, we may feel resentment and anger, but we might also feel lonely and jealous. In this situation, you could choose to express any of the emotions you feel. However, each will probably take you in a different conversational direction. Disclosing anger might evoke defensiveness. Disclosing jealousy might be perceived as insecurity. Disclosing loneliness might open you up to vulnerability. Remember, referring to an emotional vocabulary chart might help you see a range of options you haven’t considered. Whatever you decide, be honest and know that conversations about emotions are often difficult but can also ultimately lead to greater relational outcomes.

Understand why you want to communicate the emotion(s).
Before we express our emotions, it’s a good idea to think about our communication goal. In other words, consider what you hope will happen as a result of your expression. Communication goals for expressing emotions may include venting, validation, affirmation, seeking support, etc. Or we may want a specific result from communicating that emotion. For example, if we feel hurt that a friend has been canceling plans with us and we may want to express this so that they don’t continue to do so. When seeking a specific result, we need to make sure to take the time to identify our preferred solution beforehand.

Think about where, when, and how you want to communicate your emotions.
This is an important part of how our expression will be interpreted by the other person, and could affect how they will react and

respond. Consider the physical location of your expression Would it be best in a crowded bar? A park? A family dinner? Additionally, consider the timing of the disclosure. If we are feeling hurt that our romantic partner did not get us a birthday card, we may not want to express this immediately after they come home from a stressful day at work or right before an important meeting. We also need to consider the intensity of our own emotions in choosing appropriate timing. Confronting someone when feeling rage is probably not a good idea. Take time to calm down, breathe, and examine underlying thoughts before we express ourselves. The old saying "never go to bed angry" is out of touch with emotional intelligence. Sometimes sleeping off anger and letting time reduce the intensity of negative emotions is exactly what's needed before we say something we might regret. Finally, we need to consider how we are going to express our emotions, as in whether it would be best as a face-to-face interaction or via a mediated communication platform, such as text messaging.

EXPRESSING

Take ownership of your feelings and use "I" language.

Using "I" language describes our own feelings and reactions, and acknowledges ownership of them. Compare this to "you" messages, which negatively evaluate the other person's behavior and places the blame on them. Consider the difference between "I feel worried when I don't hear right back from you" vs. "You always ignore me!" Beware of starting off with an "I" statement and switching over to a "you" message, as this negates the purpose of using "I" language in the first place. For example, "I feel like you are neglecting me" is not really an "I" message expressing your own emotional reaction. It is, instead, a negative evaluation of another's behavior. "You" statements such as "you make me feel…" places the blame for your feelings on the other and is likely to cause defensiveness. Instead, rephrase statements to so that they convey your own feelings, as in "I feel lonely when we don't hang out together" or "I feel anxious because decisions aren't being made." Often times, people do not mean to intentionally cause us to experience a negative emotion with their actions, so it is likely to be more effective if we take responsibility for how we are decoding and interpreting the actions of others.

Describe the emotion(s), what behavior caused the emotion(s), and the 'why' of the emotion(s):

- **The emotion(s):** Explicitly state the emotion(s) you are experiencing. The more specific we can be, the more likely the other will understand what we are feeling. Here, it is important to have a rich and nuanced emotional vocabulary to better understand and express these emotions to others as emotions can be mild, moderate, or intense. For example, consider the difference between the terms sad, melancholy, and despondent.
- **The behavior:** Just as it is important to be able to describe the specific emotion, it is likewise important to describe the specific behavior(s) that triggered that emotion. For example, if our roommate leaves dirty dishes on the kitchen counter we may feel annoyed. When describing the behavior, we should state only what we've observed, objectively and specifically, and not in an evaluative or accusatory manner. "Leaving dirty dishes in the kitchen" is an appropriate way to describe behavior, whereas "acting like a jerk" is an evaluation of that behavior, and not very conducive to productive interactions. Instead we could say "I feel annoyed when dirty dishes are left in the kitchen" versus "I feel annoyed when you act like a jerk." The latter statement also contains a "you" statement versus an "I" statement.
- **The why:** Finally, it's useful if we include a why in our "I" statement. Consider expressing a reason for why the behavior bothers us and leads to our particular emotional reaction? The why offers an explanation, interpretation, effect, or consequence of the behavior. One example might be "I feel annoyed when dirty dishes are left around the kitchen because it attracts cockroaches." When describing the why, attempt to avoid "you" language. For example, saying "I feel sad when our plans are broken because you are neglecting me" still inserts that problematic "you," which suggests blame and could lead to defensiveness. Instead, consider something like "I feel sad when our plans are broken because I want to spend more time together."

"You" can easily creep into all three parts of an "I" message, and can be tricky to avoid at first, so you may want to mentally rehearse or even write down what you plan to say. Also, it is a good idea to repeat the statement back to yourself and think about how you might respond if someone said they exact same thing to you in a similar situation. If it would cause you to react negatively or defensively, revise your statement.

You might find that, in some situations, avoiding "you" may not be productive. At times, it might be useful to share the thoughts we attach to another person's behavior. We can share our perspective by using a phrase such as "I took it to mean…" In this case, "you" might show up in your interpretation. However, you can reduce the potential for defensiveness by using language that

reflects tentativeness and ownership. An example of this is “I’m confused about the dishes being left because it seems out of the norm for you, and I’m wondering if there’s some sort of message in this.” Another example might be “I get frustrated when the dishes are left on the counter because I remember talking about this before and I feel like I’m not being heard.” We will learn more about language and actions that contribute to and reduce defensiveness in the next chapter, Chapter 10: Communication Climate.

Respect the other’s emotional reaction and boundaries.
When we share our emotions with others, expect them to likewise have an emotional reaction to what we disclose. Sometimes people may behave defensively, or become angry, or upset. While “I” messages are useful in helping reduce these negative reactions, it doesn’t always eliminate them. The other person may also experience emotions such as concern, confusion, uncertainty, etc., and may not know how to convey what they are feeling or how to respond. While we may have had the time and forethought to analyze our emotions and plan out what to say, others may not have had this opportunity, and may need some additional time to process the message. In situations like this, it is best to be patient and work to keep your own emotional reactions in check. In addition, listening to and responding to the emotions of others can make some people extremely uncomfortable, so it’s necessary to respect their emotional boundaries.

Responding to Emotions

WHAT NOT TO SAY WHEN SOMEONE'S FEELING DOWN.

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Another aspect of emotional intelligence is being able to appropriately respond to another’s emotions, in a way that offers support. One way we can offer emotional support when someone is experiencing a negative emotion (such sadness or anger) is to validate the emotion. Validating the emotions of others is useful because people experience relief when their emotions are recognized and understood by others. In the section below, we cover some guidelines for validating another person’s emotions:

DO

Engage in a people-oriented listening style.
In Chapter 7: Listening, we discussed the various listening styles: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented. A competent communicator changes style based on the context. As such, a people-oriented style that focuses on the speaker’s feelings—versus an action-oriented style that focuses on problem-solving—would likely be more helpful.

Normalize and validate their reaction.
We can normalize and validate a person’s feelings by indicating that it is okay and understandable to feel a particular way. For example, we can say something like, “I think most people in that situation would feel that way.” This shows that we think their reactions are reasonable and acknowledges the person’s right to be experiencing their emotions. Try some of the following:[7] “It’s okay to be squeamish about your flu shot. Nobody likes those.” “Of course you’re worried about asking your boss for a promotion.

This sort of thing is scary for everyone." "You've been dealing with a lot of stress lately- no wonder you don't feel like going out today."

Help them elaborate on their feelings.
After someone has expressed themselves, we can help them elaborate a bit about what they're feeling and why. Paraphrases are useful in these situations. For example, we could say something like, "I imagine you're feeling pretty hurt?" Doing so will show the person their feelings matter to us and that we are trying to understand them, as well as helping them further explore and understand their own emotions.[5]

Acknowledge personal history.
We can also help by acknowledging how the person's history affects their emotions. This can be especially helpful if someone is worried they're being irrational or unreasonable. While the person may be reacting in a way that seems over-the-top, we can help them understand they're still allowed to feel their feelings. Try things like the following:[8] "Given how Pat treated you, I totally understand why you'd want to take a break from dating. That's a lot to recover from." "After that wreck you were in last week, I can see why you'd be hesitant to get back behind the wheel."

Help the person re-frame/re-appraise the situation.
After validating someone's emotions, it can be useful to help them re-frame or re-appraise the situation. When we do this, we provide information or observations that they may have missed, and we can offer another perspective or opinion. This encourages the speaker to try to see the situation in a different light. For example, if a friend is upset because their romantic partner has been spending less time with them and they are worried the other is losing interest in the relationship, we may offer an observation that their partner may just be busier than normal due to the promotion they just received.

AVOID

Avoid correcting someone's thoughts or telling them how to feel.
Avoid the tendency to attempt to correct someone's thoughts or feelings, especially when they are upset. If someone is being irrational, we may be inclined to try to talk them out of it. However, this can come off as negating the person's feelings, as in the example, "That's not something that's worth getting angry about." In addition, telling someone to "calm down" may imply they are being irrational, may invalidate their feelings, and/or may come off as you trying to tell them how to feel. Also, it's okay to disagree with someone, and we can acknowledge emotions and feelings without directly agreeing with someone's message or behavior. Instead, we can say something like, "I understand why that would make you angry."

Avoid giving unsolicited advice.
Many times, when people tell us about a problem, they just want to be heard. Before you say something like "just ignore them" or "look on the bright side," stop and listen more closely to what they are saying, and focus on sympathizing first. Listening is an important first step to helping others. After listening and acknowledging feelings we can ask if and/or how we can help. Sometimes it can be unclear whether or not someone wants our help or advice, so we can simply ask "Are you coming to me for advice, or would you just like to vent?"

Avoid blaming.
Blaming someone for their feelings, especially when they're very upset, may come off as suggesting their feelings are not valid. You may want to avoid responses such as these:[11] "Whining about it isn't going to make it any better. Man up and deal with it." "You're overreacting." "So you decided to be mad at your best friend. How's that working for you?" "Well, maybe he wouldn't have treated you that way if you hadn't been wearing such a short skirt."

Avoid trying to "hoover" their feelings.
Hoovering means vacuuming up any unpleasant feelings and pretending they aren't there.[12] Examples include:[13]"Oh, it's not so bad." "It's not a big deal." "Let's stay positive." "Just toughen up." "Look on the bright side."

Avoid trying to fix their feelings.
Sometimes we may try to help our loved ones stop hurting simply because we don't want them to be upset. While well-intended, it usually doesn't help them feel better long-term, and they may feel like it is their fault for still being unhappy after our efforts.[14]

Instead, we can help by listening to the whole story and validating their feelings along the way. Then, we can ask how we can help or offer to brainstorm solutions. If helping them brainstorm, we should be conscious that we aren't telling them what to do. We can also phrase things to show that we are speaking for ourselves or from our own experience. We can do this by beginning our statements with phrases like, "For me," "In my experience," and "Personally." For example, "In my experience, it's best to let go of someone who doesn't want to be in my life. I'd rather spend time with the people who matter, like you."

Contextual Communication: Emotional Rules and Norms are influenced by the Context

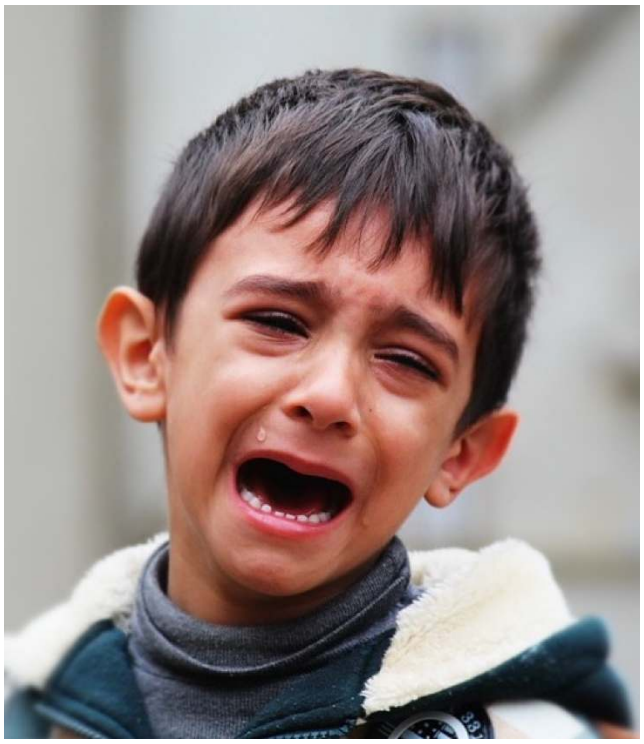
Whether you are expressing your emotions or trying to understand and respond to the emotions of others, emotions, like all communication, are contextual. Physical context can play a key role in what type of emotion is appropriate to display. For example, it may be okay to cry at a funeral, but not in the workplace. The relationship we have with another person can also shape what should or shouldn't be expressed. You probably should not share private emotions with a complete stranger while waiting in line at the grocery store and instead reserve those for people with whom you are close. Individuals also have different personalities and life experiences, so they vary in terms of what emotions they are comfortable expressing and how they interpret the behaviors of others.

While all contexts are important, two in particular shape the expression of emotions in significant ways: culture and co-culture

Culture

While our shared evolutionary past dictates some universal similarities in emotions, emotional triggers and norms for displaying emotions vary widely. Certain emotional scripts that we follow are culturally situated and affect our day to day interactions. Display rules are cultural norms that influence emotional expression. Display rules influence who can express emotions, which emotions can be expressed, where they can be expressed, and how intense the expressions can be. In individualistic cultures, where personal experience and self-determination are values built into cultural practices and communication, expressing emotions is viewed as a personal right. In collectivistic cultures, emotions are viewed as more interactional and less individual, which ties them into social context rather than into an individual right to free expression. An expression of emotion reflects on the family and cultural group rather than only on the individual. Therefore, emotional displays are more controlled, because maintaining group harmony and relationships is a primary cultural value, which is very different from the more individualistic notion of having the right to get something off your chest.

Cultural norms can also dictate which types of emotions can be expressed. In individualistic cultures, especially in the United States, there is a cultural expectation that people will exhibit positive emotions. People seek out happy situations and communicate positive emotions even when they do not necessarily feel positive emotions. Being positive implicitly communicates that you have achieved your personal goals, have a comfortable life, and have a healthy inner self (Mesquita & Albert, 2007). This cultural predisposition to express positive emotions is not universal. The people who live on the Pacific islands of Ifaluk do not encourage the expression of happiness, because they believe it will lead people to neglect their duties (Mesquita & Albert, 2007).



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Emotional display rules vary based on co-cultural factors. Phrases like “Boys don’t cry” highlight how norms that have been socially constructed for emotional expression based on gender.

Co-Culture

While emotional display rules exist for larger cultural groups, they can also vary based on co-cultural factors, like gender identity. In the U.S. many norms have been socially constructed for emotional expression based on whether you present yourself as a man or woman. It is a common misconception that males do not (or should not) feel emotions and that females are ‘overly emotional.’ Biological sex has no influence on our ability to experience a particular emotion. Gender is socially constructed, so our emotional expressions are based on the gendered scripts and norms we are given to follow. “Boys don’t cry” is one obvious example. Girls are likewise encouraged to express positive emotions by constantly being told things such as “you should smile more” or “you would look prettier if you smiled.”

In addition, the way an emotional expression is perceived by others is influenced by our gender identity. For example, if a female is not overly emotionally expressive they may be perceived as cold, or if they express anger they may be labeled a ‘bitch.’ Conversely, men may be called weak if they cry or ‘pussy-whipped’ if they express too much love and devotion in a relationship. Emotions such as jealousy may be romanticized and interpreted as ‘caring’ or ‘protective’ when exhibited by men, but may be construed as ‘clingy’ or ‘insecure’ for women.

Reflective Communication: Emotions Can Affect Us, Others, and Our Relationships

Emotional competence entails thinking about the potential effects of particular emotional expressions. Specifically, what we choose to express (or not to) may affect our own emotional well-being, the perception others may have of us, and our relationships with others.

How Emotions Affect Us

Expressing emotions can have important effects on our well-being, depending on how and with whom we share our emotions. Emotions convey information about our needs; negative emotions can signal that a need has not been met and positive emotions can signal that it has been meet. In some contexts, conveying this information can have a negative impact. For example, a person may choose to ignore or exploit our needs after we’ve disclosed an emotion.[30]

Researchers note that there are numerous important benefits to expressing emotions selectively. In the case of distress, expression can help us take control of our emotions and facilitate meaning-making to help better reappraise our situation. For instance,

emotional expression through writing can help us better understand our feelings, and subsequently regulate our emotions or adjust our actions.[31] In addition, sharing our emotions with others can cause relief and inner satisfaction.

While expressing emotions has implications for how we feel, emotional expression can also influence how others see us, both positively and negatively. Individuals who inappropriately express emotions like anger or jealousy may be perceived as irrational. Individuals who express negative emotions, in particular, may also appear less likeable as a result.[33]

How Our Emotions Affect Others:

We should also be aware that our expressions of emotion are infectious due to emotional contagion, or the spreading of emotion from one person to another (Hargie, 2011). Think about a time when someone around you got the giggles and you couldn't help but laugh along with them, even if you didn't know what was funny. While those experiences can be uplifting, the other side of emotional contagion can be unpleasant. For example, if someone constantly interjects depressing comments into the happy dialogue, it can change the mood of the conversation. We've probably all worked with someone or had that family member who can't seem to say anything positive, and this can cause frustration and annoyance.

How Emotions Affect Relationships

Emotional expression has implications for our relationships as well. Our social bonds are enhanced through emotion sharing because the support we receive from our relational partners increases our sense of closeness and interdependence. When someone responds to our emotional expressions with empathy and validation, our relationship with that person can improve. Additionally, emotional expression to someone else can be viewed as a form of disclosure and sign of trust with that person, thus promoting intimacy. Greater expression of emotions or willingness to express negative emotions, such as anxiety or fear, promotes the formation of more relationships, greater intimacy in those relationships, and more support from others.[30][33] Conversely, lack of sharing, lack of empathy, and invalidation of emotions can cause relationship dissatisfaction and even deterioration. Sharing our emotions may also be a necessary part of effective problem-solving and conflict management, a topic that will be covered in Chapter 11: Interpersonal Conflict.

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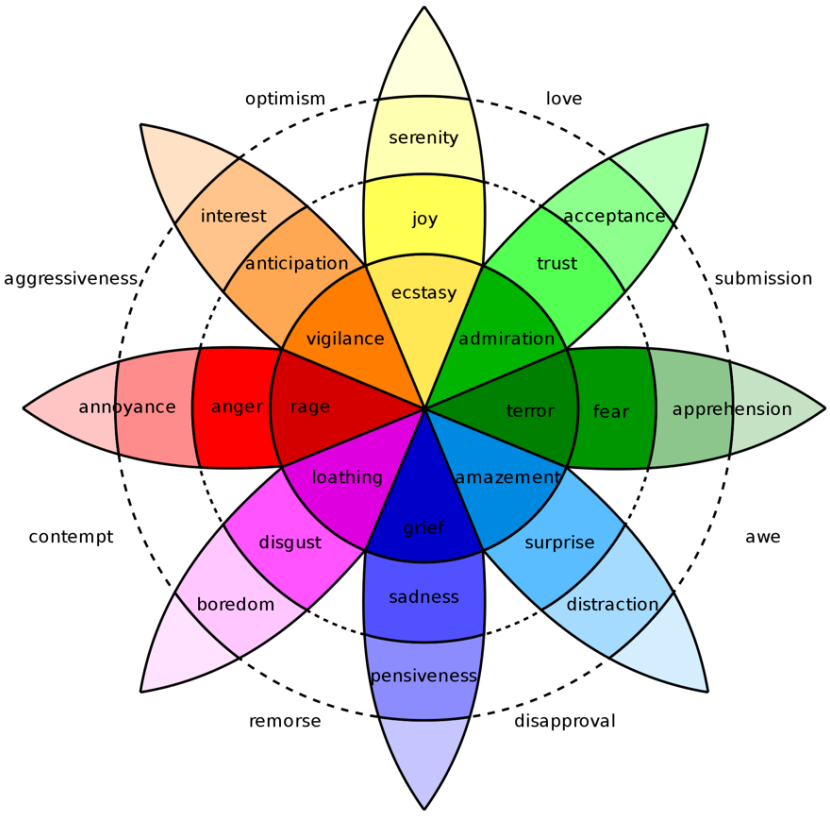
6.2: Defining Emotions

In this section, we will define emotions and explain the difference between two different types of emotions: primary and secondary.

Definition of Emotions and Types

Emotions are physiological, behavioral, and/or communicative reactions to stimuli that are cognitively processed and experienced as emotional (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). Emotions are often internally experienced through physiological changes such as increased heart rate, a tense stomach, or a cold chill. These physiological reactions may not be noticeable by others and are therefore intrapersonal unless we exhibit some change in behavior that clues others into our internal state or we verbally or nonverbally communicate our internal state. Sometimes our behavior is voluntary—we ignore someone, which may indicate we are angry with them—or involuntary—we fidget or avoid eye contact while talking because we are nervous.

When we communicate our emotions, we call attention to ourselves and provide information to others that may inform how they should react. For example, when someone we care about displays behaviors associated with sadness, we are likely to know that we need to provide support (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). We learn, through socialization, how to read and display emotions, although some people are undoubtedly better at reading emotions than others. However, as with most aspects of communication, we can all learn to become more competent with increased knowledge and by learning the difference between our primary and secondary emotions.



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Plutchik's wheel of emotions states there are eight primary emotions: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy. This model uses the color wheel as an analogy for emotions. Like colors, emotions have different intensities and can mix with one another.

- **Primary Emotions:**
  Primary emotions are innate emotions that are experienced for short periods of time and appear rapidly, usually as a reaction to

an outside stimulus, and are experienced similarly across cultures. The primary emotions are anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy.

- **Secondary Emotions:**
  Secondary emotions are not as innate as primary emotions, and they do not have a corresponding facial expression that makes them universally recognizable. Secondary emotions are processed by a different part of the brain that requires higher order thinking; therefore, they are not reflexive automatic. Secondary emotions are love, guilt, shame, embarrassment, pride, envy, and jealousy (Evans, 2001). These emotions develop over time, take longer to fade away, and are interpersonal because they are most often experienced in relation to real or imagined others. You can be fearful of the dark but feel guilty about an unkind comment made to your mother or embarrassed at the thought of doing poorly on a presentation in front of an audience.

Since these emotions require more processing, they are more easily influenced by thoughts and can be managed, which means we can become more competent communicators by becoming more aware of how we experience and express secondary emotions. Although there is more cultural variation in the meaning and expression of secondary emotions, they are still universal in that they are experienced by all cultures. It's hard to imagine what our lives would be like without emotions, and in fact many scientists believe we wouldn't be here without them.

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6.3: Perspective on Emotions

In this section, we will discuss the evolutionary function of emotions and how they are affected by social and cultural norms.

Perspectives on Emotions

Image: CCO

Attachment *theory posits that our relationship and interactions with our primary caregiver(s) will influence emotions and future interpersonal relationships.*

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

The fact that human beings were able to group together and create interpersonal bonds was a key element in the continuation and success of our species, and the ability to express emotions played a role in this success (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). For example, unlike other species, most of us are able to control our anger, and have the capacity for empathy. Emotional regulation can help manage conflict, and empathy allows us to share the emotional state of someone else, which increases an interpersonal bond. These capacities were important as early human society grew increasingly complex and people needed to cope as they lived with more and more people.

A dependable and nurturing caregiver helps establish a secure attachment style that will influence emotions and views of relationships in later life. Attachment theory ties into the evolutionary perspective because researchers claim that it is in our nature, as newborns, to create social bonds with our primary caretaker (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). This drive for attachment became innate through the process of evolution because early humans who were more successful at attachment were more likely to survive and reproduce—repeating the cycle. Attachment theory proposes that people develop one of the following three attachment styles as a result of interactions with early caretakers: secure, avoidant, or anxious attachment (Feeney, Noller, & Roverts, 2000). It is worth noting that much of the research on attachment theory has been based on some societal norms that are shifting. For example, although women for much of human history have played the primary caregiver role, men are increasingly taking on more caregiver responsibilities. Additionally, although the following examples presume that a newborn’s primary caregivers are his or her parents, it is also possible that extended family, foster parents, or others may play that role.

Individuals with a secure attachment style report that their relationship with their parents is warm, and that their parents also have a positive and caring relationship with each other. People with this attachment style are generally comfortable with intimacy, feel like

they can depend on others when needed, and have few self-doubts. As a result, they are generally more effective at managing their emotions, and they are less likely to experience intense negative emotions in response to a negative stimulus like breaking up with a romantic partner.

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

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

This process of attachment leads us to experience some of our first intense emotions, such as love, trust, joy, anxiety, or anger, and we learn to associate those emotions with closely bonded relationships (Planlap, Fitness, & Fehr, 2006). For example, the child who develops a secure attachment style and associates feelings of love and trust with forming interpersonal bonds will likely experience similar emotions as an adult entering into a romantic partnership. Conversely, a child who develops an anxious attachment style and associates feelings of anxiety and mistrust with forming interpersonal bonds will likely experience similar emotions in romantic relationships later in life. In short, our lifelong emotional tendencies are influenced by whether we form loving and secure bonds or unpredictable and insecure ones, which inevitably affects our relationships. Of course, later in life, we have more control over and conscious thoughts about this process. Although it seems obvious that developing a secure attachment style is the ideal scenario, it is also inevitable that not every child will have the same opportunity to do so. But while we do not have control over the style we develop as babies, we can exercise more control over our emotions and relationships as adults if we take the time to develop self-awareness and communication competence.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: The Perception Process and Perception of Others

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

Learning Objectives

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

Successful students will be able to:

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

7.1: The Perception Process
7.2: Perceiving Others
7.3: Perception- (Co)Culture and Personality
7.4: Communication Competence

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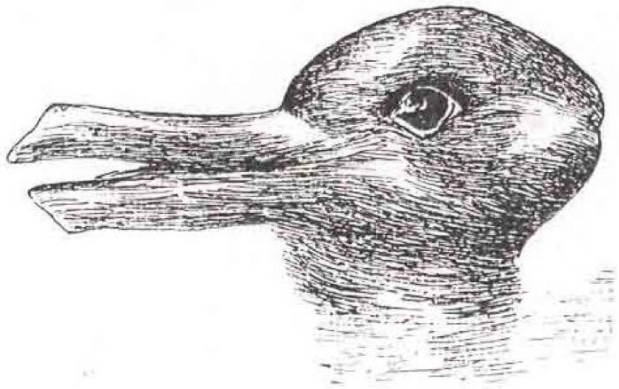
7.1: The Perception Process

Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This process includes the perception of select stimuli that pass through our perceptual filters, are organized into our existing structures and patterns, and are then interpreted based on previous experiences. Although perception is a largely cognitive and psychological process, how we perceive the people and objects around has an effect on our communication. We respond differently to an object or person that we perceive favorably than we do to something we find unfavorable. In this section, we discuss how we filter through the mass amounts of incoming stimuli we receive, organize it, and make meaning from it.



(Image: CC0 1.0)

When you look at this image do you see a rabbit or a duck? The way we view our environment and the world around us varies from person to person; sometimes quite significantly. However, even if someone sees something differently than you, it doesn't mean their perception is incorrect or not as valid as yours.

Selecting Information

We take in information through our senses, but our perceptual field (the world around us) includes so many stimuli that it is impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all. So, as information comes in through our senses, various factors influence what actually continues on through the perception process (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Selecting is the first part of the perception process, in which we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information. We tend to pay attention to information that is salient. Salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. The thing attracting our attention can be abstract, like a concept, or concrete, like an object. The degree of salience depends on three factors: visual and aural stimulation, needs and interests, and expectations (Fiske & Tayor, 1991).

- **Visual and Aural Stimulation:** It is probably not surprising to learn that visually and/or aurally stimulating things become salient in our perceptual field and get our attention. Stimuli can be attention-getting in a productive or distracting way. Creatures ranging from fish to hummingbirds are attracted to things like silver spinners on fishing poles or red and yellow bird feeders. Having our senses stimulated isn't always a positive thing though. Think about the couple that won't stop talking during the movie or the upstairs neighbor whose subwoofer shakes your ceiling at night.
- **Needs and Interests:** We select and attend to information that meets our needs- whether a sign helps us find the nearest gas station, the sound of a ringtone helps us find our missing cell phone, or a speaker tells us how avoiding processed foods will improve our health. We also find salient information that interests us. Of course, many times, stimuli that meet our needs are also interesting, but it's worth discussing these two items separately because sometimes we find things interesting that don't necessarily meet our needs. I'm sure we've all gotten sucked into a television show or random project and paid attention to that at the expense of something that actually meets our needs like cleaning. In many cases we know what interests us and we automatically gravitate toward stimuli that match up with that. For example, as you filter through radio stations, you likely already have an idea of what kind of music interests you and will stop on a station playing something in that genre while skipping right past stations playing something you aren't interested in.

- **Expectations:** The relationship between salience and expectations is a little more complex. Basically, we can find both expected and unexpected things salient. While this may sound confusing, a couple examples should illustrate this point. If you are expecting a package to be delivered, you might pick up on the slightest noise of a truck engine or someone's footsteps approaching your front door. Since we expect something to happen, we may be extra tuned in to clues that it is coming. In terms of the unexpected, if you have a shy and soft-spoken friend who you overhear raising the volume and pitch of his voice while talking to another friend, you may pick up on that and assume that something out of the ordinary is going on. For something unexpected to become salient, it has to reach a certain threshold of difference. If you walked into your regular class and there were one or two more students there than usual, you may not even notice. If you walked into your class and there was someone dressed up as a wizard, you would probably notice. Now that we know how we select stimuli, let's turn our attention to how we organize the information we receive.

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When we take in information through our senses, visually and aurally attractive stimuli tend to get our attention and become more salient in our perceptual field.

Organizing Information

Organizing is the second part of the perception process, in which we sort and categorize information that we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns. Three ways we sort things into patterns are by using proximity, similarity, and difference (Coren, 1980).

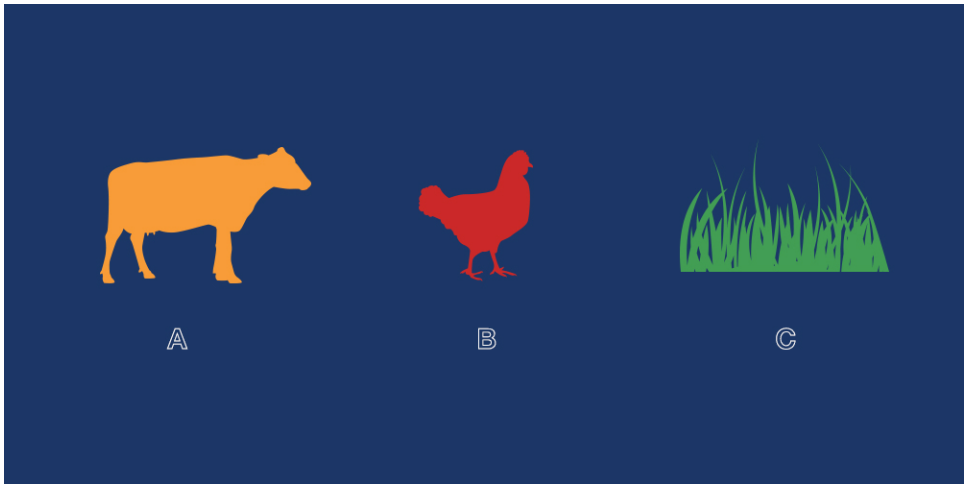
- **Proximity:** In terms of proximity, we tend to think that things that are close together go together. For example, have you ever been waiting to be helped in a business and the clerk assumes that you and the person standing beside you are together? Even though you may have never met that other person in your life, the clerk used a basic perceptual organizing cue to group you together because you were standing in proximity to one another.
- **Similarity:** We also group things together based on similarity. We tend to think similar-looking or similar-acting things belong together. For example, if you were out with a friend who was around the same height, had the same skin color, and same hair color, people might assume you are related.
- **Difference:** We also organize information that we take in based on difference. In this case, we assume that the item that looks or acts different from the rest doesn't belong with the group. For example, let's say a group of five people were standing in line at the movies and four of the people were wearing casual jeans and t-shirts, and the fifth person a business suit. You might assume the person dressed in the suit was not in the same group as those dressed in jeans and t-shirts.

(Image: CC0 1.0)

One way we organize information is by difference, which means that when something looks different from what is around it, we assume it doesn't go together

We simplify information and look for patterns to help us more efficiently communicate and get through life. Simplification and categorizing based on patterns isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, without this capability we would likely not have the ability to speak, read, or engage in other complex cognitive/behavioral functions. Our brain innately categorizes and files information and experiences away for later retrieval, and different parts of the brain are responsible for different sensory experiences. In short, it is natural for things to group together and looking for patterns helps us in many practical ways.

However, it is important to note that the judgments we place on various patterns and categories are not natural; they are learned and culturally and contextually relative. For example, a famous study conducted by Liang-Hwang Chiu (1972), presented Chinese and U.S. American children with three objects- a chicken, cow, and grass- and asked them to group the two objects that went together. Most of the U.S. American children chose the chicken and cow, citing they were both animals. However, most of the Chinese children choose cow and grass, stating that cows eat grass. The reasons for this have been explained by differences in cultural backgrounds which cultivate different cognitive styles. White explains that "East Asians are typically oriented toward interdependence, harmony, and relatedness. Westerners are typically oriented toward independence. Interdependent persons think about objects in relation to context, whereas independent persons tend to focus on categories that share properties such as 'animalness.'" (2011, para 5).



Which two items go together? Most of the U.S. Americans tend to choose the chicken and cow, because they are both animals. However, Chinese people might say the cow and grass, since cows eat grass. How we categorize information can be influenced by our culture.

Interpreting Information

Although selecting and organizing incoming stimuli happens very quickly, and sometimes without much conscious thought, interpretation can be a much more deliberate and conscious step in the perception process. Interpretation is the third part of the perception process, in which we assign meaning to our experiences using mental structures known as schemata. Schemata are like databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences. We all have fairly complicated schemata that have developed over time as small units of information combine to make more meaningful complexes of information. We have an overall schema about education and how to interpret experiences with teachers and classmates. This schema started developing before we even went to preschool based on things that parents, peers, and the media told us about school. For example, you learned that certain symbols and objects and concepts like a calculator, notebook, recess, and grades are associated with being a student or school. As you progressed through your education, your schema adapted to the changing environment.

How smooth or troubling schema reevaluation and revision is varies from situation to situation and person to person. For example, some students adapt their schema relatively easily as they move from elementary, to middle, to high school, and on to college and are faced with new expectations for behavior and academic engagement. Other students don't adapt as easily, and holding onto their old schema creates problems as they try to interpret new information through old, incompatible schema.

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

Schemata are also used to interpret others' behavior and form impressions about who they are as a person. To help this process along, we often solicit information from people to help us place them into a preexisting schema. In the United States and many other Western cultures, people's identities are often closely tied to what they do for a living. When we introduce others, or ourselves, occupation is usually one of the first things we mention. Think about how your communication with someone might differ if he or she were introduced to you as an artist versus a doctor. We make similar interpretations based on where people are from, their age, their race, and other social and cultural factors.

Your schema for what is associated with school might include a bus, notebook, calculator, books, etc.

Schema is plural for schemata

In summary, we have schemata about individuals, groups, places, and things, and these schemata filter our perceptions before, during, and after interactions. As schemata are retrieved from memory, they are executed, like computer programs or apps on your smartphone, to help us interpret the world around us. Just like computer programs and apps must be regularly updated to improve their functioning, competent communicators update and adapt their schemata as they have new experience; being able to adapt our schemata is a sign of cognitive complexity, which is an important part of communication competence.

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7.2: Perceiving Others

Now that we have an understanding of how we select, organize, and interpret the various stimuli we encounter every day, let's apply these principles to how we perceive other people and their behaviors. In this section, we will address how we form impressions of other people and make attributions for their behavior(s).

Impression Formation

We form impressions of others based on physical appearance and our interactions with them. Have you ever heard the phrase 'Don't judge a book by its cover?' When applied to people, it is meant to caution us against judging others based on physical appearance. However, forming impressions of people based on physical appearance is a natural thing that we do. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger, 1975) states that our social worlds are ambiguous, and this ambiguity can make us feel anxious. To lessen this anxiety, we monitor our environments and make interpretations. So, based on things like skin color, gender, attractiveness, grooming, clothes, weight, etc. we make judgements and have stereotypes of other people that are positive, neutral, and negative. However, although this is a natural process, it is important to be aware of how our impressions will influence our communication with people. The Communication Competence section of this chapter discusses the importance of reflecting on our judgments and stereotypes and how they may shape interactions in problematic ways.

In addition to making impressions based on physical appearance, we make impressions based off of behaviors we observe and our interactions with others. These impressions can be about their personality, likeability, attractiveness, and other characteristics. For example, if we meet someone for the first time and they are smiling and making eye contact with us, our impression may be that they are friendly. Although much of our impressions are personal, what forms them is sometimes based more on circumstances than personal characteristics. All the information we take in isn't treated equally- the timing of information and the content of the messages we receive can influence our perception.

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

Attributions

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

Internal attributions connect the cause of behaviors to personal aspects such as personality traits. External attributions connect the cause of behaviors to situational factors. Attributions are important to consider because our reactions to others' behaviors are strongly influenced by the explanations we reach. For example, imagine that Avery and Kennedy are dating. One day, Kennedy gets frustrated and raises their voice to Avery. Avery may find that behavior more offensive and even consider breaking up with Kennedy if they attribute the cause of the blow up to Kennedy's personality. Conversely, Avery may be more forgiving if they attribute the cause of Kennedy's behavior to situational factors beyond Kennedy's control. If Avery makes an internal attribution, they may think, "Wow, this person is really a loose cannon. Who knows when they'll will lose it again?" If Avery makes an external attribution, they may think, "Kennedy has been under a lot of pressure to meet deadlines at work and hasn't been getting much sleep. Once this project is over, I'm sure they'll be more relaxed." This process of attribution is ongoing, and, as with many aspects of perception, we are sometimes aware of the attributions we make, and sometimes they are automatic and/or unconscious.

Attribution has received much scholarly attention because it is in this part of the perception process that some of the most common perceptual errors or biases occur. One of the most common perceptual errors is the fundamental attribution error, which refers to our tendency to explain others' behaviors using internal rather than external attributions (Sillars, 1980). For example, if you get a

get a speeding ticket, you may attribute the cause of the ticket to the malevolence of the police officer, essentially saying you got a ticket because the officer was a mean/bad person, which is an internal attribution. You may be much less likely to acknowledge that the officer was just doing their job (an external attribution) and the ticket was a result of your decision to speed.

Just as we tend to attribute others' behaviors to internal rather than external causes, we do the same for ourselves, especially when our behaviors have led to something successful or positive. When our behaviors lead to failure or something negative, we tend to attribute the cause to external factors. For example, if a student gets a poor grade on a test, they may attribute their poor grade to their busy schedule or other external, situational factors rather than their lack of motivation, interest, or preparation (internal attributions). On the other hand, when a student gets a good grade on a paper, they will likely attribute that cause to their intelligence or hard work rather than an easy assignment or an "easy grading" professor.

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

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7.3: Perception- (Co)Culture and Personality

Our co-cultural identities and our personalities affect our perceptions. Sometimes we are conscious of these effects and sometimes we are not. In either case, we have a tendency to favor others who exhibit cultural or personality traits that match up with our own. Since knowing more about these forces can help us become more aware, in this section, we will explore how culture/co-culture and personality influence our perceptions.

Culture and Co-culture

As we mentioned in chapter 2, culture and co-culture(s) influence our behaviors, values, beliefs, patterns of thinking, and perception of our environment. Therefore, cultural and co-cultural membership based on nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, and age all affect the perceptions that we make. The schemata through which we interpret what we perceive are influenced these memberships and identities. As we are socialized, we internalize beliefs, attitudes, and values shared by others within the dominant culture and our co-cultural groups. Schemata held by members of a group may have similarities or vary greatly.

Perception starts with information that comes in through our senses. How we perceive even basic sensory information is influenced by the dominant culture in which reside. For example, many U.S. Americans, regardless of co-cultural membership, spend considerable effort to mask natural body odor, which they typically find unpleasant, with soaps, sprays, and lotions. However, some other cultures would not find unpleasant or even notice what other cultures might consider “b.o.” Those same cultures may find a U.S. American’s “clean” (soapy, perfumed, deodorized) smell unpleasant. Aside from differences in reactions to basic information we take in through our senses, there is also variations in how we perceive more complicated constructs, like marriage, politics, and privacy. For example, some groups frown on unmarried couples living together, while others do not.

As we’ve already learned, our brain processes information by putting it into categories and looking for predictability and patterns. The previous examples have covered how we do this with sensory information like smell and with more abstract concepts like marriage, but we also do this with people. When we categorize people, we generally view them as “like us” or “not like us.” This simple us/them split affects subsequent interaction, including impressions and attributions. For example, we tend to view people we perceive to be like us as more trustworthy, friendly, and honest than people we perceive to be not like us (Brewer, 1999). We are also more likely to use internal attribution to explain negative behavior of people we perceive to be different from us. If a person of a different race cuts another driver off in traffic, the driver is even more likely to attribute that action to the other driver’s internal qualities (thinking, for example, “He or she is inconsiderate and reckless!”) than they would someone of their own race. Having such inflexible categories can have negative consequences, and later we will discuss how forcing people into rigid categories leads to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

Of course, race isn’t the only marker of difference that influences our perceptions, and the problem with our rough categorization of people into “like us” and “not like us” categories is that these differences aren’t really as easy to perceive as we think. We cannot always tell whether or not someone is culturally like us through visual cues. For some co-cultural identities, like sexual orientation and ability, our awareness of any differences may only come when the other person discloses their identity to us. You no doubt frequently hear people talking and writing about the “vast differences” between men and women. Whether it’s communication, athletic ability, or expressing emotions, people will line up to say that women are one way and men are the other way. While it is true that gender affects our perception, the reason for this difference stems more from social norms than genetic, physical, or psychological differences between men and women. We are socialized to perceive differences between men and women, which leads us to exaggerate and amplify what the differences actually are (McCornack, 2007). We basically see the stereotypes and differences we are told to see, which helps to create a reality in which gender differences are “obvious.” In addition, by placing groups into binaries (such as man/woman or heterosexual/homosexual), nonbinary experiences and perceptions are often silenced and ignored.

In summary, various (co)cultural identities shape how we perceive others because beliefs, attitudes, and values of the groups to which we belong are incorporated into our schema. Our personalities also present interesting perceptual advantages and challenges that we will now discuss.

Personality

Our personalities greatly influence how we see ourselves in the world and how we perceive and interact with others. Personality refers to a person's general way of thinking, feeling, and behaving based on underlying motivations and impulses (McCornack, 2007). These underlying motivations and impulses form our personality traits. Personality traits are "underlying," but they are fairly enduring once a person reaches adulthood. That is not to say that people's personalities do not change, but major changes in personality are not common unless they result from some form of trauma.

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Our personalities influence our perception. For example- would you say this glass is half empty or half full? It is said that those who see the glass as half empty are pessimists, where those who view it as half full are optimists. Do you agree or disagree with such an assessment?

Although personality scholars believe there are thousands of personalities, they all comprise some combination of the same few traits and appear to be representative of personalities across cultures. Much research has been done on personality traits, and the "Big Five" that are most commonly discussed are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (McCrea, 2001).

The Big Five Personality Traits

- **Extroversion/Introversion:** Refers to a person's interest in interacting with others and how they "recharge" their energy. Extroverts "recharge" through interactions with others, while introverts "recharge" by being alone. This may cause extroverts to be more social and introverts to be less social, however this is not always the case. While many tend to conflate introversion with being shy, introverts can also be social and/or outgoing.
- **Agreeableness:** Refers to a person's level of trustworthiness and friendliness. People with high agreeableness are cooperative and likable. People with low agreeableness are suspicious of others and sometimes aggressive, which makes it more difficult for people to find them pleasant to be around.
- **Conscientiousness:** Refers to a person's level of self-organization and motivation. People with high conscientiousness are methodical, motivated, and dependable. People with low conscientiousness are less focused, less careful, and less dependable.
- **Neuroticism:** Refers to a person's level of negative thoughts regarding himself or herself. People high in neuroticism are insecure and experience emotional distress and may be perceived as unstable. People low in neuroticism are more relaxed, have less emotional swings, and are perceived as more stable.
- **Openness:** Refers to a person's willingness to consider new ideas and perspectives. People high in openness are creative and are perceived as open minded. People low in openness are more rigid and set in their thinking and are perceived as "set in their ways."

Scholarship related to personality serves many purposes, and some of them tie directly to perception. We tend to focus on personality traits in others that we feel are important to our own personality. What we like in ourselves, we like in others, and what we dislike in ourselves, we dislike in others (McCornack, 2007). If you admire a person's loyalty, then loyalty is probably a trait that you think you possess as well. If you work hard to be positive and motivated and suppress negative and unproductive urges within yourself, you will likely think harshly about what you've perceived as negative traits in someone else. After all, if you can suppress your negativity, why can't they do the same? This way of thinking isn't always accurate or logical, but it is common, and it impacts the way we communicate with one another.

Personality Test

If you are interested in how you rank in terms of personality traits, there are many online tests you can take. A Big Five test can be taken at the following website: **http://www.outofservice.com/bigfive**.)

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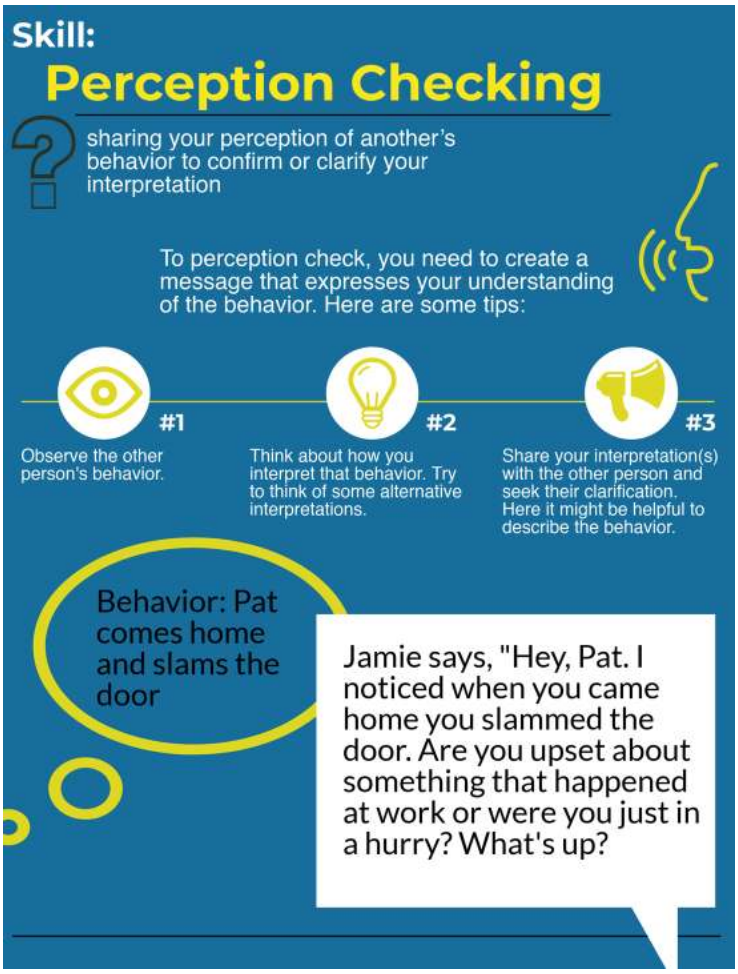
7.4: Communication Competence

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

Effective Communication: Perception Checking



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

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

Let’s take an interpersonal conflict as an example. Miguel and Edgardo are roommates. Miguel is in the living room playing a video game when they see Edgardo walk through the room with a suitcase and walk out the front door. Since Edgardo didn’t say or wave good-bye, Miguel has to make sense of this encounter, and perception checking can help with that. First, Miguel needs to try

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

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

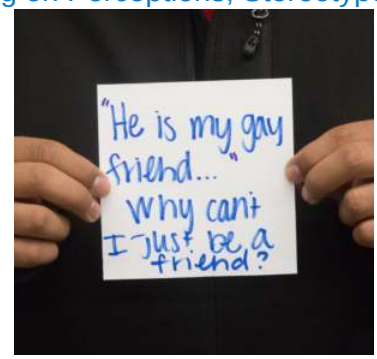
- **Step 1:** Describe the behavior or situation without evaluating or judging it (either internally or aloud).
- **Step 2:** Think of some possible interpretations of the behavior, being aware of attributions and other influences on the perception process.
- **Step 3:** Verify what happened and ask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

Contextual Communication: Contextual Nuances that Influence Perception

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

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

Reflective Communication: Reflecting on Perceptions, Stereotypes, and Biases



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

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

The final way to increase communication competence is to be self-reflective of our own perceptions. Specifically, it is important to reflect on how we perceive others and how these perceptions may be influenced by stereotypes and biases. Stereotypes are sets of beliefs that people have about a group of people, based on factors like race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, ableness, physical

appearance, speech, beliefs, etc. They serve to essentialize people based on group membership, rather than looking at individual and multiple facets of their identities. Stereotypes can make us biased and prejudiced towards a certain group, especially if we perceive them as being "not like us" or inferior in some way.

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

Double Standards

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

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

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

(Image: Kiyun Kim, used according to license)

Microaggressions are verbal and nonverbal behaviors, intentional and unintentional, that communicate some sort of stereotype, bias, prejudice, and/or others another person based off of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ableness, and/or immigration status. The photos above were taken as part of a Racial Microaggressions photo series; you can view more on **Kiyun Kim's tumblr.**

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

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Identity and Perception of Self

Learning Objectives

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

Successful students will be able to:

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

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

(Image: The Awkward Yeti, used according to license)

8.1: Types of Identities
8.2: Principles of Identity
8.3: Self-Perception
8.4: Influences on Self-Perception
8.5: Self-Perception, Identity, and Communication

8.6: Communication Competence

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8.1: Types of Identities

Three related but distinct components of our self-perception are our personal and social identities (Spreckels, J. & Kotthoff, H., 2009), and our co-cultural identities. In this section, we will discuss personal, social, and co-cultural identities.

Personal and Social Identities

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Social Identities: *Our social identities are derived from the social groups that we belong to, both voluntarily or involuntarily, such as a sports team, art club, band, or family.*

Personal identities include the components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences. For example, you may consider yourself a puzzle lover or identify as a fan of hip-hop music. Our social identities are the components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed.

Social identities differ from personal identities because they are externally organized through membership. For example, we may derive aspects of our social identity from our family or from a community of sports team fans. Our membership may be voluntary (such as being a member of a sports team) or involuntary (family). There are innumerous options for personal and social identities. While our personal identity choices express who we are, our social identities align us with particular groups. Through our social identities, we make statements about who we are and who we are not.

Personal identities may change often as people have new experiences and develop new interests and hobbies. Social identities do not change as often because they take more time to develop, as you must become interpersonally invested. For example, if an interest in online video games leads someone to become a member of a MMORPG, or a massively multiplayer online role-playing game community, that personal identity has led to a social identity that is now interpersonal and more entrenched.

Co-Cultural Identities

As a reminder, culture is defined as a set of learned behaviors, values, beliefs, and patterns of thinking that we learn as we grow and develop. However, as we know from our own experiences and observations, there are many different sets of behaviors, values, beliefs, and patterns of thinking around us. Within any geographic location, both the dominant culture and various co-cultures exist. Devito (2014) defines the dominant culture as “the learned system of values, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of thinking held by the people who are in power in a society” (p. 73). However, co-cultures also “exist side by side with the dominant culture and are comprised of smaller numbers of less powerful people who hold common values, attitudes, beliefs, and orientations that differ from those of the dominant culture” (p 73). The co-cultures we belong to are based on factors like race, gender, and social class, and they form part of our identity.

Our co-cultural identities are based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being, and include expectations for social behavior, ways of acting, and norms (Yep, G. A., 2002). The ways of being and the social expectations for behavior within co-cultural identities can and do change over time. For example, think of how ways of being and acting have changed for African Americans since the civil rights movement or norms of behavior for women today versus 50-years ago.

These common ways of being and acting, and norms within a co-cultural identity group are expressed through communication. In order to be accepted as a member of a co-cultural group, members must be acculturated, essentially learning and using a code that other group members will be able to recognize. A code is a socially-constructed, historically transmitted system of rules, beliefs, and premises pertaining to communicative behavior. Basically, communication codes tell us how to behave and interact with others, and tell us what is considered 'normal' and acceptable behavior.

We are acculturated into our various co-cultural identities and learn communication codes in obvious and less obvious ways. We may have a parent or friend tell us what it means to be a man or a woman. We may also unconsciously consume messages from popular culture that offer representations of gender. Because co-cultural identities are learned via communication, they are also socially constructed. Social constructionism is a view that argues the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relationship to social, cultural, and political contexts (Allen, 2011). The sub-sections below discuss how co-cultural identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been constructed in the United States, and how communication relates to those identities. Other important identities could be discussed, such as religion, generation, nationality, class, etc. Although they are not given their own subsection, consider how those identities may intersect with the identities discussed next.

Race

Would it surprise you to know that human beings, regardless of how they are racially classified, share 99.9 percent of their DNA? This finding by the Human Genome Project asserts that race is a social construct, not a biological one. The American Anthropological Association agrees, stating that race is the product of "historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances" (Allen, 2011). Therefore, we'll define race as a socially constructed category based on differences in appearance that has been used to create hierarchies that privilege some and disadvantage others. Racial distinctions have been based largely on phenotypes, or physiological features such as skin color, hair texture, and body/facial features. Unfortunately, Western "scientists" used these differences as "proof" that native populations were less evolved than the Europeans, which helped justify colonial expansion, enslavement, genocide, and exploitation on massive scales (Allen, 2011). Even though there is a consensus among experts that race is social rather than biological, we can't deny that race still has meaning in our society and affects people.

Colorblindness?

Think back to the previous chapter on perception and to our discussion of microaggressions. Race is one of the first things we notice about someone. Whether we are conscious of it or not, certain stereotypes and perceptions that are associated with skin color may manifest themselves, often unconsciously, in our communication. Perhaps you have heard or even made the assertion that "I don't see race" and/or "I am colorblind"? Unless you truly can't see color because of a physiological deficiency, this statement is incorrect. Usually, it is made because we feel uncomfortable talking about race or acknowledging its impact, as many of us have been told that in the U.S. we value equality and should judge others based on merit, not race. However, it is important to be critical and self-reflective of the ways in which skin color influences our communication with others.

Gender

When we first meet a newborn baby, we ask whether it's a boy or a girl. This question illustrates the importance of gender in organizing our social lives and our interpersonal relationships. Many parents consciously or unconsciously "code" their newborns in gendered ways based on our society's associations of pink clothing and accessories with girls and blue with boys. While it's obvious to most people that colors aren't gendered, they take on new meaning when we assign gendered characteristics of masculinity and femininity to them. Just like race, gender is a socially constructed category.

You may have noticed that use of the word gender instead of sex. Sex is based on biological characteristics, including external genitalia, internal sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones (Wood, 2005). While the biological characteristics between men and

women are obviously different, it's the meaning we create and attach to those characteristics that makes them significant. The cultural differences in how that significance is ascribed are proof that "our way of doing things" is arbitrary. For example, cross-cultural research has found that boys and girls in most cultures show both aggressive and nurturing tendencies, but cultures vary in terms of how they encourage these characteristics between genders. In a group in Africa, young boys are responsible for taking care of babies and are encouraged to be nurturing (Wood, 2005). This example shows that although we think gender is a natural, normal, stable way of classifying things, it is actually not.

Gender is an identity based on internalized cultural notions of masculinity and femininity that is constructed through communication and interaction. There are two important parts of this definition to unpack. First, we internalize notions of gender based on socializing institutions, which helps us form what we think it means to be male or female. For example, when you think of a man, what characteristics come to mind to describe him? What do men like to do? How does a man behave? Think of a female. What characteristics describe the normal female, what they like to do, and how do they behave? Socialization and internalization of societal norms for gender differences accounts for much more of our perceived differences than do innate or natural differences between genders. Gender norms may be explicitly stated—for example, a mother may say to her son, "Boys don't play with dolls"—or they may be more implicit, with girls being encouraged to pursue historically feminine professions like teaching or nursing without others actually stating the expectation.

Second, we attempt to construct that gendered identity through our interactions with others, which is our gender performance. If we identity as female and want others to perceive us as female, we will attempt to behave and communicate as we think a female is supposed to. For example, if you identity as female you may communicate this identity nonverbally by wearing dresses and make-up.

Sexuality

Although many people hold a view that a person's sexuality should be kept private, this isn't a reality for our society. One only needs to observe popular culture and media for a short time to see that sexuality permeates much of our public discourse. Sexuality relates to culture and identity in important ways that extend beyond sexual orientation, just as race is more than the color of one's skin and gender is more than one's biological and physiological manifestations of masculinity and femininity. Sexuality isn't just physical; it is social in that we communicate with others about sexuality (Allen, 2011). Sexuality is also biological in that it connects to physiological functions that carry significant social and political meaning like puberty, menstruation, and pregnancy. Sexuality is at the center of political issues like abortion, sex education, and gay and lesbian rights.

The most obvious way sexuality relates to identity is through sexual orientation. Sexual orientation refers to a person's primary physical and emotional sexual attraction and activity. The terms we most often use to categorize sexual orientation are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are sometimes referred to as sexual minorities. While the term sexual preference has been used previously, sexual orientation is more appropriate, since preference implies a simple choice. Although someone's preference for a restaurant or actor may change frequently, sexuality is not as simple.

Hidden Identities

Certain identities, such as sexuality or mental health conditions, are not easily discernible to the eye. These can make these types of identities 'hidden' to the general population, unless the choice is made to disclose them.

While these communities are often grouped together within one acronym, LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual- the + symbol stands for other sexualities, sexes, and genders that are not included in these letters), they are different. Gays and lesbians constitute the most visible of the groups and receive the most attention and funding. Transgender issues have received much more attention in recent years, but transgender identity connects to gender more than it does to sexuality, and a person who identifies as transgender may also be straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. Last, queer is a reclaimed term often used to describe a group that is diverse in terms of identities, but usually takes a more activist and at times radical stance that critiques sexual categories. However, it should be noted that even though the term is considered 'reclaimed' by many, it was once used as a derogatory slur meant to oppress anyone who did not present as a typical 'male' or 'female,' and, as such, some may still think of it as being negative. As with other cultural identities, notions of sexuality have been socially constructed in different ways throughout human history.

Ability

There is resistance to classifying ability as a cultural identity, because we follow a medical model of disability that places disability as an individual and medical rather than social and cultural issue. While much of what distinguishes able-bodied and cognitively able from disabled is rooted in science, biology, and physiology, there are important sociocultural dimensions. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines an individual with a disability as “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (Allen, 2011). This definition is important because it notes the social aspect of disability, in that people’s life activities are limited, and the relational aspect of disability, in that the perception of a disability by others can lead someone to be classified as such.

Ascribing an identity of disabled to a person can be problematic as this label carries social and cultural significance. People are tracked into various educational programs based on their physical and cognitive abilities, and there are many cases of people being mistakenly labeled disabled who were treated differently despite their protest of the ascribed label. Students who did not speak English as a first language are more likely to be placed in special education classes or put into a lower track.

Ability, just as the other cultural identities discussed, has institutionalized privileges and disadvantages associated with it. Ableism is the system of beliefs and practices that produces a physical and mental standard that is projected as normal for a human being and labels deviations from it as abnormal, resulting in unequal treatment and access to resources. There is also a lot of stigma that surrounds mental conditions such as depression or anxiety, and some people falsely claim that these are “made up” or “not real” conditions. However, these conditions do exist and invalidating them can and has had serious emotional consequences for those who suffer from them.

Unlike other cultural identities that are typically stable over a lifetime, ability fluctuates for most people. We have all experienced times when we are more or less able. Perhaps you broke your leg and had to use crutches or a wheelchair for a while. Whether you’ve experienced a short-term disability or not, the majority of us will become less physically and cognitively able as we get older.

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8.2: Principles of Identity

In this section, we will address the six principles of identity: how identities are plural, dynamic, have different and changing meanings, are contextual and intersectional, negotiated, and can be privileged, marginalized, silenced, or ignored

Identities are Plural

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

Identities are Dynamic

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

Identities Have Different and Changing Meanings

Identities Have Changing Meanings: A particular faucet of your identity, such as your gender, will have different meanings and associates throughout your life. For example, think about what it means to be a 'boy' versus a 'teenage boy', 'man', or 'older man.'

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

Identities are Contextual and Interactional

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

Identities are Negotiated

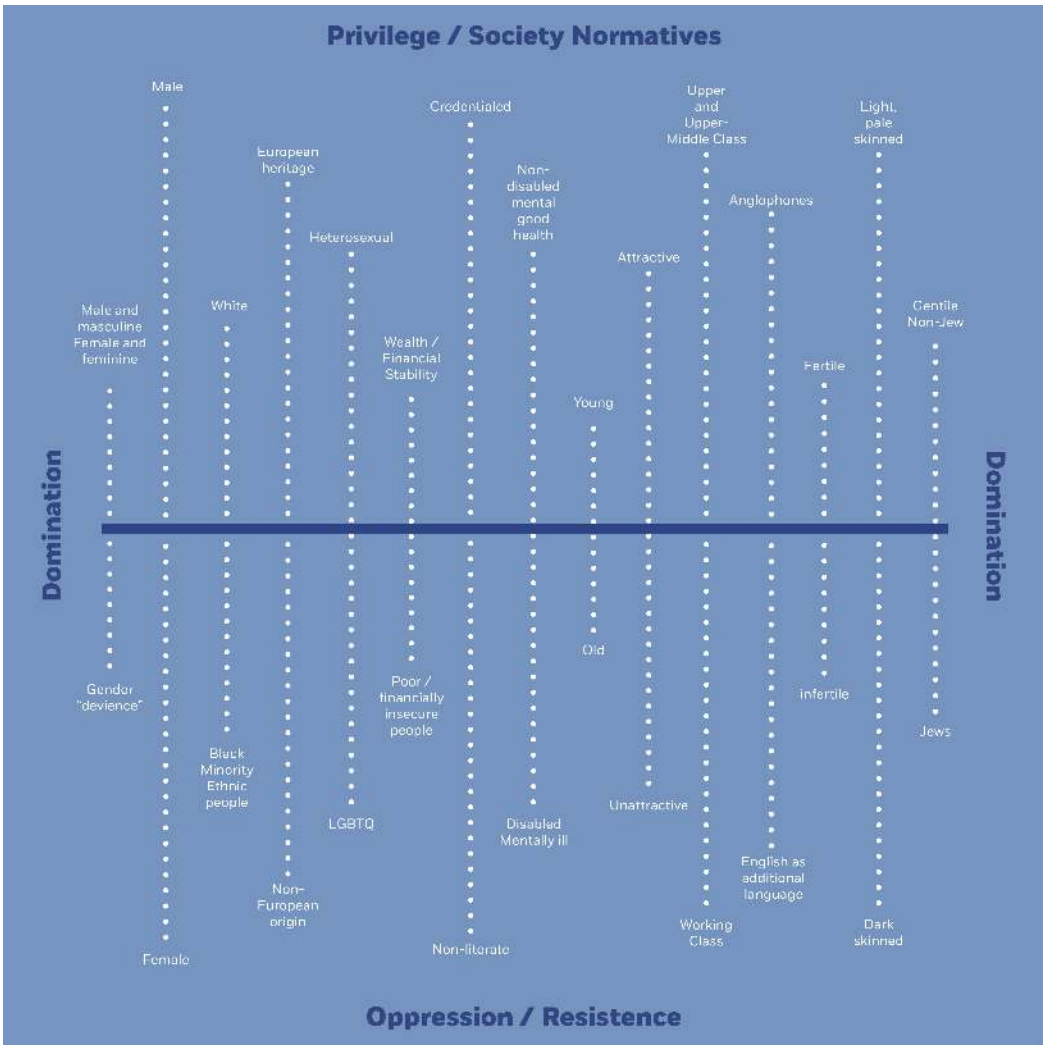
In constructing their identities, people can only draw on terms that are available in society at that time, which have meanings and associations attached. However, people may attribute different meanings and importance to those labels. This means people always negotiate their identities in the context of the different meanings attached to them. Taking this contextual view of identity- as a social process that people engage in, rather than as a fixed essence inside them- is not to deny that particular identities are

extremely important for certain groups and individuals. Being a Sikh, or a woman, or gay, may feel like the most important and 'deepest' part of you. However, a contextual and social model of identity is useful because it makes it difficult to reduce people to any one aspect of their identity, or to use one particular social identity (such as gender, race, sexual orientation, etc) as a way of explaining every aspect of their behavior and needs.

Identities can be Privileged, Marginalized, Silenced, or Ignored

The various cultural and co-cultural groups we belong to may work to advantage or disadvantage us, and, as such, our identities can be privileged or marginalized. For example, the co-cultural identity of race may grant some people with lighter skin colors advantages/privileges over those with darker skin color. Those who do have darker skin color have historically been rendered lesser than/inferior, or 'othered' in our culture. This is highlighted by the use of the common terminology white and non-white, which situates white as the norm and others and marginalizes. In addition, because humans are often grouped into binary categories, identities that are non-binary get silenced or ignored. For example, humans are usually placed into categories such as man or woman, straight or gay/lesbian. This ignores identities that fall outside of these categories or do not fit neatly into them, such as people who identify as pan or omni sexual. Conversely, those who identify as a cisgender man or woman have always had their identities embraced, acknowledged, and rendered the norm.

In addition, because our identities are plural and we are not just one thing or another, the intersectionality of our identities can work to both privilege and oppress us. For example, a white man who is of a lower economic status may experience privileges associated with skin color and maleness while simultaneously experiencing class oppression. It's usually pretty easy to identify ways in which we feel we are oppressed or disadvantaged in some way, but a lot harder for most people to acknowledge ways in which they are privileged.



(Image: Adapted from Natalya D. From Morgan, K. P. (1996). Describing the Emperor's New Clothes: Three Myths of Education (In)Equality. In A. Diller (ed). The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy & Politics. Boulder, CO: Westview)

Intersectionality: Our identities are intersectional, which means that they are plural and we are not just one thing or another based off factors such as gender, race, class, etc; instead the components of our identities intersect with each other to create our unique positionalities. These various aspects of our identities and our positionality may simultaneously work to privilege or oppress us, based on the context.

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8.3: Self-Perception

Now that we have an understanding of identity, we will explore the concept of self-perception and the various factors that create our understanding of ourselves. Specifically, in this section, we will explain how self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy shape our self-perception.

Self-Concept

(Image: mirror-cat, used according to pngtree.com license)

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

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

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons to other people. Social comparison theory states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people. Social comparisons are based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference (Hargie, 2011). In terms of superiority and inferiority, we evaluate characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn’t appropriate. Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If a someone wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, they may be discouraged by the difficulty keeping up with the aerobics instructor and judge themselves as inferior, which could negatively affect their self-concept.

We also engage in social comparison based on similarity and difference. Since self-concept is context specific, similarity may be desirable in some situations and difference more desirable in others. Factors like age and personality may influence whether or not we want to fit in or stand out. Although we compare ourselves to others throughout our lives, adolescent and teen years usually bring new pressure to be similar to or different from particular reference groups. Think of all the cliques in high school and how people voluntarily and involuntarily broke off into groups based on popularity, interest, culture, or grade level. Some kids in your high school probably wanted to fit in with and be similar to other people in the marching band but be different from the football

players. Conversely, athletes were probably more apt to compare themselves, in terms of similar athletic ability, to other athletes rather than kids in show choir.

As with other aspects of perception, there are positive and negative consequences of social comparison. We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won't stop until they get the highest grade or set a new school record in a track-and-field event. Social comparison that isn't reasoned can have negative effects and result in negative thoughts like "Look at how bad I did on that test. Man, I'm stupid!" These negative thoughts can lead to negative behaviors and may affect our self-esteem.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is a more specifically an evaluation of the self (Byrne, 1996). If I again prompted you to "Tell me who you are," and then asked you to evaluate (label as good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable) each of the things you listed about yourself, I would get clues about your self-esteem. Like self-concept, self-esteem has general and specific elements. Generally, some people are more likely to evaluate themselves positively while others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively (Brockner, 1988). More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our life span and across contexts.

How we judge ourselves affects our communication and our behaviors, but not every negative or positive judgment carries the same weight. The negative evaluation of a trait that isn't very important for our self-concept will likely not result in a loss of self-esteem. For example, if you were a person who doesn't consider drawing abilities to be a big part of your self-concept, your self-esteem would not take a big hit if someone critiqued a picture you drew. However, if you considered yourself and artist and someone negatively commented on a picture you drew, your self-esteem would be impacted.

Self-Efficacy

Self-esteem isn't the only factor that contributes to our self-concept; perceptions about our competence also play a role in developing our sense of self. Self-efficacy refers to the judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context (Bandura, 1997). Judgements about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which influences our self-concept.

The following example also illustrates these interconnections. Aki did a good job on their first college speech. During a meeting with their professor, Aki indicates that they are confident going into the next speech and thinks that they will do well. This skill-based assessment is an indication that Aki has a high level of self-efficacy related to public speaking. If Aki does well on the speech, the praise from classmates and professor will reinforce Aki's self-efficacy and lead Aki to positively evaluate their speaking skills, which will contribute to Aki's self-esteem. By the end of the class, Aki likely thinks that they are a good public speaker, which may then become an important part their self-concept. Throughout these points of connection, it's important to remember that self-perception affects how we communicate, behave, and perceive other things. Aki's increased feeling of self-efficacy may give them more confidence in delivering speeches, which will likely result in positive feedback that reinforces Aki's self-perception. Over time, Aki may even start to think about changing their major to communication or pursuing career options that incorporate public speaking, which would further integrate being "a good public speaker" into Aki's self-concept.

You can hopefully see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles. While some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives. The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affect our feelings of self-efficacy and our self-esteem. As we saw in Aki's example, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future (Hargie, 2011). Obviously, negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves and negative feedback does the opposite, which ultimately affects behaviors and creates the cycle.

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8.4: Influences on Self-Perception

Recall from our earlier discussion of self-concept that we develop a sense of who we are based on what is reflected back on us from other people. While interactions we have with individuals and groups are definitely important to consider, we must also note the other influences on our self-perception. In this section, we will examine how family and the media play a role in shaping who we think we are and how we feel about ourselves.

Family Influences

Various forces help socialize us into our respective social and cultural groups and play a powerful role in presenting us with options about who we can be. While we may like to think that our self-perception starts with a blank canvas, our perceptions are limited by our experiences and various cultural identities. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can shape our self-perception and self-esteem in significant ways and lead to either positive or negative views of self (Hargie, 2011). For example, a parent who constantly criticizes their child about their weight or looks may cause the child to internalize a negative self-perception. On the other hand, a parent who praises their child will more likely have a child with a positive self-perception. However, it is important to note that too much praise can lead people to have a misguided sense of their abilities.

Media

Although most people recognize that media has an effect on others, people often mistakenly believe they are not personally influenced. However, the representations we see in the media do affect our self-perception. The vast majority of media images include idealized representations of attractiveness and physical abilities. Despite the fact that the images of people we see in glossy magazines and on T.V. shows are not typically what we see when we look at the people around us in a classroom, at work, or at the grocery store, many of us continue to hold ourselves to an unrealistic standard of beauty and attractiveness. Movies, magazines, and television shows are filled with beautiful people, and less attractive actors, when they are present in the media, are typically portrayed as the butt of jokes, villains, or only as background extras (Patzer, 2008). Aside from overall attractiveness, the media also offers narrow representations of acceptable body weight. Researchers have found that only 12 percent of prime-time characters are overweight, which is dramatically less than the national statistics for obesity among the actual US population (Patzer, 2008).

In terms of self-concept, media representations offer us guidance on what is acceptable or unacceptable and valued or not valued in our society. Mediated messages, in general, reinforce cultural stereotypes related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class. People from historically marginalized groups must look much harder than those in the dominant groups to find positive representations of their identities in media. As a critical thinker, it is important to question media messages and to examine who is included and who is excluded. Advertising in particular encourages people to engage in social comparison, regularly communicating to us that we are inferior because we lack a certain product or that we need to change some aspect of our life to keep up with and be similar to others. For example, advertising targeted to women instills in them a fear of becoming old or unattractive, selling products to keep skin tight and clear, which will in turn will make them happy.

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8.5: Self-Perception, Identity, and Communication

In this section, we will discuss how our identity influences communication with ourselves and other people, and, in turn, how others communicate with us.

Self-Perception, Identity, and Communication

A simple way to think of identity is that it is comprised of three main facets: who we think we are, who we want others to think we are, and who others think we are (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016). The first facet, who we think we are, pertains to our self-perception, and this informs how we communicate with ourselves. For example, let's say you think you are a smart individual. When you go to approach a difficult problem you might say to yourself "I'm smart- I can do this!" On the other hand, if you don't think of yourself as very smart, when you go to approach a difficult problem you instead may say to yourself "Oh, this is too difficult. I'll never get it, so it's not worth trying."

The second facet, who we want others to think we are, influences our communication in that we use communication to try to get others to perceive us a particular way. For example, if you want others to think you are cool, you might communicate this nonverbally by dressing in particular style or buying certain brands and accessories.

The final facet, who others think we are, influences the types of messages we receive from other people. For example, let's say others don't think you are very intelligent. This will likely cause them talk to you using small words or in a condescending matter (or not talk to you all.)

In addition, identity and communication are mutually reinforcing. This means that messages we receive from others (who they think we are) influence who we think we are. For example, if others think we are intelligent and constantly tell us that we are smart, we will likely also think we are smart. This thinking about ourselves, in turn, is likely to influence how we communicate with others around us. For example, we may use big words or assert our expert opinions.

Identity and the Internet

One of the advantages to technology is that we can carefully craft and edit our online personas and the messages that are sent through mediated-communication channels. This means we have the power to shape how others perceive us. We may only post our best pictures on Facebook or tweet about exciting things we are doing so other perceive us positively. In addition, we can explore identities that we may not be able to explore in our face-to-face interactions. Online we can be anyone we want to be. For example, someone may craft an online persona and interact with others using a different gender identity, which can be much harder to achieve in face-to-face interactions.

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8.6: Communication Competence

In this section, we will discuss self-presentation, ways in which identities are contextual, and the importance of reflecting on your self-concept.

Effective Communication: Self-Presentation

Consciously and competently engaging in self-presentation can have benefits because we can provide others with a more positive and accurate picture of who we are and in doing so better achieve our communication goals. People who are skilled at impression management are typically more engaging and confident, which allows others to pick up on more cues from which to form impressions (Human et al., 2012).

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

In general, we strive to present a public image that matches up with our self-concept, but we can also use self-presentation strategies to enhance our self-concept (Hargie, 2011). When we present ourselves in order to evoke a positive evaluative response, we are engaging in self-enhancement. In the pursuit of self-enhancement, a person might try to be as appealing as possible in a particular area or with a particular person to gain feedback that will enhance one's self-esteem. Self-enhancement can be productive and achieved competently, or it can be used inappropriately. Using self-enhancement behaviors just to gain the approval of others or out of self-centeredness may lead people to communicate in ways that are perceived as phony or overbearing and end up making an unfavorable impression (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002).

Contextual Communication: Identity and Context

(Image: CCO 1.0)

Identities: Our primary identities are said to be comprised based off of components that are not changeable, such as race or gender. However this is not always the case as people can and do change their gender identities.

We all have what is called our primary and secondary identities. Our primary identities are said to be consistent and are comprised of factors that we usually cannot change, such as ethnicity, race, and gender. While these identities are usually permanent, our awareness of them and the degree to which we acknowledge or align with them changes based on the context. For example, a woman may not really focus on this identity when in a room full of other women, but it may suddenly become salient when she is the only woman in a room full of men.

Secondary identities, on the other hand, are more fluid, dependent, and dynamic. Factors that make up our secondary identities include occupation, relationship status, and the various roles we occupy. For example, you may be a student, office manager,

janitor, mother, brother, wife, husband, single, etc. As with our primary identities, the salience of secondary identities also changes based on context. Right now, as you are reading this and when you are in the classroom, you are enacting your identity of student, learner, or scholar. However, once you leave the classroom you may switch to another identity, such as a parent. While you are still a student (and vice versa still a parent while in the classroom), this identity is placed on the 'back burner' and another comes to forefront.

Based on the context, we should be flexible in what identity we enact and may need to shift or highlight one particular identity versus another. This, in turn, will influence your communication and interactions. For example, when you are a student in the classroom you may sit at your desk, answer questions when asked, and discuss communication-related topics. However, if you are a parent, when you get home you might instruct your child or chastise them for not doing their homework. Issues may occur if we do not adapt our identity to the situation. For example, we may enact a particular identity with a group of friends that manifests itself in dressing and speaking a particular way, but enacting this identity in the workplace could have negative repercussions. While it's important to feel authentic and 'true to ourselves', it is also important to realize that who we are is dynamic and changes based on the context. In order to better meet your goals, consider communicating aspects of your identities that are appropriate to the context.

Reflective Communication: Reflecting on your Identity

As we learned earlier in this chapter, our self-concept and self-esteem influence how we communicate and interact with the world around us. Because of this, it is necessary to reflect on these aspects of our self-perception and how they influence our thoughts, actions, and relationships in both positive and negative ways. In particular, it is important to be aware of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are thought and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behavior that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true (Guyll et al., 2010). The concept of self-fulfilling prophecies was originally developed to be applied to social inequality and discrimination, but it has since been applied in many other contexts, including interpersonal communication. This research has found that some people are chronically insecure, meaning they are very concerned about being accepted by others but constantly feel that other people will dislike them. This can manifest in relational insecurity, which is based on feelings of inferiority resulting from social comparison with others perceived to be more secure and superior. Such people often end up reinforcing their belief that others will dislike them because of the behaviors triggered by their irrational belief. Take the following scenario as an example: An insecure person assumes that their date will not like them. During the date they don't engage in much conversation, discloses negative information about themselves, and exhibits anxious behaviors. Because of these behaviors, their date forms a negative impression and suggests they not see each other again, reinforcing the original belief that the date wouldn't like them.

The example shows how a pattern of thinking can lead to a pattern of behavior that reinforces the thinking, and so on. Luckily, experimental research shows that self-affirmation techniques can be successfully used to intervene in such self-fulfilling prophecies. Thinking positive thoughts and focusing on personality strengths can stop this negative cycle of thinking and has been shown to have positive effects on academic performance, weight loss, and interpersonal relationships (Stinston et al., 2011).

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Verbal Communication

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

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Learning Objectives

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

Successful students will be able to:

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

9.1: Defining Verbal Communication
9.2: Characteristics of Verbal Communication
9.3: Functions of Verbal Communication
9.4: Communication Competence

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9.1: Defining Verbal Communication

Definition of Verbal Communication

Simply put, verbal communication consists of messages that are sent using words, both written and spoken. Nonverbal communication refers to communication that occurs through means other than words, such as body language, gestures, tone of voice, and silence. Because both verbal and nonverbal communication can be spoken and written, the two can often be confused. For example, let's say we tell a friend a joke and they laugh in response. Is the laughter verbal or nonverbal communication? Since laughter is not a word, we would consider this vocal act as a form of nonverbal communication. Box 1 highlights the types of communication that fall into the various categories.

Verbal versus Nonverbal Communication

	Verbal Communication	Nonverbal Communication
Oral	Spoken Language	Laughing, Crying, Coughing, Etc...
Non Oral	Written Language/ Sign Language	Gestures, Body Language, Etc...

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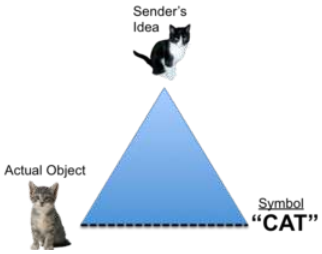
9.2: Characteristics of Verbal Communication

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

Verbal Messages are a System of Symbols



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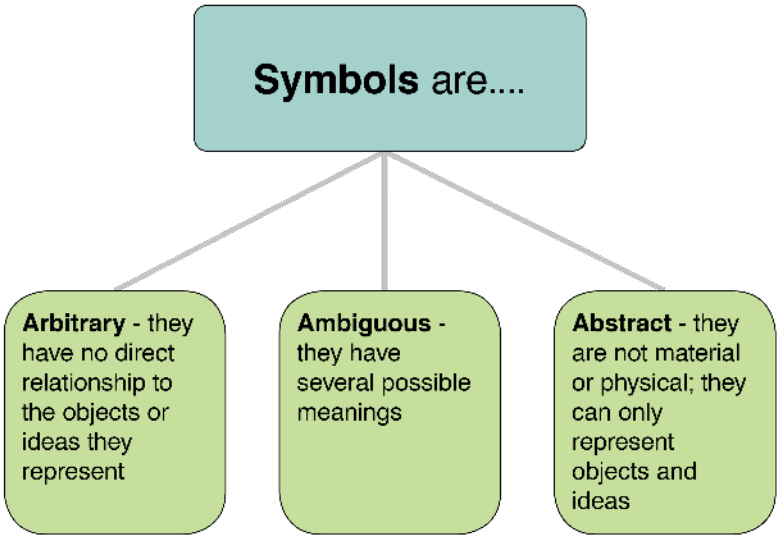
Our language system is primarily made up of symbols. A symbol is something that stands in for or represents something else. Symbols can be communicated verbally (speaking the word hello), in writing (putting the letters H-E-L-L-O together), or nonverbally (waving your hand back and forth). In any case, the symbols we use stand in for something else, like a physical object or an idea; they do not actually correspond to the thing being referenced in any direct way. For example, there is nothing inherent about calling a cat a cat. Rather, English speakers have agreed that these symbols (words), whose components (letters) are used in a particular order each time, stand for both the actual object, as well as our interpretation of that object. This idea is illustrated by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richard's triangle of meaning. The word "cat" is not the actual cat. Nor does it have any direct connection to an actual cat. Instead, it is a symbolic representation of our idea of a cat, as indicated by the line going from the word "cat" to the speaker's idea of "cat" to the actual object.

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

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



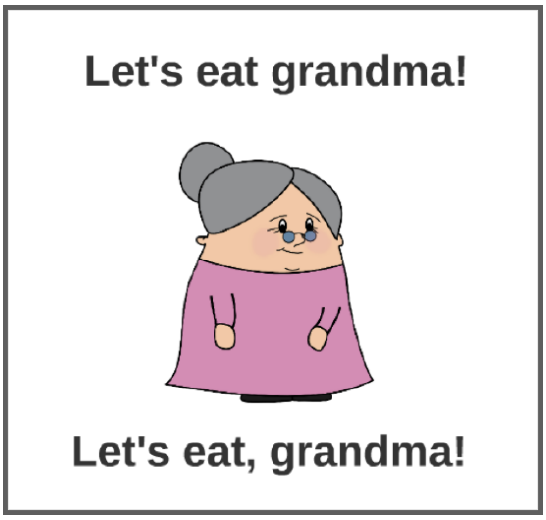
Symbols are Arbitrary, Ambiguous, & Abstract

The verbal symbols we use are also abstract, meaning that, words are not material or physical. A certain level of abstraction is inherent in the fact that symbols can only represent objects and ideas. This abstraction allows us to use a phrase like “the public” in a broad way to mean all the people in the United States rather than having to distinguish among all the diverse groups that make up the U.S. population. Similarly, in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter book series, wizards and witches call the non-magical population on earth “muggles” rather than having to define all the separate cultures of muggles. Abstraction is helpful when you want to communicate complex concepts in a simple way. However, the more abstract the language, the greater potential there is for confusion. Saying “cat” is not as abstract as saying “animal,” but also will not necessarily bring an image of a much more specific white cat named “Calliope” to the mind of your listener, if that is your intention.

Verbal Messages are Learned

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

Verbal Messages are Rule-Governed



(Image: CCO 1.0)

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

Verbal communication is rule-governed. We must follow agreed-upon rules to make sense of the symbols we share. Let's take another look at our example of the word cat. What would happen if there were no rules for using the symbols (letters) that make up this word? If placing these symbols in a proper order was not important, then cta, tac, tca, act, or atc could all mean cat. Any language system has to have rules to make it learnable and usable. Grammar refers to the rules that govern how words are used to make phrases and sentences. Someone would likely know what you mean by the question "Where's the remote control?" But "The control remote where's?" is likely to be unintelligible or at least confusing (Crystal, 2005). Knowing the rules of grammar is important in order to be able to write and speak to be understood. However, those rules are also open and flexible, allowing a person to make choices to determine meaning (Eco, 1976).

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

Verbal Messages Have Both Denotative and Connotative Meanings

We attach meanings to words; meanings are not inherent in words themselves. As you've been reading, words (symbols) are arbitrary and attain meaning only when people give them meaning. While we can always look to a dictionary to find a standardized definition of a word, or its denotative meaning, meanings do not always follow standard, agreed-upon definitions when used in various contexts. For example, think of the word "sick". The denotative definition of the word is ill or unwell. However, connotative meanings, the meanings we assign based on our experiences and beliefs, are quite varied. For example, take the word 'hippie', the denotative meaning or dictionary definition is "a usually young person who rejects the mores of established society (as by dressing unconventionally or favoring communal living) and advocates a nonviolent ethic" (Webster, 2019). However, what comes to mind when you think of the word hippie? Long hair? Tye-dye shirts? Drugs? This is the connotative meaning, the things you associate with that particular world. Connotative meanings can be positive, negative, and/or neutral and what WE associate with word may change over time and vary based on individual experiences. For example, a person who liked road trips as child may have a positive association with that phrase, while a person who disliked them may have a negative association.

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9.3: Functions of Verbal Communication

Since our existence is intimately tied to the communication we use, in this section we will address how verbal communication serves many functions in our daily lives. Specifically, we use verbal communication to define reality, organize, and think.

Verbal Communication Helps Us Define Reality and Shape Our Attitudes About Our World

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

Verbal Communication Helps Us Organize

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

Verbal Communication Helps Us Think

Without verbal communication, we would not function as thinking beings. The ability to reason and communicate is what distinguishes humans from other animals. In the 2011 Scientific American article “How Language Shapes Thought,” author Lera Boroditsky claims that people “rely on language even when doing simple things like distinguishing patches of color, counting dots on a screen or orienting in a small room…” In addition, with language, we are able to reflect on the past, consider the present, and ponder the future. We develop our memories using language. Try recalling your first conscious memories. Chances are, your first conscious memories formed around the time you started using verbal communication.

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9.4: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover techniques for sending more effective verbal messages, address contextual nuances surrounding the meaning of verbal messages, and discuss the importance of reflecting on our own verbal messages.

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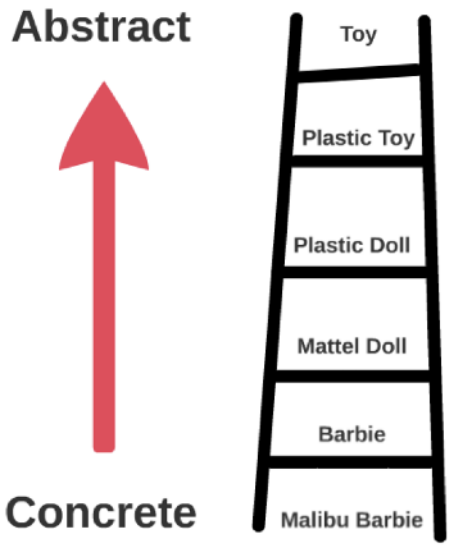
Effective Communication: Improving Verbal Message Clarity

In order to increase shared meaning in interactions, it's important to focus on message clarity. The level of clarity we need to provide in a communicative interaction can vary based on context, who we are talking to, and our communication goal. The language and words we use can range from abstract to concrete. Abstract language covers a broader range of objects, events, and phenomenon without providing much detail, whereas concrete language refers to specific objects, events, and phenomenon that can be observed. For example, 'fruit' is abstract as it can refer to a wide range of different fruits, from an apple to an orange. On the other hand, 'Granny Smith apple' would be concrete in that it refers to a specific type and color of fruit. The abstraction ladder illustrates how objects, events, phenomenon, and ideas can be described on a scale ranging from abstract to concrete. The bottom rung of the ladder refers to something specific/concrete, and as you move up the ladder the phrasing gets more abstract. When language is more abstract, it leaves more room interpretation; this likewise increases the chances of a miscommunication or shared meaning not be achieved. However, abstracting is beneficial in certain instances as it enables us to communicate more efficiently without using dozens of words to refer to one particular idea or concept. For example, if your partner stopped by the grocery store, picked up the dry cleaning, and dropped off the mail, we might simply say "thanks for doing the errands" versus noting every specific thing.



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Objects, events, phenomenon, and ideas can be described on a scale ranging from abstract to concrete. When language is more abstract, it leaves more room interpretation and this likewise increases the chances of a miscommunication.

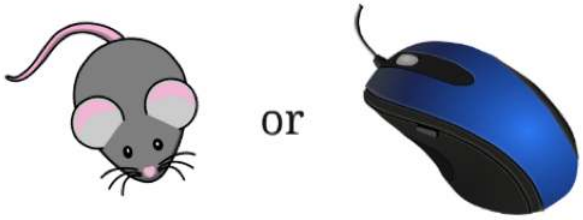
When producing and interpreting abstract messages, context is key to expressing and discerning what one means and creating shared meaning. While certain situations lend themselves to abstract messages, others lend themselves to more concrete messages. Concrete messages can be useful when it is important that the message be understood, such as when we are interacting with children who are still developing the meaning of certain words and concepts, in professional contexts, or through text and/or email. Parents sometimes expect kids to "behave" before giving kids a concrete sense of what that actually looks or sounds like to them (e.g., "sit still and don't talk during the movie").

Professionally, using concrete language is helpful when giving feedback designed to improve performance, when addressing complaints, and/or making requests. How many of us have received feedback such as "good job" or "needs improvement?" What that means might be very clear to the feedback giver, but those phrases could have many possible interpretations in the mind of the recipient. A better form of feedback might look like "The evidence you gave clearly supported your claims" or "Work to provide evidence that clearly supports your claims." Additionally, when it comes to text or email, don't just assume the other knows what you are talking about and be as concrete and specific as possible. Texting "You're ignoring me" is not as clear as saying "I haven't heard from you in two days." The more abstract the words, the more possibility there is for misunderstanding.

However, it's important to note that sometimes we may intentionally use abstract language, depending on our communication goal. Vague and unclear language may be used as a way to avoid hurting another's feelings, alluding to something we don't want to say directly, hinting, or avoiding certain topics. For example, we may use the term "interesting" to describe a friend's outfit when we really think it's garish so as not to hurt their feelings.

Contextual Communication: Nuances in Verbal Meanings

Rules for communication guide our behaviors and interactions in a particular context and as the context changes, so do the rules and norms. When it comes to our verbal communication, what is considered 'appropriate' language and word choice will vary based on contextual nuances. For example, think of the types of words choices you might make when you are hanging out with your friends versus when you are in an interview. Would you speak to a small child differently and select different words than when you are speaking to an adult.



(Image: CCO 1.0)

Mouse? Some words have multiple meanings, such as the word mouse. However, context can often help us determine whether someone is referring to a rodent or a computer mouse. If someone said 'mouse' in a computer lab, they would probably mean the latter.

In addition, since language is ambiguous and can have multiple denotative and connotative meanings, we must rely on the context not only to determine what words to use, but how to decode the messages of others. For example, the word "mouse" can mean either a computer mouse or a rodent. If someone said the word mouse in a computer lab (physical context), it would likely mean the former, where as if they said it in a pet store, it would likely mean the latter. Cultural context and your co-cultures (the various groups you may belong to based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, generation, etc) also play a key role in meaning making. For example, generations often have differences in what a particular word might mean. The word cool might be used by a younger generation to refer to awesome, where as an older generation might use it to refer to the temperature. So if you were to tell your grandmother something was cool, you may intend it to mean awesome, but she may be think it means cold.

Because words can hold different meanings for different people and vary in what is considered acceptable and accepted, context and should always be kept in mind. As competent communicators, we should strive to use vocabulary the listener understands and only use slang in situations where it is considered acceptable and accepted. For example, we might use slang terms with our friends, but should probably avoid them in professional situations.

Word Choice

Think of the words "bowel movements," "poop," "crap," and "shit." While all of these words have essentially the same denotative meaning, people make choices based on context and audience regarding which word they feel comfortable using. .

Reflective Communication: Understanding Biases in Language

Bias has a way of creeping into our daily language use, often without our awareness. Culturally biased language can make reference to one or more cultural identities, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability. Much biased language is based on stereotypes and myths, both culturally and individually, that influence the words we use. Bias is both intentional and unintentional; sometimes we don't even realize our words communicate a particular bias, and we have no intention of offending others. However, because others may decode a message differently from what we intend, as competent communicators, we must be aware of how others may interpret (or misinterpret) our words, what biases we may be intentionally or unintentionally communicating, and how our word choice can affect others. While it is unlikely that we will ever completely eliminate bias from our verbal communication or never offend anyone, it is important to be aware and reflective of our communication. Below focuses on five types of biases inherent in language people use: race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ableness.

Race

People sometimes use euphemisms for race that illustrate bias because the terms are usually implicitly compared to the dominant group (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). For example, referring to a person as "urban" or a neighborhood as "inner city" can be an accurate descriptor, but when such words are used as a substitute for racial identity, they illustrate cultural biases that equate certain races with cities and poverty. Using adjectives like articulate or well-dressed in statements like "My black coworker is articulate" reinforces negative stereotypes even though these words are typically viewed as

positive. Terms like nonwhite set up whiteness as the norm, which implies that white people are the norm against which all other races should be compared.

Biased language also reduces the diversity within certain racial groups—for example, referring to anyone who looks like they are of Asian descent as Chinese or everyone who “looks” Latino/a as Mexicans. Some people with racial identities other than white, including people who are multiracial, use the label person/people of color to indicate solidarity among groups, but it is likely that they still prefer a more specific label when referring to an individual or referencing a specific racial group.

Gender

Language has a tendency to exaggerate perceived and stereotypical differences between men and women. For example, the use of the term opposite sex presumes that men and women are opposites. One key to avoiding gendered bias in language is to avoid the generic use of he or she when referring to something relevant to males and females. Instead, you can informally use a gender-neutral pronoun like they or their or you (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). Other words reflect the general masculine bias present in English. The following word pairs show the gender-biased term followed by an unbiased term: waitress / server, chairman / chair or chairperson, mankind / people, cameraman / camera operator, mailman / postal worker, sportsmanship / fair play. Common language practices also tend to infantilize women but not men, when, for example, women are referred to as chicks, girls, or babes. Since there is no linguistic equivalent that indicates the marital status of men before their name, using Ms. instead of Miss or Mrs. helps reduce bias.

Age

Language that includes age bias can be directed toward older or younger people. Descriptions of younger people often presume recklessness or inexperience, while those of older people presume frailty or disconnection. The term elderly generally refers to people over sixty-five, but it has connotations of weakness, which isn’t accurate because there are plenty of people over sixty-five who are stronger and more athletic than people in their twenties and thirties. Even though it’s a generic phrase, older people doesn’t really have negative implications, whereas referring to people over the age of eighteen as boys or girls isn’t typically viewed as appropriate.

Sexual Orientation

Discussions of sexual orientation range from everyday conversations to contentious political and personal debates. The negative stereotypes that have been associated with homosexuality, including deviance, mental illness, and criminal behavior, continue to influence our language use (American Psychological Association, 2012). Terminology related to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people can be confusing, so let’s spend some time to raise our awareness about preferred labels. First, sexual orientation is the term preferred to sexual preference. Preference suggests a voluntary choice, as in someone has a preference for cheddar or American cheese, which doesn’t reflect the experience of most GLB people or research findings that show sexuality is more complex. Most people also prefer the labels gay, lesbian, or bisexual to homosexual, which is clinical and doesn’t so much refer to an identity as a sex act. Language regarding romantic relationships contains bias when heterosexuality is assumed. For example, asking a female if she has a boyfriend or a male if he has a girlfriend. Comments comparing GLB people to “normal” people, although possibly intended to be positive, reinforces the stereotype that GLB people are abnormal.

Don’t presume you can identify a person’s sexual orientation by looking at them or talking to them. Don’t assume that GLB people will “come out” to you. Given that many GLB people have faced and continue to face regular discrimination, they may be cautious about disclosing their identities. However, using gender neutral terminology like partner and avoiding other biased language mentioned previously may create a climate in which a GLB person feels comfortable disclosing his or her sexual orientation identity. Conversely, the casual use of phrases like “that’s gay” to mean “that’s stupid” may create an environment in which GLB people do not feel comfortable.

Ability

People who are differently-abled or have disabilities make up a diverse group that has increasingly come to be viewed as a cultural identity group. People without disabilities are often referred to as able-bodied. As with sexual orientation, comparing people with disabilities to “normal” people implies that there is an agreed-on definition of what “normal” is and that people with disabilities are “abnormal.” People who fall into the category may prefer the word differently abled or prefer disability to the word handicap.

It's also important to keep in mind that just because someone is disabled doesn't mean they are also handicapped. The environment around them rather than their disability often handicaps people with disabilities (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). Ignoring the environment as the source of a handicap and placing it on the person fits into a pattern of reducing people with disabilities to their disability—for example, calling someone a paraplegic instead of a person with paraplegia. In many cases, as with sexual orientation, race, age, and gender, verbally marking a person as different isn't relevant. Language used in conjunction with disabilities also tends to portray people as victims of their disability and paint pictures of their lives as gloomy, dreadful, or painful. Such descriptors are often generalizations or completely inaccurate.

Politically Correct?

Since the terms and language we use in reference to people or groups has the power to reveal biases within our culture and ourselves, these messages may have a negative impact over time on the person or group of people who hear them, especially when derogatory terms related to gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, etc. are used. Reflecting on and addressing biases in words and using them in a respectful, ethical manner so as not to offend others is important part of being a competent communicator and should not be conflated with the pejorative term 'political correctness.' Misuse and the negative connotation of this term has created ill-feelings around respectful and ethical communication. However, holding empathy towards others and being aware of and sensitive to their reactions is not a bad thing, it should actually be something we all strive for in our interactions. Addressing biases means being reflective of our communication, taking responsibility for what we say, holding others accountable for they say, and modifying the language we use. This can be hard at first, as it can make us feel uncomfortable, guilty, or even defensive. It is natural to try to shift the blame to others, tell them they are being 'too sensitive,' that we didn't intend something a particular way, or that they need to 'toughen' up. However, a competent communicator is one who can reflect on their (and others') biases and holds themselves accountable for the effects of their messages on other, whether intentional or unintentional. Throughout history, words have had the power to motivate, elevate, transform, ridicule, and silence. Words have been used to incite violence against others. Some people have very strong reactions to words and phrases, leading them to hurt others or even themselves. Words have been used to incite violence against groups of people and cause others to take their own lives. Words are not just words; words matter.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: Nonverbal Communication

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

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Learning Objectives

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

Successful students will be able to:

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

10.1: Defining Nonverbal Communication
10.2: Functions of Nonverbal Communication
10.3: Types of Nonverbal Communication
10.4: Principles of Nonverbal Communication
10.5: Communication Competence

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10.1: Defining Nonverbal Communication

In this section, we will define what nonverbal communication is.

Definition of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication consists of meaning that is conveyed through behaviors, sounds, spatial use, and artifacts such as clothing and accessories. While nonverbal messages may substitute for verbal messages, they often work together to help aid in understanding and create shared meaning by enhancing, modifying, or contradicting an accompanying verbal message. For example, take the word ‘yes’. We may nod our head up and down to substitute for saying it verbally. However, we can also simultaneously nod and verbally say ‘yes’ to emphasize the message or modify it by changing our tone of voice to convey an excited or begrudging yes. Finally, we may unintentionally contradict our verbal message by subtly shaking our head no while we say it.

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10.2: Functions of Nonverbal Communication

In this section, we will address six important functions that our nonverbal communication serves in interactions: we use it to convey meaning and provide information, regulate interactions, express our identities, indicate relational standing, communicate emotions, and express status and power.

We Use Nonverbal Communication To Convey Meaning and Provide Information

We use nonverbal communication to complement, substitute for, modify, or contradict verbal messages.

Complement

We can use nonverbal communication to complement the accompanying verbal message. Obvious examples include a head-nod or a head-shake to complement the verbal messages of “yes” or “no.” If a friend tells us that they recently received a promotion and a pay raise, we can show our enthusiasm in a number of verbal and nonverbal ways. We can exclaim, “Wow, that’s great! I’m so happy for you!” while at the same time using our nonverbal communication to complement what we are saying by smiling and hugging them.

Substitute

We can also use nonverbal communication to substitute for a verbal message. If someone asks you a question, instead of a verbal reply “yes”, you may choose to simply nod your head without the accompanying verbal message. When we replace verbal communication with nonverbal communication, we use nonverbal behaviors that are easily recognized by others such as a wave, head-nod, or head-shake.

Modify

While nonverbal communication can complement verbal communication, we also use it to modify the meaning of verbal communication by emphasizing certain parts of the verbal message. For instance, you may be upset with a family member and state, “I’m very angry with you.” To accent this statement nonverbally you might say it, “I’m VERY angry with you,” placing your emphasis on the word “very” to demonstrate the magnitude of your anger. In this example, it is your tone of voice (called paralanguage) that serves as the nonverbal communication accenting the message

Contradict

Finally, our nonverbal messages can contradict our verbal message. Imagine that you are greeting a friend in passing and say, “How are you?” They might say, “Fine” but have a sad tone to their voice. In this example, their nonverbal behaviors go against their verbal response and sends a mixed message to you. Research suggests that when verbal and nonverbal messages contradict one another, receivers often place greater value on the nonverbal communication as the more accurate message (Argyle, Alkema & Gilmour).

We Use Nonverbal Communication To Regulate Interactions

(Image: Jacksoncolvett, CC BY-SA 3.0)

We can use our nonverbal communication to regulate interactions. For example, if we are talking to someone and we want to show them we are interested in what they are saying and that they should continue, we can make eye contact, lean forward, and/or nod our heads. However, if we are trying to get the other person to stop talking so that we can exit from the interaction, we might look at our phones or angle our bodies away from theirs. Based on the above body language, what message do you think the person on the left is trying convey to the person on the right?

Generally, it is pretty easy for us to enter, maintain, and exit our interactions with others nonverbally. Rarely, if ever, would we approach a person and say, “I’m going to start a conversation with you now. Okay, let’s begin.” Instead, we might make eye contact, move closer to the person, or face the person directly, which are all nonverbal behaviors that indicate our desire to interact. Likewise, we do not generally end conversations by stating, “I’m done talking to you now” unless there is a breakdown in the communication process. We are generally proficient enacting nonverbal communication such as looking at our watch, looking in the direction we wish to go, or being silent to indicate an impending end in the conversation. However, there are times where someone may not pick up on the nonverbal cues and we have to explicitly state something verbally instead.

We Use Nonverbal Communication To Express Our Identities

Nonverbal communication expresses who we are. Our identities are conveyed nonverbally through the way we set up our living and working spaces, the clothes we wear, the way we carry ourselves, and the way we talk. Our physical bodies even give others impressions about who we are. We have control over some aspects of our nonverbal communication in terms of how we communicate our identities. For example, the way we carry and present ourselves through posture, eye contact, and tone of voice can be altered to present ourselves as warm or distant depending on the context. Aside from our physical body, artifacts, which are the objects and possessions that surround us, also communicate our identities. Examples of artifacts include our clothes, jewelry, and space decorations.

We Use Nonverbal Communication To Indicate Relational Standing

(Image: Elvert Barnes, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Nonverbal communication can indicate relationship standing. Holding hands, sitting close to another person, or wearing weddings rings can be used to express that you are in an intimate relationship.

Take a few moments today to observe the nonverbal communication of people you see in public areas. What can you determine about their relational standing from their nonverbal communication? For example, romantic partners tend to stand close to one another and touch one another frequently. On the other hand, acquaintances generally maintain greater distances and touch less than romantic partners. Those who hold higher social status often use more space when they interact with others. We make many inferences about relational standing based on the nonverbal communication of those with whom we interact and observe. Imagine seeing a couple talking to each other across a small table. They both have faces that look upset, red eyes from crying, closed body positions, leaning into each other, and are whispering emphatically. Upon seeing this, would you think they were having a "breakup conversation"? It is important to note, however, that nonverbals don't always mean what we think they mean. Later on, we will cover the ambiguity of nonverbal communication.

We Use Nonverbal Communication To Communicate Emotions

(Image: Robin Higgens, Pixabay License)

Facial expressions are one way that we express emotion. What emotions do you think this person is trying to convey?

While we can certainly tell people how we feel, we more frequently use nonverbal communication to express our emotions. Conversely, we tend to interpret emotions by examining nonverbal communication. For example, it is probably easy to tell by their nonverbal communication that a friend may be feeling sad. Not only may they be less talkative but their shoulders may be slumped and they may not smile. One study suggests that it is important to use and interpret nonverbal communication for emotional expression as it leads to relational attachment and satisfaction (Schachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer). For example, if you acknowledge that your friend is sad, ask what is wrong, and try to help them this can heighten or increase intimacy. However, if a

friend is visibly upset and you choose to ignore them, they may perceive that you don't care about their feelings and become dissatisfied with the relationship.

We Use Nonverbal Communication To Express Social Status And Power

Nonverbal communication can be used to express social status in a variety of ways. (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016). Nonverbal communication can be used to express social status in a variety of ways, such as by dressing or speaking a particular way. For example, think of how a high-level manager may convey status to employees. They may choose to wear a formal suit or speak with an authoritative tone. Likewise, employees may also use their nonverbals to show respect to their managers, as by making eye contact and listening to what they have to say. are also associated with power, while others are associated with powerlessness or vulnerability. For example, standing up tall and taking up a lot of space shows dominance, while hunched shoulders, folding your body inward to take up as little space as possible, and touching your neck indicate the opposite. Recent research has even demonstrated that forming expansive "power poses" with our bodies can actually increase emotional feelings of power, which may be helpful to us prior to job interviews and other anxiety-provoking situations (Cuddy, Schultz and Fosse, 2017).

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10.3: Types of Nonverbal Communication

As you'll recall from chapter one, a channel is the means through which the message is sent from one communicator to the other. The channels used for communication coincide with our senses of sound, sight, smell, taste, and touch. While verbal messages can only travel via the sensory routes of sound (spoken words) or sight (written words), nonverbal communication can take place through all five of our senses. In this section, we will describe the various types of non-verbal communication, which we break into four distinct categories to aid in comprehension: body language, paralanguage, space and time use, and personal and environmental presentation.

Body Language

Body language refers to nonverbal communication that is expressed through the use of gestures, head movements and posture, eye contact, facial expressions, and touch.

Gestures

There are three main types of gestures: adaptors, emblems, and illustrators (Andersen, 1999). Adaptors are touching behaviors and movements that indicate internal states typically related to arousal or anxiety. Adaptors can be targeted toward the self, objects, or others. In regular social situations, adaptors result from uneasiness, anxiety, or a general sense that we are not in control of our surroundings. Many of us subconsciously click pens, shake our legs, or engage in other adaptors during classes, meetings, or while waiting as a way to do something with our excess energy. Use of object adaptors can also signal boredom as people play with the straw in their drink or peel the label off a bottle of beer.

Emblems are gestures that have a specific agreed-on meaning. A hitchhiker's raised thumb, the "OK" sign with thumb and index finger connected in a circle with the other three fingers sticking up, and the raised middle finger are all examples of emblems that have an agreed-upon meaning or meanings within a specific culture. Later in the chapter, you will see how different those agree-upon meanings can be among different cultures.

Illustrators are the most common type of gesture and are used to illustrate the verbal message they accompany. For example, you might use hand gestures to indicate the size or shape of an object. Unlike emblems, illustrators do not typically have meaning on their own and are used more subconsciously than emblems.

Head Movements and Posture

Head movements and posture are grouped together because they are often both used to acknowledge others and communicate interest or attentiveness. For example, a head up typically indicates an engaged or neutral attitude, a head tilt indicates interest and is an innate submission gesture that exposes the neck and subconsciously makes people feel more trusting of us, and a head down signals a negative or aggressive attitude (Pease & Pease, 2004). One interesting standing posture involves putting our hands on our hips, and is a nonverbal cue that we use subconsciously to make us look bigger and show assertiveness.

Eye Contact

(Image: Robert Couse-Baker, CC BY 2.0)

Eye Contact: Eye contact can have a variety of meanings, based on culture, co-culture, and context. It can be used to show interest, respect, aggression, or even dislike. For example, what do you think it means when someone "mad dogs" another person or gives them the "stink eye"?

We also communicate through eye behaviors, primarily eye contact. Eye contact serves several communicative functions: regulating interaction, monitoring interaction, conveying information, or establishing interpersonal connections. In terms of regulating communication, we use eye contact to signal to others that we are ready to speak or to indicate that we are finishing up. Eye contact is also used to monitor interaction by taking in feedback and other nonverbal cues. A communicator can use eye contact to determine if others are engaged, confused, or bored and then adapt their message accordingly. Our eyes also send information to others. Making eye contact with others also communicates that we are paying attention and are interested in what another person is saying. Eye contact can also be used to intimidate others. Staring at another person in some contexts could communicate intimidation, while in other contexts it could communicate flirtation.

Facial Expressions

Our faces are the most expressive part of our bodies. Facial expressions communicate a range of emotions and can be used to infer personality traits and make judgments about others. Facial expressions can communicate that someone is tired, excited, angry, confused, frustrated, sad, confident, smug, shy, or bored. A few basic facial expressions are recognizable by humans all over the world; research has supported the universality of a core group of facial expressions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust. The first four are especially identifiable across cultures (Andersen, 1999).

Although facial expressions are typically viewed as innate and several are universally recognizable, they are not always connected to an emotional or internal biological stimulus; they can actually serve a more social purpose. For example, most of the smiles we produce are primarily made for others and are not just an involuntary reflection of an internal emotional state (Andersen, 1999).

Haptics

Haptics refers to the study of communication by touch. Touch is necessary for human social development, and it can be welcoming, threatening, or persuasive. There are several types of touch, including functional-professional, social-polite, friendship-warmth, and love- intimacy (Heslin & Apler, 1983). At the functional-professional level, touch is related to a goal or part of a routine professional interaction, which makes it less threatening and more expected. For example, we let barbers, hairstylists, doctors, nurses, tattoo artists, and security screeners touch us in ways that would otherwise be seen as intimate or inappropriate if not in a professional context.

At the social-polite level, socially sanctioned touching behaviors help initiate interactions and show that others are included and respected. A handshake, a pat on the arm, and a pat on the shoulder are examples of social-polite touching. At the friendship-warmth level, touch is more important and more ambiguous than at the social-polite level. At this level, touch interactions are important because they serve a relational maintenance purpose and communicate closeness, liking, care, and concern. At the love-intimacy level, touch is more personal and is typically only exchanged between significant others, such as best friends, close family members, and romantic partners. Touching faces, holding hands, and frontal embraces are examples of touch at this level.

Paralanguage & Silence

(Image: Natalie Cassidy/www.nataliedee.com, printed with permission for use in I.C.A.T.)

Silence: *Silence can be a powerful form of nonverbal communication. What does it usually mean if someone is giving you the "silent treatment"?*

Paralanguage, often referred to as vocalics, refers to the vocalized but nonverbal parts of a message such as pitch, volume, rate, vocal quality, and verbal fillers (Andersen, 1999). Pitch helps convey meaning, regulate conversational flow, and communicate the intensity of a message. We also learn that greetings have a rising emphasis and farewells have falling emphasis. Of course, no one ever tells us these things explicitly; we learn them through observation and practice. We do not pick up on some more subtle and/or complex patterns of paralanguage involving pitch until we are older. Children, for example, have a difficult time perceiving sarcasm, which is usually conveyed through paralinguistic characteristics like pitch and tone rather than the actual words being spoken. Paralanguage provides important context for the verbal content of a message. For example, volume helps communicate intensity. A louder voice is usually thought of as more intense, although a soft voice combined with a certain tone and facial expression can be just as intense. Our tone of voice can be controlled somewhat with pitch, volume, and emphasis, but each voice has a distinct quality known as a vocal signature. Voices vary in terms of resonance, pitch, and tone, and some voices are more pleasing than others.

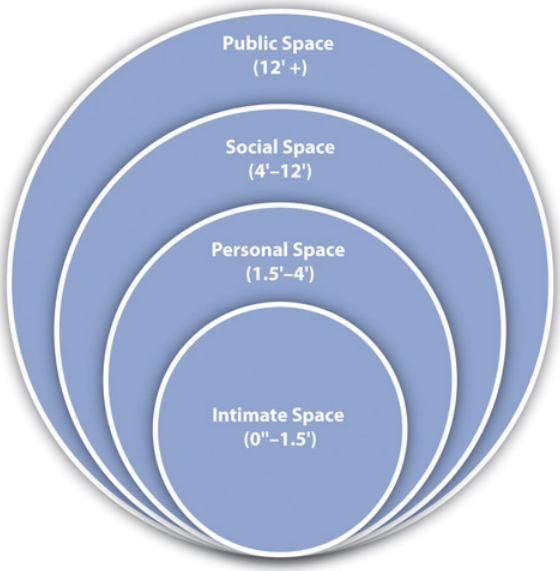
In addition, the use of silence serves as a type of nonverbal communication when we do not use words or utterances to convey meanings. Have you ever experienced the "silent treatment" from someone? What meanings did you take from that person's silence? Silence is powerful because the person using silence may be refusing to engage in communication with you. Silence can also be used strategically in conversations, such as silent pause for emphasis or a long period of silence in response to another's message. Others may use silence as a form of resistance. For example, silent protests or 'days of silence' are often used to show disapproval or bring awareness to a particular issue. It's important to be aware that silence has a variety of interpretations and

misinterpretations. For example, we may interpret another's silence as intentional, even when it wasn't. Or some people may remain silent to convey disagreement with something, however, others may interpret that silence as agreement.

Space, Territory, and Time

Other types of nonverbal communication types are: the way we use space around us, the territories we claim, and how we use time.

Spatial Use



People who live in U.S. America usually have very set notions on what is considered appropriate or inappropriate spatial distance between people, based on the relationship and context.

Spatial use, also called proxemics, refers to the study of how space and distance influence communication. In general, space influences how people communicate and behave. Smaller spaces with a higher density of people often lead to breaches of our personal space bubbles. Unexpected breaches of personal space can lead to negative reactions, especially if we feel someone has violated our space voluntarily, meaning that a crowding situation didn't force them into our space. We all have varying definitions of what our "personal space" is, and these definitions are contextual and depend on the situation and the relationship.

Although our bubbles are invisible, people are socialized into the norms of personal space within their cultural group. Scholars have identified four zones for U.S. Americans, which are public, social, personal, and intimate distance (Hall, 1968). The zones are more elliptical than circular, taking up more space in our front, where our line of sight is, than at our side or back where we can't monitor what people are doing. Even within a particular zone, interactions may differ depending on whether someone is in the outer or inner part of the zone.

Territoriality

In addition to various notions of personal space, we claim spaces as our own, such as a gang territory, a neighborhood claimed by a particular salesperson, your usual desk in the classroom, or the seat you've marked to save while getting concessions at a sporting event. Territoriality is an innate drive to take up and defend spaces. There are three main divisions for territory: primary, secondary, and public (Hargie, 2011). Sometimes our claim to a space is official. These spaces are known as our primary territories because they are marked or understood to be exclusively ours and under our control. A person's house, yard, room, desk, side of the bed, or shelf in the medicine cabinet could be considered primary territories. Secondary territories don't belong to us and aren't exclusively under our control. However, they are associated with us, which may lead us to assume that the space will be open and available to us when we need it without us taking any further steps to reserve it.

This happens in classrooms regularly. Students often sit in the same desk or at least same general area as they did on the first day of class. The expectation of this being "our space" could lead to a negative interpretation of the classmate you find sitting there one morning. Public territories are open to all people. People are allowed to mark public territory and use it for a limited period of time. This space is often up for grabs, though, which makes public space difficult to manage for some people, and can lead to conflict. To

avoid this type of situation, people use a variety of objects that are typically recognized by others as nonverbal cues that mark a place as temporarily reserved—for example, jackets, bags, papers, or a drink.

Time

Chronemics refers to the study of how time affects communication. Time can be classified into several different categories, including personal, physical, and cultural time (Andersen, 1999). Personal time refers to the ways in which individuals experience time. The way we experience time varies based on our mood, our interest level, and other factors. Think about how quickly time passes when you are interested in and therefore engaged in something. Physical time refers to the fixed cycles of days, years, and seasons. Physical time, especially seasons, can affect our mood and psychological states. Some people experience seasonal affective disorder that leads them to experience emotional distress and anxiety during the changes of seasons, primarily from warm and bright to dark and cold (summer to fall and winter). Cultural time refers to how a large group of people view time. Polychronic people do not view time as a linear progression that needs to be divided into small units and scheduled in advance. Polychronic people keep more flexible schedules and may engage in several activities at once. Monochronic people tend to schedule their time more rigidly and do one thing at a time. A polychronic or monochronic orientation to time influences our social realities and how we interact with others. Additionally, the way we use time depends in some ways on our status. For example, doctors can make their patients wait for extended periods of time. 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.

Personal and Environmental Presentation

Personal Presentation involves two components: our physical characteristics and the artifacts with which we adorn and surround ourselves with. Physical characteristics include body shape, height, weight, attractiveness, and other physical features of our bodies. We do not have as much control over how these nonverbal cues are encoded as we do with many other aspects of nonverbal communication. However, these characteristics play a large role in initial impression formation even though we know we “shouldn’t judge a book by its cover.” Although ideals of attractiveness vary among cultures and individuals, research consistently indicates that people who are deemed attractive based on physical characteristics have distinct advantages in many aspects of life.

While there are physical characteristics about ourselves that we cannot change, we do have control over our clothing choices, grooming behaviors, such as hair style, and the artifacts with which we adorn ourselves, such as clothes and accessories. Have you ever tried to consciously change your “look?” Changes in hairstyle and clothes can impact how you are perceived by others. In addition to artifacts such as clothes and hairstyles, other political, social, and cultural symbols send messages to others about who we are, such as piercings and tattoos. Jewelry can also send messages with varying degrees of direct meaning. A ring on the “ring finger” of a person’s left hand typically indicates that they are married or in an otherwise committed relationship. Expensive watches can serve as symbols that distinguish a CEO from an entry-level employee. People also adorn their clothes, body, or belongings with religious or cultural symbols, like a cross to indicate a person’s Christian faith or a rainbow flag to indicate that a person is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or an ally to one or more of those groups.

In addition, we can use artifacts in the spaces we occupy, such as our home, office, or bedroom, to communicate about ourselves. The books that we display on our coffee table, the magazines a doctor keeps in his or her waiting room, or the placement of fresh flowers in a foyer all convey meaning to others. For example, imagine a bedroom that has the wall painted pink, a ruffle bedspread, and dolls displayed on the self. What do these items say about the person who occupies that room? What age would you think they are? Gender? What types of activities might you think the occupant likes by the various toys on display? In summary, whether we know it or not, our physical characteristics and the artifacts that surround us communicate much about us.

(Left Image: home space, CC BY-SA 2.0; Right Image: Ben Babcock, CC BY 2.0)

Artifacts: *The artifacts that we use to decorate the spaces we occupy, such as a bedroom or office, can be used to communicate aspects of ourselves. Look at the artifacts in the above rooms. What do they communicate? Who lives in these spaces? Can you guess their age, gender identity, or socioeconomic status? What do you think they like?*

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10.4: Principles of Nonverbal Communication

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

Nonverbal Communication is Continuous

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

Nonverbal Communication is **Multi-channeled**

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

Nonverbal Communication is Conscious/Intentional and Unconscious/Unintentional

Nonverbal communication is both conscious and unconscious, which means we use it both intentionally and unintentionally. Conscious communication means that we think about our communication before we communicate. Unconscious communication means that we do not think about every message we communicate. For example, when something funny happens, you probably do not think, "Okay, I'm going to smile and laugh right now." Instead, you react unconsciously, displaying your emotions through nonverbal behaviors. Nonverbal communication can occur as unconscious reactions to situations. However, at times, we certainly make conscious choices to use or withhold nonverbal communication to share meaning. Angry drivers use many conscious nonverbal expressions to communicate to other drivers, and in a job interview you are making conscious decisions about your wardrobe, posture, and eye contact.

Nonverbal Communication is Ambiguous

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

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

When most people think of nonverbal communication, they think of behaviors and actions directly connected to the body, such as gestures and facial expressions. And when most people think of the type of communication that takes place through mediated platforms, like text messaging and social media posts, they usually think of it as verbal communication. However, technology has

changed and reshaped our conceptualization and definitions of what communication is and looks like in a variety of contexts. Scholars have equated communication such as text messages to ‘fingered speech’ (McWhorter, 2013) and these types of communication have transcended past our traditional definitions as they exhibit characteristics of both verbal and nonverbal communication simultaneously.

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

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

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10.5: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover techniques for sending more effective nonverbal messages, address cultural and co-cultural nuances surrounding nonverbal symbols, and discuss the importance of nonverbal behaviors in our relationships.

Effective Communication: Encoding Nonverbal Signals

While it is important to recognize that we send nonverbal signals through multiple channels simultaneously, we can also increase our nonverbal communication competence by becoming more aware of how it operates in specific channels. Although no one can truly offer you a rulebook on how to effectively send every type of nonverbal signal, there are some guidelines you can follow to help you become more effective at consciously encoding nonverbal signals that are meant to be intentional.

Gestures

- Remember that adaptors can hurt your credibility in more formal or serious interactions. Figure out what your common adaptors are and monitor them so you can avoid creating unfavorable impressions.
- Gestures send messages about your emotional state. Be aware that clenched hands may signal aggression or anger, nail biting or fidgeting may signal nervousness, and finger tapping may signal boredom.

Eye Contact

- Eye contact is useful for initiating and regulating conversations. To make sure someone is available for interaction and to avoid being perceived as rude, it is usually a good idea to “catch their eye” before you start talking to them.
- Avoiding eye contact or shifting your eye contact from place to place can lead others to think you are being deceptive or inattentive.

Facial Expressions

- You can use facial expressions to manage your expressions of emotions to intensify what you’re feeling, to diminish what you’re feeling, to cover up what you’re feeling, to express a different emotion than you’re feeling, or to simulate an emotion that you’re not feeling (Metts & Planlap, 2002).
- Smiles are especially powerful in interactions and can act as rapport-building tool. Smiles can also help to disarm a potentially hostile person or deescalate conflict.

Haptics

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

Paralanguage

- Verbal fillers such as uh and um are often used subconsciously and can negatively affect your credibility and reduce the clarity of your message when speaking in more formal situations.
- Vocal variety increases listener and speaker engagement, understanding, information recall, and motivation. Having a more expressive voice that varies appropriately in terms of rate, pitch, and volume can help you achieve communication goals related to maintaining attention, effectively conveying information, and getting others to act in a particular way.

Spatial Use/Proxemics

- When breaches of personal space occur, it is a social norm to make nonverbal adjustments such as lowering our level of immediacy, changing our body orientations, and using objects to separate ourselves from others. physically separate or block off the front of our bodies from others.
- Although pets and children are often granted more leeway to breach other people’s space, since they are still learning social norms and rules, as a pet owner, parent, or temporary caretaker, be aware of this possibility and try to prevent such breaches or correct them when they occur.

Contextual Communication: Cultural and Co-Cultural Nuances

Many people mistakenly believe that nonverbal communication, such as gestures, are universal. However, there can be many different meanings associated with a particular gesture. For example, take the thumbs up sign. In U.S. American it can mean 'okay' whereas in Japan it represents the number 5 and in Ghana is an insult. Even context changes the meaning, such as using the thumbs up sign for hitchhiking if by the road or to indicate you like something in mediated communication.

As with other aspects of communication, norms for nonverbal communication vary from country to country and from co-culture to co-culture within a particular country. We've already learned that some nonverbal communication behaviors appear to be somewhat innate because they are universally recognized. Smiling is a universal nonverbal behavior, however, the triggers that lead a person to smile vary from culture to culture. In addition, the smile may not always equate to happiness. The expansion of media, particularly from the United States and other Western countries around the world, is leading to more nonverbal similarities among cultures, but the biggest cultural differences in nonverbal communication occur within the categories of gestures, eye contact, touch, volume, personal space, and time (Pease & Pease, 2004).

Gestures

If you'll recall from our discussion on gestures, emblems are gestures that correspond to a word and an agreed-upon meaning. However, the meaning attached to emblems and gestures vary from culture to culture. For example, the "thumbs up" gesture can mean the number "one" in mainland Europe, but it also means "up yours" in Greece (when thrust forward) and is recognized as a signal for hitchhiking or "good," "good job / way to go," or "OK" in many other cultures. So using a particular gesture to communicate in another country might actually end up causing a conflict.

Eye Contact

In the U.S., much importance is placed on making eye contact and it is often equated with confidence, interest, and honesty. Eye contact aversion, however, could be seen as a sign that the other person is being deceptive, is bored, or is being rude. However, in some cultures, avoiding eye contact is considered a sign of respect. Some Native American nations teach that people should avoid eye contact with elders, teachers, and other people with status. This can create issues when others view lack of eye contact as a sign of disrespect, lack of engagement, or lower intelligence.

Touch, Volume, and Spatial Use

Contact cultures are cultural groups in which people stand closer together, engage in more eye contact, touch more frequently, and speak more loudly. The volume at which we speak is influenced by specific contexts and is more generally influenced by our culture. In European countries like France, England, Sweden, and Germany, it is not uncommon to find restaurants that have small tables very close together. In many cases, two people dining together may be sitting at a table that is actually touching the table of another pair of diners. Most U.S. Americans would consider this a violation of personal space, and Europeans often perceive U.S. Americans to be rude in such contexts because they do not control the volume of their conversations more. Since personal space is usually more plentiful in the U. S., Americans are used to speaking at a level that is considered loud to many cultures that are used to less personal space.

Time

The United States and many northern and western European countries have a monochronic orientation to time, meaning time is seen as a commodity that can be budgeted, saved, spent, and wasted. Events are to be scheduled in advance and have set beginning and ending times. Countries like Spain and Mexico have a polychronic orientation to time. Appointments may be scheduled at overlapping times, making an "orderly" schedule impossible. People may also miss appointments or deadlines without offering an

apology, which would be considered very rude by a person with a monochronic orientation to time. People from cultures with a monochronic orientation to time are frustrated when people from polychromic cultures cancel appointments or close businesses for family obligations. Conversely, people from polychromic cultures feel that US Americans, for example, follow their schedules at the expense of personal relationships (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

On a global scale, we see many variations in nonverbal communication across cultures. However, even within one geographic location, there are also variations based on co-cultural factors such as race, gender, social class, etc. As an example of gender variation, it's obvious that males and females tend to have differences in physical appearances in regards to dress, grooming, and artifacts. But even the ways males and females walk and sit can be vastly different. Males tend to take up much more space than females, particular in public spaces. The phenomenon of 'manspreading' on subways is one that has gained a lot of recent attention.

In addition to co-cultural nuances, nonverbal encoding and decoding of messages is further complicated by other contextual nuances such as the physical context and relational context.

For example, if you are in a bar, someone making prolonged eye contact could be interpreted as romantic interest. However, someone making prolonged eye contact in a prison could be a sign of aggression. The relationship between two people can also influence the interpretation. Consider the differences between making prolonged eye contact with your sibling versus a romantic partner. Always keep in mind that nonverbal communication is ambiguous and just as you must consider nonverbal congruence for the channels, you must also pay attention to contextual nuances as all these things work together to generate meaning.

Activity

Cross-cultural Awareness Quiz: You can take a cross-cultural awareness quiz to learn some more interesting cultural variations in gestures at the following link: **https://www.funtrivia.com/playquiz/quiz31230423c0d88.html** .

Reflective Communication: Nonverbal Communication in Relationships

As we already discussed, nonverbal communication is important part of expressing identities. However, another central—if not primary—function of nonverbal communication is the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. As a competent communicator, it is important to reflect on nonverbal communication and recognize the role it plays in our various relationships. People who are skilled at consciously encoding nonverbal messages have various interpersonal advantages, including being more popular, having larger social networks consisting of both acquaintances and close friends, and being less likely to be lonely or socially anxious (Riggio, 1992). Nonverbal communication increases our expressivity, and people generally find attractive and want to pay more attention to things that are expressive. This increases our chances of initiating interpersonal relationships.

Nonverbal communication also helps maintain relationships once they have moved beyond the initial stages by helping us communicate emotions, and seek and provide social and emotional support. In terms of communicating emotions, competent communicators know when it is appropriate to express emotions and when more self-regulation is needed. Expressing the need for support is also an important part of relational maintenance. People who lack nonverbal encoding skills may send unclear or subtle cues requesting support that are not picked up on by others, which can lead to increased feelings of loneliness. Skilled encoders of nonverbal messages, on the other hand, are able to appropriately communicate the need for support in recognizable ways.

Decoding Nonverbal Messages

When it comes to decoding, always keep in mind the that our nonverbal messages are ambiguous and there is no set universal meaning. As such, it is important to be tentative when decoding messages and not 'jump to conclusions' in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings or hurt feelings. It is common to misinterpret the emotional expression of others, even when we are close to them, or to think an emotional expression is tied to something we did. For example, we may think our partner's lack of responsiveness and irritable mood means they are upset with us, when they might have just had a stressful day at work and feel tired. When unsure about what another is expressing, you can use the skill of perception checking covered in Chapter 3 to aid in the clarity of your interpretations and avoid potentially harmful misunderstandings.

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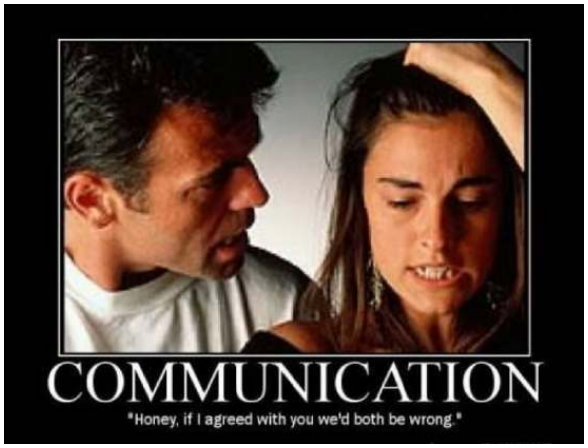
CHAPTER OVERVIEW

11: Interpersonal Conflict

Which of your relationships contain the most conflict right now? Your answer to this question probably depends on the various contexts in your life. If you live with family, you may have daily conflicts as you try to balance your autonomy with the practicalities of living under your family's roof. Or if you live with friends, you may be negotiating roommate conflicts. You probably also have experiences managing conflict in romantic relationships and in the workplace. Think back and ask yourself, "How well do I handle conflict?" As with all areas of communication, we can improve if we have the background knowledge to identify relevant communication phenomena and the motivation to reflect on and enhance our communication skills. In this chapter, we will define interpersonal conflict, describe common conflict approaches, and explain how to be more competent when it comes to more effectively managing conflict in our lives.



Learning Objectives

- What is conflict, and what are some of the different ways we behave in conflict situations?
- How can we approach conflict effectively, and why is it important?

Successful students will be able to:

- define conflict
- explain the importance of effective conflict management
- identify five conflict styles
- demonstrate effective strategies for approaching and responding to conflict
- demonstrate effective apologies
- recognize how culture affects perceptions of conflict approaches
- identify four conflict triggers

11.1: Interpersonal Conflict
11.2: Conflict Management Styles
11.3: Communication Competence

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11.1: Interpersonal Conflict

In this section, we will define interpersonal conflict and explain the importance of managing it constructively.

Interpersonal Conflict

Conflict occurs due to real or perceived incompatible goals, scarce resources, or opposing viewpoints. It can be expressed both verbally and/or nonverbally, explicated stated or passively conveyed, and ranges on a continuum from nearly imperceptible (e.g., giving someone the 'cold shoulder') to very obvious (e.g., verbally yelling).

Conflict is an inevitable part of close relationships and can take a negative emotional toll. It takes effort to ignore someone or to be passive aggressive, and the negative feelings of anger or guilt we may feel after blowing up at someone are valid. However, conflict isn't always negative or unproductive. In fact, numerous research studies have shown that the number of conflicts in a relationship is not as important as how the conflict is handled (Markman et al., 1993).

Improving your competence in dealing with conflict can yield positive effects in the real world. Since conflict is inevitable in our personal and professional lives, the ability to manage conflict and negotiate desirable outcomes can help us be more successful. Whether you are trying to decide what brand of flat-screen television to buy with your partner or discussing the upcoming political election with your mother, the potential for conflict is present.

Being able to manage conflict situations can make life more pleasant as opposed to what we may feel if we let a situation stagnate or escalate. Additionally, when conflict is well managed, it has the potential to lead to more rewarding and satisfactory relationships (Canary & Messman, 2000). The negative effects of poorly handled conflict could range from an awkward last few weeks of a semester with a college roommate to violence or divorce.

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11.2: Conflict Management Styles

Would you describe yourself as someone who prefers to avoid conflict? Do you like to get your way? Are you good at working with someone to reach a solution that is mutually beneficial? Odds are that you have been in situations where you could answer yes to each of these questions. You may also find that one of the above approaches is preferable for most situations you face, making it your primary or "go-to" conflict style. Conflict management styles are the communication strategies we use that attempt to avoid, address, or resolve a conflict. In this section, we will describe five approaches for managing conflict: competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating.

Each of these conflict styles emphasize a dynamic between concern for self and others. In order to better understand the elements of the five styles of conflict management, we will apply each to the following scenario. Amal and Vaughn have been married for seventeen years. Amal is growing frustrated because Vaughn continues to give money to their teenager, Sasha, even though they both decided to keep Sasha on a fixed allowance. While conflicts regarding money and child rearing are very common, we will see the numerous ways that Amal and Vaughn could approach this problem as we address each of the five styles. We rarely are conscious of our approach. Rather, unless we've been trained, we tend to handle conflict habitually, in the default ways we've been conditioned through observing others (e.g., family, culture).

Competing

(Image: CC0)

Coercive Competitive strategies can include verbal and/or nonverbal aggressive acts such as threats, yelling, or violence.

The competing style indicates a high concern for self and a low concern for other. When we compete, we are striving to "win" the conflict, potentially at the expense or "loss" of the other person. One way we may gauge our win is by being granted or taking concessions from the other person. For example, if Vaughn gives Sasha extra money behind Amal's back, then Vaughn is taking an indirect competitive route. The competing style also involves the use of power, which can be noncoercive or coercive (Sillars, 1980). Noncoercive strategies include requesting and persuading. Amal could try to persuade Vaughn to stop giving Sasha extra allowance money by bringing up their fixed budget or by reminding Vaughn that they are saving for a summer vacation. Coercive strategies may include aggressive communication directed at rousing your partner's emotions through insults, profanity, and yelling, or through threats of punishment if you do not get your way. If Amal is the primary income earner in the family, they could use that power to threaten to take Vaughn's ATM card away if Vaughn continues to give Sasha money. In all these scenarios, the "win" that could result is only short term and can lead to conflict escalation, even in the seemingly innocuous noncoercive situation, because the core of the conflict was not resolved. Each parent's goals for Sasha may still be incompatible.

Interpersonal conflict is rarely isolated, meaning ripple effects can occur that connect the current conflict to previous and future conflicts. Vaughn's behind-the-scenes money giving or Amal's confiscation of the ATM card could lead to built-up negative emotions that could further test the relationship.

Avoiding

(Image: CC0)
When people engage in an Avoiding style, they physical, mentally, and/or emotionally withdraw from the conflict and do not communicate about the issue(s).

The avoiding style of conflict management often indicates a low concern for self and a low concern for other, and no overt or direct communication about the conflict takes place. However, in some cultures that emphasize group harmony over individual interests, and even in some situations in the United States, avoiding a conflict can indicate a high level of concern for the other. In general, avoiding doesn't mean that there is no communication about the conflict. Remember, you cannot not communicate. Even when we try to avoid conflict, we may intentionally or unintentionally give away our feelings through our verbal and nonverbal communication. Amal's sarcastic tone when telling Vaughn "You are soooo good with money!" and subsequent eye roll both bring the conflict to the surface without specifically addressing it. The avoiding style is either passive or indirect, which may make this style less effective than others.

We may decide to avoid conflict for many different reasons, some of which are better than others. If you view the conflict as having little importance to you, it may be better to ignore it. If the person with whom you're in conflict with will only be working in your office for a week, you may perceive a conflict to be temporary and choose to avoid it, hoping it will solve itself. If you are not emotionally invested in the conflict, you may be able to reframe your perspective and see the situation in a different way, therefore resolving the issue. In all these cases, avoiding doesn't really require an investment of time, emotion, or communication skill, so there is not much at stake to lose. However, while it may be easy to tolerate a problem when you're not personally invested in it or view it as temporary, when faced with a situation like Amal and Vaughn's, avoidance may just make the problem worse. For example, avoidance could first manifest as changing the subject, and then progress from avoiding the issue to avoiding the person altogether, to even ending the relationship.

Indirect strategies of hinting and joking also fall under the avoiding style. When we hint, we drop clues that we hope our partner will find and piece together to see the problem and hopefully change, thereby solving the problem without any direct communication. However, often the person dropping the hints overestimates their partner's detective abilities. For example, when Amal leaves the bank statement on the kitchen table in hopes that Vaughn will realize how much extra money is being given to Sasha, Vaughn may simply ignore it. We also overestimate our partner's ability to decode the jokes we make about a conflict situation. It is more likely the receiver of the jokes will think you're genuinely trying to be funny or feel provoked or insulted than realize the conflict situation that you are referencing. More frustration may develop when the hints and jokes are not accurately decoded, which often leads to a more extreme form of hinting/joking: passive-aggressive behavior.

Passive-aggressive behavior is a way of dealing with conflict in which one person indirectly communicates negative thoughts or feelings through nonverbal behaviors, such as not completing a task. For example, Amal may wait a few days to deposit money into the bank so Vaughn can't withdraw it to give to Sasha. Although passive-aggressive behavior can feel rewarding in the moment, it is one of the most unproductive ways to deal with conflict. However, as noted above, avoidance can be appropriate in some situations—for example, when the conflict is temporary, when the stakes are low or there is little personal investment, or when there is the potential for violence or retaliation.

Accommodating

The accommodating conflict management style indicates a low concern for self and a high concern for other, and is often viewed as passive or submissive, in that someone complies with or obliges another. Basically, accommodating entails doing what the other wants, whereas avoiding is doing nothing in a situation. It should be noted that sometimes avoiding often leads to accommodating indirectly as not addressing a problem or voicing our opinion can lead others to perceive that we are okay with doing things their way.

The context for and motivation behind accommodating play an important role in whether or not it is an appropriate approach. Generally, we accommodate because we are being generous, we are obeying, we are yielding (Bobot, 2010). If we are being generous, we accommodate because we genuinely want to. If we are obeying, we don't have a choice but to accommodate (perhaps due to the potential for negative consequences or punishment). If we yield, we may have our own views or goals but give up on them due to fatigue, time constraints, or because a better solution has been offered.

Accommodating can be appropriate when there is little chance that our own goals can be achieved, when we don't have much to lose by accommodating, when we feel we are wrong, or when advocating for our own needs could negatively affect the relationship (Isenhart & Spangle, 2000). The occasional accommodation can be useful in maintaining a relationship. For example, Amal may say, "It's OK that you gave Sasha some extra money. Sasha did have to spend more on gas this week since the prices went up." However, being a team player can slip into being a pushover, which people generally do not appreciate. If Amal keeps telling Vaughn, "It's OK this time," the family may find themselves short on spending money at the end of the month.

Compromising

The compromising style shows a moderate concern for self and other. Even though we often hear that the best way to handle a conflict is to compromise, the compromising style isn't a win/win solution; it is a partial win/lose. In essence, when we compromise, we give up some or most of what we want. It's true that the conflict gets resolved temporarily, but lingering thoughts of what you gave up could lead to a future conflict. Compromising may be a good strategy when there are time limitations or when prolonging a conflict may lead to relationship deterioration. Compromise may also be good when both parties have equal power or when other resolution strategies have not worked (Macintosh & Stevens, 2008). Compromising may help conflicting parties come to a resolution, but neither may be completely satisfied if they each had to give something up.

Compromising versus Accommodating

People often get accommodating and compromising confused. Accommodating means sacrificing your needs/wants/desires for what the other wants, without them giving anything in return. When you compromise, both parties give something and gain something.

A negative of compromising is that it may be used as an easy way out of a conflict. The compromising style is most effective when both parties find the solution reasonably agreeable. If Amal values using allowance to teach responsibility and Vaughn wants to give Sasha an extra twenty dollars a week to make Sasha's life easier, they may decide to compromise by giving Sasha ten more dollars a week.

Collaborating

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

Problem-Solving

When trying to collaborate on solving a conflict, it is useful to use the following five-step problem-solving sequence:

1. Identify the problem(s).
2. Analyze the problem(s), the causes, and symptoms. In other words, how did the problem come about and why are you having this conflict?
3. Identify the goals/needs of each person in the conflict. In other words, what does each person want?
4. Identify solutions that might solve the problem and meet the goals/needs of the conflict participants. Be creative and think outside the box if necessary.
5. Evaluate the solutions that were identified. When evaluating the solutions, you should consider the following: Will it solve the problem? Will it satisfy the goals/needs of the conflict participants? What are some potential issues that might arise when the choice is implemented?

Here are some tips for collaborating and achieving a win/win outcome (Hargie, 2011):

- Avoid viewing the conflict as a contest you are trying to win.
- Remain flexible and realize there are solutions yet to be discovered.
- Separate between the person and the problem (don't make it personal).
- Determine the underlying needs driving the other person's demands.
- Identify areas of common ground or shared interests that you can work from to develop solutions.
- Ask questions to allow them to clarify and to help you understand their perspective.

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11.3: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover techniques for approaching and responding to conflict, address cultural nuances surrounding conflict approaches, and reflect on some common conflict triggers.

Effective Communication: Approaching and Responding to Conflict and Apologizing

While many tend to think of conflict as negative, it isn't inherently so, and you can use effective interpersonal communication skills to manage conflict constructively. This could potentially transform a negative situation into something that is positive and cathartic. However, it is important to note that conflict involves more than one person, and that the other person or people in the conflict may not have the knowledge or skills of effective communication. Despite this, having just one person knowledgeable in conflict management skills can help deescalate the situation and better resolve the conflict. Below, we will discuss how to approach a conflict situation and how to effectively apologize in situations where you have wronged another person.

Approaching Conflict

To effectively approach someone about a conflict, consider the strategies below.

Prepare.
Before approaching someone, be sure to define the problem, your goals, and brainstorm potential solutions that you think will solve the problem. Also, take into consideration how, when, and where you will approach the other person with the problem. Usually it is best to approach someone privately versus in a public location around other people.

Take ownership.
Recognize that the conflict consists of at least two people. Whether it is a disagreement or hurt feelings, both people play a role in the conflict.

Be assertive, not aggressive.
Being assertive means stating the message in a clear, direct manner while respecting the other person. Aggressiveness entails attacking another's self-esteem, blaming, expressing hostility, and name-calling. Behaving aggressively is unlikely to yield the results you want.

Start with Facework.
In Chapter 10: Communicate Climate we discussed facework strategies that avoid embarrassing, blaming, and/ ascribing motives to the other. Using these strategies when approaching conflict can help reduce defensiveness in the other person. (As a reminder, some good facework starters include 'You may not have meant it this way…' or 'You may not be aware of this, but…').

Describe the conflict in terms of Behavior, Consequences, and/or Feelings.
When you approach the other person, be sure to include the behavior(s) involved in the conflict and either the consequences of said behavior or how it makes you feel (or both).

- **Behavior(s):**
  Tell the other person what the behavior is and when it occurred. In other words, what did the person specifically do or say and when did this occur? Be sure the description of the behavior is specific, objective, and observable, with no meaning, interpretation, or significance attached. For example: "Your voice raised last night when we were discussing finances…" vs "You were being a jerk last night." "You didn't respond to my texts yesterday" vs "You are ignoring me." Starters include "I noticed recently that…"
- **Consequences:**
  Describe the reason(s) you are bothered by the behavior(s) or what happens in your life or someone else's life as result of the behavior you described. Starters: "This bothers me because…" "What happens when…"
- **Feelings:**
  Describe the emotions you are experiencing as a result of the interpretation you attached to the behavior. Be sure to say things like "I feel…" rather than "you make me feel…" or "you hurt my feelings" Starter: "I feel (emotion)…"

Use "I" statements.
As mentioned in previous communication competence sections throughout this book, "I" statements are key in communication.

(For example, “I interpret this behavior x to mean”… versus “you are inconsiderate”).

Be sure the other person understands your problem.
Invite them to paraphrase and ask additional questions. Don’t be offended or deterred if they have trouble understanding the problem at first, respond defensively or angrily, try to deflect responsibility, or need some time to respond. Remember, not everyone has learned effective communication skills, and needing time to process the information they are receiving should be expected.

Phrase your preferred solution in a way that focuses on common ground.
Try to identify solutions that meet the goals/needs for both parties. This means utilizing the collaborative approach. Also, avoid framing your solution in a way that makes it seem as if it is the only or even best solution. Instead, solicit potential suggestions from the other.

Responding to Conflict

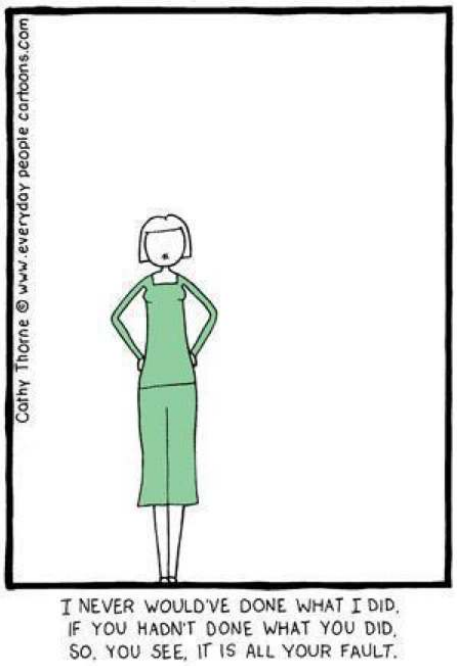
When another person approaches you about a conflict, consider the strategies below.

Listen to what the other has to say.
If you are in situation where another person approaches you with an issue, you can usually help deescalate the situation by listening to what the other person has to say. Sometimes this can be hard, as our immediate reaction may be to deny, or to become defensive or emotional. However, try to listen objectively and demonstrate effective listening skills such as using back-channel cues, asking questions, and paraphrasing to show understanding. When you do this, you are able to gain more information and better understand the other’s perspective and feelings, which will enable you to constructively address the situation

Validate what the other person has to say.
You do not need to agree but you can show that you recognize and understand the other person’s feelings and thoughts about the situation. Doing so can help to neutralize the tension and enables you to then offer your own or a different perspective and work towards identifying solutions via the collaborative approach to conflict.

Take ownership and apologize if necessary.
Sometimes conflict occurs because you have done something that has negatively impacted another person in some way, whether intentional or unintentional. When this happens, it is necessary to offer a sincere apology to alleviate hurt feelings and/or prevent the situation from escalating. In some situations, not apologizing and/or apologizing ineffectively (e.g., “my bad”) can exacerbate the situation. Non-apologies or ineffective apologies can be potentially problematic by escalating a simple mistake or misunderstanding into a full-scale conflict, and can result in long-term feelings of resentment and/or the issue being brought up later on (often again and again).

Ask the other for preferred solutions or engage in problem solving to identify some.
Ask for suggestions and/or work together to brainstorm solutions that might meet both of your needs. Be creative and think outside the box when possible. Evaluate proposed solutions and decide on the necessary actions needed to move forward. Be sure to reflect on how you will keep yourself and the other accountable to implementing solutions.



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Whether approaching or responding to a conflict, take ownership and avoid blaming the other.

Contextual Communication: Culture and Conflict

There is no absolute right or wrong way to handle a conflict. A competent communicator assesses contextual nuances and applies or adapts communication tools and skills to fit the dynamic situation. In this section, we will specifically focus on the role of cultural context when approaching conflict situations, as it is important to understand how various groups value, approach, and respond to conflict in interpersonal relationships.

Recent research has called into question some of the assumptions behind the five conflict management styles discussed so far, which were formulated with a Western bias (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008). For example, the avoiding style of conflict has been cast as a negative option in the U.S., emphasizing it's focus on the low concern for self and other or as a lose/lose outcome. However, some countries viewed avoiding strategies as demonstrating a concern for the other.

We can better understand some of the cultural differences in conflict management by further examining the concept of face. Our face is the projected self we desire to put into the world, and facework, as discussed in Chapter 10: Communication Climate refers to the communicative strategies we employ to project, maintain, or repair our face or maintain, repair, or challenge another's face. Cultural factors influence whether we are more concerned with self-face or other-face and which types of conflict management strategies we may use. One key cultural influence on face negotiation is the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Individualistic cultures like the United States emphasize individual identity over group identity and encourage competition and self-reliance. Collectivistic cultures value in-group identity over individual identity and value conformity to social norms of the in-group (Dsilva & Whyte, 1998).

Individualistic or collectivistic cultural orientations affect how people engage in facework and the conflict management styles they employ. Individualistic cultures tend to favor self-face concerns and collectivistic cultures tend to employ other-face strategies. Someone from an individualistic culture, like the United States, may be more likely to engage in competing as a conflict management strategy if they are directly confronted, which may be an attempt to defend their reputation (self-face concern). Someone in a collectivistic culture, may be more likely to engage in avoiding or accommodating in order not to embarrass or anger the person confronting them (other-face concern) or out of concern that their reaction could reflect negatively on their family or cultural group (other-face concern). While these distinctions are useful for categorizing large-scale cultural patterns, it is important not to essentialize or arbitrarily group countries together, because there are measurable differences within cultures.

Reflective Communication: Conflict Triggers

A key to handling conflict effectively is to notice patterns of conflict in specific relationships and to generally have an idea of what causes you and others to react negatively. Four common triggers for conflict are criticism, demand, cumulative annoyance, and rejection (Christensen & Jacobson, 2000).

Criticism

We all know from experience that criticism, or comments that evaluate another person's personality, behavior, appearance, or life choices, may lead to conflict. Comments do not have to be meant as criticism to be perceived as such. If Gary comes home from college for the weekend and his mom says, "Looks like you put on a few pounds," she may view this as a statement of fact based on observation. Gary, however, may take the comment personally and respond negatively back to his mom, starting a conflict that will last for the rest of his visit. However, in many cases, we can consider alternative ways to phrase things that may be taken less personally, or we may determine that our comment doesn't need to be spoken at all. A majority of the thoughts we have about another person's physical appearance, especially when negative, do not need to be verbalized. Ask yourself, "What is my motivation for making this comment?" and "Do I have anything to lose by not making this comment?" If your underlying reasons seem valid, perhaps there is another way to phrase your observation. If Gary's mom is worried about his eating habits and health, she could wait until they're eating dinner and ask him how he likes the food choices at school and what he usually eats. Remember the tips from Chapter 10: Communication Climate about criticism that honors interpersonal and face needs.

Demands

Demands also frequently trigger conflict, especially if the demand is viewed as unfair or irrelevant. It's important to note that demands rephrased as questions may still be or be perceived as demands. Tone of voice and context are important factors here. As with criticism, thinking before you speak and before you respond can help manage demands and minimize conflict episodes. If you are doing the demanding, include more information in the exchange to make your demand clearer or more reasonable to the other person. Consider making a request instead, in a way that honors the other person's interpersonal and face needs. If you are being demanded of, responding calmly and expressing your thoughts and feelings are likely more effective than withdrawing, which may escalate the conflict.

Cumulative Annoyance

Cumulative annoyance is a building of frustration or anger that occurs over time, eventually resulting in a conflict interaction. For example, your friend shows up late to drive you to class three times in a row. You didn't say anything the previous times, but on the third time you say, "You're late again! If you can't get here on time, I'll find another way to get to class." Cumulative annoyance can build up like a pressure cooker, and as it builds up, the intensity of the conflict also builds. Criticism and demands can also play into cumulative annoyance. Probably, we have all let critical or demanding comments slide, but if they continue, it becomes difficult to hold back, and most of us have a breaking point. The problem here is that all the other incidents come back to your mind as you confront the other person, which usually intensifies the conflict. You've likely been surprised when someone has blown up at you due to cumulative annoyance or surprised when someone you have blown up at didn't know there was a problem building. You are more likely to have success with conflict management if you stick to addressing the problematic behavior, without judgment. If you are the subject of someone else's built up frustration, remember to employ empathy and listening skills.

Rejection

No one likes the feeling of rejection. Rejection can lead to conflict when one person's comments or behaviors are perceived as ignoring or invalidating the other person. Vulnerability is a component of any close relationship. When we care about someone, we verbally or nonverbally communicate. We may tell our best friend that we miss them, or plan a home-cooked meal for our partner who is working late. The vulnerability that underlies these actions comes from the possibility that our relational partner will not notice or appreciate them. When someone feels exposed or rejected, they often respond with anger to mask their hurt, which ignites a conflict. Managing feelings of rejection is difficult because it is so personal, but controlling the impulse to assume that your relational partner is rejecting you, and engaging in communication rather than reflexive reaction, can help put things in perspective. If your partner doesn't get excited about the meal you planned and cooked, it could be because he or she is physically or mentally tired after a long day. Concepts discussed throughout this book, such as empathy, perception checking, listening skills and facework can be useful here.

Apologizing

An apology is an expression of remorse for something you've done wrong and serves as a way to repair a relationship after that wrongdoing. A good apology will communicate three things: regret, responsibility, and remedy.[2] Apologizing for a mistake might seem difficult, but it will help us repair and improve our relationships with others. Below are some suggestions for crafting apologies. As you review these, consider how each might be effective because it addresses the interpersonal and face needs we covered in Chapter 10: Communication Climate.

Give up the idea of being "right."

Arguing about the details of an experience that involves more than one person is usually frustrating because two people may experience the same situation very differently. An apology needs to acknowledge the other person's feelings, regardless of whether you think they're "right" or not.[3] For example, imagine that you went out to the movies without your partner. Your partner felt left out and hurt. Instead of arguing about whether they are "right" to feel this way or whether you were "right" to go out, acknowledge that they felt hurt in your apology.

Use "I"-statements.

When you apologize, don't push responsibility for the offense off on to the other person. [4] For example, a very common but ineffective way of apologizing is to say something like, "I'm sorry your feelings were hurt" or "I'm sorry you feel that way." An apology does not need to apologize for the other person's feelings. It needs to acknowledge your responsibility, and these types of statements don't. Rather, they push the responsibility back onto the person who was hurt.[5][6] Instead, keep the focus on you. "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings" or "I'm sorry that my actions upset you."

Accept responsibility and be specific.

Be as specific as possible when you accept responsibility as it is more likely to be meaningful to the other person, because it shows you have paid attention to the situation.[26][27] Saying something like "I'm a terrible person" isn't attentive to the specific behavior or situation that caused the hurt. Instead state what, specifically, caused the hurt. For example, "I should never have snapped at you for picking me up late."

State your regret.

Express your empathy toward the other person and acknowledge the other person's feelings as real and valued.[24] For example, you could begin an apology by saying "I'm sorry I made that choice. Looks like you are really hurt, and that matters to me."

Avoid justifying your actions and blaming the other person.

It's natural to want to justify your actions when explaining them to another person. However, presenting justifications will often negate the meaning of an apology, because the other person may perceive the apology as insincere.[7] Justifications may include claims that the person you hurt misunderstood you, such as "you took it the wrong way" or a denial of injury, such as "it wasn't really that bad." Also, don't try to put the blame on the other person. For example, "Well, if you didn't put the cup on the counter, I wouldn't have knocked it off."

Use excuses cautiously.

An apology may express that your offense was not intentional or aimed at harming the person. However, you must be careful that your reasons for your behavior don't slip into justifying away the harm you did.[8] Examples of excuses might include denying your intent or a denial of volition, such as "I was drunk and didn't know what I was saying." Use these types of statements carefully, and make sure that you always acknowledge the hurt you did first before following it with any reasons for your behavior.[9]

Find the right time.

Even if you immediately regret something, an apology may not be effective if it comes in the middle of a highly emotional situation. [15] Waiting until you have collected yourself will help you say what you mean to say and make sure that your apology is meaningful and complete. Just don't wait too long. Waiting days or weeks to apologize can do damage too.[16] In professional settings, it's a good idea to make your apology as soon after the mistake as possible. Choose a quiet or private setting for the apology. Also, make sure you have enough time to have a complete conversation. Rushed apologies are often ineffective.[18]

> **State how you will remedy the situation.**
> Apologies are likely to be most successful if you offer a suggestion about how you will do things differently in the future, or repair the hurt in some way.[28] For example, “I never should have snapped at you for picking me up late. In the future, I will stop to think more carefully before I say things.”

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