COMS 246: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Introduction to Communication

By its very nature communication is not a skill we are born with. If lucky, we are born with the senses necessary to learn to use the communication skills we can learn. Our journey in interpersonal communication will be to take the senses that we have and learn better to use them. We will look into ourselves at a deep level. Only when individuals understand themselves better, can they improve their own communication skills.

In chapter one, you will have an opportunity to learn the fundamentals of communication. The very process of communication is complex even to explain, yet in real time occurs very quickly. As each section is explained, try to apply it to your own life and you will have more comprehensive learning experience.

1.1: Types of Communication
1.2: The Communication Process
1.3: Principles of Interpersonal Communication

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1.1: Types of Communication

Learning Objectives

- Define communication.
- List two forms of communication.
- Distinguish among the two forms of communication.

Before we dive into the history of communication, it is important that we have a shared understanding of what we mean by the word *communication*. For our purposes in this book, we will define **communication** as the process of generating meaning by sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal symbols and signs that are influenced by multiple contexts. This definition builds on other definitions of communication that have been rephrased and refined over many years. In fact, since the systematic study of communication began in colleges and universities a little over one hundred years ago, there have been more than 126 published definitions of communication.

Intrapersonal Communication

Intrapersonal communication is communication with oneself using internal vocalization or reflective thinking. Like other forms of communication, intrapersonal communication is triggered by some internal or external stimulus. We may, for example, communicate with our self about what we want to eat due to the internal stimulus of hunger, or we may react intrapersonally to an event we witness. Unlike other forms of communication, intrapersonal communication takes place only inside our heads. The other forms of communication must be perceived by someone else to count as communication. So what is the point of intrapersonal communication if no one else even sees it?

Intrapersonal communication serves several social functions**.** ***Internal vocalization***, or talking to ourselves, can help us achieve or maintain social adjustment.1 For example, a person may use self-talk to calm himself down in a stressful situation, or a shy person may remind herself to smile during a social event. Intrapersonal communication also helps build and maintain our self-concept. We form an understanding of who we are based on how other people communicate with us and how we process that communication intrapersonally. The shy person in the earlier example probably internalized shyness as a part of her self-concept because other people associated her communication behaviors with shyness and may have even labeled her "shy" before she had a firm grasp on what that meant. We also use intrapersonal communication or "self-talk" to let off steam, process emotions, think through something, or rehearse what we plan to say or do in the future. As with the other forms of communication, competent intrapersonal communication helps facilitate social interaction and can enhance our well-being. Conversely, the breakdown in the ability of a person to intrapersonally communicate is associated with mental illness.2

Sometimes we intrapersonally communicate for the fun of it. I'm sure we have all had the experience of laughing aloud because we thought of something funny. We also communicate intrapersonally to pass time. I bet there is a lot of intrapersonal communication going on in waiting rooms all over the world right now. In both of these cases, intrapersonal communication is usually unplanned and doesn't include a clearly defined goal.3 We can, however, engage in more intentional intrapersonal communication. In fact, deliberate self-reflection can help us become more competent communicators as we become more mindful of our own behaviors. For example, your internal voice may praise or scold you based on a thought or action.

Of the forms of communication, intrapersonal communication has received the least amount of formal study. It is rare to find courses devoted to the topic, and it is generally separated from the remaining four types of communication. The main distinction is that intrapersonal communication is not created with the intention that another person will perceive it. In all the other levels, the fact that the communicator anticipates consumption of their message is very important.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is communication between people whose lives mutually influence one another. Interpersonal communication builds, maintains, and ends our relationships, and we spend more time engaged in interpersonal communication than the other forms of communication. Interpersonal communication occurs in various contexts and is addressed in subfields of study within communication studies such as intercultural communication, organizational communication, health communication, and computer-mediated communication. After all, interpersonal relationships exist in all those contexts.

Interpersonal communication can be planned or unplanned, but since it is interactive, it is usually more structured and influenced by social expectations than intrapersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is also more goal oriented than

intrapersonal communication. Interpersonal communication and fulfills instrumental and relational needs. In terms of instrumental needs, the goal may be as minor as greeting someone to fulfill a morning ritual or as major as conveying your desire to be in a committed relationship with someone. Interpersonal communication meets relational needs by communicating the uniqueness of a specific relationship. Since this form of communication deals so directly with our personal relationships and is the most common form of communication, instances of miscommunication and communication conflict most frequently occur here.[4] Couples, bosses and employees, and family members all have to engage in complex interpersonal communication, and it doesn't always go well. In order to be a competent interpersonal communicator, you need conflict management skills and listening skills, among others, to maintain positive relationships.

Key Takeaways

- Communication is the process of generating meaning by sending and receiving symbolic cues that are influenced by multiple contexts.
- Intrapersonal communication is communication with oneself and occurs only inside our heads.

Exercises

1. Come up with your own definition of communication. How does it differ from the definition in the book? Why did you choose to define communication the way you did?
2. Over the course of a day, keep track of the forms of communication that you use. Make a pie chart of how much time you think you spend, on an average day, engaging in each form of communication (intrapersonal and interpersonal)

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2. Frank E. X. Dance and Carl E. Larson, Speech Communication: Concepts and Behaviors (New York, NY: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1972), 55.
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1.2: The Communication Process

Learning Objectives

- Identify and define the components of the transmission model of communication.
- Identify and define the components of the interaction model of communication.
- Identify and define the components of the transaction model of communication.
- Compare and contrast the three models of communication.
- Use the transaction model of communication to analyze a recent communication encounter.

Communication is a complex process, and it is difficult to determine where or with whom a communication encounter starts and ends. Models of communication simplify the process by providing a visual representation of the various aspects of a communication encounter. Some models explain communication in more detail than others, but even the most complex model still doesn't recreate what we experience in even a moment of a communication encounter. Models still serve a valuable purpose for students of communication because they allow us to see specific concepts and steps within the process of communication, define communication, and apply communication concepts. When you become aware of how communication functions, you can think more deliberately through your communication encounters, which can help you better prepare for future communication and learn from your previous communication. The three models of communication we will discuss are the transmission, interaction, and transaction models.

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

The internal cognitive process that allows participants to send, receive, and understand messages is the encoding and decoding process. **Encoding** is the process converting thoughts and ideas into verbal and nonverbal messages. As we will learn later, the level of conscious thought that goes into encoding messages varies. **Decoding** does the opposite. It is the process of converting verbal and nonverbal messages into thoughts and ideas. For example, you may realize you're hungry and encode the following message to send to your roommate: "I'm hungry. Do you want to get pizza tonight?" As your roommate receives the message, he decodes your communication and turns it back into thoughts in order to make meaning out of it. Of course, we don't just communicate verbally—we have various options, or channels for communication. Encoded messages are sent through a **channel**, or a sensory route on which a message travels, to the receiver for decoding. While communication can be sent and received using any sensory route (sight, smell, touch, taste, or sound), most communication occurs through visual (sight) and/or auditory (sound) channels. If your roommate has headphones on and is engrossed in a video game, you may need to get his attention by waving your hands before you can ask him about dinner.

Transmission Model of Communication

The **transmission model of communication** describes communication as a linear, one-way process in which a sender intentionally transmits a message to a receiver.[1] This model focuses on the sender and message within a communication encounter. Although the receiver is included in the model, this role is viewed as more of a target or end point rather than part of an ongoing process. We are left to presume that the receiver either successfully receives and understands the message or does not. The scholars who designed this model extended on a linear model proposed by Aristotle centuries before that included a speaker, message, and hearer. They were also influenced by the advent and spread of new communication technologies of the time such as telegraphy and radio, and you can probably see these technical influences within the model.[2] Think of how a radio message is sent from a person in the radio studio to you listening in your car. The sender is the radio announcer who encodes a verbal message that is transmitted by a radio tower through electromagnetic waves (the channel) and eventually reaches your (the receiver's) ears via an antenna and speakers in order to be decoded. The radio announcer doesn't really know if you receive his or her message or not, but if the equipment is working and the channel is free of static, then there is a good chance that the message was successfully received.

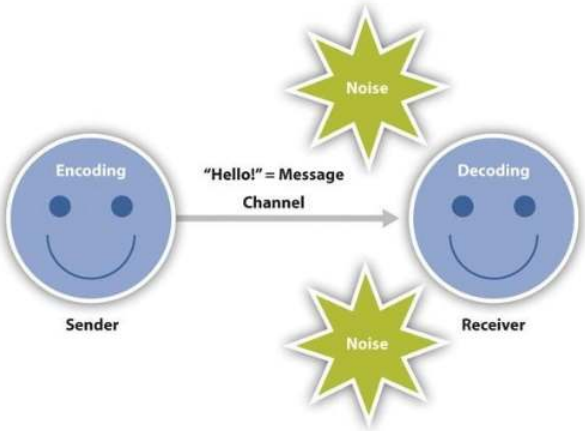

Figure 1.2.1: The Transmission Model of Communication

Since this model is sender and message focused, responsibility is put on the sender to help ensure the message is successfully conveyed. This model emphasizes clarity and effectiveness, but it also acknowledges that there are barriers to effective communication. **Noise** is anything that interferes with a message being sent between participants in a communication encounter. Even if a speaker sends a clear message, noise may interfere with a message being accurately received and decoded. The transmission model of communication accounts for environmental and semantic noise. **Environmental noise** is any physical noise present in a communication encounter. Other people talking in a crowded diner could interfere with your ability to transmit a message and have it successfully decoded. While environmental noise interferes with the transmission of the message, **semantic noise** refers to noise that occurs in the encoding and decoding process when participants do not understand a symbol. To use a technical example, FM antennae can't decode AM radio signals and vice versa. Likewise, most French speakers can't decode Swedish and vice versa. Semantic noise can also interfere in communication between people speaking the same language because many words have multiple or unfamiliar meanings.

Although the transmission model may seem simple or even underdeveloped to us today, the creation of this model allowed scholars to examine the communication process in new ways, which eventually led to more complex models and theories of communication that we will discuss more later. This model is not quite rich enough to capture dynamic face-to-face interactions, but there are instances in which communication is one-way and linear, especially computer-mediated communication (CMC). As the following "Getting Plugged In" box explains, CMC is integrated into many aspects of our lives now and has opened up new ways of communicating and brought some new challenges. Think of text messaging for example. The transmission model of communication is well suited for describing the act of text messaging since the sender isn't sure that the meaning was effectively conveyed or that the message was received at all. Noise can also interfere with the transmission of a text. If you use an abbreviation the receiver doesn't know or the phone autocorrects to something completely different than you meant, then semantic noise has interfered with the message transmission. I enjoy bargain hunting at thrift stores, so I just recently sent a text to a friend asking if she wanted to go thrifting over the weekend. After she replied with "What?!?" I reviewed my text and saw that my "smart" phone had autocorrected *thrifting* to *thrusting*! You have likely experienced similar problems with text messaging, and a quick Google search for examples of text messages made funny or embarrassing by the autocorrect feature proves that many others do, too.

"Getting Plugged In" - Computer-Mediated Communication

When the first computers were created around World War II and the first e- mails exchanged in the early 1960s, we took the first steps toward a future filled with computer-mediated communication (CMC).Crispin Thurlow, Laura Lengel, and Alice Tomic, *Computer Mediated Communication: Social Interaction and the Internet* (London: Sage, 2004), 14. Those early steps turned into huge strides in the late 1980s and early 1990s when personal computers started becoming regular features in offices, classrooms, and homes. I remember getting our first home computer, a Tandy from Radio Shack, in the early 1990s and then getting our first Internet connection at home in about 1995.

Figure 1.2.2: Internet Communication. Image by Jason Howie is under CC BY 2.0

I set up my first e-mail account 1996 and remember how novel and exciting it was to send and receive e-mails. I wasn't imagining a time when I would get dozens of e-mails a day, much less be able to check them on my cell phone! Many of you reading this book probably can't remember a time without CMC. If that's the case, then you're what some scholars have called "digital natives." When you take a moment to think about how, over the past twenty years, CMC has changed the way we teach and learn, communicate at work, stay in touch with friends, initiate romantic relationships, search for jobs, manage our money, get our news, and participate in our democracy, it really is amazing to think that all that used to take place without computers. But the increasing use of CMC has also raised some questions and concerns, even among those of you who are digital natives. Almost half of the students in my latest communication research class wanted to do their final research projects on something related to social media. Many of them were interested in studying the effects of CMC on our personal lives and relationships. This desire to study and question CMC may stem from an anxiety that people have about the seeming loss or devaluing of face-to-face (FtF) communication. Aside from concerns about the digital cocoons that many of us find ourselves in, CMC has also raised concerns about privacy, cyberbullying, and lack of civility in online interactions. We will continue to explore many of these issues in the "Getting Plugged In" feature box included in each chapter, but the following questions will help you begin to see the influence that CMC has in your daily communication.

- In a typical day, what types of CMC do you use?
- What are some ways that CMC reduces stress in your life? What are some ways that CMC increases stress in your life? Overall, do you think CMC adds to or reduces your stress more?
- Do you think we, as a society, have less value for FtF communication than we used to? Why or why not?

Interaction Model of Communication

The **interaction model of communication**[3] describes communication as a process in which participants alternate positions as sender and receiver and generate meaning by sending messages and receiving feedback within physical and psychological contexts.[4] Rather than illustrating communication as a linear, one-way process, the interaction model incorporates feedback, which makes communication a more interactive, two-way process. **Feedback** includes messages sent in response to other messages. For example, your instructor may respond to a point you raise during class discussion or you may point to the sofa when your roommate asks you where the remote control is. The inclusion of a feedback loop also leads to a more complex understanding of the roles of participants in a communication encounter. Rather than having one sender, one message, and one receiver, this model has two sender-receivers who exchange messages. Each participant alternates roles as sender and receiver in order to keep a communication encounter going. Although this seems like a perceptible and deliberate process, we alternate between the roles of sender and receiver very quickly and often without conscious thought.

The interaction model is also less message focused and more interaction focused. While the transmission model focused on how a message was transmitted and whether or not it was received, the interaction model is more concerned with the communication process itself. In fact, this model acknowledges that there are so many messages being sent at one time that many of them may not even be received. Some messages are also unintentionally sent. Therefore, communication isn't judged effective or ineffective in this model based on whether or not a single message was successfully transmitted and received.

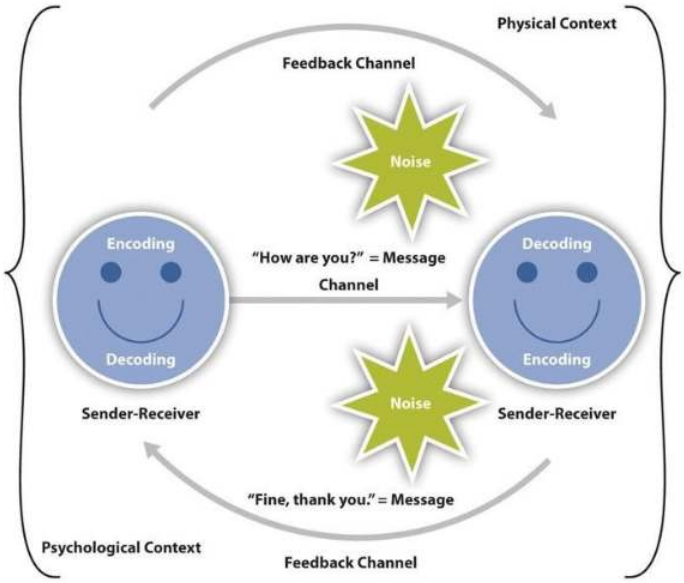

Figure 1.2.3: The Interaction Model of Communication

Physical context includes the environmental factors in a communication encounter. The size, layout, temperature, and lighting of a space influence our communication. Imagine the different physical contexts in which job interviews take place and how that may affect your communication. I have had job interviews on a sofa in a comfortable office, sitting around a large conference table, and even once in an auditorium where I was positioned on the stage facing about twenty potential colleagues seated in the audience. I've also been walked around campus to interview with various people in temperatures below zero degrees. Although I was a little chilly when I got to each separate interview, it wasn't too difficult to warm up and go on with the interview. During a job interview in Puerto Rico, however, walking around outside wearing a suit in near 90 degree temperatures created a sweating situation that wasn't pleasant to try to communicate through. Whether it's the size of the room, the temperature, or other environmental factors, it's important to consider the role that physical context plays in our communication. The interaction model takes physical and psychological context into account.

Psychological context includes the mental and emotional factors in a communication encounter. Stress, anxiety, and emotions are just some examples of psychological influences that can affect our communication. I recently found out some troubling news a few hours before a big public presentation. It was challenging to try to communicate because the psychological noise triggered by the stressful news kept intruding into my other thoughts. Seemingly positive psychological states, like experiencing the emotion of love, can also affect communication. During the initial stages of a romantic relationship individuals may be so "love struck" that they don't see incompatible personality traits or don't negatively evaluate behaviors they might otherwise find off-putting. Feedback and context help make the interaction model a more useful illustration of the communication process, but the transaction model views communication as a powerful tool that shapes our realities beyond individual communication encounters.

Transaction Model of Communication

As the study of communication progressed, models expanded to account for more of the communication process. Many scholars view communication as more than a process that is used to carry on conversations and convey meaning. We don't send messages like computers, and we don't neatly alternate between the roles of sender and receiver as an interaction unfolds. We also can't consciously decide to stop communicating, because communication is more than sending and receiving messages. The transaction model differs from the transmission and interaction models in significant ways, including the conceptualization of communication, the role of sender and receiver, and the role of context.[5]

To review, each model incorporate a different understanding of what communication is and what communication does. The transmission model views communication as a thing, like an information packet, that is sent from one place to another. From this view, communication is defined as sending and receiving messages. The interaction model views communication as an interaction in which a message is sent and then followed by a reaction (feedback), which is then followed by another reaction, and so on. From this view, communication is defined as producing conversations and interactions within physical and psychological contexts. The

transaction model views communication as integrated into our social realities in such a way that it helps us not only understand them but also create and change them.

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

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

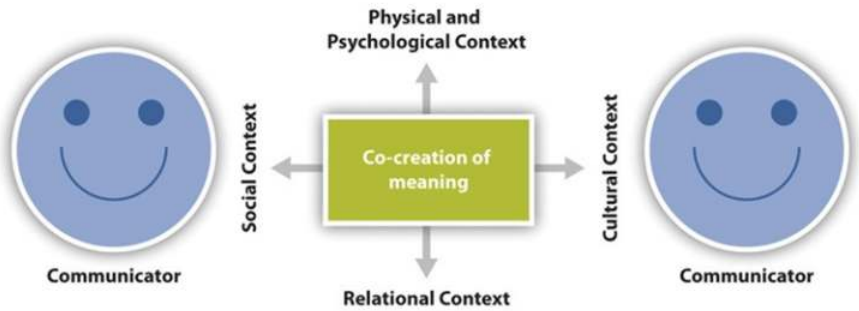

Figure 1.2.4: Communicators

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

Social context refers to the stated rules or unstated norms that guide communication. As we are socialized into our various communities, we learn rules and implicitly pick up on norms for communicating. Some common rules that influence social contexts include don't lie to people, don't interrupt people, don't pass people in line, greet people when they greet you, thank people when they pay you a compliment, and so on. Parents and teachers often explicitly convey these rules to their children or students. Rules may be stated over and over, and there may be punishment for not following them.

Norms are social conventions that we pick up on through observation, practice, and trial and error. We may not even know we are breaking a social norm until we notice people looking at us strangely or someone corrects or teases us. For example, as a new employee you may over- or underdress for the company's holiday party because you don't know the norm for formality. Although there probably isn't a stated rule about how to dress at the holiday party, you will notice your error without someone having to point it out, and you will likely not deviate from the norm again in order to save yourself any potential embarrassment. Even though breaking social norms doesn't result in the formal punishment that might be a consequence of breaking a social rule, the social awkwardness we feel when we violate social norms is usually enough to teach us that these norms are powerful even though they aren't made explicit like rules. Norms even have the power to override social rules in some situations. To go back to the examples of common social rules mentioned before, we may break the rule about not lying if the lie is meant to save someone from feeling hurt. We often interrupt close friends when we're having an exciting conversation, but we wouldn't be as likely to interrupt a professor while they are lecturing. Since norms and rules vary among people and cultures, relational and cultural contexts are also included in the transaction model in order to help us understand the multiple contexts that influence our communication.

Relational context includes the previous interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person. We communicate differently with someone we just met versus someone we've known for a long time. Initial interactions with people tend to be more

highly scripted and governed by established norms and rules, but when we have an established relational context, we may be able to bend or break social norms and rules more easily. For example, you would likely follow social norms of politeness and attentiveness and might spend the whole day cleaning the house for the first time you invite your new neighbors to visit. Once the neighbors are in your house, you may also make them the center of your attention during their visit. If you end up becoming friends with your neighbors and establishing a relational context, you might not think as much about having everything cleaned and prepared or even giving them your whole attention during later visits. Since communication norms and rules also vary based on the type of relationship people have, relationship type is also included in relational context. For example, there are certain communication rules and norms that apply to a supervisor-supervisee relationship that don't apply to a brother-sister relationship and vice versa. Just as social norms and relational history influence how we communicate, so does culture.

Cultural context includes various aspects of identities such as race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and ability. It is important for us to understand that whether we are aware of it or not, we all have multiple cultural identities that influence our communication. Some people, especially those with identities that have been historically marginalized, are regularly aware of how their cultural identities influence their communication and influence how others communicate with them. Conversely, people with identities that are dominant or in the majority may rarely, if ever, think about the role their cultural identities play in their communication.

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

Key Takeaways

- Communication models are not complex enough to truly capture all that takes place in a communication encounter, but they can help us examine the various steps in the process in order to better understand our communication and the communication of others.
- The transmission model of communication describes communication as a one-way, linear process in which a sender encodes a message and transmits it through a channel to a receiver who decodes it. The transmission of the message many be disrupted by environmental or semantic noise. This model is usually too simple to capture FtF interactions but can be usefully applied to computer-mediated communication.
- The interaction model of communication describes communication as a two-way process in which participants alternate positions as sender and receiver and generate meaning by sending and receiving feedback within physical and psychological contexts. This model captures the interactive aspects of communication but still doesn't account for how communication constructs our realities and is influenced by social and cultural contexts.
- The transaction model of communication describes communication as a process in which communicators generate social realities within social, relational, and cultural contexts. This model includes participants who are simultaneously senders and receivers and accounts for how communication constructs our realities, relationships, and communities.

Exercises

1. Getting integrated: How might knowing the various components of the communication process help you in your academic life, your professional life, and your civic life?
2. What communication situations does the transmission model best represent? The interaction model? The transaction model?
3. Use the transaction model of communication to analyze a recent communication encounter you had. Sketch out the communication encounter and make sure to label each part of the model (communicators; message; channel; feedback; and physical, psychological, social, relational, and cultural contexts).

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1.3: Principles of Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives

- Define interpersonal communication.
- Explain how the notion of a "process" fits into communication.
- Discuss the functional aspects of interpersonal communication.
- Explain how communication meets physical, instrumental, relational, and identity needs.
- Discuss the ways in which communication is guided by culture and context.

Taking this course will change how you view communication. Most people admit that communication is important, but it's often in the back of our minds or viewed as something that "just happens." Putting communication at the front of your mind and becoming more aware of how you communicate can be informative and have many positive effects. When I first started studying communication as an undergraduate, I began seeing the concepts we learned in class in my everyday life. When I worked in groups, I was able to apply what I had learned about group communication to improve my performance and overall experience. I also noticed interpersonal concepts and theories as I communicated within various relationships. Whether I was analyzing mediated messages or considering the ethical implications of a decision before I made it, studying communication allowed me to see more of what was going on around me, which allowed me to more actively and competently participate in various communication contexts. In this section, as we learn the principles of communication, I encourage you to take note of aspects of communication that you haven't thought about before and begin to apply the principles of communication to various parts of your life.

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

Why Study Interpersonal Communication?

Interpersonal communication has many implications for us in the real world. Did you know that interpersonal communication played an important role in human evolution? Early humans who lived in groups, rather than alone, were more likely to survive, which meant that those with the capability to develop interpersonal bonds were more likely to pass these traits on to the next generation.[1] Did you know that interpersonal skills have a measurable impact on psychological and physical health? People with higher levels of interpersonal communication skills are better able to adapt to stress, have greater satisfaction in relationships and more friends, and have less depression and anxiety.[2] In fact, prolonged isolation has been shown to severely damage a human.[3] Have you ever heard of the boy or girl who was raised by wolves? There have been documented cases of abandoned or neglected children, sometimes referred to as feral children, who survived using their animalistic instincts but suffered psychological and physical trauma as a result of their isolation.[4] There are also examples of solitary confinement, which has become an ethical issue in many countries. In "supermax" prisons, which now operate in at least forty-four states, prisoners spend 22.5 to 24 hours a day in their cells and have no contact with the outside world or other prisoners.[5]

Think About It . . . Solitary Confinement

Watch this video on the effects of solitary confinement. How does this information relate to the value of interpersonal communication?

Aside from making your relationships and health better, interpersonal communication skills are highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys.[6] Each of these examples illustrates how interpersonal communication meets our basic needs as humans for security in our social bonds, health, and careers. But we are not born with all the interpersonal communication skills we'll need in life. So in order to make the most out of our interpersonal relationships, we must learn some basic principles.

Think about a time when a short communication exchange affected a relationship almost immediately. Did you mean for it to happen? Many times we engage in interpersonal communication to fulfill certain goals we may have, but sometimes we are more successful than others. This is because interpersonal communication is strategic, meaning we intentionally create messages to achieve certain goals that help us function in society and our relationships. Goals vary based on the situation and the communicators, but ask yourself if you are generally successful at achieving the goals with which you enter a conversation or not. If so, you may already possess a high degree of interpersonal communication competence, or the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in personal relationships. This chapter will help you understand some key processes that can make us more effective and appropriate communicators. You may be asking, "Aren't effectiveness and appropriateness the same thing?" The answer is no. Imagine that you are the manager of a small department of employees at a marketing agency where you often have to work on deadlines. As a deadline approaches, you worry about your team's ability to work without your supervision to complete the tasks, so you interrupt everyone's work and assign them all individual tasks and give them a bulleted list of each subtask with a deadline to turn each part in to you. You meet the deadline and have effectively accomplished your goal. Over the next month, one of your employees puts in her two-weeks' notice, and you learn that she and a few others have been talking about how they struggle to work with you as a manager. Although your strategy was effective, many people do not respond well to strict hierarchy or micromanaging and may have deemed your communication inappropriate. A more competent communicator could have implemented the same detailed plan to accomplish the task in a manner that included feedback, making the employees feel more included and heard. In order to be competent interpersonal communicators, we must learn to balance being effective and appropriate.

Functional Aspects of Interpersonal Communication

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

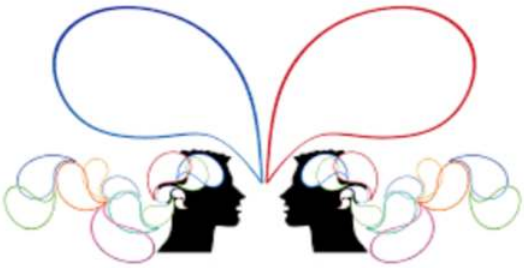

Figure 1.3.1: What we here and how we hear it are not always the same thing, that's why learning to communicate well is key. Communication by NeedPix.

What motivates you to communicate with someone? We frequently engage in communication designed to achieve instrumental goals such as gaining compliance (getting someone to do something for us), getting information we need, or asking for support.[7] In short, instrumental talk helps us "get things done" in our relationships. Our instrumental goals can be long term or day to day. The following are examples of communicating for instrumental goals:

- You ask your friend to help you move this weekend (gaining/resisting compliance).
- You ask your coworker to remind you how to balance your cash register till at the end of your shift (requesting or presenting information).
- You console your roommate after he loses his job (asking for or giving support).

When we communicate to achieve relational goals, we are striving to maintain a positive relationship. Engaging in relationship-maintenance communication is like taking your car to be serviced at the repair shop. To have a good relationship, just as to have a long-lasting car, we should engage in routine maintenance. For example, have you ever wanted to stay in and order a pizza and watch a movie, but your friend suggests that you go to a local restaurant and then to the theatre? Maybe you don't feel like being around a lot of people or spending money (or changing out of your pajamas), but you decide to go along with his or her suggestion. In that moment, you are putting your relational partner's needs above your own, which will likely make him or her feel valued. It is likely that your friend has made or will also make similar concessions to put your needs first, which indicates that there is a satisfactory and complimentary relationship. Obviously, if one partner always insists on having his or her way or always concedes, becoming the martyr, the individuals are not exhibiting interpersonal-communication competence. Other routine relational tasks

include celebrating special occasions or honoring accomplishments, spending time together, and checking in regularly by phone, e-mail, text, social media, or face-to-face communication. The following are examples of communicating for relational goals:

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

Another form of relational talk that I have found very useful is what I call the **DTR talk**, which stands for "defining-the-relationship talk" and serves a relationship-maintenance function. In the early stages of a romantic relationship, you may have a DTR talk to reduce uncertainty about where you stand by deciding to use the term *boyfriend*, *girlfriend*, or *partner*. In a DTR talk, you may proactively define your relationship by saying, "I'm glad I'm with you and no one else." Your romantic interest may respond favorably, echoing or rephrasing your statement, which gives you an indication that he or she agrees with you. The talk may continue on from there, and you may talk about what to call your relationship, set boundaries, or not. It is not unusual to have several DTR talks as a relationship progresses. At times, you may have to define the relationship when someone steps over a line by saying, "I think we should just be friends." This more explicit and reactive (rather than proactive) communication can be especially useful in situations where a relationship may be unethical, inappropriate, or create a conflict of interest—for example, in a supervisor-supervisee, mentor-mentee, professional- client, or collegial relationship.

We also pursue self-presentation goals by adapting our communication in order to be perceived in particular ways. Just as many companies, celebrities, and politicians create a public image, we desire to present different faces in different contexts.8 The well-known scholar Erving Goffman compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts. Indeed, competent communicators can successfully manage how others perceive them by adapting to situations and contexts. A parent may perform the role of stern head of household, supportive shoulder to cry on, or hip and culturally aware friend to his or her child. A newly hired employee may initially perform the role of serious and agreeable coworker. Sometimes people engage in communication that doesn't necessarily present them in a positive way. For example, Haley, the oldest daughter in the television show *Modern Family*, often presents herself as incapable in order to get her parents to do her work. In one episode she pretended she didn't know how to crack open an egg so her mom Claire would make the brownies for her school bake sale. Here are some other examples of communicating to meet self- presentation goals:

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

"Getting Real" - Image Consultants

Figure 1.3.2: Woman in Orange by Alex Iby on Unsplash

The Association of Image Consultants International (AICI) states that appearance, behavior, and communication are the "ABC's of image." Many professional image consultants are licensed by this organization and provide a variety of services to politicians, actors, corporate trainers, public speakers, organizations, corporations, and television personalities such as news anchors.9 Visit the AICI's website and read about image consulting, including the "How to Choose," "How to Become," and "FAQs" sections. Then consider the following questions:

1. If you were to hire an image consultant for yourself, what would you have them "work on" for you? Why?
2. What communication skills that you've learned about in the book so far would be most important for an image consultant to possess?

Many politicians use image consultants to help them connect to voters and win elections. Do you think this is ethical? Why or why not?

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

Interpersonal Communication Meets Needs

You hopefully now see that communication is far more than the transmission of information. The exchange of messages and information is important for many reasons, but it is not enough to meet the various needs we have as human beings. While the content of our communication may help us achieve certain physical and instrumental needs, it also feeds into our identities and relationships in ways that far exceed the content of what we say.

Physical Needs

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. Even babies cry when they are hungry or sick to alert their caregiver of these physical needs. Asking a friend if you can stay at their house because you got evicted or kicked out of your own place will help you meet your physical need for shelter. There are also strong ties between the social function of communication and our physical and psychological health. Human beings are social creatures, which makes communication important for our survival. In fact, prolonged isolation has been shown to severely damage a human.10 Aside from surviving, communication skills can also help us thrive. People with good interpersonal communication skills are better able to adapt to stress and have less depression and anxiety.11 Communication can also be therapeutic, which can lessen or prevent physical problems. A research study found that spouses of suicide or accidental death victims who did not communicate about the death with their friends were more likely to have health problems such as weight change and headaches than those who did talk with friends.12 Satisfying physical needs is essential for our physical functioning and survival. But, in order to socially function and thrive, we must also meet instrumental, relational, and identity needs.

Instrumental Needs

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 have short- and long-term goals that we work on 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.13 In short, communication that meets our instrumental needs helps us "get things done."

To meet instrumental needs, we often use communication strategically. Politicians, parents, bosses, and friends use communication to influence others in order to accomplish goals and meet needs. There is a research area within communication that examines **compliance-gaining communication**, or communication aimed at getting people to do something or act in a particular way.14

Compliance gaining and communicating for instrumental needs is different from coercion, which forces or manipulates people into doing what you want. Compliance-gaining communication is different from persuasion.

While research on persuasion typically focuses on public speaking and how a speaker persuades a group, compliance-gaining research focuses on our daily interpersonal interactions. Researchers have identified many tactics that people typically use in compliance-gaining communication.15 As you read through the following list, I am sure many of these tactics will be familiar to you.

Common Tactics Used for Compliance Gaining

- **Offering rewards.** Seeks compliance in a positive way, by promising returns, rewards, or generally positive outcomes.
- **Threatening punishment.** Seeks compliance in a negative way, by threatening negative consequences such as loss of privileges, grounding, or legal action.
- **Using expertise.** Seeks compliance by implying that one person "knows better" than the other based on experience, age, education, or intelligence.
- **Liking.** Seeks compliance by acting friendly and helpful to get the other person into a good mood before asking them to do something.
- **Debt.** Seeks compliance by calling in past favors and indicating that one person "owes" the other.
- **Altruism.** Seeks compliance by claiming that one person only wants "what is best" for the other and he or she is looking out for the other person's "best interests."
- **Esteem.** Seeks compliance by claiming that other people will think more highly of the person if he or she complies or think less of the person if he or she does not comply.

Relational Needs

Relational needs include needs that help us maintain social bonds and interpersonal relationships. Communicating to fill our instrumental needs helps us function on many levels, but communicating for relational needs helps us achieve the social relating that is an essential part of being human. Communication meets our relational needs by giving us a tool through which to 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" or engage in behaviors that communicate our investment in the relationship, like organizing a birthday party. Although our relationships vary in terms of closeness and intimacy, all individuals have relational needs and all relationships require maintenance. 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 spending time together, to checking in with relational partners by text, social media, or face-to-face, to celebrating accomplishments, to providing support during difficult times, communication forms the building blocks of our relationships. Communicating for relational needs isn't always positive though. Some people's "relational needs" are negative, unethical, or even illegal. Although we may feel the "need" to be passive aggressive or controlling, these communicative patterns are not positive and can hurt our relationships.

Identity Needs

Identity needs include our need to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular and desired ways.

Figure 1.3.3: The way we dress can be one of the most straightforward ways to disclose things about our personalities. This man is dressed in steampunk style. Photo is used under a CC BY-SA 3.0 license.

What adjectives would you use to describe yourself? Are you funny, smart, loyal, or quirky? Your answer isn't just based on who you think you are, since much of how we think of ourselves is based on our communication with other people. 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 desire to present different faces in different contexts.16 The influential scholar Erving Goffman compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts. Indeed, competent communicators can successfully manage how others perceive them by adapting to situations and contexts. A parent may perform the role of stern head of household, supportive shoulder to cry on, or hip and culturally aware friend based on the situation they are in with their child. A newly hired employee may initially perform the role of motivated and agreeable coworker but later perform more leadership behaviors after being promoted.

Communication Is a Process

We have already learned, in the transaction model of communication, that we communicate using multiple channels and send and receive messages simultaneously. There are also messages and other stimuli around us that we never actually perceive because we can only attend to so much information at one time. The dynamic nature of communication allows us to examine some principles of communication that are related to its processual nature. Next, we will learn that communication messages vary in terms of their level of conscious thought and intention, communication is irreversible, and communication is unrepeatable.

Communication is Intentional and Unintentional

Some scholars have put forth definitions of communication stating that messages must be intended for others to perceive them in order for a message to "count" as communication. This narrow definition only includes messages that are tailored or at least targeted to a particular person or group and excludes any communication that is involuntary. Frank E. X. Dance and Carl E. Larson, *The Functions of Human Communication: A Theoretical Approach* (New York, NY: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1976), 25. Since intrapersonal communication happens in our heads and isn't intended for others to perceive, it wouldn't be considered communication. But imagine the following scenario: You and I are riding on a bus and you are sitting across from me. As I sit thinking about a stressful week ahead, I wrinkle up my forehead, shake my head, and put my head in my hands. Upon seeing this you think, "That guy must be pretty stressed out." In this scenario, did communication take place? If I really didn't intend for anyone to see the nonverbal communication that went along with my intrapersonal communication, then this definition would say no. But even though words weren't exchanged, you still generated meaning from the communication I was unintentionally sending. As a communication scholar, I do not take such a narrow definition of communication. Based on the definition of communication from the beginning of this chapter, the scenario we just discussed would count as communication, but the scenario illustrates the point that communication messages are sent both intentionally and unintentionally.

Communication is Conscious and Unconscious

Communication messages also vary in terms of the amount of conscious thought that goes into their creation. In general, we can say that intentional communication usually includes more conscious thought and unintentional communication usually includes less. For example, some communication is reactionary and almost completely involuntary. We often scream when we are frightened, say "ouch!" when we stub our toe, and stare blankly when we are bored. This isn't the richest type of communication, but it *is* communication. Some of our interactions are slightly more substantial and include more conscious thought but are still very routine. For example, we say "excuse me" when we need to get past someone, say "thank you" when someone holds the door for us, or say "what's up?" to our neighbor we pass every day in the hall. The reactionary and routine types of communication just discussed are common, but the messages most studied by communication scholars are considered constructed communication. These messages include more conscious thought and intention than reactionary or routine messages and often go beyond information exchange to also meet relational and identity needs. As we will learn later on, a higher degree of conscious thought and intention doesn't necessarily mean the communication will be effective, understood, or ethical. In addition, ethical communicators cannot avoid responsibility for the effects of what they say by claiming they didn't "intend" for their communication to cause an undesired effect. Communication has short- and long-term effects, which illustrates the next principle we will discuss—communication is irreversible.

Communication is Irreversible

The dynamic nature of the communication process also means that communication is irreversible. After an initial interaction has gone wrong, characters in sitcoms and romantic comedies often use the line "Can we just start over?" As handy as it would be to be able to turn the clock back and "redo" a failed or embarrassing communication encounter, it is impossible. Miscommunication can occur regardless of the degree of conscious thought and intention put into a message. For example, if David tells a joke that offends his coworker Beth, then he can't just say, "Oh, forget I said that," or "I didn't intend for it to be offensive." The message has been sent and it can't be taken back. I'm sure we have all wished we could take something back that we have said. Conversely, when communication goes well, we often wish we could recreate it. However, in addition to communication being irreversible, it is also unrepeatable.

Communication is Not Repeatable

If you try to recreate a good job interview experience by asking the same questions and telling the same stories about yourself, you can't expect the same results. Even trying to repeat a communication encounter with the same person won't feel the same or lead to the same results. We have already learned the influence that contexts have on communication, and those contexts change frequently. Even if the words and actions stay the same, the physical, psychological, social, relational, and cultural contexts will vary and ultimately change the communication encounter. Have you ever tried to recount a funny or interesting experience to a friend who doesn't really seem that impressed? These "I guess you had to be there" moments illustrate the fact that communication is unrepeatable.

Communication is Guided by Rules and Norms

Earlier we learned about the transaction model of communication and the powerful influence that social context and the roles and norms associated with social context have on our communication. Whether verbal or nonverbal, mediated or interpersonal, our communication is guided by rules and norms.

Phatic communion is an instructive example of how we communicate under the influence of rules and norms.[17] **Phatic communion** refers to scripted and routine verbal interactions that are intended to establish social bonds rather than actually exchange meaning. When you pass your professor in the hall, the exchange may go as follows:

Student:	"Hey, how are you?"
Professor:	"Fine, how are you?"
Student:	"Fine."

What is the point of this interaction? It surely isn't to actually inquire as to each other's well-being. We have similar phatic interactions when we make comments on the weather or the fact that it's Monday. We often joke about phatic communion because we see that is pointless, at least on the surface. The student and professor might as well just pass each other in the hall and say the following to each other:

Student:	“Generic greeting question.”
Professor:	“Generic greeting response and question.”
Student:	“Generic response.”

This is an example of communication messages that don’t really require a high level of conscious thought or convey much actual content or generate much meaning. So if phatic communion is so “pointless,” why do we do it?

The term ***phatic communion*** derives from the Greek word *phatos*, which means “spoken,” and the word *communion*, which means “connection or bond.” As we discussed earlier, communication helps us meet our relational needs. In addition to finding communion through food or religion, we also find communion through our words. But the degree to which and in what circumstances we engage in phatic communion is also influenced by norms and rules. Generally, US Americans find silence in social interactions awkward, which is one sociocultural norm that leads to phatic communion, because we fill the silence with pointless words to meet the social norm. It is also a norm to greet people when you encounter them, especially if you know them. We all know not to unload our physical and mental burdens on the person who asks, “How are you?” or go through our “to do” list with the person who asks, “What’s up?” Instead, we conform to social norms through this routine type of verbal exchange.

Phatic communion, like most aspects of communication we will learn about, is culturally relative as well. While most cultures engage in phatic communion, the topics of and occasions for phatic communion vary. Scripts for greetings in the United States are common, but scripts for leaving may be more common in another culture. Asking about someone’s well-being may be acceptable phatic communion in one culture, and asking about the health of someone’s family may be more common in another.

Key Takeaways

- Getting integrated: Interpersonal communication occurs between two or more people whose lives are interdependent and mutually influence one another.
- There are functional aspects of interpersonal communication.
  - We “get things done” in our relationships by communicating for instrumental goals such as getting someone to do something for us, requesting or presenting information, and asking for or giving support.
  - We maintain our relationships by communicating for relational goals such as putting your relational partner’s needs before your own, celebrating accomplishments, spending time together, and checking in.
  - We strategically project ourselves to be perceived in particular ways by communicating for self-presentation goals such as appearing competent or friendly.
- Communication meets our physical needs by helping us maintain physical and psychological well-being; our instrumental needs by helping us achieve short- and long-term goals; our relational needs by helping us initiate, maintain, and terminate relationships; and our identity needs by allowing us to present ourselves to others in particular ways.
- Communication is a process that includes messages that vary in terms of conscious thought and intention. Communication is also irreversible and unrepeatable.
- Rules and norms influence the routines and rituals within our communication.

Exercises

1. Recount a time when you had a DTR talk. At what stage in the relationship was the talk? What motivated you or the other person to initiate the talk? What was the result of the talk?
2. Identify some physical, instrumental, relational, and identity needs that communication helps you meet in a given day.
3. We learned in this section that communication is irreversible and unrepeatable. Identify a situation in which you wished you could reverse communication. Identify a situation in which you wished you could repeat communication. Even though it’s impossible to reverse or repeat communication, what lessons can be learned from these two situations you identified that you can apply to future communication?
4. What types of phatic communion do you engage in? How are they connected to context and/or social rules and norms?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Communication and the Self

Learning Objectives

- Define self-concept and discuss how we develop our self-concept.
- Define self-esteem and discuss how we develop self-esteem.
- Explain how social comparison theory and self-discrepancy theory influence selfperception.
- Discuss how social norms, family, culture, and media influence self- perception.
- Define self-presentation and discuss common self-presentation strategies.

Just as our perception of others affects how we communicate, so does our perception or view of ourselves. But what influences how we see ourselves? How much of our self is a product of our own making and how much of it is constructed based on how others react to us? How do we present ourselves to others in ways that maintain our sense of self or challenge how others see us? We will begin to answer these questions in this section as we explore self-concept, self-esteem, and self- presentation.

2.1: Self-Concept, Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy
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2.1: Self-Concept, Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy

Self-Concept

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

Our self-concept is also formed through our interactions with others and their reactions to us. The concept of the **looking glass self** explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people's reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us.[1] This reflective process of building our self-concept is based on what other people have actually said, such as "You're a good listener," and other people's actions, such as coming to you for advice. These thoughts evoke emotional responses that feed into our self-concept. For example, you may think, "I'm glad that people can count on me to listen to their problems."

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**.[2]

In terms of **superiority and inferiority**, we evaluate characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn't appropriate. Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If a man wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, he may be discouraged by his difficulty keeping up with the aerobics instructor or running partner and judge himself as inferior, which could negatively affect his self-concept. Using as a reference group people who have only recently started a fitness program but have shown progress could help maintain a more accurate and hopefully positive self-concept.

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

We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won't stop until they get the high score on the video game or set a new school record in a track-and-field event. Some people strive to be first chair in the clarinet section of the orchestra, while another person may be content to be second chair. The education system promotes social comparison through grades and rewards such as honor rolls and dean's lists. Although education and privacy laws prevent me from displaying each student's grade on a test or paper for the whole class to see, I do typically report the aggregate grades, meaning the total number of As, Bs, Cs, and so on. This doesn't violate anyone's privacy rights, but it allows students to see where they fell in the distribution. This type of social comparison can be used as motivation. The student who was one of only three out of twenty-three to get a D on the exam knows that most of her classmates are performing better than she is, which may lead her to think, "If they can do it, I can do it." But social comparison that isn't reasoned can have negative effects and result in

negative thoughts like “Look at how bad I did. Man, I’m stupid!” These negative thoughts can lead to negative behaviors, because we try to maintain internal consistency, meaning we act in ways that match up with our self-concept. So if the student begins to question her academic abilities and then incorporates an assessment of herself as a “bad student” into her self-concept, she may then behave in ways consistent with that, which is only going to worsen her academic performance. Additionally, a student might be comforted to learn that he isn’t the only person who got a D and then not feel the need to try to improve, since he has company. You can see in this example that evaluations we place on our self-concept can lead to cycles of thinking and acting. These cycles relate to self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are components of our self-concept.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self- concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is a more specifically an evaluation of the self.3 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.4 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, I am not very good at drawing. While I appreciate drawing as an art form, I don’t consider drawing ability to be a very big part of my self-concept. If someone critiqued my drawing ability, my self-esteem wouldn’t take a big hit. I do consider myself a good teacher, however, and I have spent and continue to spend considerable time and effort on improving my knowledge of teaching and my teaching skills. If someone critiqued my teaching knowledge and/or abilities, my self-esteem would definitely be hurt. This doesn’t mean that we can’t be evaluated on something we find important. Even though teaching is very important to my self-concept, I am regularly evaluated on it. Periodically I am evaluated by my students, my dean, and my colleagues. Most of that feedback is in the form of praise and constructive criticism, (which can still be difficult to receive), but when taken in the spirit of self-improvement, it is valuable and may even enhance our self- concept and self-esteem. In fact, in professional contexts, people with higher self- esteem are more likely to work harder based on negative feedback, are less negatively affected by work stress, are able to handle workplace conflict better, and are better able to work independently and solve problems.5 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.6 As you can see in Figure 2.1.1 "Relationship between Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, and Self-Concept", judgments about our self- efficacy influence our self-esteem, which influences our self-concept. The following example also illustrates these interconnections.

Figure 2.1.1: Relationship between Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, and Self-Concept

Pedro did a good job on his first college speech. During a meeting with his professor, Pedro indicates that he is confident going into the next speech and thinks he will do well. This skill-based assessment is an indication that Pedro has a high level of self-efficacy related to public speaking. If he does well on the speech, the praise from his classmates and professor will reinforce his self-efficacy and lead him to positively evaluate his speaking skills, which will contribute to his self- esteem. By the end of the class,

Pedro likely thinks of himself as a good public speaker, which may then become an important part of his self-concept. Throughout these points of connection, it's important to remember that self-perception affects how we communicate, behave, and perceive other things. Pedro's increased feeling of self-efficacy may give him more confidence in his delivery, which will likely result in positive feedback that reinforces his self-perception. He may start to perceive his professor more positively since they share an interest in public speaking, and he may begin to notice other people's speaking skills more during class presentations and public lectures. Over time, he may even start to think about changing his major to communication or pursuing career options that incorporate public speaking, which would further integrate being "a good public speaker" into his self-concept. You can hopefully see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles. While some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives.

The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affect our feelings of self- efficacy and our self-esteem. As we saw in Pedro's example, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future.7 Obviously, negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves and negative feedback does the opposite, which ultimately affects behaviors and creates the cycle. When feedback from others is different from how we view ourselves, additional cycles may develop that impact self-esteem and self-concept.

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2.2: Self-Discrepancy Theory

Self-discrepancy theory[1] states that people have beliefs about and expectations for their actual and potential selves that do not always match up with what they actually experience.[2] To understand this theory, we have to understand the different "selves" that make up our self-concept, which are the actual, ideal, and ought selves. The **actual self** consists of the attributes that you or someone else believes you *actually* possess. The **ideal self** consists of the attributes that you or someone else *would like you* to possess. The **ought self** consists of the attributes you or someone else believes you *should* possess.

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

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

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

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

Finally, when our actual self doesn't match up with what we think we should obtain, we are not meeting what we see as our duties or obligations, which can lead to feelings of agitation including guilt, weakness, and a feeling that we have fallen short of our moral standard.[3] For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so due to the guilt of reading about the increasing number of animals being housed at the facility. The following is a review of the four potential discrepancies between selves:

- **Actual vs. own ideals.** We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining our desires and hopes, which leads to feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration.
- **Actual vs. others' ideals.** We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining significant others' desires and hopes for us, which leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment.
- **Actual vs. others' ought.** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting what others see as our duties and obligations, which leads to feelings of agitation including fear of potential punishment.
- **Actual vs. own ought.** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting our duties and obligations, which can lead to a feeling that we have fallen short of our own moral standards.

Influences on the Self

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

Social and Family Influences

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

Figure 2.2.1: reading to very young children helps shape their perception of the world and view of self. Photo by Picsea on Unsplash..

Parents and peers shape our self-perceptions in positive and negative ways. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can lead to positive views of self.4 In the past few years, however, there has been a public discussion and debate about how much positive reinforcement people should give to others, especially children. The following questions have been raised: Do we have current and upcoming generations that have been overpraised? Is the praise given warranted? What are the positive and negative effects of praise? What is the end goal of the praise? Let's briefly look at this discussion and its connection to self-perception.

Whether praise is warranted or not is very subjective and specific to each person and context, but in general there have been questions raised about the potential negative effects of too much praise. Motivation is the underlying force that drives us to do things. Sometimes we are intrinsically motivated, meaning we want to do something for the love of doing it or the resulting internal satisfaction. Other times we are extrinsically motivated, meaning we do something to receive a reward or avoid punishment. If you put effort into completing a short documentary for a class because you love filmmaking and editing, you have been largely motivated by intrinsic forces. If you complete the documentary because you want an "A" and know that if you fail your parents will not give you money for your spring break trip, then you are motivated by extrinsic factors. Both can, of course, effectively motivate us. Praise is a form of extrinsic reward, and if there is an actual reward associated with the praise, like money or special recognition, some people speculate that intrinsic motivation will suffer. But what's so good about intrinsic motivation? Intrinsic motivation is more substantial and long-lasting than extrinsic motivation and can lead to the development of a work ethic and sense of pride in one's abilities. Intrinsic motivation can move people to accomplish great things over long periods of time and be happy despite the effort and sacrifices made. Extrinsic motivation dies when the reward stops. Additionally, too much praise can lead people to have a misguided sense of their abilities. College professors who are reluctant to fail students who produce failing work may be setting those students up to be shocked when their supervisor critiques their abilities or output once they get into a professional context.5

There are cultural differences in the amount of praise and positive feedback that teachers and parents give their children. For example, teachers give less positive reinforcement in Japanese and Taiwanese classrooms than do teachers in US classrooms. Chinese and Kenyan parents do not regularly praise their children because they fear it may make them too individualistic, rude, or arrogant.6 So the phenomenon of overpraising isn't universal, and the debate over its potential effects is not resolved.

Research has also found that communication patterns develop between parents and children that are common to many verbally and physically abusive relationships. Such patterns have negative effects on a child's self-efficacy and self-esteem.7 Attributions are links we make to identify the cause of a behavior. In the case of aggressive or abusive parents, they are not as able to distinguish between mistakes and intentional behaviors, often seeing honest mistakes as intended and reacting negatively to the child. Such parents also communicate generally negative evaluations to their child by saying, for example, "You can't do anything right!" or "You're a bad girl." When children do exhibit *positive* behaviors, abusive parents are more likely to use external attributions (causes outside of the child) that diminish the achievement of the child by saying, for example, "You only won because the other

team was off their game." In general, abusive parents have unpredictable reactions to their children's positive and negative behavior, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child that can lead to lower self- esteem and erratic or aggressive behavior. The cycles of praise and blame are just two examples of how the family as a socializing force can influence our self-perceptions. Culture also influences how we see ourselves.

Culture

How people perceive themselves varies across cultures. For example, many cultures exhibit a phenomenon known as the **self-enhancement bias**[8], meaning that we tend to emphasize our desirable qualities relative to other people.[9] But the degree to which people engage in self-enhancement varies. A review of many studies in this area found that people in Western countries such as the United States were significantly more likely to self- enhance than people in countries such as Japan. Many scholars explain this variation using a common measure of cultural variation that claims people in individualistic cultures are more likely to engage in competition and openly praise accomplishments than people in collectivistic cultures. The difference in self- enhancement has also been tied to economics, with scholars arguing that people in countries with greater income inequality are more likely to view themselves as superior to others or want to be perceived as superior to others (even if they don't have economic wealth) in order to conform to the country's values and norms. This holds true because countries with high levels of economic inequality, like the United States, typically value competition and the right to boast about winning or succeeding, while countries with more economic equality, like Japan, have a cultural norm of modesty.[10]

Figure 2.2.2: Three Women Performing a Traditional Dance by Pavan Gupta on Unsplash.

Race also plays a role in self-perception. For example, positive self-esteem and self- efficacy tend to be higher in African American adolescent girls than Caucasian girls.[11] In fact, more recent studies have discounted much of the early research on race and self-esteem that purported that African Americans of all ages have lower self-esteem than whites. Self-perception becomes more complex when we consider biracial individuals—more specifically those born to couples comprising an African American and a white parent.[12] In such cases, it is challenging for biracial individuals to embrace both of their heritages, and social comparison becomes more difficult due to diverse and sometimes conflicting reference groups. Since many biracial individuals identify as and are considered African American by society, living and working within a black community can help foster more positive self-perceptions in these biracial individuals. Such a community offers a more nurturing environment and a buffer zone from racist attitudes but simultaneously distances biracial individuals from their white identity. Conversely, immersion into a predominantly white community and separation from a black community can lead biracial individuals to internalize negative views of people of color and perhaps develop a sense of inferiority. Gender intersects with culture and biracial identity to create different experiences and challenges for biracial men and women. Biracial men have more difficulty accepting their potential occupational limits, especially if they have white fathers, and biracial women have difficulty accepting their black features, such as hair and facial features. All these challenges lead to a sense of being marginalized from both ethnic groups and interfere in the development of positive self-esteem and a stable self-concept.

There are some general differences in terms of gender and how we see ourselves that relate to self-concept, self- efficacy, and envisioning ideal selves. As with any cultural differences, these are generalizations that have been supported by research, but they do not represent all individuals within a group. Regarding self-concept, men are more likely to describe themselves in terms of their group membership, and women are more likely to include references to relationships in their self- descriptions. For example, a man

may note that he is a Tarheel fan, a boat enthusiast, or a member of the Rotary Club, and a woman may note that she is a mother of two or a loyal friend.

Regarding self-efficacy, men tend to have higher perceptions of self-efficacy than women.13 In terms of actual and ideal selves, men and women in a variety of countries both described their ideal self as more masculine.14 As was noted earlier, gender differences are interesting to study but are very often exaggerated beyond the actual variations. Socialization and internalization of societal norms for gender differences accounts for much more of our perceived differences than do innate or natural differences between genders. These gender norms may be explicitly stated—for example, a mother may say to her son, “Boys don’t play with dolls”—or they may be more implicit, with girls being encouraged to pursue historically feminine professions like teaching or nursing without others actually stating the expectation.

Media

The representations we see in the media affect our self-concept. The vast majority of media images include idealized representations of attractiveness. Despite the fact that the images of people we see in glossy magazines and on movie screens are not typically what we see when we look at the people around us in a classroom, at work, or at the grocery store, many of us continue to hold ourselves to an unrealistic standard of beauty and attractiveness. Movies, magazines, and television shows are filled with beautiful people, and less attractive actors, when they are present in the media, are typically portrayed as the butt of jokes, villains, or only as background extras.15 Aside from overall attractiveness, the media also offers narrow representations of acceptable body weight.

Figure 2.2.3: Vogue by Charisse Kenion on Unsplash.

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.16 Further, an analysis of how weight is discussed on prime-time sitcoms found that heavier female characters were often the targets of negative comments and jokes that audience members responded to with laughter. Conversely, positive comments about women’s bodies were related to their thinness. In short, the heavier the character, the more negative the comments, and the thinner the character, the more positive the comments. The same researchers analyzed sitcoms for content regarding male characters’ weight and found that although comments regarding their weight were made, they were fewer in number and not as negative, ultimately supporting the notion that overweight male characters are more accepted in media than overweight female characters. Much more attention has been paid in recent years to the potential negative effects of such narrow media representations. The following “Getting Critical” box explores the role of media in the construction of body image.

In terms of self-concept, media representations offer us guidance on what is acceptable or unacceptable and valued or not valued in our society. Mediated messages, in general, reinforce cultural stereotypes related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class. People from historically marginalized groups must look much harder than those in the dominant groups to find positive representations of their identities in media. As a critical thinker, it is important to question media messages and to examine who is included and who is excluded.

Advertising in particular encourages people to engage in social comparison, regularly communicating to us that we are inferior because we lack a certain product or that we need to change some aspect of our life to keep up with and be similar to others. For example, for many years advertising targeted to women instilled in them a fear of having a dirty house, selling them products that

promised to keep their house clean, make their family happy, and impress their friends and neighbors. Now messages tell us to fear becoming old or unattractive, selling products to keep our skin tight and clear, which will in turn make us happy and popular.

"Getting Critical" - Body Image and Self-Perception

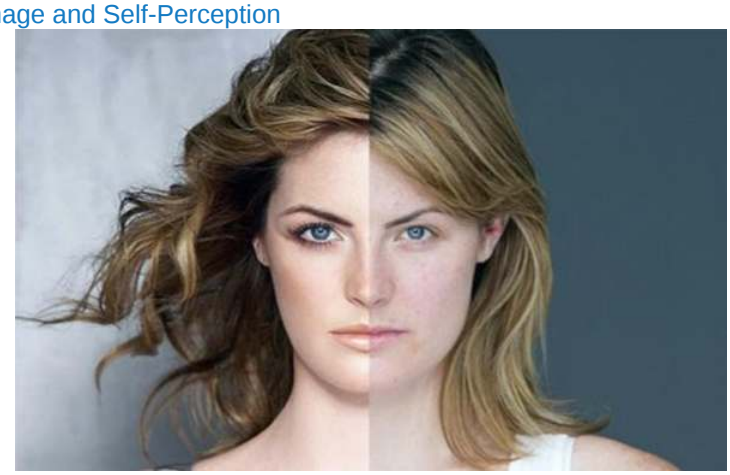

Figure 2.2.4: Photo shopping women in magazine is an industry standard but some social commentators believe it promotes unrealistic body image ideals.

Take a look at any magazine, television show, or movie and you will most likely see very beautiful people. When you look around you in your daily life, there are likely not as many glamorous and gorgeous people. Scholars and media critics have critiqued this discrepancy for decades because it has contributed to many social issues and public health issues ranging from body dysmorphic disorder, to eating disorders, to lowered self-esteem.

Much of the media is driven by advertising, and the business of media has been to perpetuate a "culture of lack." This means that we are constantly told, via mediated images, that we lack something. In short, advertisements often tell us we don't have enough money, enough beauty, or enough material possessions. Over the past few decades, women's bodies in the media have gotten smaller and thinner, while men's bodies have gotten bigger and more muscular. At the same time, the US population has become dramatically more obese. As research shows that men and women are becoming more and more dissatisfied with their bodies, which ultimately affects their self-concept and self-esteem, health and beauty product lines proliferate and cosmetic surgeries and other types of enhancements become more and more popular. From young children to older adults, people are becoming more aware of and oftentimes unhappy with their bodies, which results in a variety of self- perception problems.

Exercises

1. How do you think the media influences your self-perception and body image?
2. Describe the typical man that is portrayed in the media. Describe the typical woman that is portrayed in the media. What impressions do these typical bodies make on others? What are the potential positive and negative effects of the way the media portrays the human body?
3. Find an example of an "atypical" body represented in the media (a magazine, TV show, or movie). Is this person presented in a positive, negative, or neutral way? Why do you think this person was chosen?

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2.3: Self-Presentation

How we perceive ourselves manifests in how we present ourselves to others. **Self-presentation** is the process of strategically concealing or revealing personal information in order to influence others' perceptions.1 We engage in this process daily and for different reasons. Although people occasionally intentionally deceive others in the process of self-presentation, in general we try to make a good impression while still remaining authentic. Since self-presentation helps meet our instrumental, relational, and identity needs, we stand to lose quite a bit if we are caught intentionally misrepresenting ourselves. In May of 2012, Yahoo!'s CEO resigned after it became known that he stated on official documents that he had two college degrees when he actually only had one. In a similar incident, a woman who had long served as the dean of admissions for the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology was dismissed from her position after it was learned that she had only attended one year of college and had falsely indicated she had a bachelor's and master's degree.2 Such incidents clearly show that although people can get away with such false self-presentation for a while, the eventual consequences of being found out are dire. As communicators, we sometimes engage in more subtle forms of inauthentic self-presentation. For example, a person may state or imply that they know more about a subject or situation than they actually do in order to seem smart or "in the loop." During a speech, a speaker works on a polished and competent delivery to distract from a lack of substantive content. These cases of strategic self-presentation may not ever be found out, but communicators should still avoid them as they do not live up to the standards of ethical communication.

Consciously and competently engaging in self-presentation can have benefits because we can provide others with a more positive and accurate picture of who we are. People who are skilled at impression management are typically more engaging and confident, which allows others to pick up on more cues from which to form impressions.3 Being a skilled self-presenter draws on many of the practices used by competent communicators, including becoming a higher self-monitor. When self-presentation skills and self-monitoring skills combine, communicators can simultaneously monitor their own expressions, the reaction of others, and the situational and social context.4

Sometimes people get help with their self-presentation. Although most people can't afford or wouldn't think of hiring an image consultant, some people have started generously donating their self-presentation expertise to help others. Many people who have been riding the tough job market for a year or more get discouraged and may consider giving up on their job search. Now a project called "Style Me Hired" has started offering free makeovers to jobless people in order to offer them new motivation and help them make favorable impressions and hopefully get a job offer.5

There are two main types of self-presentation: prosocial and self-serving.6 **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.7 When we present ourselves in order to evoke a positive evaluative response, we are engaging in self-enhancement. In the pursuit of self-enhancement, a person might try to be as appealing as possible in a particular area or with a particular person to gain feedback that will enhance one's self-esteem. For example, a singer might train and practice for weeks before singing in front of a well-respected vocal coach but not invest as much effort in preparing to sing in front of friends. Although positive feedback from friends is beneficial, positive feedback from an experienced singer could enhance a person's self-concept. Self-enhancement can be productive and achieved competently, or it can be used inappropriately. Using self-enhancement behaviors just to gain the approval of others or out of self-centeredness may lead people to communicate in ways that are perceived as phony or overbearing and end up making an unfavorable impression.8

"Getting Plugged In" - Self-Presentation Online: Social Media, Digital Trails, and Your Reputation

Although social networking has long been a way to keep in touch with friends and colleagues, the advent of social media has made the process of making connections and those all-important first impressions much more complex. Just looking at Facebook as an example, we can clearly see that the very acts of constructing a profile, posting status updates, "liking" certain things, and sharing various information via Facebook features and apps is self- presentation. People also form impressions based on the number of

friends we have and the photos and posts that other people tag us in. All this information floating around can be difficult to manage. So how do we manage the impressions we make digitally given that there is a permanent record?

Research shows that people overall engage in positive and honest self- presentation on Facebook. Since people know how visible the information they post is, they may choose to only reveal things they think will form favorable impressions. But the mediated nature of Facebook also leads some people to disclose more personal information than they might otherwise in such a public or semipublic forum. These hyperpersonal disclosures run the risk of forming negative impressions based on who sees them. In general, the ease of digital communication, not just on Facebook, has presented new challenges for our self-control and information management. Sending someone a sexually provocative image used to take some effort before the age of digital cameras, but now "sexting" an explicit photo only takes a few seconds. So people who would have likely not engaged in such behavior before are more tempted to now, and it is the desire to present oneself as desirable or cool that leads people to send photos they may later regret.

In fact, new technology in the form of apps is trying to give people a little more control over the exchange of digital information. An iPhone app called "Snapchat" allows users to send photos that will only be visible for a few seconds. Although this isn't a guaranteed safety net, the demand for such apps is increasing, which illustrates the point that we all now leave digital trails of information that can be useful in terms of our self-presentation but can also create new challenges in terms of managing the information floating around from which others may form impressions of us.

1. What impressions do you want people to form of you based on the information they can see on your Facebook page?
2. Have you ever used social media or the Internet to do "research" on a person? What things would you find favorable and unfavorable?
3. Do you have any guidelines you follow regarding what information about yourself you will put online or not? If so, what are they? If not, why?

Key Takeaways

- Our self-concept is the overall idea of who we think we are. It is developed through our interactions with others and through social comparison that allows us to compare our beliefs and behaviors to others.
- Our self-esteem is based on the evaluations and judgments we make about various characteristics of our self-concept. It is developed through an assessment and evaluation of our various skills and abilities, known as self-efficacy, and through a comparison and evaluation of who we are, who we would like to be, and who we should be (self-discrepancy theory).
- Social comparison theory and self-discrepancy theory affect our self- concept and self-esteem because through comparison with others and comparison of our actual, ideal, and ought selves we make judgments about who we are and our self-worth. These judgments then affect how we communicate and behave.
- Socializing forces like family, culture, and media affect our self- perception because they give us feedback on who we are. This feedback can be evaluated positively or negatively and can lead to positive or negative patterns that influence our self-perception and then our communication.
- Self-presentation refers to the process of strategically concealing and/or revealing personal information in order to influence others' perceptions. Prosocial self-presentation is intended to benefit others and self-serving self-presentation is intended to benefit the self at the expense of others. People also engage in self-enhancement, which is a self-presentation strategy by which people intentionally seek out positive evaluations.

Exercises

1. Make a list of characteristics that describe who you are (your self- concept). After looking at the list, see if you can come up with a few words that summarize the list to narrow in on the key features of your self-concept. Go back over the first list and evaluate each characteristic, for example noting whether it is something you do well/poorly, something that is good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable. Is the overall list more positive or more negative? After doing these exercises, what have you learned about your self-concept and self- esteem?
2. Discuss at least one time in which you had a discrepancy or tension between two of the three selves described by self-discrepancy theory (the actual, ideal, and ought selves). What effect did this discrepancy have on your self-concept and/or self-esteem?
3. Take one of the socializing forces discussed (family, culture, or media) and identify at least one positive and one negative influence that it/they have had on your self-concept and/or self-esteem.

4. Getting integrated: Discuss some ways that you might strategically engage in self-presentation to influence the impressions of others in an academic, a professional, a personal, and a civic context.

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2.4: Improving How You See Yourself

Learning Objectives

- Discuss strategies for improving self-perception.
- Discuss strategies for improving perception of others.
- Employ perception checking to improve perception of self and others.

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

Improving How You See Yourself

How we see ourselves, our self-perceptions can and do change. Recall that we have an overall self-concept and self-esteem that are relatively stable, and we also have context-specific self- perceptions. **Context-specific self-perceptions** vary depending on the person with whom we are interacting, our emotional state, and the subject matter being discussed. Becoming aware of the process of self-perception and the various components of our self-concept (which you have already started to do by studying this chapter) will help you understand and improve your self-perceptions.

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

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

Avoid Reliance on Rigid Schema

Schemata are sets of information based on cognitive and experiential knowledge that guide our interaction. We rely on schemata almost constantly to help us make sense of the world around us. For example, in searching for the ideal mate, you may have a prototype for what makes that person "perfect." You also use schemata in describing phenomena. For example, the use of personal constructs, defining yourself as intelligent or unintelligent is another way schemata is used. Personal constructs are often stated using terms that are polar opposites. Sometimes schemata become so familiar that we use them as scripts, which prompts mindless communication and can lead us to overlook new information that may need to be incorporated into the schema. So it's important to remain mindful of new or contradictory information that may warrant revision of a schema. Being mindful is difficult, however, especially since we often unconsciously rely on schemata. We are not the same people today that we were ten years ago. Perhaps ten years ago you were unable to do complex math, and you called yourself unintelligent. That way of thinking could lead to a

rigid schema, and you could still think of yourself that way. This example illustrates the importance of keeping your schemata flexible.

Be Critical of Socializing Forces

We learned earlier that family, friends, sociocultural norms, and the media are just some of the socializing forces that influence our thinking and therefore influence our self-perception. These powerful forces serve positive functions but can also set into motion negative patterns of self-perception. Two examples can illustrate the possibility for people to critique and resist socializing forces in order to improve their self-perception. The first deals with physical appearance and notions of health, and the second deals with cultural identities and discrimination.

Physical Appearance and Health

We have already discussed how the media presents us with narrow and often unrealistic standards for attractiveness. Even though most of us know that these standards don't represent what is normal or natural for the human body, we internalize these ideals, which results in various problems ranging from eating disorders, to depression, to poor self-esteem. A relatively overlooked but controversial and interesting movement that has emerged partially in response to these narrow representations of the body is the fat acceptance movement. The fat acceptance movement has been around for more than thirty years, but it has more recently gotten public attention due to celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Kirstie Alley, who after years of publicly struggling with weight issues have embraced a view that weight does not necessarily correspond to health. Many people have found inspiration in that message and have decided that being healthy and strong is more important than being thin.[1]

The "Healthy at Every Size" movement and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance have challenged the narrative put out by the thirty-billion-dollar-a-year weight- loss industry that fat equals lazy, ugly, and unhealthy.[2] Conflicting scientific studies make it difficult to say conclusively how strong the correlation is between weight and health, but it seems clear that a view that promotes healthy living and positive self-esteem over unconditional dieting and a cult of thinness is worth exploring more given the potential public health implications of distorted body image and obesity.

Cultural Identities

Cultural influences related to identities and difference can also lead to distorted self-perceptions, especially for people who occupy marginalized or oppressed identities. While perception research has often been used to support the notion that individuals who are subjected to discrimination, like racial and ethnic minorities, are likely to have low self-esteem because they internalize negative societal views, this is not always the case.[3] In fact, even some early perception research showed that minorities do not just passively accept the negative views society places on them. Instead, they actively try to maintain favorable self-perceptions in the face of discriminatory attitudes. Numerous studies have shown that people in groups that are the targets of discrimination may identify with their in-group more because of this threat, which may actually help them maintain psychological well-being. In short, they reject the negative evaluations of the out-group and find refuge and support in their identification with others who share their marginalized status.

Beware of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Self-fulfilling prophecies are thought and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behavior that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true.[4] For example, let's say a student's biology lab instructor is a Chinese person who speaks English as a second language. The student falsely believes that the instructor will not be a good teacher because he speaks English with an accent. Because of this belief, the student doesn't attend class regularly and doesn't listen actively when she does attend. Because of these behaviors, the student fails the biology lab, which then reinforces her original belief that the instructor wasn't a good teacher.

Self Fulfilling Prophecy

Visit this link and watch the clip from the Matrix in which the oracle illustrates a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies was originally developed to be applied to social inequality and discrimination, it has since been applied in many other contexts, including interpersonal communication. This research has found that some people are chronically insecure, meaning they are very concerned about being accepted by others but constantly feel that other people will dislike them. This can manifest in relational insecurity, which is again based on feelings of inferiority resulting from social comparison with others perceived to be more secure and superior. Such people often end up reinforcing their belief that others will

dislike them because of the behaviors triggered by their irrational belief. Take the following scenario as an example: An insecure person assumes that his date will not like him. During the date he doesn't engage in much conversation, discloses negative information about himself, and exhibits anxious behaviors. Because of these behaviors, his date forms a negative impression and suggests they not see each other again, reinforcing his original belief that the date wouldn't like him. 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.5

Create and Maintain Supporting Interpersonal Relationships

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

Beware of Distorted Patterns of Thinking and Acting

We often engage in distorted thinking without being conscious of it. Learning about some of the typical negative patterns of thinking and acting may help us acknowledge and intervene in them. One such pattern involves self-esteem and overcompensation.

People with low self-esteem may act in ways that overcompensate for their feelings of low self-worth and other insecurities. Whether it's the businessman buying his midlife crisis Corvette, the "country boy" adding monster tires to his truck, or the community leader who wears several carats of diamonds everywhere she goes, people often turn to material possessions to try to boost self-esteem. While these purchases may make people feel better in the short term, they may have negative financial effects that can exacerbate negative self- perceptions and lead to interpersonal conflict. People also compensate for self-esteem with their relational choices. A person who is anxious about his career success may surround himself with people who he deems less successful than himself. In this case, being a big fish in a small pond helps some people feel better about themselves when they engage in social comparison.

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

Some people develop low self-esteem because they lack accurate information about themselves, which may be intentional or unintentional. A person can intentionally try to maintain high self-esteem by ignoring or downplaying negative comments and beliefs and focusing on positive evaluations. While this can be a good thing, it can also lead to a distorted self-concept. There is a middle ground between beating yourself up or dwelling on the negative and ignoring potentially constructive feedback about weaknesses and missing opportunities to grow as a person. Conversely, people who have low self-esteem or negative self-concepts may discount or ignore positive feedback. To wrap up this section, I'd like to turn to one of my favorite shows and a great source for examples relevant to the perception process: *American Idol*.

I've always enjoyed showing clips from *American Idol* auditions in my class when I teach about self-perception. As you probably know, the season always starts with audition footage shot in various cities. The range of singing abilities, not to mention personalities, of those who show up for a chance to sing in front of the judges leads millions of viewers to keep tuning in. While it's obvious that the producers let some people through who they know don't have a chance at making it on the show, they also know that certain personalities make for good reality television viewing. I've often found myself wondering, "Do these people really think they can sing?" The answer is sometimes a very clear "Yes!" Sure, some are there just to make a spectacle and hopefully make it on TV, but there are many who actually believe they have singing abilities—even to the point that they challenge and discount the judges' comments.

During the contestant's tearful and/or angry post rejection interview, they are often shown standing with their family and friends, who are also surprised at the judges' decision. These contestants could potentially avoid this emotional ending by following some of the previous tips. It's good that they have supportive interpersonal relationships, but people's parents and friends are a little

biased in their feedback, which can lead to a skewed self-concept. These contestants could also set incremental goals. Singing at a local event or even at a karaoke bar might have helped them gain more accurate information about their abilities and led them to realize they didn't have what it takes to be an "American idol."

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2.5: Self-Disclosure and Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives

- Define self-disclosure.
- Explain the connection between social penetration theory, social comparison theory, and self-disclosure.
- Discuss the process of self-disclosure, including how we make decisions about what, where, when, and how to disclose.
- Explain how self-disclosure affects relationships.

Have you ever said too much on a first date? At a job interview? To a professor? Have you ever posted something on Facebook only to return later to remove it? When self-disclosure works out well, it can have positive effects for interpersonal relationships. Conversely, self-disclosure that does not work out well can lead to embarrassment, lower self-esteem, and relationship deterioration or even termination. As with all other types of communication, increasing your competence regarding self-disclosure can have many positive effects.

So what is self-disclosure? It could be argued that any verbal or nonverbal communication reveals something about the self. The clothes we wear, a laugh, or an order at the drive-through may offer glimpses into our personality or past, but they are not necessarily self-disclosure. **Self-disclosure** is purposeful disclosure of personal information to another person. If I purposefully wear the baseball cap of my favorite team to reveal my team loyalty to a new friend, then this clothing choice constitutes self-disclosure. Self-disclosure doesn't always have to be deep to be useful or meaningful. Superficial self-disclosure, often in the form of "small talk," is key in initiating relationships that then move onto more personal levels of self-disclosure. Telling a classmate your major or your hometown during the first week of school carries relatively little risk but can build into a friendship that lasts beyond the class.

Theories of Self-Disclosure

Social penetration theory states that as we get to know someone, we engage in a reciprocal process of self-disclosure that changes in breadth and depth and affects how a relationship develops. *Depth* refers to how personal or sensitive the information is, and *breadth* refers to the range of topics discussed.[1] You may recall Shrek's declaration that ogres are like onions in the movie *Shrek*. While certain circumstances can lead to a rapid increase in the depth and/or breadth of self-disclosure, the theory states that in most relationships people gradually penetrate through the layers of each other's personality like we peel the layers from an onion.

The theory also argues that people in a relationship balance needs that are sometimes in tension, which is a dialectic. Balancing a dialectic is like walking a tightrope. You have to lean to one side and eventually lean to another side to keep yourself balanced and prevent falling. The constant back and forth allows you to stay balanced, even though you may not always be even, or standing straight up. One of the key dialectics that must be negotiated is the tension between openness and closedness.[2] We want to make ourselves open to others, through self-disclosure, but we also want to maintain a sense of privacy.

We may also engage in self-disclosure for the purposes of social comparison. **Social comparison theory** states that we evaluate ourselves based on how we compare with others.[3]

Figure 2.5.1: Social comparison is a well-known concept to advertisers. They create idealized images that influence consumers' self-perceptions as well as the things they feel they must buy in order to be satisfied. Image by Sensei Alan is under a CC BY 2.0 license

We may disclose information about our intellectual aptitude or athletic abilities to see how we relate to others. This type of comparison helps us decide whether we are superior or inferior to others in a particular area. Disclosures about abilities or talents can also lead to self-validation if the person to whom we disclose reacts positively. By disclosing information about our beliefs and values, we can determine if they are the same as or different from others. Last, we may disclose fantasies or thoughts to another to determine whether they are acceptable or unacceptable. We can engage in social comparison as the discloser or the receiver of disclosures, which may allow us to determine whether or not we are interested in pursuing a relationship with another person.

The final theory of self-disclosure that we will discuss is the Johari window, which is named after its creators Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham.4 The **Johari window** can be applied to a variety of interpersonal interactions in order to help us understand what parts of ourselves are open, hidden, blind, and unknown. To help understand the concept, think of a window with four panes. As you can see in Figure 2.5.2 "Johari Window", one axis of the window represents things that are known to us, and the other axis represents things that are known to others. The upper left pane contains open information that is known to us and to others. The amount of information that is openly known to others varies based on relational context. When you are with close friends, there is probably a lot of information already in the open pane, and when you are with close family, there is also probably a lot of information in the open pane. The information could differ, though, as your family might know much more about your past and your friends more about your present. Conversely, there isn't much information in the open pane when we meet someone for the first time, aside from what the other person can guess based on our nonverbal communication and appearance.

Figure 2.5.2: Johari Window. Source: Joseph Luft, Of Human Interaction (Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books, 1969).

The bottom left pane contains hidden information that is known to us but not to others. As we are getting to know someone, we engage in self-disclosure and move information from the “hidden” to the “open” pane. By doing this, we decrease the size of our hidden area and increase the size of our open area, which increases our shared reality. The reactions that we get from people as we open up to them help us form our self-concepts and also help determine the trajectory of the relationship. If the person reacts favorably to our disclosures and reciprocates disclosure, then the cycle of disclosure continues and a deeper relationship may be forged.

The upper right pane contains information that is known to others but not to us. For example, we may be unaware of the fact that others see us as pushy or as a leader. Looking back to self-discrepancy theory, we can see that people who have a disconnect between how they see themselves and how others see them may have more information in their blind pane. Engaging in perception checking and soliciting feedback from others can help us learn more about our blind area.

The bottom right pane represents our unknown area, as it contains information not known to ourselves or others. To become more self-aware, we must solicit feedback from others to learn more about our blind pane, but we must also explore the unknown pane. To discover the unknown, we have to get out of our comfort zones and try new things. We have to pay attention to the things that excite or scare us and investigate them more to see if we can learn something new about ourselves. By being more aware of what is contained in each of these panes and how we can learn more about each one, we can more competently engage in self-disclosure and use this process to enhance our interpersonal relationships.

“Getting Plugged In” - Self-Disclosure and Social Media

Figure 2.5.3: Photo by Blogtrepreneur is used under a CC BY 2.0 license.

Facebook and Twitter are undoubtedly dominating the world of online social networking, and the willingness of many users to self-disclose personal information ranging from moods to religious affiliation, relationship status, and personal contact information has led to an increase in privacy concerns. Facebook and Twitter offer convenient opportunities to stay in touch with friends, family, and coworkers, but are people using them responsibly? Some argue that there are fundamental differences between today’s digital natives, whose private and public selves are intertwined through these technologies, and older generations. Even though some colleges are offering seminars on managing privacy online, we still hear stories of self-disclosure gone wrong, such as the football player from the University of Texas who was kicked off the team for posting racist comments about the president or the student who was kicked out of his private, Christian college after a picture of him dressed in drag surfaced on Facebook. However, social media experts say these cases are rare and that most students are aware of who can see what they’re posting and the potential consequences. The issue of privacy management on Facebook is affecting parent-child relationships, too, and as the website “Oh Crap. My Parents Joined Facebook.” shows, the results can sometimes be embarrassing for the college student and the parent as they balance the dialectic between openness and closeness once the child has moved away.

1. How do you manage your privacy and self-disclosures online?
2. Do you think it’s ethical for school officials or potential employers to make admission or hiring decisions based on what they can learn about you online? Why or why not?
3. Are you or would you be friends with a parent on Facebook? Why or why not? If you already are friends with a parent, did you change your posting habits or privacy settings once they joined? Why or why not?

The Process of Self-Disclosure

There are many decisions that go into the process of self-disclosure. We have many types of information we can disclose, but we have to determine whether or not we will proceed with disclosure by considering the situation and the potential risks. Then we must decide when, where, and how to disclose. Since all these decisions will affect our relationships, we will examine each one in turn.

Four main categories for disclosure include observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs.[5] Observations include what we have done and experienced. For example, I could tell you that I live in a farmhouse in Illinois. If I told you that I think my move from the city to the country was a good decision, I would be sharing my thoughts, because I included a judgment about my experiences. Sharing feelings includes expressing an emotion—for example, "I'm happy to wake up every morning and look out at the corn fields. I feel lucky." Last, we may communicate needs or wants by saying something like "My best friend is looking for a job, and I really want him to move here, too." We usually begin disclosure with observations and thoughts and then move onto feelings and needs as the relationship progresses. There are some exceptions to this. For example, we are more likely to disclose deeply in crisis situations, and we may also disclose more than usual with a stranger if we do not think we'll meet the person again or do not share social networks. Although we don't often find ourselves in crisis situations, you may recall scenes from movies or television shows where people who are trapped in an elevator or stranded after a plane crash reveal their deepest feelings and desires. I imagine that we have all been in a situation where we said more about ourselves to a stranger than we normally would. To better understand why, let's discuss some of the factors that influence our decision to disclose.

Generally speaking, some people are naturally more transparent and willing to self- disclose, while others are more opaque and hesitant to reveal personal information.[6] Interestingly, recent research suggests that the pervasiveness of reality television, much of which includes participants who are very willing to disclose personal information, has led to a general trend among reality television viewers to engage in self-disclosure through other mediated means such as blogging and video sharing.[7] Whether it is online or face-to-face, there are other reasons for disclosing or not, including self-focused, other-focused, interpersonal, and situational reasons.[8]

Self-focused reasons for disclosure include having a sense of relief or catharsis, clarifying or correcting information, or seeking support. Self-focused reasons for not disclosing include fear of rejection and loss of privacy. In other words, we may disclose to get something off our chest in hopes of finding relief, or we may not disclose out of fear that the other person may react negatively to our revelation. Other-focused reasons for disclosure include a sense of responsibility to inform or educate. Other-focused reasons for not disclosing include feeling like the other person will not protect the information. If someone mentions that their car wouldn't start this morning and you disclose that you are good at working on cars, you've disclosed to help out the other person. On the other side, you may hold back disclosure about your new relationship from your coworker because he or she's known to be loose-lipped with other people's information. Interpersonal reasons for disclosure involve desires to maintain a trusting and intimate relationship. Interpersonal reasons for not disclosing include fear of losing the relationship or deeming the information irrelevant to the particular relationship. Your decision to disclose an affair in order to be open with your partner and hopefully work through the aftermath together or withhold that information out of fear he or she will leave you is based on interpersonal reasons. Finally, situational reasons may be the other person being available, directly asking a question, or being directly involved in or affected by the information being disclosed. Situational reasons for not disclosing include the person being unavailable, a lack of time to fully discuss the information, or the lack of a suitable (i.e., quiet, private) place to talk. For example, finding yourself in a quiet environment where neither person is busy could lead to disclosure, while a house full of company may not.

Deciding when to disclose something in a conversation may not seem as important as deciding whether or not to disclose at all. But deciding to disclose and then doing it at an awkward time in a conversation could lead to negative results. As far as timing goes, you should consider whether to disclose the information early, in the middle, or late in a conversation.[9] If you get something off your chest early in a conversation, you may ensure that there's plenty of time to discuss the issue and that you don't end up losing your nerve. If you wait until the middle of the conversation, you have some time to feel out the other person's mood and set up the tone for your disclosure. For example, if you meet up with your roommate to tell her that you're planning on moving out and she starts by saying, "I've had the most terrible day!" the tone of the conversation has now shifted, and you may not end up making your disclosure. If you start by asking her how she's doing, and things seem to be going well, you may be more likely to follow through with the disclosure. You may choose to disclose late in a conversation if you're worried about the person's reaction. If you know they have an appointment or you have to go to class at a certain time, disclosing just before that time could limit your immediate exposure to any negative reaction. However, if the person doesn't have a negative reaction, they could still become upset because they don't have time to discuss the disclosure with you.

Sometimes self-disclosure is unplanned. Someone may ask you a direct question or disclose personal information, which leads you to reciprocate disclosure. In these instances you may not manage your privacy well because you haven't had time to think through any potential risks. In the case of a direct question, you may feel comfortable answering, you may give an indirect or general answer, or you may feel enough pressure or uncertainty to give a dishonest answer. If someone unexpectedly discloses, you may feel the need to reciprocate by also disclosing something personal. If you're uncomfortable doing this, you can still provide support for the other person by listening and giving advice or feedback.

Once you've decided when and where to disclose information to another person, you need to figure out the best channel to use. Face-to-face disclosures may feel more genuine or intimate given the shared physical presence and ability to receive verbal and nonverbal communication. There is also an opportunity for immediate verbal and nonverbal feedback, such as asking follow-up questions or demonstrating support or encouragement through a hug. The immediacy of a face- to-face encounter also means you have to deal with the uncertainty of the reaction you'll get. If the person reacts negatively, you may feel uncomfortable, pressured to stay, or even fearful. If you choose a mediated channel such as an e-mail or a letter, text, note, or phone call, you may seem less genuine or personal, but you have more control over the situation in that you can take time to carefully choose your words, and you do not have to immediately face the reaction of the other person. This can be beneficial if you fear a negative or potentially violent reaction. Another disadvantage of choosing a mediated channel, however, is the loss of nonverbal communication that can add much context to a conversation. Although our discussion of the choices involved in self-disclosure so far have focused primarily on the discloser, self-disclosure is an interpersonal process that has much to do with the receiver of the disclosure.

Effects of Disclosure on the Relationship

The process of self-disclosure is circular. An individual self-discloses, the recipient of the disclosure reacts, and the original discloser processes the reaction. How the receiver interprets and responds to the disclosure are key elements of the process. Part of the response results from the receiver's attribution (reason) of the cause of the disclosure, which may include dispositional, situational, and interpersonal attributions.10

Let's say your coworker discloses that she thinks the new boss got his promotion because of favoritism instead of merit. You may make a **dispositional attribution** that connects the cause of her disclosure to her personality by thinking, for example, that she is outgoing, inappropriate for the workplace, or fishing for information. If the personality trait to which you attribute the disclosure is positive, then your reaction to the disclosure is more likely to be positive. **Situational attributions** identify the cause of a disclosure with the context or surroundings in which it takes place. For example, you may attribute your coworker's disclosure to the fact that you agreed to go to lunch with her. **Interpersonal attributions** identify the relationship between sender and receiver as the cause of the disclosure. So if you attribute your coworker's comments to the fact that you are best friends at work, you think your unique relationship caused the disclosure. If the receiver's primary attribution is interpersonal, relational intimacy and closeness will likely be reinforced more than if the attribution is dispositional or situational, because the receiver feels like they were specially chosen to receive the information.

The receiver's role doesn't end with attribution and response. There may be added burdens if the information shared with you is a secret. As was noted earlier, there are clear risks involved in self-disclosure of intimate or potentially stigmatizing information if the receiver of the disclosure fails to keep that information secure. As the receiver of a secret, you may feel the need to unburden yourself from the co- ownership of the information by sharing it with someone else.11 This is not always a bad thing. You may strategically tell someone who is removed from the social network of the person who told you the secret to keep the information secure. Although unburdening yourself can be a relief, sometimes people tell secrets they were entrusted to keep for less productive reasons. A research study of office workers found that 77 percent of workers that received a disclosure and were told not to tell anyone else told at least two other people by the end of the day!12 They reported doing so to receive attention for having inside information or to demonstrate their power or connection. Needless to say, spreading someone's private disclosure without permission for personal gain does not demonstrate communication competence.

When the cycle of disclosure ends up going well for the discloser, there is likely to be a greater sense of relational intimacy and self-worth, and there are also positive psychological effects such as reduced stress and increased feelings of social support.

Self-disclosure can also have effects on physical health. Spouses of suicide or accidental death victims who did not disclose information to their friends were more likely to have more health problems such as weight change and headaches and suffer from more intrusive thoughts about the death than those who did talk with friends.13

Key Takeaways

- Through the process of self-disclosure, we disclose personal information and learn about others.
- The social penetration theory argues that self-disclosure increases in breadth and depth as a relationship progresses, like peeling back the layers of an onion.
- We engage in social comparison through self-disclosure, which may determine whether or not we pursue a relationship.
- Getting integrated: The process of self-disclosure involves many decisions, including what, when, where, and how to disclose. All these decisions may vary by context, as we follow different patterns of self- disclosure in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts.

- The receiver's reaction to and interpretation of self-disclosure are important factors in how the disclosure will affect the relationship.

Exercises

1. Answer the questions from the beginning of the section: Have you ever said too much on a first date? At a job interview? To a professor? Have you ever posted something on Facebook only to return later to remove it? If you answered yes to any of the questions, what have you learned in this chapter that may have led you to do something differently?
2. Have you experienced negative results due to self-disclosure (as sender or receiver)? If so, what could have been altered in the decisions of what, where, when, or how to disclose that may have improved the situation?
3. Under what circumstances is it OK to share information that someone has disclosed to you? Under what circumstances is to not OK to share the information?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Emotions and Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives

- Define emotions.
- Explain the evolutionary and cultural connections to emotions.
- Discuss how we can more effectively manage our own and respond to others' emotions.

3.1: Understanding Emotions
3.2: Expressing Emotions
3.3: Understanding Feelings

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3.1: Understanding 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, as 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 our own emotions and better respond to others when they display emotions.

Emotions are physiological, behavioral, and/or communicative reactions to stimuli that are cognitively processed and experienced as emotional.[1] This definition includes several important dimensions of emotions. First, 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.[2] 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 effort.

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 joy, distress, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust. Members of a remote tribe in New Guinea, who had never been exposed to Westerners, were able to identify these basic emotions when shown photographs of US Americans making corresponding facial expressions.[3]

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. Secondary emotions are love, guilt, shame, embarrassment, pride, envy, and jealousy.[4] 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 a 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.

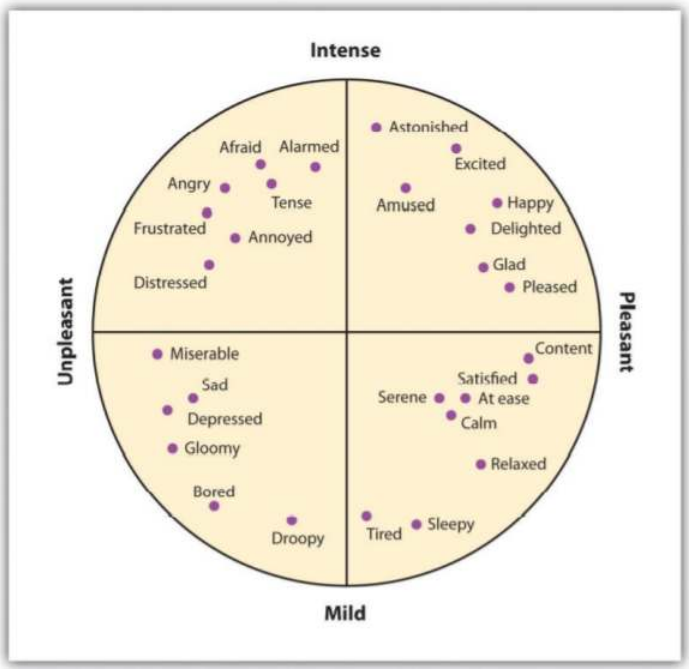

Figure 3.1.1: The Secondary Emotions. The secondary emotions are those that have a major cognitive component. They are determined by both their level of arousal (mild to intense) and their valence (pleasant to unpleasant). Photo is used under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

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.

Perspectives on Emotion

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.

Evolution and Emotions

Human beings grouping together and creating 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.5 For example, unlike other species, most of us are able to control our anger, and we 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 deal with living with more people.

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.6 This drive for attachment became innate through the process of evolution as 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.7 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, extended family, foster parents, or others may also play that role.

Individuals with a **secure attachment**8 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 **dismissive-avoidant attachment**[9] 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-preoccupied 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.

People with a **fearful attachment** style report being uncomfortable in close relationships. Although they desire closeness, they avoid getting close, and have difficulty expressing affection to others. They often have negative view of themselves and negative views of others. This attachment style can develop when primary caregivers were abusive.

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.[10] 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, whether we form loving and secure bonds or unpredictable and insecure bonds influences our emotional tendencies throughout our lives, 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—both things this book will help you do if you put what you learn into practice.

Culture and Emotions

While our shared evolutionary past dictates some universal similarities in emotions, triggers for emotions and norms for displaying emotions vary widely. Certain emotional scripts that we follow are socially, culturally, and historically situated. Take the example of "falling in love." Westerners may be tempted to critique the practice of arranged marriages in other cultures and question a relationship that isn't based on falling in love. However, arranged marriages have been a part of Western history, and the emotional narrative of falling in love has only recently become a part of our culture. Even though we know that compatible values and shared social networks are more likely to predict the success of a long-term romantic relationship than "passion," Western norms privilege the emotional role of falling in love in our courtship narratives and practices.[11] While this example shows how emotions tie into larger social and cultural narratives, rules and norms for displaying emotions affect our day-to-day interactions.

Display rules[12] are sociocultural norms that influence emotional expression. Display rules influence who can express emotions, which emotions 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 fact, the outward expression of our inner states may be exaggerated, since getting attention from those around you is accepted and even expected in individualistic cultures like the United States.[13] 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.

There are also cultural norms regarding 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. Recent research has documented the culture of cheerfulness in the United States.[14] 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.[15] In a culture of cheerfulness, failure to express positive emotions could lead others to view you as a failure or to recommend psychological help or therapy. The 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.[16] Similarly, collectivistic cultures may view expressions of positive emotion negatively because someone is bringing undue attention to himself or herself, which could upset group harmony and potentially elicit jealous reactions from others.

Emotional expressions of grief also vary among cultures and are often tied to religious or social expectations.[17] Thai and Filipino funeral services often include wailing, a more intense and loud form of crying, which shows respect for the deceased. The intensity of the wailing varies based on the importance of the individual who died and the closeness of the relationship between the mourner and the deceased. Therefore, close relatives like spouses, children, or parents would be expected to wail louder than distant relatives or friends. In Filipino culture, wailers may even be hired by the family to symbolize the importance of the person who died. In some Latino cultures, influenced by the concept of machismo or manliness, men are not expected or allowed to cry. Even in the United States, there are gendered expectations regarding grieving behaviors that lead some men to withhold emotional displays such as crying even at funerals. On the other hand, as you can see in Video Clip 6.1, the 2011 death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il brought out public mourners who some suspected were told and/ or paid to wail in front of television cameras.

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3.2: Expressing Emotions

Emotion sharing involves communicating the circumstances, thoughts, and feelings surrounding an emotional event. Emotion sharing usually starts immediately following an emotional episode. The intensity of the emotional event corresponds with the frequency and length of the sharing, with high-intensity events being told more often and over a longer period of time. Research shows that people communicate with others after almost any emotional event, positive or negative, and that emotion sharing offers intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits, as individuals feel inner satisfaction and relief after sharing, and social bonds are strengthened through the interaction.1

Our social bonds are enhanced through emotion sharing because the support we receive from our relational partners increases our sense of closeness and interdependence. We should also be aware that our expressions of emotion are infectious due to **emotional contagion**31, or the spreading of emotion from one person to another.2 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. One of my favorite skits from *Saturday Night Live*, called "Debbie Downer," clearly illustrates the positive and negative aspects of emotional contagion. In the skit, a group of friends and family have taken a trip to an amusement park. One of the people in the group, Debbie, interjects depressing comments into the happy dialogue of the rest of the group. Within the first two minutes of the skit, Debbie mentions mad cow disease after someone orders steak and eggs for breakfast, a Las Vegas entertainer being mauled by his tiger after someone gets excited about seeing Tigger, and a train explosion in North Korea after someone mentions going to the Epcot center. We've probably all worked with someone or had that family member who can't seem to say anything positive, and Debbie's friends react, as we would, by getting increasingly frustrated with her. The skit also illustrates the sometimes uncontrollable aspects of emotional contagion. As you know, the show is broadcast live and the characters occasionally "break character" after getting caught up in the comedy. After the comment about North Korea, Rachel Dratch, who plays Debbie, and Jimmy Fallon, another actor in the scene, briefly break character and laugh a little bit. Their character slip leads other actors to break character and over the next few minutes the laughter spreads (which was not scripted and not supposed to happen) until all the actors in the skit are laughing, some of them uncontrollably, and the audience is also roaring with laughter. This multilayered example captures the positive, negative, and interpersonal aspects of emotional contagion.

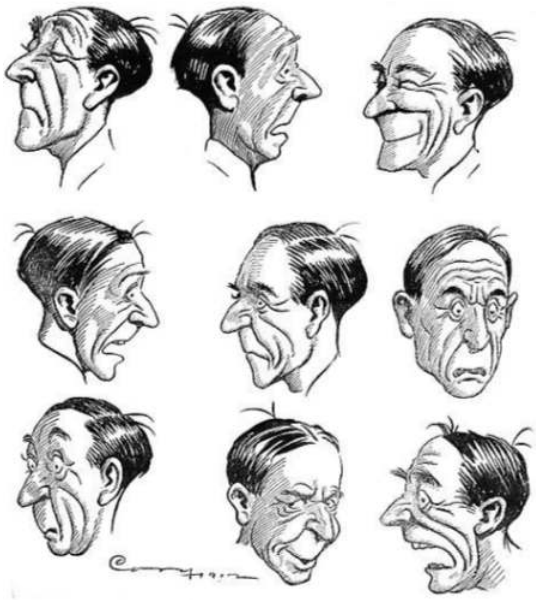

Figure 3.2.1: Facial Expressions. Photo is in the Public Domain

In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous they will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, *happy* is mild, *delighted* is moderate, and *ecstatic* is intense, and *ignored* is mild, *rejected* is moderate, and *abandoned* is intense.3 Aside from conveying the intensity of your emotions, you can also verbally frame your emotions in a way that allows you to have more control over them.

We can communicate ownership of our emotions through the use of "I" language. This may allow us to feel more in control, but it may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying "You're making me crazy!" you could say, "I'm starting to feel really anxious because we can't make a decision." However, there may be times when face-to-face communication isn't possible or desired, which can complicate how we express emotions. Developing an emotional vocabulary, as you will see in the next few pages, will also help you with your ability to share your emotions.

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

Managing and Responding to Emotions

The notion of emotional intelligence emerged in the early 1990s and has received much attention in academic scholarship, business and 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."[4]

As was noted earlier, improving our emotional vocabulary and considering how and when to verbally express our emotions can help us better distinguish between and monitor our emotions. However, 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 likely to be on the receiving end of that sharing. Another part of emotional intelligence is being able to appraise others' expressions of emotions and communicatively adapt. A key aspect in this process is empathy, which is the ability to comprehend the emotions of others and to elicit those feelings in ourselves. Being empathetic has important social and physical implications. By expressing empathy, we will be more likely to attract and maintain supportive social networks, which has positive physiological effects like lower stress and less anxiety and psychological effects such as overall life satisfaction and optimism.[5]

When people share emotions, they may expect a variety of results such as support, validation, or advice. If someone is venting, they may just want your attention. When people share positive emotions, they may want recognition or shared celebration. Remember too that you are likely to co-experience some of the emotion with the person sharing it and that the intensity of their share may dictate your verbal and nonverbal reaction.[6] Research has shown that responses to low-intensity episodes are mostly verbal. For example, if someone describes a situation where they were frustrated with their car shopping experience, you may validate their emotion by saying, "Car shopping can be really annoying. What happened?" Conversely, more intense episodes involve nonverbal reactions such as touching, body contact (scooting close together), or embracing. These reactions may or may not accompany verbal communication. You may have been in a situation where someone shared an intense emotion, such as learning of the death of a close family member, and the only thing you could think to do was hug them. Although being on the receiving end of emotional sharing can be challenging, your efforts will likely result in positive gains in your interpersonal communication competence and increased relational bonds.

Key Takeaways

- Emotions result from outside stimuli or physiological changes that influence our behaviors and communication.
- Emotions developed in modern humans to help us manage complex social life including interpersonal relations.
- The expression of emotions is influenced by sociocultural norms and display rules.
- Emotion sharing includes verbal expression, which is made more effective with an enhanced emotional vocabulary, and nonverbal expression, which may or may not be voluntary.
- Emotional intelligence helps us manage our own emotions and effectively respond to the emotions of others.

Exercises

1. In what situations would you be more likely to communicate emotions through electronic means rather than in person? Why?
2. Can you think of a display rule for emotions that is not mentioned in the chapter? What is it and why do you think this norm developed?
3. When you are trying to determine someone's emotional state, what nonverbal communication do you look for and why?
4. Think of someone in your life who you believe has a high degree of emotional intelligence. What have they done that brought you to this conclusion?

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3.3: Understanding Feelings

As you have learned, emotions are physiological, behavioral, and/or communicative reactions to stimuli that are cognitively processed and experienced as emotional. **Feelings** are experienced differently because they do not generate the same physiological response as emotions do. We experience more feelings in a day than we do emotions. We may feel bored or frustrated, but those feelings don't last as long, nor do they require that we "manage" the feeling as we do emotions. People often use the term incorrectly, such as "I feel hungry." Hunger is not actually a feeling.

Expressing Feelings

Expressing feelings can be uncomfortable for those listening. Some people are generally not good at or comfortable with receiving and processing other people's feelings. Even those with good empathetic listening skills can be positively or negatively affected by others' emotions. Despite the fact that expressing feelings is more complicated than other forms of expression, sharing is an important part of how we create social bonds and empathize with others, and it can be improved.

In order to verbally express our feelings and emotions, it is important that we develop an *emotional vocabulary*. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous our emotions will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, *happy* is mild, *delighted* is moderate, and *ecstatic* is intense; *ignored* is mild, *rejected* is moderate, and *abandoned* is intense.[1]

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

Finally, it is important to understand the difference between a feeling and a mood. **Moods** are low-intensity states, and these can last much longer than an emotion or a feeling. Moods can last for weeks or even months. What makes moods different is that there isn't *necessarily* a specific trigger like there is for an emotion or a feeling. Can you remember when you said "I'm just in a bad mood." Sometimes we hear the expression "I just woke up on the wrong side of the bed." There was no stimulus for the bad mood. However, certain personality characteristics, such as neuroticism, can impact moods.

Evocative Language

Vivid language captures people's attention and their imagination by conveying emotions and action. Think of the array of mental images that a poem or a well-told story from a friend can conjure up. Evocative language can also lead us to have physical reactions. Words like *shiver* and *heartbroken* can lead people to remember previous physical sensations related to the word. As a speaker, there may be times when evoking a positive or negative reaction could be beneficial. Evoking a sense of calm could help you talk a friend through troubling health news. Evoking a sense of agitation and anger could help you motivate an audience to action. When we are conversing with a friend or speaking to an audience, we are primarily engaging others' visual and auditory senses. Evocative language can help your conversational partner or audience members feel, smell, or taste something as well as hear it and see it. Good writers know how to use words effectively and affectively. A well- written story, whether it is a book or screenplay, will contain all the previous elements.

Some words are so evocative that their usage violates the social norms of appropriate conversations. Although we could use such words to intentionally shock people, we can also use euphemisms, or less evocative synonyms for or indirect references to words or ideas that are deemed inappropriate to discuss directly. We have many euphemisms for things like excretory acts, sex, and death.[2] While euphemisms can be socially useful and creative, they can also lead to misunderstanding and problems in cases where more direct communication is warranted despite social conventions.

Polarizing Language

Philosophers of language have long noted our tendency to verbally represent the world in very narrow ways when we feel threatened.[3] This misrepresents reality and closes off dialogue. Although in our everyday talk we describe things in nuanced and measured ways, quarrels and controversies often narrow our vision, which is reflected in our vocabulary. In order to maintain a civil discourse in which people interact ethically and competently, it has been suggested that we keep an open mind and an open vocabulary.

One feature of communicative incivility is polarizing language, which refers to language that presents people, ideas, or situations as polar opposites. Such language exaggerates differences and overgeneralizes. Things aren't simply black or white, right or wrong, or good or bad. Being able to only see two values and clearly accepting one and rejecting another doesn't indicate sophisticated or critical thinking. We don't have to accept every viewpoint as right and valid, and we can still hold strongly to our own beliefs and defend them without ignoring other possibilities or rejecting or alienating others. A citizen who says, "All cops are corrupt," is just as wrong as the cop who says, "All drug users are scum." In avoiding polarizing language we keep a more open mind, which may lead us to learn something new. A citizen may have a personal story about a negative encounter with a police officer that could enlighten us on his or her perspective, but the statement also falsely overgeneralizes that experience. Avoiding polarizing language can help us avoid polarized thinking, and the new information we learn may allow us to better understand and advocate for our position. Clearly, the way you use language both impacts your ability to express your emotions, and also impacts how your messages are received by others.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Interpersonal Communication and Listening

In our sender-oriented society, listening is often overlooked as an important part of the communication process. Yet research shows that adults spend about 45 percent of their time listening, which is more than any other communicative activity. In some contexts, we spend even more time listening than that. On average, workers spend 55 percent of their workday listening, and managers spend about 63 percent of their day listening.[1]

Think about It . . . Listening

Watch this video on how to improve your listening skills.

On a scale of 1 to ten how would you rate yourself as a listener?

Listening is a primary means through which we learn new information, which can help us meet instrumental needs as we learn things that helps us complete certain tasks at work or school and get things done in general. The act of listening to our relational partners provides support, which is an important part of relational maintenance and helps us meet our relational needs. Listening to what others say about us helps us develop an accurate self-concept, which can help us more strategically communicate for identity needs in order to project to others our desired self. Overall, improving our listening skills can help us be better students, better relational partners, and more successful professionals.

4.1: Understanding How and Why We Listen
4.2: Types of Listening
4.3: Barriers to Effective Listening
4.4: Bad Listening Practices
4.5: Improving Listening Competence

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4.1: Understanding How and Why We Listen

Learning Objectives

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

Listening is the learned process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. We begin to engage with the listening process long before we engage in any recognizable verbal or nonverbal communication. It is only after listening for months as infants that we begin to consciously practice our own forms of expression. In this section we will learn more about each stage of the listening process, the main types of listening, and the main listening styles.

The Listening Process

Listening is a process and as such doesn't have a defined start and finish. Like the communication process, listening has cognitive, behavioral, and relational elements and doesn't unfold in a linear, step-by-step fashion. Models of processes are informative in that they help us visualize specific components, but keep in mind that they do not capture the speed, overlapping nature, or overall complexity of the actual process in action. The stages of the listening process are receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding.

Receiving

Before we can engage other steps in the listening process, we must take in stimuli through our senses. In any given communication encounter, it is likely that we will return to the receiving stage many times as we process incoming feedback and new messages. This part of the listening process is more physiological than other parts, which include cognitive and relational elements. We primarily take in information needed for listening through auditory and visual channels. Although we don't often think about visual cues as a part of listening, they influence how we interpret messages. For example, seeing a person's face when we hear their voice allows us to take in nonverbal cues from facial expressions and eye contact. The fact that these visual cues are missing in e-mail, text, and phone interactions presents some difficulties for reading contextual clues into meaning received through only auditory channels.

Our chapter on perception discusses some of the ways in which incoming stimuli are filtered. These perceptual filters also play a role in listening. Some stimuli never make it in, some are filtered into our subconscious, 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 and that we tend to find salient things that are visually or audibly stimulating and things 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.

Environmental noise such as other people talking, the sounds of traffic, and music interfere with the physiological aspects of hearing. Psychological noise like stress and anger interfere primarily with the cognitive processes of listening. We can enhance our ability to receive, and in turn listen, by trying to minimize noise.

Interpreting

During the interpreting stage of listening, we combine the visual and auditory information we receive and try to make meaning out of that information using schemata. The interpreting stage engages cognitive and relational processing as we take in informational, contextual, and relational cues and try to connect them in meaningful ways to previous experiences. It is through the interpreting stage that we may begin to understand the stimuli we have received. When we understand something, we are able to attach meaning by connecting information to previous experiences. Through the process of comparing new information with old information, we may also update or revise particular schemata if we find the new information relevant and credible. If we have difficulty interpreting information, meaning we don't have previous experience or information in our existing schemata to make sense of it, then it is difficult to transfer the information into our long-term memory for later recall. In situations where

understanding the information we receive isn't important or isn't a goal, this stage may be fairly short or even skipped. After all, we can move something to our long-term memory by repetition and then later recall it without ever having understood it. I remember earning perfect scores on exams in my anatomy class in college because I was able to memorize and recall, for example, all the organs in the digestive system. But neither then nor now could I tell you the significance or function of most of those organs, meaning I didn't really get to a level of understanding but simply stored the information for later recall.

Recalling

Our ability to recall information is dependent on some of the physiological limits of how memory works. Overall, our memories are known to be fallible. We forget about half of what we hear immediately after hearing it, recall 35 percent after eight hours, and recall 20 percent after a day.[1] Our memory consists of multiple "storage units," including sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory.[2]

Our sensory storage is very large in terms of capacity but limited in terms of length of storage. We can hold large amounts of unsorted visual information but only for about a tenth of a second. By comparison, we can hold large amounts of unsorted auditory information for longer—up to four seconds. This initial memory storage unit doesn't provide much use for our study of communication, as these large but quickly expiring chunks of sensory data are primarily used in reactionary and instinctual ways.

As stimuli are organized and interpreted, they make their way to short-term memory where they either expire and are forgotten or are transferred to long-term memory. **Short-term memory**[3] is a mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for twenty seconds to one minute. **Long-term memory**[4] 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.[5] 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. This is different from our typical memory function in that information usually has to make it to long-term memory before we can call it back up to apply to a current situation. People with good working memories are able to keep recent information in mind and process it and apply it to other incoming information. This can be very useful during high-stress situations. A person in control of a command center like the White House Situation Room should have a good working memory in order to take in, organize, evaluate, and then immediately use new information instead of having to wait for that information to make it to long-term memory and then be retrieved and used.

Although recall is an important part of the listening process, there isn't a direct correlation between being good at recalling information and being a good listener. Some people have excellent memories and recall abilities and can tell you a very accurate story from many years earlier during a situation in which they should actually be listening and not showing off their recall abilities. Recall is an important part of the listening process because it is most often used to assess listening abilities and effectiveness. Many quizzes and tests in school are based on recall and are often used to assess how well students comprehended information presented in class, which is seen as an indication of how well they listened. When recall is our only goal, we excel at it. Experiments have found that people can memorize and later recall a set of faces and names with near 100 percent recall when sitting in a quiet lab and asked to do so. But throw in external noise, more visual stimuli, and multiple contextual influences, and we can't remember the name of the person we were just introduced to one minute earlier. Even in interpersonal encounters, we rely on recall to test whether or not someone was listening. Imagine that Azam is talking to his friend Belle, who is sitting across from him in a restaurant booth. Azam, annoyed that Belle keeps checking her phone, stops and asks, "Are you listening?" Belle inevitably replies, "Yes," since we rarely fess up to our poor listening habits, and Azam replies, "Well, what did I just say?"

Evaluating

When we evaluate something, we make judgments about its credibility, completeness, and worth. In terms of credibility, we try to determine the degree to which we believe a speaker's statements are 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.

Figure 4.1.1: Evaluate by Nick Youngson CC BY-SA 3.0 Alpha Stock Images

Studying communication is a great way to build your critical thinking skills, because you learn much more about the taken-for-granted aspects of how communication works, which gives you tools to analyze and critique messages, senders, and contexts. Critical thinking and listening skills also help you take a more proactive role in the communication process rather than being a passive receiver of messages that may not be credible, complete, or worthwhile. One danger within the evaluation stage of listening is to focus your evaluative lenses more on the speaker than the message. This can quickly become a barrier to effective listening if we begin to prejudge a speaker based on his or her identity or characteristics rather than on the content of his or her message. We will learn more about how to avoid slipping into a person-centered rather than message-centered evaluative stance later in the chapter.

Responding

Responding entails sending verbal and nonverbal messages that indicate attentiveness and understanding or a lack thereof. From our earlier discussion of the communication model, you may be able to connect this part of the listening process to feedback. Later, we will learn more specifics about how to encode and decode the verbal and nonverbal cues sent during the responding stage, but we all know from experience some signs that indicate whether a person is paying attention and understanding a message or not.

We send verbal and nonverbal feedback while another person is talking and after they are done. **Back-channel cues** are the verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking and can consist of verbal cues like “uh-huh,” “oh,” and “right,” and/or nonverbal cues like direct eye contact, head nods, and leaning forward. Back-channel cues are generally a form of positive feedback that indicates others are actively listening. People also send cues intentionally and unintentionally that indicate they aren’t listening. If another person is looking away, fidgeting, texting, or turned away, we will likely interpret those responses negatively.

Paraphrasing is a responding behavior that can also show that you understand what was communicated. When you **paraphrase** information, you rephrase the message into your own words. For example, you might say the following to start off a paraphrased response: “What I heard you say was…” or “It seems like you’re saying…” You can also ask clarifying questions to get more information. It is often a good idea to pair a paraphrase with a question to keep a conversation flowing. For example, you might pose the following paraphrase and question pair: “It seems like you believe you were treated unfairly. Is that right?” Or you might ask a standalone question like “What did your boss do that made you think he was ‘playing favorites?’” Make sure to paraphrase and/or ask questions once 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.

The Importance of Listening

Understanding how listening works provides the foundation we need to explore why we listen, including various types and styles of listening. In general, listening helps us achieve 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, poor listening skills were shown to contribute significantly to failure in a person’s first year of college.6 In general, students with high scores for listening ability have greater academic achievement. Interpersonal communication skills including listening are also highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys.7

Poor listening skills, lack of conciseness, and inability to give constructive feedback have been identified as potential communication challenges in professional contexts. Even though listening education is lacking in our society, research has shown that introductory communication courses provide important skills necessary for functioning in entry-level jobs, including listening, writing, motivating/ persuading, interpersonal skills, informational interviewing, and small-group problem solving.8 Training and

improvements in listening will continue to pay off, as employers desire employees with good communication skills, and employees who have good listening skills are more likely to get promoted.

Listening also has implications for our personal lives and relationships. We shouldn't underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information. Empathetic listening can help us expand our self and social awareness by learning from other people's experiences and by helping us take on different perspectives. Emotional support in the form of empathetic listening and validation during times of conflict can help relational partners manage common stressors of relationships that may otherwise lead a partnership to deteriorate.[9] The following list reviews some of the main functions of listening that are relevant in multiple contexts.

The main purposes of listening are[10]

- to focus on messages sent by other people or noises coming from our surroundings;
- to better our understanding of other people's communication;
- to critically evaluate other people's messages;
- to monitor nonverbal signals;
- to indicate that we are interested or paying attention;
- to empathize with others and show we care for them (relational maintenance); and
- to engage in negotiation, dialogue, or other exchanges that result in shared understanding of or agreement on an issue.

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4.2: Types of Listening

Listening serves many purposes, and different situations require different types of listening. The type of listening we engage in affects our communication and how others respond to us. For example, when we listen to empathize with others, our communication will likely be supportive and open, which will then lead the other person to feel "heard" and supported and hopefully view the interaction positively.1 The main types of listening we will discuss are discriminative, informational, critical, empathetic2 and appreciative.

Discriminative Listening

Discriminative listening, is a focused and usually instrumental type of listening that is primarily physiological and occurs mostly at the receiving stage of the listening process.3 It is sometimes referred to as listening for discernment because it involves listening for specific sounds. Here we engage in listening to scan and monitor our surroundings in order to isolate particular stimuli. For example, we may focus our listening on a dark part of the yard while walking the dog at night to determine if the noise we just heard presents us with any danger. In the absence of a hearing impairment, we have an innate and physiological ability to engage in discriminative listening. Although this is the most basic form of listening, it provides the foundation on which more intentional listening skills are built. This type of listening can be refined and honed. Think of how musicians, singers, and mechanics exercise specialized discriminative listening to isolate sounds. Even parents can hear the sound of their own baby's cry and distinguish it from any other child.

Informational Listening

Informational listening entails listening with the goal of comprehending and retaining information. This type of listening is not evaluative and is common in teaching and learning contexts ranging from a student listening to an informative speech to an out-of-towner listening to directions to the nearest gas station. We also use informational listening when we listen to news reports, voice mail, and briefings at work. Since retention and recall are important components of informational listening, good concentration and memory skills are key. These also happen to be skills that many college students struggle with, at least in the first years of college, but will be expected to have mastered once they get into professional contexts. In many professional contexts, informational listening is important, especially when receiving instructions. I caution my students that they will be expected to process verbal instructions more frequently in their profession than they are in college. Most college professors provide detailed instructions and handouts with assignments so students can review them as needed, but many supervisors and managers will expect you to take the initiative to remember or record vital information. Additionally, many bosses are not as open to questions or requests to repeat themselves as professors are.

Critical Listening

Critical listening8 entails listening with the goal of analyzing or evaluating a message based on information presented verbally and information that can be inferred from context. A critical listener evaluates a message and accepts it, rejects it, or decides to withhold judgment and seek more information. As constant consumers of messages, we need to be able to assess the credibility of speakers and their messages and identify various persuasive appeals and faulty logic (known as fallacies). Critical listening is important during persuasive exchanges, but I recommend always employing some degree of critical listening, because you may find yourself in a persuasive interaction that you thought was informative. For example, critical listening skills are useful when listening to a political speech, being on a jury, and when processing any of the persuasive media messages we receive daily. You can see judges employ critical listening, with varying degrees of competence, on talent competition shows like *Rupaul's Drag Race*, *America's Got Talent*, and *The Voice*. While the exchanges between judge and contestant on these shows is expected to be subjective and critical, critical listening is also important when listening to other speakers that have stated or implied objectivity, such as parents, teachers, doctors, and religious leaders. Given the number of instances in which you listen critically, it is clear that there is often a high level of analysis in your listening so that you can make informed decisions.

Empathetic Listening

Empathetic listening is the most challenging form of listening and occurs when we try to understand or experience what a speaker is thinking or feeling. Empathetic listening is distinct from sympathetic listening. While the word *empathy* means to "feel into" or "feel with" another person, *sympathy* means to "feel for" someone. Sympathy is generally more self-oriented and distant than empathy.4 Empathetic listening is other oriented and should be genuine. Because of our own centrality in our perceptual world, empathetic listening can be difficult. It's often much easier for us to tell our own story or to give advice than it is to really listen to

and empathize with someone else. We should keep in mind that sometimes others just need to be heard and our feedback isn't actually desired.

Empathetic listening is key for dialogue and helps maintain interpersonal relationships. In order to reach dialogue, people must have a degree of open-mindedness and a commitment to civility that allows them to be empathetic while still allowing them to believe in and advocate for their own position. Empathetic listening focuses on offering support to another individual *without judgment*, therefore it is not only one of the most important listening skills you can have, but one of the most difficult to achieve.

Appreciative Listening

Finally, as communicators we often engage in appreciative listening. It is easy to understand that listening to music, watching a movie, or going to a theatre would allow us to simply listen for enjoyment. We can also engage in conversations with friends or others that have no purpose other than enjoyment. Think about a time when a friend told you a funny story, or you just got together to talk about what is happening in each other's lives. You may even have a college professor that you find entertaining! Appreciative listening is the easiest type of listening because you do not have to necessarily engage in analysis.

Although we can engage in each of these listening types independently, you will find that you can will use more than one type at the same time. If you are in a college class, you will most definitely need to focus on informational listening, but if your instructor is telling a story, you may also be listening appreciatively.

Listening Styles

Just as there are different types of listening, there are also different *styles* of listening. People may be categorized as one or more of the following listeners: **people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented listeners.** Research finds that 40 percent of people have more than one preferred listening style, and that they choose a style based on the listening situation.[5] 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.[6] Following a brief overview of each listening style, we will explore some of their applications, strengths, and weaknesses.

- **People-oriented listeners** are concerned about the needs and feelings of others and may get distracted from a specific task or the content of a message in order to address feelings.
- **Action-oriented listeners** prefer well-organized, precise, and accurate information. They can become frustrated with they perceive communication to be unorganized or inconsistent, or a speaker to be "long-winded."
- **Content-oriented listeners** are analytic and enjoy processing complex messages. They like in-depth information and like to learn about multiple sides of a topic or hear multiple perspectives on an issue. Their thoroughness can be difficult to manage if there are time constraints.
- **Time-oriented listeners** are concerned with completing tasks and achieving goals. They do not like information perceived as irrelevant and like to stick to a timeline. They may cut people off and make quick decisions (taking short cuts or cutting corners) when they think they have enough information.

People-Oriented Listeners

People-oriented listeners[7] 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 all 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. People-oriented listeners are likely skilled empathetic listeners and may find success in supportive fields like counseling, social work, or nursing. Interestingly, such fields are typically feminized, in that people often associate the characteristics of people-oriented listeners with roles filled by women.

Action-Oriented Listeners

Action-oriented listeners[8] 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 can be thought of as "builders"—like an engineer, a construction site foreperson, or a skilled project manager. 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

instructional contexts.9 In other situations, such as interpersonal communication, action-oriented listeners may not actually be very interested in listening, instead taking a "What do you want me to do?" approach. A friend and colleague of mine who exhibits some qualities of an action-oriented listener once told me about an encounter she had with a close friend who had a stillborn baby. My friend said she immediately went into "action mode." Although it was difficult for her to connect with her friend at an emotional/empathetic level, she was able to use her action-oriented approach to help out in other ways as she helped make funeral arrangements, coordinated with other family and friends, and handled the details that accompanied this tragic emotional experience. As you can see from this example, the action-oriented listening style often contrasts with the people-oriented listening style.

Content-Oriented Listeners

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. Content- oriented listeners are likely skilled informational and critical listeners and may find success in academic careers in the humanities, social sciences, or sciences. Ideally, judges and politicians would also possess these characteristics.

Time-Oriented Listeners

Time-oriented listeners13 are more concerned about time limits and timelines than they are with the content or senders of a message. These listeners can be thought of as "executives," and they 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, 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. Unlike time-oriented listeners, action-oriented listeners are not as likely to cut people off (especially if people are presenting relevant information) and are not as likely to take short cuts.

Key Takeaways

- Getting integrated: Listening is a learned process and skill that we can improve on with concerted effort. Improving our listening skills can benefit us in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts.
- Listening is the process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. In the receiving stage, we select and attend to various stimuli based on salience. We then interpret auditory and visual stimuli in order to make meaning out of them based on our existing schemata. Short-term and long-term memory store stimuli until they are discarded or processed for later recall. We then evaluate the credibility, completeness, and worth of a message before responding with verbal and nonverbal signals.
- Discriminative listening is the most basic form of listening, and we use it to distinguish between and focus on specific sounds. We use informational listening to try to comprehend and retain information. Through critical listening, we analyze and evaluate messages at various levels. We use empathetic listening to try to understand or experience what a speaker is feeling. Appreciative listening is the easiest type of listening as we use it to experience pleasure.
- People-oriented listeners are concerned with others' needs and feelings, which may distract from a task or the content of a message. Action- oriented listeners prefer listening to well-organized and precise information and are more concerned about solving an issue than they are about supporting the speaker. Content-oriented listeners enjoy processing complicated information and are typically viewed as credible because they view an issue from multiple perspectives before making a decision. Although content-oriented listeners may not be very effective in situations with time constraints, time-oriented listeners are fixated on time limits and listen in limited segments regardless of the complexity of the information or the emotions involved, which can make them appear cold and distant to some.

Exercises

1. The recalling stage of the listening process is a place where many people experience difficulties. What techniques do you use or could you use to improve your recall of certain information such as people's names, key concepts from your classes, or instructions or directions given verbally?
2. Getting integrated: Identify how critical listening might be useful for you in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic.
3. Listening scholars have noted that empathetic listening is the most difficult type of listening. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. Which style of listening best describes you and why? Which style do you have the most difficulty with or like the least and why?

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4.3: Barriers to Effective Listening

Learning Objectives

- Discuss some of the environmental and physical barriers to effective listening.
- Explain how cognitive and personal factors can present barriers to effective listening.
- Discuss common bad listening practices.

Barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process.[1] At the receiving stage, noise can block or distort incoming stimuli. At the interpreting stage, complex or abstract information may be difficult to relate to previous experiences, making it difficult to reach understanding. At the recalling stage, natural limits to our memory and challenges to concentration can interfere with remembering. At the evaluating stage, personal biases and prejudices can lead us to block people out or assume we know what they are going to say. At the responding stage, a lack of paraphrasing and questioning skills can lead to misunderstanding. In the following section, we will explore how environmental and physical factors, cognitive and personal factors, and bad listening practices present barriers to effective listening.

Environmental and Physical Barriers to Listening

Environmental factors such as lighting, temperature, and furniture affect our ability to listen. A room that is too dark can make us sleepy, just as a room that is too warm or cool can raise awareness of our physical discomfort to a point that it is distracting. Some seating arrangements facilitate listening, while others separate people. In general, listening is easier when listeners can make direct eye contact with and are in close physical proximity to a speaker. When group members are allowed to choose a leader, they often choose the person who is sitting at the center or head of the table.[2] Even though the person may not have demonstrated any leadership abilities, people subconsciously gravitate toward speakers that are nonverbally accessible. The ability to effectively see and hear a person increases people's confidence in their abilities to receive and process information. Eye contact and physical proximity can still be affected by noise. As we learned in the first chapter, 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.

Physiological noise, like environmental noise, can interfere with our ability to process incoming information. This is considered a physical barrier to effective listening because it emanates from our physical body. **Physiological noise** is noise stemming from a physical illness, injury, or bodily stress. Ailments such as a cold, a broken leg, a headache, or a poison ivy outbreak can range from annoying to unbearably painful and impact our listening relative to their intensity. Another type of noise, psychological noise, 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. Excited arousal can also distract as much as anxious arousal. Stress about an upcoming events ranging from losing a job, to having surgery, to wondering about what to eat for lunch can overshadow incoming messages. While we will explore cognitive barriers to effective listening more in the next section, psychological noise is relevant here given that the body and mind are not completely separate. In fact, they can interact in ways that further interfere with listening. Fatigue, for example, is usually a combination of psychological and physiological stresses that manifests as stress (psychological noise) and weakness, sleepiness, and tiredness (physiological noise). Additionally, mental anxiety (psychological noise) can also manifest itself in our bodies through trembling, sweating, blushing, or even breaking out in rashes (physiological noise). Preferences affect our listening, we are likely to experience more barriers than benefits.

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4.4: Bad Listening Practices

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

Interrupting

Conversations unfold as a series of turns, and turn taking is negotiated through a complex set of verbal and nonverbal signals that are consciously and subconsciously received. In this sense, conversational turn taking has been likened to a dance where communicators try to avoid stepping on each other's toes. One of the most frequent glitches in the turn-taking process is interruption, but not all interruptions are considered "bad listening." An interruption could be unintentional if we misread cues and think a person is done speaking only to have him or her start up again at the same time we do. Sometimes interruptions are more like overlapping statements that show support (e.g., "I think so too.") or excitement about the conversation (e.g., "That's so cool!"). Back-channel cues like "uh-huh," as we learned earlier, also overlap with a speaker's message. We may also interrupt out of necessity if we're engaged in a task with the other person and need to offer directions (e.g., "Turn left here."), instructions (e.g., "Will you whisk the eggs?"), or warnings (e.g., "Look out behind you!"). All these interruptions are not typically thought of as evidence of bad listening unless they become distracting for the speaker or are unnecessary.

Unintentional interruptions can still be considered bad listening if they result from mindless communication. As we've already learned, intended meaning is not as important as the meaning that is generated in the interaction itself. So if you interrupt unintentionally, but because you were only half-listening, then the interruption is still evidence of bad listening. The speaker may form a negative impression of you that can't just be erased by you noting that you didn't "mean to interrupt." Interruptions can also be used as an attempt to dominate a conversation. A person engaging in this type of interruption may lead the other communicator to try to assert dominance, too, resulting in a competition to see who can hold the floor the longest or the most often. More than likely, though, the speaker will form a negative impression of the interrupter and may withdraw from the conversation.

Eavesdropping

Eavesdropping is a bad listening practice that involves a calculated and planned attempt to secretly listen to a conversation. There is a difference between eavesdropping on and overhearing a conversation. Many if not most of the interactions we have throughout the day occur in the presence of other people. However, given that our perceptual fields are usually focused on the interaction, we are often unaware of the other people around us or don't think about the fact that they could be listening in on our conversation. We usually only become aware of the fact that other people could be listening in when we're discussing something private.

People eavesdrop for a variety of reasons. People might think another person is talking about them behind their back or that someone is engaged in illegal or unethical behavior. Sometimes people eavesdrop to feed the gossip mill or out of curiosity.[1] In any case, this type of listening is considered bad because it is a violation of people's privacy. Consequences for eavesdropping may include an angry reaction if caught, damage to interpersonal relationships, or being perceived as dishonest and sneaky. Additionally, eavesdropping may lead people to find out information that is personally upsetting or hurtful, especially if the point of the eavesdropping is to find out what people are saying behind their back.

Aggressive Listening

Aggressive listening also referred to as ambushing, is a bad listening practice in which people pay attention in order to attack something that a speaker says.[2] Aggressive listeners like to ambush speakers in order to critique their ideas, personality, or other characteristics. Such behavior often results from built- up frustration within an interpersonal relationship. Unfortunately, the more two people know each other, the better they will be at aggressive listening. Take the following exchange between long-term partners:

Deb:	I've been thinking about making a salsa garden next to the side porch. I think it would be really good to be able to go pick our own tomatoes and peppers and cilantro to make homemade salsa.

Summer:	Really? When are you thinking about doing it?
Deb:	Next weekend. Would you like to help?
Summer:	I won't hold my breath. Every time you come up with some "idea of the week" you get so excited about it. But do you ever follow through with it? No. We'll be eating salsa from the store next year, just like we are now.

Although Summer's initial response to Deb's idea is seemingly appropriate and positive, she asks the question because she has already planned her upcoming aggressive response. Summer's aggression toward Deb isn't about a salsa garden; it's about a building frustration with what Summer perceives as Deb's lack of follow-through on her ideas. Aside from engaging in aggressive listening because of built-up frustration, such listeners may also attack others' ideas or mock their feelings because of their own low self-esteem and insecurities.

Narcissistic Listening

Narcissistic listening[3] is a form of self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them.[4] You might consider this type of listener a "stage-hog." Narcissistic listeners redirect the focus of the conversation to them by interrupting or changing the topic. When the focus is taken off them, narcissistic listeners may give negative feedback by pouting, providing negative criticism of the speaker or topic, or ignoring the speaker. A common sign of narcissistic listening is the combination of a "pivot," when listeners shift the focus of attention back to them, and "one-upping," when listeners try to top what previous speakers have said during the interaction. You can see this narcissistic combination in the following interaction:

Bryce: My boss has been really unfair to me lately and hasn't been letting me work around my class schedule. I think I may have to quit, but I don't know where I'll find another job.

Toby: Why are you complaining? I've been working with the same stupid boss for two years. He doesn't even care that I'm trying to get my degree and work at the same time. And you should hear the way he talks to me in front of the other employees.

Narcissistic listeners, given their self-centeredness, may actually fool themselves into thinking that they are listening and actively contributing to a conversation. We all have the urge to share our own stories during interactions, because other people's communication triggers our own memories about related experiences. It is generally more competent to withhold sharing our stories until the other person has been able to speak and we have given the appropriate support and response. But we all shift the focus of a conversation back to us occasionally, either because we don't know another way to respond or because we are making an attempt at empathy. Narcissistic listeners consistently interrupt or follow another speaker with statements like "That reminds me of the time…," "Well, if I were you…," and "That's nothing…"[5] As we'll learn later, matching stories isn't considered empathetic listening, but occasionally doing it doesn't make you a narcissistic listener.

Defensive listening

Defensive listening is a practice of listening where you perceive an attack where one does not really exist. Sometimes this occurs when we feel guilty, or even insecure. We tend to personalize a comment that might be made innocently. For example, imagine that you have a roommate, and he or she makes the following comment: "Gosh, the shower in here sure gets moldy easily." If you are a defensive listener, you would assume that your roommate was somehow accusing you of not taking better care of the shower. If you both had a rule that said you would wipe the shower down each time you used it, but you had neglected to do so several times, then some guilt might be at work as well!

Selective listening

If you have ever noticed yourself only listening to the points someone makes that are important to you or that you agree with, you might be engaging in selective listening. Children may not pay attention to their parents' conversation until one of them says "you need to have a B average if you want us to pay your car insurance." Similarly, listening to political pundits or figures is often a place where selective listening occurs. You will take in the parts of the discussion that you agree with, and filter out the rest. As with most listening barriers, you can miss a lot of important information.

Insensitive listening

Insensitive listening can often be the exact opposite of empathetic listening. This barrier can also be viewed as literal listening, where we listen for the content, but ignore the relational meaning. This means that we don't pay attention to the emotional cues the other person may be giving. Imagine if your friend did not pass an exam, and then tells you. Rather than asking questions, or providing an empathetic response, your response is "I guess you didn't study" or "Yeah, life can be hard." Neither response will allow your friend to feel good about the exchange.

Pseudo-listening

Do you have a friend or family member who repeats stories? If so, then you've probably engaged in pseudo-listening as a politeness strategy. **Pseudo-listening** is behaving as if you're paying attention to a speaker when you're actually not.6 Outwardly visible signals of attentiveness are an important part of the listening process, but when they are just an "act," the pseudo-listener is engaging in bad listening behaviors. She or he is not actually going through the stages of the listening process and will likely not be able to recall the speaker's message or offer a competent and relevant response. Although it is a bad listening practice, we all understandably engage in pseudo-listening from time to time. If a friend needs someone to talk but you're really tired or experiencing some other barrier to effective listening, it may be worth engaging in pseudo- listening as a relational maintenance strategy, especially if the friend just needs a sounding board and isn't expecting advice or guidance. We may also pseudo-listen to a romantic partner or grandfather's story for the fifteenth time to prevent hurting their feelings. We should avoid pseudo-listening when possible and should definitely avoid making it a listening habit. Although we may get away with it in some situations, each time we risk being "found out," which could have negative relational consequences.

Key Takeaways

- Environmental and physical barriers to effective listening include furniture placement, environmental noise such as sounds of traffic or people talking, physiological noise such as a sinus headache or hunger, and psychological noise such as stress or anger.
- Cognitive barriers to effective listening include the difference between speech and thought rate that allows us "extra room" to think about other things while someone is talking and limitations in our ability or willingness to concentrate or pay attention. Personal barriers to effective listening include a lack of listening preparation, poorly structured and/or poorly delivered messages, and prejudice.
- There are several bad listening practices that we should avoid, as they do not facilitate effective listening:
  - Interruptions that are unintentional or serve an important or useful purpose are not considered bad listening. When interrupting becomes a habit or is used in an attempt to dominate a conversation, then it is a barrier to effective listening.
  - Distorted listening occurs when we incorrectly recall information, skew information to fit our expectations or existing schemata, or add material to embellish or change information.
  - Eavesdropping is a planned attempt to secretly listen to a conversation, which is a violation of the speakers' privacy.
  - Aggressive listening is a bad listening practice in which people pay attention to a speaker in order to attack something they say.
  - Narcissistic listening is self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them by interrupting, changing the subject, or drawing attention away from others.
  - Defensive listening is a barrier to listening where you perceive an attack where one does not really exist.
  - Selective listening is listening for the content, but ignore the relational meaning.
  - Insensitive listening is listening for content, but ignoring the relational meaning and any nonverbal cues you are given.
  - Pseudo-listening is "fake listening," in that people behave like they are paying attention and listening when they actually are not.

Exercises

1. We are capable of thinking faster than the speed at which the average person speaks, which allows us some room to put mental faculties toward things other than listening. What typically makes your mind wander?
2. Bad speakers and messages are a common barrier to effective listening.
3. Describe a time recently when your ability to listen was impaired by the poor delivery and/or content of another person.
4. Of the bad listening practices listed, which do you use the most? Why do you think you use this one more than the others? What can you do to help prevent or lessen this barrier?

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4.5: Improving Listening Competence

Learning Objectives

- Identify strategies for improving listening competence at each stage of the listening process.
- Summarize the characteristics of active listening.
- Apply critical-listening skills in interpersonal, educational, and mediated contexts.
- Practice empathetic listening skills.
- Discuss ways to improve listening competence in relational, professional, and cultural contexts.

Many people admit that they could stand to improve their listening skills. This section will help us do that. In this section, we will learn strategies for developing and improving competence at each stage of the listening process. We will also define active listening and the behaviors that go along with it. Looking back to the types of listening discussed earlier, we will learn specific strategies for sharpening our critical and empathetic listening skills. In keeping with our focus on integrative learning, we will also apply the skills we have learned in academic, professional, and relational contexts and explore how culture and gender affect listening.

Listening Competence at Each Stage of the Listening Process

We can develop competence within each stage of the listening process, as the following list indicates:[1]

1. **To improve listening at the receiving stage,**
   a. prepare yourself to listen,
   b. discern between intentional messages and noise,
   c. concentrate on stimuli most relevant to your listening purpose(s) or goal(s),
   d. be mindful of the selection and attention process as much as possible,
   e. pay attention to turn-taking signals so you can follow the conversational flow, and
   f. avoid interrupting someone while they are speaking in order to maintain your ability to receive stimuli and listen.
2. **To improve listening at the interpreting stage,**
   a. identify main points and supporting points;
   b. use contextual clues from the person or environment to discern additional meaning;
   c. be aware of how a relational, cultural, or situational context can influence meaning;
   d. be aware of the different meanings of silence; and
   e. note differences in tone of voice and other paralinguistic cues that influence meaning.
3. **To improve listening at the recalling stage,**
   a. use multiple sensory channels to decode messages and make more complete memories;
   b. repeat, rephrase, and reorganize information to fit your cognitive preferences; and
   c. use mnemonic devices as a gimmick to help with recall.
4. **To improve listening at the evaluating stage,**
   a. separate facts, inferences, and judgments;
   b. be familiar with and able to identify persuasive strategies and fallacies of reasoning;
   c. assess the credibility of the speaker and the message; and
   d. be aware of your own biases and how your perceptual filters can create barriers to effective listening.
5. **To improve listening at the responding stage,**
   a. ask appropriate clarifying and follow-up questions and paraphrase information to check understanding,
   b. give feedback that is relevant to the speaker's purpose/motivation for speaking,
   c. adapt your response to the speaker and the context, and
   d. do not let the preparation and rehearsal of your response diminish earlier stages of listening.

Active Listening

Active listening refers to the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices. Active listening can help address many of the environmental, physical, cognitive, and personal barriers to effective

listening that we discussed earlier. The behaviors associated with active listening can also enhance informational, critical, and empathetic listening.

Active Listening Can Help Overcome Barriers to Effective Listening

Being an active listener starts before you actually start receiving a message. Active listeners make strategic choices and take action in order to set up ideal listening conditions. Physical and environmental noises can often be managed by moving locations or by manipulating the lighting, temperature, or furniture. When possible, avoid important listening activities during times of distracting psychological or physiological noise. For example, we often know when we're going to be hungry, full, more awake, less awake, more anxious, or less anxious, and advance planning can alleviate the presence of these barriers. For college students, who often have some flexibility in their class schedules, knowing when you best listen can help you make strategic choices regarding what class to take when. And student options are increasing, as some colleges are offering classes in the overnight hours to accommodate working students and students who are just "night owls."[2] Of course, we don't always have control over our schedule, in which case we will need to utilize other effective listening strategies that we will learn more about later in this chapter.

In terms of cognitive barriers to effective listening, we can prime ourselves to listen by analyzing a listening situation before it begins. For example, you could ask yourself the following questions:

1. "What are my goals for listening to this message?"
2. "How does this message relate to me / affect my life?"
3. "What listening type and style are most appropriate for this message?"

Effective listeners must work to maintain focus as much as possible and refocus when attention shifts or fades.[3] One way to do this is to find the motivation to listen. If you can identify intrinsic and or extrinsic motivations for listening to a particular message, then you will be more likely to remember the information presented. Ask yourself how a message could impact your life, your career, your intellect, or your relationships. This can help overcome our tendency toward selective attention. As senders of messages, we can help listeners by making the relevance of what we're saying clear and offering well- organized messages that are tailored for our listeners. We will learn much more about establishing relevance, organizing a message, and gaining the attention of an audience in public speaking contexts later in the book.

Given that we can process more words per minute than people can speak, we can engage in internal dialogue, making good use of our intrapersonal communication, to become a better listener. Three possibilities for internal dialogue include covert coaching, self-reinforcement, and covert questioning; explanations and examples of each follow:[4]

- **Covert coaching** involves sending yourself messages containing advice about better listening, such as "You're getting distracted by things you have to do after work. Just focus on what your supervisor is saying now."
- **Self-reinforcement** involves sending yourself affirmative and positive messages: "You're being a good active listener. This will help you do well on the next exam."
- **Covert questioning** involves asking yourself questions about the content in ways that focus your attention and reinforce the material: "What is the main idea from that PowerPoint slide?" "Why is he talking about his brother in front of our neighbors?"

Internal dialogue is a more structured way to engage in active listening, but we can use more general approaches as well. I suggest that students occupy the "extra" channels in their mind with thoughts that are related to the primary message being received instead of thoughts that are unrelated. We can use those channels to resort, rephrase, and repeat what a speaker says. When we resort, we can help mentally repair disorganized messages. When we rephrase, we can put messages into our own words in ways that better fit our cognitive preferences. When we repeat, we can help messages transfer from short-term to long-term memory.

Other tools can help with concentration and memory. **Mental bracketing** refers to the process of intentionally separating out intrusive or irrelevant thoughts that may distract you from listening.[5] This requires that we monitor our concentration and attention and be prepared to let thoughts that aren't related to a speaker's message pass through our minds without us giving them much attention. **Mnemonic devices** are techniques that can aid in information recall.[6] Starting in ancient Greece and Rome, educators used these devices to help people remember information. They work by imposing order and organization on information. Three main mnemonic devices are acronyms, rhymes, and visualization, and examples of each follow:

- **Acronyms.** HOMES—to help remember the Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior).
- **Rhyme.** "Righty tighty, lefty loosey"—to remember which way most light bulbs, screws, and other coupling devices turn to make them go in or out.

- **Visualization.** Imagine seeing a glass of port wine (which is red) and the red navigation light on a boat to help remember that the red light on a boat is always on the port side, which will also help you remember that the blue light must be on the starboard side.

Active Listening Behaviors

From the suggestions discussed previously, you can see that we can prepare for active listening in advance and engage in certain cognitive strategies to help us listen better. We also engage in active listening behaviors as we receive and process messages.

Eye contact is a key sign of active listening. Speakers usually interpret a listener's eye contact as a signal of attentiveness. While a lack of eye contact may indicate inattentiveness, it can also signal cognitive processing. When we look away to process new information, we usually do it unconsciously. Be aware, however, that your conversational partner may interpret this as not listening. If you really do need to take a moment to think about something, you could indicate that to the other person by saying, "That's new information to me. Give me just a second to think through it." We already learned the role that back-channel cues play in listening. An occasional head nod and "uh-huh" signal that you are paying attention. However, when we give these cues as a form of "autopilot" listening, others can usually tell that we are pseudo-listening, and whether they call us on it or not, that impression could lead to negative judgments.

A more direct way to indicate active listening is to reference previous statements made by the speaker. Norms of politeness usually call on us to reference a past statement or connect to the speaker's current thought before starting a conversational turn. Being able to summarize what someone said to ensure that the topic has been satisfactorily covered and understood or being able to segue in such a way that validates what the previous speaker said helps regulate conversational flow. Asking probing questions is another way to directly indicate listening and to keep a conversation going, since they encourage and invite a person to speak more.

You can also ask questions that seek clarification and not just elaboration. Speakers should present complex information at a slower speaking rate than familiar information, but many will not. Remember that your nonverbal feedback can be useful for a speaker, as it signals that you are listening but also whether or not you understand. If a speaker fails to read your nonverbal feedback, you may need to follow up with verbal communication in the form of paraphrased messages and clarifying questions.

As active listeners, we want to be excited and engaged, but don't let excitement manifest itself in interruptions. Being an active listener means knowing when to maintain our role as listener and resist the urge to take a conversational turn. Research shows that people with higher social status are more likely to interrupt others, so keep this in mind and be prepared for it if you are speaking to a high- status person, or try to resist it if you are the high-status person in an interaction.[7]

Note-taking can also indicate active listening. Translating information through writing into our own cognitive structures and schemata allows us to better interpret and assimilate information. Of course, note-taking isn't always a viable option. It would be fairly awkward to take notes during a first date or a casual exchange between new coworkers. But in some situations where we wouldn't normally consider taking notes, a little awkwardness might be worth it for the sake of understanding and recalling the information. For example, many people don't think about taking notes when getting information from their doctor or banker. I actually invite students to take notes during informal meetings because I think they sometimes don't think about it or don't think it's appropriate. But many people would rather someone jot down notes instead of having to respond to follow-up questions on information that was already clearly conveyed. To help facilitate your note-taking, you might say something like "Do you mind if I jot down some notes? This seems important."

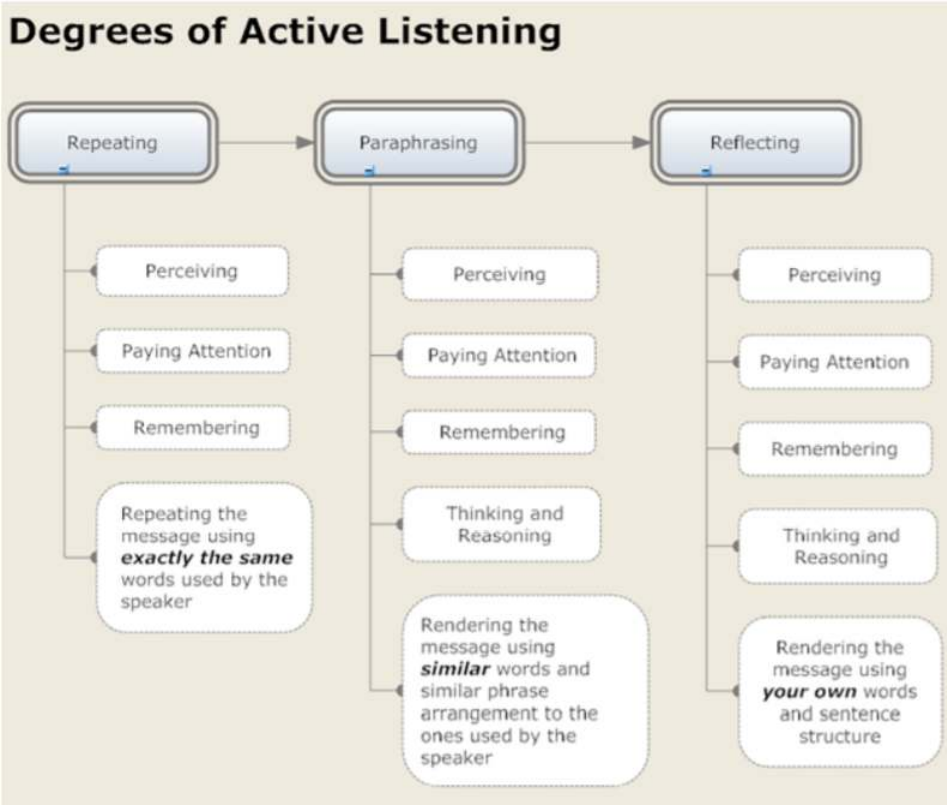

Figure 4.5.1: Degrees of Active Listening is used under a CC BY-SA license.

In summary, active listening is exhibited through verbal and nonverbal cues, including steady eye contact with the speaker; smiling; slightly raised eyebrows; upright posture; body position that is leaned in toward the speaker; nonverbal back-channel cues such as head nods; verbal back-channel cues such as “OK,” “mmhum,” or “oh”; and a lack of distracting mannerisms like doodling or fidgeting.8

Listening in Relational Contexts

Listening plays a central role in establishing and maintaining our relationships.9 Without some listening competence, we wouldn’t be able to engage in the self-disclosure process, which is essential for the establishment of relationships. Newly acquainted people get to know each other through increasingly personal and reciprocal disclosures of personal information. In order to reciprocate a conversational partner’s disclosure, we must process it through listening. Once relationships are formed, 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.10 So something as routine and seemingly pointless as listening to our romantic partner debrief the events of his or her day or our roommate recount his or her 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 closely ties to conflict, as a lack of listening often plays a large role in creating 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.11

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.12 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. Fortunately for the more-listened-to children and unfortunately for the less-listened-to children, these early experiences become predispositions that don't change much as the children get older and may actually reinforce themselves and become stronger.

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 the verbal communication used rather than nonverbal or contextual cues. Conversely, much of the meaning generated by a **high-context communication** style comes from nonverbal and contextual cues.13 For example, US 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. Cultures with a low-context communication style also tend to have a monochronic orientation toward time, while high-context cultures have a polychronic time orientation, which also affects listening.

Monochronic cultures like the United States value time and action-oriented listening styles, especially in professional contexts, because time is seen as a commodity that is scarce and must be managed.14 This is evidenced by leaders in businesses and organizations who often request "executive summaries" that only focus on the most relevant information and who use statements like "Get to the point." Polychronic cultures, which have more flexible listening styles, value people and content-oriented listening styles, which makes sense when we consider that polychronic cultures also tend to be more collectivistic and use a high-context communication style. In collectivistic cultures, indirect communication is preferred in cases where direct communication would be considered a threat to the other person's face (desired public image). For example, flatly turning down a business offer would be too direct, so a person might reply with a "maybe" instead of a "no." The person making the proposal, however, would be able to draw on contextual clues that they implicitly learned through socialization to interpret the "maybe" as a "no."

Listening and Gender

Research on gender and listening 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. Researchers also dispelled the belief that men interrupt more than women do, finding that men and women interrupt each other with similar frequency in cross-gender encounters.15 So men may interrupt each other more in same-gender interactions as a conscious or subconscious attempt to establish dominance because such behaviors are expected, as men are generally socialized to be more competitive than women. However, this type of competitive interrupting isn't as present in cross-gender interactions because the contexts have shifted.

Key Takeaways

- Active listening is the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices and is characterized by mentally preparing yourself to listen, working to maintain focus on concentration, using appropriate verbal and nonverbal back-channel cues to signal attentiveness, and engaging in strategies like note taking and mentally reorganizing information to help with recall.

- In relational contexts, listening plays a central role in initiating relationships, as listening is required for mutual self-disclosure, and in maintaining relationships, as listening to our relational partners provides a psychological reward in the form of recognition. When people aren't or don't feel listened to, they may experience feelings of isolation or loneliness that can have negative effects throughout their lives.
  - In cultural contexts, high- or low-context communication styles, monochronic or polychronic orientations toward time, and individualistic or collectivistic cultural values affect listening preferences and behaviors.
  - Research regarding listening preferences and behaviors of men and women has been contradictory. While some differences in listening exist, many of them are based more on societal expectations for how men and women should listen rather than biological differences.

Exercises

1. Keep a "listening log" for part of your day. Note times when you feel like you exhibited competent listening behaviors and note times when listening became challenging. Analyze the log based on what you have learned in this section. Which positive listening skills helped you listen? What strategies could you apply to your listening challenges to improve your listening competence?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Conflict and Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives

- Define interpersonal conflict.
- Compare and contrast the five styles of interpersonal conflict management.
- Explain how perception and culture influence interpersonal conflict.
- List strategies for effectively managing conflict.

5.1: Understanding Conflict
5.2: Conflict Management Styles
5.3: Culture and Conflict
5.4: Dealing with Conflict
5.5: Negotiation Steps and Skills

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5.1: Understanding Conflict

Who do you have the most conflict with right now? Your answer to this question probably depends on the various contexts in your life. If you still live at home with a parent or parents, you may have daily conflicts with your family as you try to balance your autonomy, or desire for independence, with the practicalities of living under your family's roof. If you've recently moved away to go to college, you may be negotiating roommate conflicts as you adjust to living with someone you may not know at all. You probably also have experiences managing conflict in romantic relationships and in the workplace. So 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.

Interpersonal conflict[1] occurs in interactions where there are real or perceived incompatible goals, scarce resources, or opposing viewpoints. Interpersonal conflict may be expressed verbally or nonverbally along a continuum ranging from a nearly imperceptible cold shoulder to a very obvious blowout. Interpersonal conflict is, however, distinct from interpersonal violence, which goes beyond communication to include abuse. Domestic violence is a serious issue and is discussed in the section "The Dark Side of Relationships."

Conflict is an inevitable part of close relationships and can take a negative emotional toll. It takes effort to ignore someone or be passive aggressive, and the anger or guilt we may feel after blowing up at someone are valid negative feelings. However, conflict isn't always negative or unproductive. In fact, numerous research studies have shown that quantity of conflict in a relationship is not as important as how the conflict is handled. Additionally, when conflict is well managed, it has the potential to lead to more rewarding and satisfactory relationships.[2]

Language and Conflict

At the interpersonal level, **unsupportive messages**[3] can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and actual separation or dissolution of a relationship. It's impossible to be supportive in our communication all the time, but consistently unsupportive messages can hurt others' self-esteem, escalate conflict, and lead to defensiveness. People who regularly use unsupportive messages may create a toxic win/lose climate in a relationship. Six verbal tactics that can lead to feelings of defensiveness and separation are global labels, sarcasm, dragging up the past, negative comparisons, judgmental "you" messages, and threats.[4]

Common Types of Unsupportive Messages

- **Global labels.** "You're a liar." Labeling someone irresponsible, untrustworthy, selfish, or lazy calls his or her whole identity as a person into question. Such sweeping judgments and generalizations are sure to only escalate a negative situation.
- **Sarcasm.** "No, you didn't miss anything in class on Wednesday. We just sat here and looked at each other." Even though sarcasm is often disguised as humor, it usually represents passive-aggressive behavior through which a person indirectly communicates negative feelings.
- **Dragging up the past.** "I should have known not to trust you when you never paid me back that $100 I let you borrow." Bringing up negative past experiences is a tactic used by people when they don't want to discuss a current situation. Sometimes people have built up negative feelings that are suddenly let out by a seemingly small thing in the moment.
- **Negative comparisons.** "Jade graduated from college without any credit card debt. I guess you're just not as responsible as her." Holding a person up to the supposed standards or characteristics of another person can lead to feelings of inferiority and resentment. Parents and teachers may unfairly compare children to their siblings.
- **Judgmental "you" messages.** "You're never going to be able to hold down a job." Accusatory messages are usually generalized overstatements about another person that go beyond labeling but still do not describe specific behavior in a productive way.
- **Threats.** "If you don't stop texting back and forth with your ex, both of you are going to regret it." Threatening someone with violence or some other negative consequence usually signals the end of productive communication. Aside from the potential legal consequences, threats usually overcompensate for a person's insecurity.

These types of messages can lead to conflict. It is important to understand how you respond to conflict so that you can work toward a more productive style if it is warranted.

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5.2: 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, which underscores the important role context plays in conflict and conflict management styles in particular. The way we view and deal with conflict is learned and contextual. Is the way you handle conflicts similar to the way your parents handle conflict? If you're of a certain age, you are likely predisposed to answer this question with a certain "No!" It wasn't until my late twenties and early thirties that I began to see how similar I am to my parents, even though I, like many, spent years trying to distinguish myself from them. Research does show that there is intergenerational transmission of traits related to conflict management. As children, we test out different conflict resolution styles we observe in our families with our parents and siblings. Later, as we enter adolescence and begin developing platonic and romantic relationships outside the family, we begin testing what we've learned from our parents in other settings. If a child has observed and used negative conflict management styles with siblings or parents, he or she is likely to exhibit those behaviors with non–family members.[1]

There has been much research done on different types of conflict management styles, which are communication strategies that attempt to avoid, address, or resolve a conflict. Keep in mind that we don't always consciously choose a style. We may instead be caught up in emotion and become reactionary. The strategies for more effectively managing conflict that will be discussed later may allow you to slow down the reaction process, become more aware of it, and intervene in the process to improve your communication. A powerful tool to mitigate conflict is information exchange. Asking for more information before you react to a conflict- triggering event is a good way to add a buffer between the trigger and your reaction. Another key element is whether or not a communicator is oriented toward self-centered or other-centered goals. For example, if your goal is to "win" or make the other person "lose," you show a high concern for self and a low concern for other. If your goal is to facilitate a "win/win" resolution or outcome, you show a high concern for self and other. In general, strategies that facilitate information exchange and include concern for mutual goals will be more successful at managing conflict.[2]

The five strategies for managing conflict we will discuss are competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. Each of these conflict styles accounts for the concern we place on self versus other (see Figure 5.2.1 "Five Styles of Interpersonal Conflict Management").

Figure 5.2.1: Five Styles of Interpersonal Conflict Management. Adapted from M. Afzalur Rahim, "A Measure of Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict," Academy of Management Journal 26, no. 2 (1983): 368–76.

In order to better understand the elements of the five styles of conflict management, we will apply each to the follow scenario. Rosa and D'Shaun have been partners for seventeen years. Rosa is growing frustrated because D'Shaun continues to give money to their teenage daughter, Casey, even though they decided to keep the teen on a fixed allowance to try to teach her more responsibility. While conflicts regarding money and child rearing are very common, we will see the numerous ways that Rosa and D'Shaun could address this problem.

Competing

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 D'Shaun gives Casey extra money behind Rosa's back, he is taking an indirect competitive route resulting in a "win" for him because he got his way. The competing style also involves the use of power, which can be noncoercive or coercive.[3] Noncoercive strategies include requesting and persuading. When requesting, we suggest the

conflict partner change a behavior. Requesting doesn't require a high level of information exchange. When we persuade, however, we give our conflict partner reasons to support our request or suggestion, meaning there is more information exchange, which may make persuading more effective than requesting. Rosa could try to persuade D'Shaun to stop giving Casey extra allowance money by bringing up their fixed budget or reminding him that they are saving for a summer vacation. Coercive strategies violate standard guidelines for ethical communication and 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 Rosa is the primary income earner in the family, she could use that power to threaten to take D'Shaun's ATM card away if he continues giving Casey money. In all these scenarios, the "win" that could result is only short term and can lead to conflict escalation. Interpersonal conflict is rarely isolated, meaning there can be ripple effects that connect the current conflict to previous and future conflicts. D'Shaun's behind-the-scenes money giving or Rosa's confiscation of the ATM card could lead to built-up negative emotions that could further test their relationship.

Competing has been linked to aggression, although the two are not always paired. If assertiveness does not work, there is a chance it could escalate to hostility. There is a pattern of verbal escalation: requests, demands, complaints, angry statements, threats, harassment, and verbal abuse.4 Aggressive communication can become patterned, which can create a volatile and hostile environment. The reality television show *The Bad Girls Club* is a prime example of a chronically hostile and aggressive environment. If you do a Google video search for clips from the show, you will see yelling, screaming, verbal threats, and some examples of physical violence. The producers of the show choose houseguests who have histories of aggression, and when the "bad girls" are placed in a house together, they fall into typical patterns, which creates dramatic television moments. Obviously, living in this type of volatile environment would create stressors in any relationship, so it's important to monitor the use of competing as a conflict resolution strategy to ensure that it does not lapse into aggression.

The competing style of conflict management is not the same thing as having a competitive personality. Competition in relationships isn't always negative, and people who enjoy engaging in competition may not always do so at the expense of another person's goals. In fact, research has shown that some couples engage in competitive shared activities like sports or games to maintain and enrich their relationship.5 And although we may think that competitiveness is gendered, research has often shown that women are just as competitive as men.6

Avoiding

The **avoiding** style of conflict management often indicates a low concern for self and a low concern for other, and no direct communication about the conflict takes place. However, as we will discuss later, 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 our feelings away through our verbal and nonverbal communication. Rosa's sarcastic tone as she tells D'Shaun that he's "Soooo good with money!" and his subsequent eye roll both bring the conflict to the surface without specifically addressing it. The avoiding style is either passive or indirect, meaning there is little information exchange, which may make this strategy 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 you're having 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 and hope that 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.

Avoidance is not always an easy conflict management choice, because sometimes the person we have conflict with isn't a temp in our office or a weekend houseguest. 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 Rosa and D'Shaun's, avoidance would just make the problem worse. For example, avoidance could first manifest as changing the subject, 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. While these indirect avoidance strategies may lead to a buildup of frustration or even anger, they allow us to vent a little of our built-up steam and may make a conflict situation more bearable. 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. In almost all the cases of hinting that I have experienced or heard about, the person dropping the hints overestimates their partner's detective abilities. For example, when Rosa leaves the bank

statement on the kitchen table in hopes that D'Shaun will realize how much extra money he is giving Casey, D'Shaun may simply ignore it or even get irritated with Rosa for not putting the statement with all the other mail. We also overestimate our partner's ability to decode the jokes we make about a conflict situation. It is more likely that 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. So more frustration may develop when the hints and jokes are not 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 their negative thoughts or feelings through nonverbal behaviors, such as not completing a task. For example, Rosa may wait a few days to deposit money into the bank so D'Shaun can't withdraw it to give to Casey, or D'Shaun may cancel plans for a romantic dinner because he feels like Rosa is questioning his responsibility with money. Although passive-aggressive behavior can feel rewarding in the moment, it is one of the most unproductive ways to deal with conflict. These behaviors may create additional conflicts and may lead to a cycle of passive-aggressiveness in which the other partner begins to exhibit these behaviors as well, while never actually addressing the conflict that originated the behavior. In most avoidance situations, both parties lose. However, as noted above, avoidance can be the most appropriate strategy 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 without providing personal input. The context for and motivation behind accommodating play an important role in whether or not it is an appropriate strategy. Generally, we accommodate because we are being generous, we are obeying, or we are yielding.[7] 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); and 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.[8] The occasional accommodation can be useful in maintaining a relationship—remember earlier we discussed putting another's needs before your own as a way to achieve relational goals. For example, Rosa may say, "It's OK that you gave Casey some extra money; she 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 Rosa keeps telling D'Shaun, "It's OK this time," they may find themselves short on spending money at the end of the month. At that point, Rosa and D'Shaun's conflict may escalate as they question each other's motives, or the conflict may spread if they direct their frustration at Casey and blame it on her irresponsibility.

Research has shown that the accommodating style is more likely to occur when there are time restraints and less likely to occur when someone does not want to appear weak.[9] If you're standing outside the movie theatre and two movies are starting, you may say, "Let's just have it your way," so you don't miss the beginning. If you're a new manager at an electronics store and an employee wants to take Sunday off to watch a football game, you may say no to set an example for the other employees. As with avoiding, there are certain cultural influences we will discuss later that make accommodating a more effective strategy.

Compromising

The **compromising** style shows a moderate concern for self and other and may indicate that there is a low investment in the conflict and/or the relationship. 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.[10] 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 agreeable. Rosa and D'Shaun could decide that Casey's allowance does need to be increased and could each give ten more dollars a week by committing to taking their lunch to work twice a week instead of eating out. They are both giving up something, and if neither of them have a problem with taking their lunch to work, then the compromise was equitable. If the couple agrees that the twenty extra dollars a week should come out of D'Shaun's golf budget, the

compromise isn't as equitable, and D'Shaun, although he agreed to the compromise, may end up with feelings of resentment. Wouldn't it be better to both win?

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 ultimately leads 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 lead to positive problem solving in the future and strengthen the overall relationship. For example, Rosa and D'Shaun may agree that Casey's allowance needs to be increased and may decide to give her twenty more dollars a week in exchange for her babysitting her little brother one night a week. 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 is eager to compete to meet their goals or willing to accommodate.

Here are some tips for collaborating and achieving a win/win outcome:11

- Do not view the conflict as a contest you are trying to win.
- Remain flexible and realize there are solutions yet to be discovered.
- Distinguish the people from the problem (don't make it personal).
- Determine what the underlying needs are that are driving the other person's demands (needs can still be met through different 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.
- Listen carefully and provide verbal and nonverbal feedback.

"Getting Competent" - Handling Roommate Conflicts

Whether you have a roommate by choice, by necessity, or through the random selection process of your school's housing office, it's important to be able to get along with the person who shares your living space. While having a roommate offers many benefits such as making a new friend, having someone to experience a new situation like college life with, and having someone to split the cost on your own with, there are also challenges. Some common roommate conflicts involve neatness, noise, having guests, sharing possessions, value conflicts, money conflicts, and personality conflicts. Read the following scenarios and answer the following questions for each one:

1. Which conflict management style, from the five discussed, would you use in this situation?
2. What are the potential strengths of using this style?
3. What are the potential weaknesses of using this style?

Scenario 1: Neatness. Your college dorm has bunk beds, and your roommate takes a lot of time making his bed (the bottom bunk) each morning. He has told you that he doesn't want anyone sitting on or sleeping in his bed when he is not in the room. While he is away for the weekend, your friend comes to visit and sits on the bottom bunk bed. You tell him what your roommate said, and you try to fix the bed back before he returns to the dorm. When he returns, he notices that his bed has been disturbed and he confronts you about it.

Scenario 2: Noise and having guests. Your roommate has a job waiting tables and gets home around midnight on Thursday nights. She often brings a couple friends from work home with her. They watch television, listen to music, or play video games and talk and laugh. You have an 8 a.m. class on Friday mornings and are usually asleep when she returns. Last Friday, you talked to her and asked her to keep it down in the future. Tonight, their noise has woken you up and you can't get back to sleep.

Scenario 3: Sharing possessions. When you go out to eat, you often bring back leftovers to have for lunch the next day during your short break between classes. You didn't have time to eat breakfast, and you're really excited about having your leftover pizza for lunch until you get home and see your roommate sitting on the couch eating the last slice.

Scenario 4: Money conflicts. Your roommate got mono and missed two weeks of work last month. Since he has a steady job and you have some savings, you cover his portion of the rent and agree that he will pay your portion next month. The next month comes around and he informs you that he only has enough to pay his half.

Scenario 5: Value and personality conflicts. You like to go out to clubs and parties and have friends over, but your roommate is much more of an introvert. You've tried to get her to come out with you or join the party at your place, but she'd rather study. One day she tells you that she wants to break the lease so she can move out early to live with one of her friends. You both signed the lease, so you have to agree or she can't do it. If you break the lease, you automatically lose your portion of the security deposit.

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5.3: Culture and Conflict

Culture is an important context to consider when studying conflict, and recent research has called into question some of the assumptions of the five conflict management styles discussed so far, which were formulated with a Western bias.1 For example, while the avoiding style of conflict has been cast as negative, with a low concern for self and other or as a lose/lose outcome, this research found that participants in the United States, Germany, China, and Japan all viewed avoiding strategies as demonstrating a concern for the other. While there are some generalizations we can make about culture and conflict, it is better to look at more specific patterns of how interpersonal communication and conflict management are related. We can better understand some of the cultural differences in conflict management by further examining the concept of *face*.

What does it mean to "save face?" This saying generally refers to preventing embarrassment or preserving our reputation or image, which is similar to the concept of face in interpersonal and intercultural communication. Our **face** is the projected self we desire to put into the world, and **facework** refers to the communicative strategies we employ to project, maintain, or repair our face or maintain, repair, or challenge another's face. **Face negotiation theory** argues that people in all cultures negotiate face through communication encounters, and that cultural factors influence how we engage in facework, especially in conflict situations.2 These cultural factors influence whether we are more concerned with self-face or other-face and what types of conflict management strategies we may use. One key cultural influence on face negotiation is the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

The distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is an important dimension across which all cultures vary. **Individualistic cultures** like the United States and most of Europe emphasize individual identity over group identity and encourage competition and self-reliance. **Collectivistic cultures** like Taiwan, Colombia, China, Japan, Vietnam, and Peru value in-group identity over individual identity and value conformity to social norms of the in-group.3 However, within the larger cultures, individuals will vary in the degree to which they view themselves as part of a group or as a separate individual, which is called **self-construal. Independent self-construal** indicates a perception of the self as an individual with unique feelings, thoughts, and motivations. Interdependent self- construal indicates a perception of the self as interrelated with others.4 Not surprisingly, people from individualistic cultures are more likely to have higher levels of *independent* self-construal, and people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to have higher levels of *interdependent* self- construal. Self-construal and individualistic or collectivistic cultural orientations affect how people engage in facework and the conflict management styles they employ.

Self-construal alone does not have a direct effect on conflict style, but it does affect face concerns, with independent self-construal favoring self-face concerns and interdependent self-construal favoring other-face concerns. There are specific facework strategies for different conflict management styles, and these strategies correspond to self-face concerns or other-face concerns.

- **Accommodating.** Giving in (self-face concern).
- **Avoiding.** Pretending conflict does not exist (other-face concern).
- **Competing.** Defending your position, persuading (self-face concern).
- **Collaborating.** Apologizing, having a private discussion, remaining calm (other-face concern).5

Research done on college students in Germany, Japan, China, and the United States found that those with independent self-construal were more likely to engage in competing, and those with interdependent self-construal were more likely to engage in avoiding or collaborating.6 And in general, this research found that members of collectivistic cultures were more likely to use the *avoiding* style of conflict management and less likely to use the *integrating* or *competing* styles of conflict management than were members of individualistic cultures. The following examples bring together facework strategies, cultural orientations, and conflict management style: Someone from an individualistic culture 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. For example, expressing one's emotions was seen as demonstrating a low concern for other-face in Japan, but this was not so in China, which shows there is variety between similarly collectivistic cultures. Culture always adds layers of complexity to any communication phenomenon, but experiencing and learning from other cultures also enriches our lives and makes us more competent communicators.

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5.4: Dealing with Conflict

Conflict is inevitable and it is not inherently negative. A key part of developing interpersonal communication competence involves being able to effectively manage the conflict you will encounter in all your relationships. One key part of handling conflict better is to notice patterns of conflict in specific relationships and to generally have an idea of what causes you to react negatively and what your reactions usually are.

Think about It . . . Conflict

Watch this Ted talk on conflict. How do you view conflict?

Can you think of the last time you used conflict to resolve a situation?

Identifying Conflict Patterns

Much of the research on conflict patterns has been done on couples in romantic relationships, but the concepts and findings are applicable to other relationships. Four common triggers for conflict are **criticism, demand, cumulative annoyance, and rejection**.[1]

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. A simple but useful strategy to manage the trigger of criticism is to follow the old adage "Think before you speak." In many cases, there are 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. I've learned that a majority of the thoughts that we have about another person's physical appearance, whether positive or 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 for asking are 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.

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. When you were younger, you may have asked a parent, teacher, or elder for something and heard back "Ask nicely." As with criticism, thinking before you speak and before you respond can help manage demands and minimize conflict episodes. As we discussed earlier, demands are sometimes met with withdrawal rather than a verbal response. If you are doing the demanding, remember a higher level of information exchange may make your demand clearer or more reasonable to the other person. 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. We have all probably 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. A good strategy for managing cumulative annoyance is to monitor your level of annoyance and occasionally let some steam out of the pressure cooker by processing through your frustration with a third party or directly addressing what is bothering you with the source.

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 worked 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. Before you jump to a conclusion, it is useful to examine why a person might be acting the way that they are. You can check to see if your perceptions are correct by first attributing different causes to their behaviors, and then asking them about what you perceive. If you did cook a nice meal for someone who worked late, and didn't let you know in advance, your initial reaction might be one of rejection. This is a good time to look for causes for their behavior other than rejection. Were they forced into working late by their boss? Did they have a deadline they had to meet? Finally, ask about the cause because the answer may indicate that being late had nothing to do with rejecting you.

Interpersonal conflict may take the form of **serial arguing**, which is a repeated pattern of disagreement over an issue. Serial arguments do not necessarily indicate negative or troubled relationships, but any kind of patterned conflict is worth paying attention to. There are three patterns that occur with serial arguing: repeating, mutual hostility, and arguing with assurances.2 The first pattern is **repeating**, which means reminding the other person of your complaint (what you want them to start/stop doing). The pattern may continue if the other person repeats their response to your reminder. For example, if Marita reminds Kate that she doesn't appreciate her sarcastic tone, and

Kate responds, "I'm soooo sorry, I forgot how perfect you are," then the reminder has failed to effect the desired change. A predictable pattern of complaint like this leads participants to view the conflict as irresolvable. The second pattern within serial arguments is **mutual hostility**, which occurs when the frustration of repeated conflict leads to negative emotions and increases the likelihood of verbal aggression. Again, a predictable pattern of hostility makes the conflict seem irresolvable and may lead to relationship deterioration.

Whereas the first two patterns entail an increase in pressure on the participants in the conflict, the third pattern offers some relief. If people in an interpersonal conflict offer **verbal assurances** of their commitment to the relationship, then the problems associated with the other two patterns of serial arguing may be ameliorated. Even though the conflict may not be solved in the interaction, the verbal assurances of commitment imply that there is a willingness to work on solving the conflict in the future, which provides a sense of stability that can benefit the relationship. If the pattern becomes more of a vicious cycle, it can lead to alienation, polarization, and an overall toxic climate, and the problem may seem so irresolvable that people feel trapped and terminate the relationship.3

Two common conflict pitfalls are **one-upping and mindreading**.4 **One-upping** is a quick reaction to communication from another person that escalates the conflict. If Sam comes home late from work and Nicki says, "I wish you would call when you're going to be late" and Sam responds, "I wish you would get off my back," the reaction has escalated the conflict. **Mindreading** is communication in which one person attributes something to the other using generalizations. If Sam says, "You don't care whether I come home at all or not!" she is presuming to know Nicki's thoughts and feelings. Nicki is likely to respond defensively, perhaps saying, "You don't know how I'm feeling!" One-upping and mindreading are often reactions that are more reflexive than deliberate. Remember to stop and consider what may have caused the behavior. Nicki may have received bad news and was eager to get support from Sam when she arrived home. Although Sam perceives Nicki's comment as criticism and justifies her comments as a reaction to Nicki's behavior, Nicki's comment could actually be a sign of their closeness, in that Nicki appreciates Sam's emotional support. Sam could have said, "I know, I'm sorry, I was on my cell phone for the past hour with a client who had a lot of problems to work out." Taking a moment to respond mindfully rather than react with a knee-jerk reflex can lead to information exchange, which could deescalate the conflict.

Validating the person with whom you are in conflict can be an effective way to deescalate conflict. While avoiding or retreating may seem like the best option in the moment, one of the key negative traits found in research on married couples' conflicts was withdrawal, which as we learned before may result in a demand- withdrawal pattern of conflict. Often validation can be as simple as demonstrating good listening skills discussed earlier in this book by making eye contact and giving verbal and nonverbal back-channel cues like saying "mmm-hmm" or nodding your head.5 This doesn't mean that you have to give up your own side in a

conflict or that you agree with what the other person is saying; rather, you are hearing the other person out, which validates them and may also give you some more information about the conflict that could minimize the likelihood of a reaction rather than a response.

As with all the aspects of communication competence we have discussed so far, you cannot expect that everyone you interact with will have the same knowledge of communication that you have after reading this book. But it often only takes one person with conflict management skills to make an interaction more effective. Remember that it's not the quantity of conflict that determines a relationship's success; it's how the conflict is managed, and one person's competent response can deescalate a conflict. Now we turn to a discussion of negotiation steps and skills as a more structured way to manage conflict.

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5.5: Negotiation Steps and Skills

We negotiate daily. We may negotiate with a professor to make up a missed assignment or with our friends to plan activities for the weekend. **Negotiation** in interpersonal conflict refers to the process of attempting to change or influence conditions within a relationship. The negotiation skills discussed next can be adapted to all types of relational contexts, from romantic partners to coworkers. The stages of negotiating are pre-negotiation, opening, exploration, bargaining, and settlement.[1]

Pre-Negotiation Stage

In the **pre-negotiation stage,** you want to prepare for the encounter. If possible, let the other person know you would like to talk to them, and preview the topic, so they will also have the opportunity to prepare. While it may seem awkward to "set a date" to talk about a conflict, if the other person feels like they were blindsided, their reaction could be negative. Make your preview simple and nonthreatening by saying something like "I've noticed that we've been arguing a lot about who does what chores around the house. Can we sit down and talk tomorrow when we both get home from class?" Obviously, it won't always be feasible to set a date if the conflict needs to be handled immediately because the consequences are immediate or if you or the other person has limited availability. In that case, you can still prepare, but make sure you allot time for the other person to digest and respond. During this stage you also want to figure out your goals for the interaction by reviewing your instrumental, relational, and self-presentation goals. Is getting something done, preserving the relationship, or presenting yourself in a certain way the most important? For example, you may highly rank the instrumental goal of having a clean house, or the relational goal of having pleasant interactions with your roommate, or the self-presentation goal of appearing nice and cooperative. Whether your roommate is your best friend from high school or a stranger the school matched you up with could determine the importance of your relational and self-presentation goals. At this point, your goal analysis may lead you away from negotiation—remember, as we discussed earlier, avoiding can be an appropriate and effective conflict management strategy. If you decide to proceed with the negotiation, you will want to determine your ideal outcome and your bottom line, or the point at which you decide to break off negotiation. It's very important that you realize there is a range between your ideal and your bottom line and that remaining flexible is key to a successful negotiation—remember, through collaboration a new solution could be found that you didn't think of.

Opening Stage

In the **opening stage** of the negotiation, you want to set the tone for the interaction because the other person will be likely to reciprocate. Generally, it is good to be cooperative and pleasant, which can help open the door for collaboration. You also want to establish common ground by bringing up overlapping interests and using "we" language. It would not be competent to open the negotiation with "You're such a slob! Didn't your mom ever teach you how to take care of yourself?" Instead, you may open the negotiation by making small talk about classes that day and then move into the issue at hand. You could set a good tone and establish common ground by saying, "We both put a lot of work into setting up and decorating our space, but now that classes have started, I've noticed that we're really busy and some chores are not getting done." With some planning and a simple opening like that, you can move into the next stage of negotiation.

Exploration Stage

There should be a high level of information exchange in the **exploration stage.** The overarching goal in this stage is to get a panoramic view of the conflict by sharing your perspective and listening to the other person. In this stage, you will likely learn how the other person is punctuating the conflict. Although you may have been mulling over the mess for a few days, your roommate may just now be aware of the conflict. She may also inform you that she usually cleans on Sundays but didn't get to last week because she unexpectedly had to visit her parents. The information that you gather here may clarify the situation enough to end the conflict and cease negotiation. If negotiation continues, the information will be key as you move into the bargaining stage.

Bargaining Stage

The **bargaining stage** is where you make proposals and concessions. The proposal you make should be informed by what you learned in the exploration stage. Flexibility is important here, because you may have to revise your ideal outcome and bottom line based on new information. If your plan was to have a big cleaning day every Thursday, you may now want to propose to have the roommate clean on Sunday while you clean on Wednesday. You want to make sure your opening proposal is reasonable and not presented as an ultimatum. "I don't ever want to see a dish left in the sink" is different from "When dishes are left in the sink too long, they stink and get gross. Can we agree to not leave any dishes in the sink overnight?" Through the proposals you make, you could end up with a win/win situation. If there are areas of disagreement, however, you may have to make concessions or

compromise, which can be a partial win or a partial loss. If you hate doing dishes but don't mind emptying the trash and recycling, you could propose to assign those chores based on preference. If you both hate doing dishes, you could propose to be responsible for washing your own dishes right after you use them. If you really hate dishes and have some extra money, you could propose to use disposable (and hopefully recyclable) dishes, cups, and utensils.

Settlement Stage

In the **settlement stage**, you want to decide on one of the proposals and then summarize the chosen proposal and any related concessions. It is possible that each party can have a different view of the agreed solution. If your roommate thinks you are cleaning the bathroom every other day and you plan to clean it on Wednesdays, then there could be future conflict. You could summarize and ask for confirmation by saying, "So, it looks like I'll be in charge of the trash and recycling, and you'll load and unload the dishwasher. Then I'll do a general cleaning on Wednesdays and you'll do the same on Sundays. Is that right?" Last, you'll need to follow up on the solution to make sure it's working for both parties. If your roommate goes home again next Sunday and doesn't get around to cleaning, you may need to go back to the exploration or bargaining stage.

Key Takeaways

- Interpersonal conflict is an inevitable part of relationships that, although not always negative, can take an emotional toll on relational partners unless they develop skills and strategies for managing conflict.
- Although there is no absolute right or wrong way to handle a conflict, there are five predominant styles of conflict management, which are competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating.
- Perception plays an important role in conflict management because we are often biased in determining the cause of our own and others' behaviors in a conflict situation, which necessitates engaging in communication to gain information and perspective.
- Culture influences how we engage in conflict based on our cultural norms regarding individualism or collectivism and concern for self-face or other-face.
- We can handle conflict better by identifying patterns and triggers such as demands, cumulative annoyance, and rejection and by learning to respond mindfully rather than reflexively.

Exercises

1. Of the five conflict management strategies, is there one that you use more often than others? Why or why not? Do you think people are predisposed to one style over the others based on their personality or other characteristics? If so, what personality traits do you think would lead a person to each style?
2. Review the example of D'Shaun and Rosa. If you were in their situation, what do you think the best style to use would be and why?
3. Of the conflict triggers discussed (demands, cumulative annoyance, rejection, one-upping, and mindreading) which one do you find most often triggers a negative reaction from you? What strategies can you use to better manage the trigger and more effectively manage conflict?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Communication in Relationships

More than 2,300 years ago, Aristotle wrote about the importance of friendships to society, and other Greek philosophers wrote about emotions and their effects on relationships. Although research on relationships has increased dramatically over the past few decades, the fact that these revered ancient philosophers included them in their writings illustrates the important place interpersonal relationships have in human life.[1] But how do we come to form relationships with friends, family, romantic partners, and coworkers? Why are some of these relationships more exciting, stressful, enduring, or short-lived than others? Are we guided by fate, astrology, luck, personality, or other forces to the people we like and love? We'll begin to answer those questions in this chapter.

6.1: Foundations of Relationships
6.2: Communication and Friends
6.3: Communication and Families
6.4: Romantic Relationships
6.5: Relationships at Work
6.6: Culture and Romantic Relationships
6.7: The Dark Side of Relationships

References

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6.1: Foundations of Relationships

Learning Objectives

- Distinguish between personal and social relationships.
- Describe stages of relational interaction.
- Discuss social exchange theory.

We can begin to classify key relationships we have by distinguishing between our personal and our social relationships.1 **Personal relationships** meet emotional, relational, and instrumental needs, as they are intimate, close, and interdependent relationships such as those we have with best friends, partners, or immediate family. **Social relationships** are relationships that occasionally meet our needs and lack the closeness and interdependence of personal relationships. Examples of social relationships include coworkers, distant relatives, and acquaintances. Another distinction useful for categorizing relationships is whether or not they are voluntary. For example, some personal relationships are voluntary, like those with romantic partners, and some are involuntary, like those with close siblings. Likewise, some social relationships are voluntary, like those with acquaintances, and some are involuntary, like those with neighbors or distant relatives. You can see how various relationships fall into each of these dimensions in Figure 6.1.1 "Types of Relationships". Now that we have a better understanding of how we define relationships, we'll examine the stages that most of our relationships go through as they move from formation to termination.

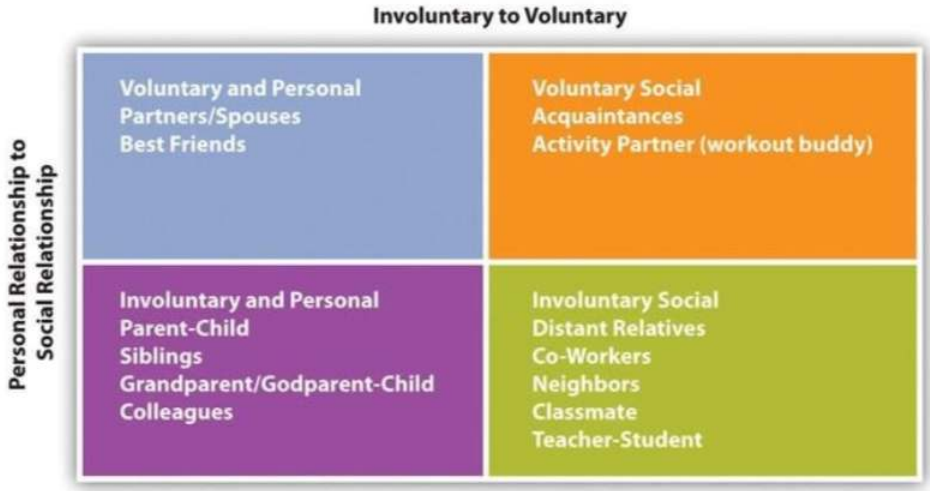

Figure 6.1.1: Types of Relationships. Adapted from C. Arthur VanLear, Ascan Koerner, and Donna M. Allen, "Relationship Typologies," in The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships, eds. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 95.

Source: Adapted from C. Arthur VanLear, Ascan Koerner, and Donna M. Allen, "Relationship Typologies," in The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships, eds. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 95.

Stages of Relational Interaction

Communication is at the heart of forming our interpersonal relationships. We reach the achievement of relating through the everyday conversations and otherwise trivial interactions that form the fabric of our relationships. It is through our communication that we adapt to the dynamic nature of our relational worlds, given that relational partners do not enter each encounter or relationship with compatible expectations. Communication allows us to test and be tested by our potential and current relational partners. It is also through communication that we respond when someone violates or fails to meet those expectations.2

There are ten established stages of interaction that can help us understand how relationships come together and come apart.3 We will discuss each stage in more detail, but in Table 6.1.1 "Relationship Stages" you will find a list of the communication stages. We should keep the following things in mind about this model of relationship development: relational partners do not always go through the stages sequentially, some relationships do not experience all the stages, we do not always consciously move between stages, and coming together and coming apart are not inherently good or bad. As we have already discussed, relationships are

always changing—they are dynamic. Although this model has been applied most often to romantic relationships, most relationships follow a similar pattern that may be adapted to a particular context.

Table 6.1.1: Relationship Stages[4]

Process	Stage	Representative Communication
Coming Together	Initiating	"My name's Rich. It's nice to meet you."
	Experimenting	"I like to cook and refinish furniture in my spare time. What about you?"
	Intensifying	"I feel like we've gotten a lot closer over the past couple months."
	Integrating	(To friend) "We just opened a joint bank account."
	Bonding	"I can't wait to tell my parents that we decided to get married!"
Coming Apart	Differentiating	"I'd really like to be able to hang out with my friends sometimes."
	Circumscribing	"Don't worry about problems I'm having at work. I can deal with it."
	Stagnating	(To self) "I don't know why I even asked him to go out to dinner. He never wants to go out and have a good time."
	Avoiding	"I have a lot going on right now, so I probably won't be home as much."
	Terminating	"It's important for us both to have some time apart. I know you'll be fine."

Stages of Coming Together

Initiating

In the **initiating stage**, people size each other up and try to present themselves favorably. It is a brief stage. Whether you run into someone in the hallway at school or in the produce section at the grocery store, you scan the person and consider any previous knowledge you have of them, expectations for the situation, and so on. Initiating is influenced by several factors.

If you encounter a stranger, you may say, "Hi, my name's Rich." If you encounter a person you already know, you've already gone through this before, so you may just say, "What's up?" Time constraints also affect initiation. A quick passing calls for a quick hello, while a scheduled meeting may entail a more formal start. If you already know the person, the length of time that's passed since your last encounter will affect your initiation. For example, if you see a friend from high school while home for winter break, you may set aside a long block of time to catch up; however, if you see someone at work that you just spoke to ten minutes earlier, you may skip initiating communication. The setting also affects how we initiate conversations, as we communicate differently at a crowded bar than we do on an airplane. Even with all this variation, people typically follow typical social scripts for interaction at this stage.

Experimenting

The scholars who developed these relational stages have likened the **experimenting stage**, where people exchange information and often move from strangers to acquaintances, to the "sniffing ritual" of animals.[5] A basic exchange of information is typical as the experimenting stage begins. For example, on the first day of class, you may chat with the person sitting beside you and take turns sharing your year in school, hometown, residence hall, and major. Then you may branch out and see if there are any common interests that emerge. Finding out you're both St. Louis Cardinals fans could then lead to more conversation about baseball and other hobbies or interests; however, sometimes the experiment may fail. If your attempts at information exchange with another

person during the experimenting stage are met with silence or hesitation, you may interpret their lack of communication as a sign that you shouldn't pursue future interaction.

Experimenting continues in established relationships. *Small talk*, a hallmark of the experimenting stage, is common among young adults catching up with their parents when they return home for a visit or committed couples when they recount their day while preparing dinner. Small talk can be annoying sometimes, especially if you feel like you have to do it out of politeness. I have found, for example, that strangers sometimes feel the need to talk to me at the gym (even when I have ear buds in). Although I'd rather skip the small talk and just work out, I follow social norms of cheerfulness and politeness and engage in small talk. Small talk serves important functions, such as creating a communicative entry point that can lead people to uncover topics of conversation that go beyond the surface level, helping us audition someone to see if we'd like to talk to them further, and generally creating a sense of ease and community with others. And even though small talk isn't viewed as very substantive, the authors of this model of relationships indicate that most of our relationships do not progress far beyond this point.[6]

Intensifying

As we enter the **intensifying stage**, we indicate that we would like or are open to more intimacy, and then we wait for a signal of acceptance before we attempt more intimacy. This incremental intensification of intimacy can occur over a period of weeks, months, or years and may involve inviting a new friend to join you at a party, then to your place for dinner, then to go on vacation with you. It would be seen as odd, even if the experimenting stage went well, to invite a person who you're still getting to know on vacation with you without engaging in some less intimate interaction beforehand. In order to save face and avoid making ourselves overly vulnerable, steady progression is key in this stage. Aside from sharing more intense personal time, requests for and granting favors may also play into intensification of a relationship. For example, one friend helping the other prepare for a big party on their birthday can increase closeness. However, if one person asks for too many favors or fails to reciprocate favors granted, then the relationship can become unbalanced, which could result in a transition to another stage, such as differentiating.

Other signs of the intensifying stage include creation of nicknames, inside jokes, and personal idioms; increased use of *we* and *our*; increased communication about each other's identities (e.g., "My friends all think you are really laid back and easy to get along with"); and a loosening of typical restrictions on possessions and personal space (e.g., you have a key to your best friend's apartment and can hang out there if your roommate is getting on your nerves). Navigating the changing boundaries between individuals in this stage can be tricky, which can lead to conflict or uncertainty about the relationship's future as new expectations for relationships develop. Successfully managing this increasing closeness can lead to relational integration.

Integrating

In the **integrating stage**, two people's identities and personalities merge, and a sense of interdependence develops. Even though this stage is most evident in romantic relationships, there are elements that appear in other relationship forms. Some verbal and nonverbal signals of the integrating stage are when the social networks of two people merge; those outside the relationship begin to refer to or treat the relational partners as if they were one person (e.g., always referring to them together—"Let's invite Olaf and Bettina"); or the relational partners present themselves as one unit (e.g., both signing and sending one holiday card or opening a joint bank account). Even as two people integrate, they likely maintain some sense of self by spending time with friends and family separately, which helps balance their needs for independence and connection.

Bonding

The **bonding stage** includes a public ritual that announces formal commitment. These types of rituals include weddings, commitment ceremonies, and civil unions. Obviously, this stage is almost exclusively applicable to romantic couples. In some ways, the bonding ritual is arbitrary, in that it can occur at any stage in a relationship. In fact, bonding rituals are often later annulled or reversed because a relationship doesn't work out, perhaps because there wasn't sufficient time spent in the experimenting or integrating phases. However, bonding warrants its own stage because the symbolic act of bonding can have very real effects on how two people communicate about and perceive their relationship. For example, the formality of the bond may lead the couple and those in their social network to more diligently maintain the relationship if conflict or stress threatens it.

Stages of Coming Apart

Differentiating

Individual differences can present a challenge at any given stage in the relational interaction model; however, in the **differentiating stage**, communicating these differences becomes a primary focus. At this stage, people discover their differences. Differentiating

is the reverse of integrating, as *we* and *our may* revert back to *I* and *my*. People may try to put boundaries back from some aspects of their life prior to the integrating of the current relationship, including other relationships or possessions. For example, Carrie may reclaim friends who became "shared" as she got closer to her roommate Julie and their social networks merged by saying, "I'm having *my friends* over to the apartment and would like to have privacy for the evening." Differentiating may onset in a relationship that bonded before the individuals knew each other in enough depth and breadth. Even in relationships where the bonding stage is less likely to be experienced, such as a friendship, unpleasant discoveries about the other person's past, personality, or values during the integrating or experimenting stage could lead a person to begin differentiating.

Circumscribing

To circumscribe means to draw a line around something or put a boundary around it.[7] So in the **circumscribing stage**, communication becomes restricted in terms of subjects and depth as individuals verbally close themselves off from each other. People may search for safe topics to talk about. They may say things like "I don't want to talk about that anymore" or "You mind your business and I'll mind mine." If one person was more interested in differentiating in the previous stage, or the desire to end the relationship is one-sided, verbal expressions of commitment may go unechoed—for example, when one person's statement, "I know we've had some problems lately, but I still like being with you," is met with silence. Passive-aggressive behavior and the demand-withdrawal conflict pattern may occur more frequently in this stage. Once the increase in boundaries and decrease in communication becomes a pattern, the relationship further deteriorates toward stagnation.

Stagnating

During the **stagnating stage**, the relationship may 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. Parents and children who are estranged, couples who are separated and awaiting a divorce, or friends who want to end a relationship but don't know how to do it may have extended periods of stagnation. Short periods of stagnation may occur right after a failed exchange in the experimental stage, where you may be in a situation that's not easy to get out of, but the person is still there. Although most people don't like to linger in this unpleasant stage, some may do so to avoid potential pain from termination, some may still hope to rekindle the spark that started the relationship, or some may enjoy leading their relational partner on.

Avoiding

Moving to the **avoiding stage** may be a way to end the awkwardness that comes with stagnation, as people signal that they want to close down the lines of communication. Communication in the avoiding stage can be very direct—"I don't want to talk to you anymore"—or more indirect—"I have to meet someone in a little while, so I can't talk long." While physical avoidance such as leaving a room or requesting a schedule change at work may help clearly communicate the desire to terminate the relationship, we don't always have that option. In a parent-child relationship, where the child is still dependent on the parent, or in a roommate situation, where a lease agreement prevents leaving, people may engage in cognitive dissociation, which means they mentally shut down and ignore the other person even though they are still physically co-present.

Terminating

The **terminating stage** of a relationship can occur shortly after initiation or after a ten- or 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 either want to be with someone who is willing to support me, or 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."). 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.").[8] Finally, **sudden death** is a way that a relationship ends without warning. In cases like this, one individual did not see it coming. Your partner may say "it's over." The most confusing and sad way that a person could experience this is to come home one day and find that their partner had moved out. Sudden death is very difficult to grapple with emotionally because there is often no resolution.

These ten stages of relational development provide insight into the complicated processes that affect relational formation and deterioration. It is important to keep in mind that there is no absolute way in which people move around the stages of coming together and coming apart. If a relationship is not working, and people work through it, they will return to a stage in coming together. Keep in mind that after life experiences we would not return to the exact same place because we are not the exact same person anymore. Also keep in mind that if a relationship starts to come apart, it does not mean automatic doom. Communication can help a relationship get back on track.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory essentially entails a weighing of the costs and rewards in a given relationship.[9] Rewards are outcomes that we get from a relationship that benefit us in some way, while costs 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. In an equitable relationship, costs and rewards are balanced, which usually leads to a positive evaluation of the relationship and satisfaction.

Commitment and interdependence are important interpersonal and psychological dimensions of a relationship that relate to social exchange theory. Interdependence refers to the relationship between a person's well-being and involvement in a particular relationship. A person will feel interdependence in a relationship when (1) satisfaction is high or the relationship meets important needs; (2) the alternatives are not good, meaning the person's needs couldn't be met without the relationship; or (3) investment in the relationship is high, meaning that resources might decrease or be lost without the relationship.[10]

We can be cautioned, though, to not view social exchange theory as a tit-for-tat accounting of costs and rewards.[11] We wouldn't be very good relational partners if we carried around a little notepad, notating each favor or good deed we completed so we can expect its repayment. As noted earlier, we all become aware of the balance of costs and rewards at some point in our relationships, but that awareness isn't persistent. We also have communal relationships, in which members engage in a relationship for mutual benefit and do not expect returns on investments such as favors or good deeds.[12] As the dynamics in a relationship change, we may engage communally without even being aware of it, just by simply enjoying the relationship. It has been suggested that we become more aware of the costs and rewards balance when a relationship is going through conflict.[13] Overall, 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. Logic would dictate that we would end a relationship if the costs are too great, but often we do not. One flaw of the Social Exchange Theory is that it does not account for why we stay in relationships where the costs are greater than the rewards. People do not always make rational decisions!

Key Takeaways

- Relationships can be easily distinguished into personal or social and voluntary or involuntary.
  - Personal relationships are close, intimate, and interdependent, meeting many of our interpersonal needs.
  - Social relationships meet some interpersonal needs but lack the closeness of personal relationships.
- There are stages of relational interaction in which relationships come together (initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding) and come apart (differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating).
- The weighing of costs and rewards in a relationship affects commitment and overall relational satisfaction.

Exercises

1. Review the types of relationships in Figure 6.1.1"Types of Relationships".
2. Name at least one person from your relationships that fits into each quadrant. How does your communication differ between each of these people?
3. Pick a relationship important to you and determine what stage of relational interaction you are currently in with that person. What communicative signals support your determination? What other stages from the ten listed have you experienced with this person?
4. How do you weigh the costs and rewards in your relationships? What are some rewards you are currently receiving from your closest relationships? What are some costs?

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6.2: Communication and Friends

Do you consider all the people you are "friends" with on Facebook to be friends? What's the difference, if any, between a "Facebook friend" and a real-world friend? Friendships, like other relationship forms, can be divided into categories. What's the difference between a best friend, a good friend, and an old friend? What about work friends, school friends, and friends of the family? It's likely that each of you reading this book has a different way of perceiving and categorizing your friendships. In this section, we will learn about the various ways we classify friends, the life cycle of friendships, and how gender affects friendships.

Defining and Classifying Friends

Friendships are voluntary interpersonal relationships between two people who are usually equals and who mutually influence one another.1 Friendships are distinct from romantic relationships, family relationships, and acquaintances and are often described as more vulnerable relationships than others due to their voluntary nature, the availability of other friends, and the fact that they lack the social and institutional support of other relationships. The lack of official support for friendships is not universal, though. In rural parts of Thailand, for example, special friendships are recognized by a ceremony in which both parties swear devotion and loyalty to each other.2 Even though we do not have a formal ritual to recognize friendship in the United States, in general, research shows that people have three main expectations for close friendships. A friend is someone you can talk to, someone you can depend on for help and emotional support, and someone you can participate in activities and have fun with.3

Types of Friendships

Although friendships vary across the life span, three types of friendships are common in adulthood: **reciprocal, associative, and receptive**.4 **Reciprocal friendships** are solid interpersonal relationships between people who are equals with a shared sense of loyalty and commitment. These friendships are likely to develop over time and can withstand external changes such as geographic separation or fluctuations in other commitments such as work and childcare. Reciprocal friendships are what most people would consider the ideal for best friends. **Associative friendships** are mutually pleasurable relationships between acquaintances or associates that, although positive, lack the commitment of reciprocal friendships. These friendships are likely to be maintained out of convenience or to meet instrumental goals.

For example, a friendship may develop between two people who work out at the same gym. They may spend time with each other in this setting a few days a week for months or years, but their friendship might end if the gym closes or one person's schedule changes. **Receptive friendships** include a status differential that makes the relationship asymmetrical. Unlike the other friendship types that are between peers, this relationship is more like that of a supervisor- subordinate or clergy-parishioner. In some cases, like a mentoring relationship, both parties can benefit from the relationship. In other cases, the relationship could quickly sour if the person with more authority begins to abuse it.

Friends with Benefits

A relatively new type of friendship, at least in label, is the "friends with benefits" relationship. **Friends with benefits** relationships have the closeness of a friendship and the sexual activity of a romantic partnership without the expectations of romantic commitment or labels.5 FWB relationships are hybrids that combine characteristics of romantic and friend pairings, which produces some unique dynamics. In my conversations with students over the years, we have talked through some of the differences between friends, FWB, and hook-up partners, or what we termed "just benefits." Hook-up or "just benefits" relationships do not carry the emotional connection typical in a friendship, may occur as one-night-stands or be regular things, and exist solely for the gratification and/or convenience of sexual activity. So why might people choose to have or avoid FWB relationships?

Various research studies have shown that half of the college students who participated have engaged in heterosexual FWB relationships.6 Many who engage in FWB relationships have particular views on love and sex—namely, that sex can occur independently of love. Conversely, those who report no FWB relationships often cite religious, moral, or personal reasons for not doing so. Some who have reported FWB relationships note that they value the sexual activity with their friend, and many feel that it actually brings the relationship closer. Despite valuing the sexual activity, they also report fears that it will lead to hurt feelings or the dissolution of a friendship.7 We must also consider gender differences and communication challenges in FWB relationships.

Gender biases must be considered when discussing heterosexual FWB relationships, given that women in most societies are judged more harshly than men for engaging in casual sex. But aside from dealing with the double standard that women face regarding their sexual activity, there aren't many gender differences in how men and women engage in and perceive FWB relationships. So what communicative patterns are unique to the FWB relationship? Those who engage in FWB relationships have some unique

communication challenges. For example, they may have difficulty with labels as they figure out whether they are friends, close friends, a little more than friends, and so on. Research participants currently involved in such a relationship reported that they have more commitment to the friendship than the sexual relationship. But does that mean they would give up the sexual aspect of the relationship to save the friendship? The answer is "no" according to the research study. Most participants reported that they would like the relationship to stay the same, followed closely by the hope that it would turn into a full romantic relationship.[8] Just from this study, we can see that there is often a tension between action and labels. In addition, those in a FWB relationship often have to engage in privacy management as they decide who to tell and who not to tell about their relationship, given that some mutual friends are likely to find out and some may be critical of the relationship. Last, they may have to establish ground rules or guidelines for the relationship. Since many FWB relationships are not exclusive, meaning partners are open to having sex with other people, ground rules or guidelines may include discussions of safer-sex practices, disclosure of sexual partners, or periodic testing for sexually transmitted infections.

The Life Span of Friendships

Friendships, like most relationships, have a life span ranging from formation to maintenance to deterioration/dissolution. Friendships have various turning points that affect their trajectory. While there are developmental stages in friendships, they may not be experienced linearly, as friends can cycle through formation, maintenance, and deterioration/dissolution together or separately and may experience stages multiple times. Friendships are also diverse, in that not all friendships develop the same level of closeness, and the level of closeness can fluctuate over the course of a friendship. Changes in closeness can be an expected and accepted part of the cycle of friendships, and less closeness doesn't necessarily lead to less satisfaction.[9]

Figure 6.2.1: Lifespan of Friendship

The formation process of friendship development involves two people moving from strangers toward acquaintances and potentially friends.[10] Several factors influence the formation of friendships, including environmental, situational, individual, and interactional factors.[11] Environmental factors lead us to have more day-to-day contact with some people over others. For example, residential proximity and sharing a workplace are catalysts for friendship formation. Thinking back to your childhood, you may have had early friendships with people on your block because they were close by and you could spend time together easily without needing transportation. A similar situation may have occurred later if you moved away from home for college and lived in a residence hall. You may have formed early relationships, perhaps even before classes started, with hall-mates or dorm-mates. I've noticed that many students will continue to associate and maybe even attempt to live close to friends they made in their first residence hall throughout their college years, even as they move residence halls or off campus. We also find friends through the social networks of existing friends and family. Although these people may not live close to us, they are brought into proximity through people we know, which facilitates our ability to spend time with them. Encountering someone due to environmental factors may lead to a friendship if the situational factors are favorable.

The main situational factor that may facilitate or impede friendship formation is availability. Initially, we are more likely to be interested in a friendship if we anticipate that we'll be able to interact with the other person again in the future without expending more effort than our schedule and other obligations will allow. In order for a friendship to take off, both parties need resources such as time and energy to put into it. Hectic work schedules, family obligations, or personal stresses such as financial problems or family or relational conflict may impair someone's ability to nurture a friendship.

The number of friends we have at any given point is a situational factor that also affects whether or not we are actually looking to add new friends. I have experienced this fluctuation. Since I stayed in the same city for my bachelor's and master's degrees, I had forged many important friendships over those seven years. In the last year of my master's program, I was immersed in my own classes and jobs as a residence hall director and teaching assistant. I was also preparing to move within the year to pursue my doctorate. I recall telling a friend of many years that I was no longer "accepting applications" for new friends. Although I was half-joking, this example illustrates the importance of environmental and situational factors. Not only was I busier than I had ever been; I was planning on moving and therefore knew it wouldn't be easy to continue investing in any friendships I made in my final year. Instead, I focused on the friendships I already had and attended to my other personal obligations. Of course, when I moved to a new

city a few months later, I was once again "accepting applications," because I had lost the important physical proximity to all my previous friends. Environmental and situational factors that relate to friendship formation point to the fact that convenience plays a large role in determining whether a relationship will progress or not.

While contact and availability may initiate communication with a potential friend, individual and interactional factors are also important. We are more likely to develop friendships with individuals we deem physically attractive, socially competent, and responsive to our needs.12 Specifically, we are more attracted to people we deem similar to or slightly above us in terms of attractiveness and competence. Although physical attractiveness is more important in romantic relationships, research shows that we evaluate attractive people more positively, which may influence our willingness to invest more in a friendship. Friendships also tend to form between people with similar demographic characteristics such as race, gender, age, and class, and similar personal characteristics like interests and values. Being socially competent and responsive in terms of empathy, emotion management, conflict management, and self-disclosure also contribute to the likelihood of friendship development.

If a friendship is established in the formation phase, then the new friends will need to maintain their relationship. The maintenance phase includes the most variation in terms of the processes that take place, the commitment to maintenance from each party, and the length of time of the phase.13 In short, some friendships require more maintenance in terms of shared time together and emotional support than other friendships that can be maintained with only occasional contact. Maintenance is important, because friendships provide important opportunities for social support that take the place of or supplement family and romantic relationships. Sometimes, we may feel more comfortable being open with a friend about something than we would with a family member or romantic partner. Most people expect that friends will be there for them when needed, which is the basis of friendship maintenance. As with other relationships, tasks that help maintain friendships range from being there in a crisis to seemingly mundane day-to-day activities and interactions.

Failure to perform or respond to friendship-maintenance tasks can lead to the deterioration and eventual dissolution of friendships. Causes of dissolution may be voluntary (termination due to conflict), involuntary (death of friendship partner), external (increased family or work commitments), or internal (decreased liking due to perceived lack of support).14 While there are often multiple, interconnecting causes that result in friendship dissolution, there are three primary sources of conflict in a friendship that stem from internal/interpersonal causes and may lead to voluntary dissolution: sexual interference, failure to support, and betrayal of trust.15 Sexual interference generally involves a friend engaging with another friend's romantic partner or romantic interest and can lead to feelings of betrayal, jealousy, and anger. Failure to support may entail a friend not coming to another's aid or defense when criticized. Betrayal of trust can stem from failure to secure private information by telling a secret or disclosing personal information without permission. While these three internal factors may initiate conflict in a friendship, discovery of unfavorable personal traits can also lead to problems.

Have you ever started investing in a friendship only to find out later that the person has some character flaws that you didn't notice before? As was mentioned earlier, we are more likely to befriend someone whose personal qualities we find attractive. However, we may not get to experience the person in a variety of contexts and circumstances before we invest in the friendship. We may later find out that our easygoing friend becomes really possessive once we start a romantic relationship and spend less time with him. Or we may find that our happy-go-lucky friend gets moody and irritable when she doesn't get her way. These individual factors become interactional when our newly realized dissimilarity affects our communication. It is logical that as our liking decreases, as a result of personal reassessment of the friendship, we will engage in less friendship-maintenance tasks such as self- disclosure and supportive communication. In fact, research shows that the main termination strategy employed to end a friendship is avoidance. As we withdraw from the relationship, the friendship fades away and may eventually disappear, which is distinct from romantic relationships, which usually have an official "breakup." Aside from changes based on personal characteristics discovered through communication, changes in the external factors that help form friendships can also lead to their dissolution.

The main change in environmental factors that can lead to friendship dissolution is a loss of proximity, which may entail a large or small geographic move or school or job change. The two main situational changes that affect friendships are schedule changes and changes in romantic relationships. Even without a change in environment, someone's job or family responsibilities may increase, limiting the amount of time one has to invest in friendships. Additionally, becoming invested in a romantic relationship may take away from time previously allocated to friends. For environmental and situational changes, the friendship itself is not the cause of the dissolution. These external factors are sometimes difficult if not impossible to control, and lost or faded friendships are a big part of everyone's relational history.

Friendships across the Life Span

As we transition between life stages such as adolescence, young adulthood, emerging adulthood, middle age, and later life, our friendships change in many ways.[16] Our relationships begin to deepen in adolescence as we negotiate the confusion of puberty. Then, in early adulthood, many people get to explore their identities and diversify their friendship circle. Later, our lives stabilize and we begin to rely more on friendships with a romantic partner and continue to nurture the friendships that have lasted. Let's now learn more about the characteristics of friendships across the life span.

Adolescence

Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty and lasts through the teen years. We typically make our first voluntary close social relationships during adolescence as cognitive and emotional skills develop. At this time, our friendships are usually with others of the same age/grade in school, gender, and race, and friends typically have similar attitudes about academics and similar values.[17] These early friendships allow us to test our interpersonal skills, which affects the relationships we will have later in life. For example, emotional processing, empathy, self-disclosure, and conflict become features of adolescent friendships in new ways and must be managed.[18]

Figure 6.2.2: Teenagers by Blake Barlow on Unsplash

Adolescents begin to see friends rather than parents as providers of social support, as friends help negotiate the various emotional problems often experienced for the first time.[19] This new dependence on friendships can also create problems. For example, as adolescents progress through puberty and forward on their identity search, they may experience some jealousy and possessiveness in their friendships as they attempt to balance the tensions between their dependence on and independence from friends. Additionally, as adolescents articulate their identities, they look for acceptance and validation of self in their friends, especially given the increase in self- consciousness experienced by most adolescents.[20] Those who do not form satisfying relationships during this time may miss out on opportunities for developing communication competence, leading to lower performance at work or school and higher rates of depression.[21] The transition to college marks a move from adolescence to early adulthood and opens new opportunities for friendship and challenges in dealing with the separation from hometown friends.

Early Adulthood

Early adulthood encompasses the time from around eighteen to twenty-nine years of age, and although not every person in this age group goes to college, most of the research on early adult friendships focuses on college students. Those who have the opportunity to head to college will likely find a canvas for exploration and experimentation with various life and relational choices relatively free from the emotional, time, and financial constraints of starting their own family that may come later in life.[22]

Figure 6.2.3: Young Adult Friends by Helena Lopes on Unsplash

As we transition from adolescence to early adulthood, we are still formulating our understanding of relational processes, but people report that their friendships are more intimate than the ones they had in adolescence. During this time, friends provide important feedback on self-concept, careers, romantic and/or sexual relationships, and civic, social, political, and extracurricular activities. It is inevitable that young adults will lose some ties to their friends from adolescence during this transition, which has positive and negative consequences. Investment in friendships from adolescence provides a sense of continuity during the often rough transition to college. These friendships may also help set standards for future friendships, meaning the old friendships are a base for comparison for new friends. Obviously this is a beneficial situation relative to the quality of the old friendship. If the old friendship was not a healthy one, using it as the standard for new friendships is a bad idea. Additionally, nurturing older friendships at the expense of meeting new people and experiencing new social situations may impede personal growth during this period.

Adulthood

Adult friendships span a larger period of time than the previous life stages discussed, as adulthood encompasses the period from thirty to sixty-five years old.23 The exploration that occurs for most middle-class people in early adulthood gives way to less opportunity for friendships in adulthood, as many in this period settle into careers, nourish long- term relationships, and have children of their own. These new aspects of life bring more time constraints and interpersonal and task obligations, and with these obligations comes an increased desire for stability and continuity. Adult friendships tend to occur between people who are similar in terms of career position, race, age, partner status, class, and education level. This is partly due to the narrowed social networks people join as they become more educated and attain higher career positions. Therefore, finding friends through religious affiliation, neighborhood, work, or civic engagement is likely to result in similarity between friends.24

Even as social networks narrow, adults are also more likely than young adults to rely on their friends to help them process thoughts and emotions related to their partnerships or other interpersonal relationships.25 For example, a person may rely on a romantic partner to help process through work relationships and close coworkers to help process through family relationships. Work life and home life become connected in important ways, as career (money making) intersects with and supports the desires for stability (home making).26

Figure 6.2.4: Dinner Party by Kevin Curtis on Unsplash

Since home and career are primary focuses, socializing outside of those areas may be limited to interactions with family (parents, siblings, and in-laws) if they are geographically close. In situations where family isn't close by, adults' close or best friends may adopt kinship roles, and a child may call a parent's close friend "Uncle Andy" even if they are not related. Spouses or partners are expected to be friends; it is often expressed that the best partner is one who can also serve as best friend, and having a partner as a best friend can be convenient if time outside the home is limited by parental responsibilities. There is not much research on friendships in late middle age (ages fifty to sixty-five), but it has been noted that relationships with partners may become even more important during this time, as parenting responsibilities diminish with grown children and careers and finances stabilize. Partners who have successfully navigated their middle age may feel a bonding sense of accomplishment with each other and with any close friends with whom they shared these experiences.27

Later Life

Friendships in later-life adulthood, which begins in one's sixties, are often remnants of previous friends and friendship patterns. Those who have typically had a gregarious social life will continue to associate with friends if physically and mentally able, and those who relied primarily on a partner, family, or limited close friends will have more limited, but perhaps equally rewarding, interactions. Friendships that have extended from adulthood or earlier are often "old" or "best" friendships that offer a look into a dyad's shared past.

Figure 6.2.5: The Chess Players by Vlad Sargu on Unsplash

Given that geographic relocation is common in early adulthood, these friends may be physically distant, but if investment in occasional contact or visits preserved the friendship, these friends are likely able to pick up where they left off.28 However, biological aging and the social stereotypes and stigma associated with later life and aging begin to affect communication patterns.

Obviously, our physical and mental abilities affect our socializing and activities and vary widely from person to person and age to age. Mobility may be limited due to declining health, and retiring limits the social interactions one had at work and work-related events.29 People may continue to work and lead physically and socially active lives decades past the marker of later life, which occurs around age sixty-five. Regardless of when these changes begin, it is common and normal for our opportunities to interact with wide friendship circles to diminish as our abilities decline. Early later life may be marked by a transition to partial or full retirement if a person is socioeconomically privileged enough to do so. For some, retirement is a time to settle into a quiet routine in the same geographic place, perhaps becoming even more involved in hobbies and civic organizations, which may increase social interaction and the potential for friendships. Others may move to a more desirable place or climate and go through the process of starting over with new friends. For health or personal reasons, some in later life live in assisted-living facilities. Later-life adults in these facilities may make friends based primarily on proximity, just as many college students in early adulthood do in the similarly age-segregated environment of a residence hall.30

Friendships in later life provide emotional support that is often only applicable during this life stage. For example, given the general stigma against aging and illness, friends may be able to shield each other from negative judgments from others and help each other maintain a positive self-concept.31 Friends can also be instrumental in providing support after the death of a partner. Men, especially, may need this type of support, as men are more likely than women to consider their spouse their sole confidante, which means the death of the wife may end a later-life man's most important friendship. Women who lose a partner also go through considerable life changes, and in general more women are left single after the death of a spouse than men due to men's shorter life span and the tendency for men to be a few years older than their wives. Given this fact, it is not surprising that widows in particular may turn to other single women for support. Overall, providing support in later life is important given the likelihood of declining health. In the case of declining health, some may turn to family instead of friends for support to avoid overburdening friends with requests for assistance. However, turning to a friend for support is not completely burdensome, as research shows that feeling needed helps older people maintain a positive well-being. William K. Rawlins, *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1992), 232–33.

Gender and Friendship

Gender influences our friendships and has received much attention, as people try to figure out how different men and women's friendships are. There is a conception that men's friendships are less intimate than women's based on the stereotype that men do not express emotions. In fact, men report a similar amount of intimacy in their friendships as women but are less likely than women to explicitly express affection verbally (e.g., saying "I love you") and nonverbally (e.g., through touching or embracing) toward their same-gender friends.32 This is not surprising, given the societal taboos against same-gender expressions of affection, especially between men, even though an increasing number of men are more comfortable expressing affection toward other men and women. However, researchers have wondered if men communicate affection in more implicit ways that are still understood by the other friend. Men may use shared activities as a way to express closeness—for example, by doing favors for each other, engaging in friendly competition, joking, sharing resources, or teaching each other new skills.33 Some scholars have argued that there is a bias toward viewing intimacy as feminine, which may have skewed research on men's friendships. While verbal expressions of intimacy through self-disclosure have been noted as important features of women's friendships, activity sharing has been the focus in men's friendships. This research doesn't argue that one gender's friendships are better than the other's, and it concludes that the differences shown in the research regarding expressions of intimacy are not large enough to impact the actual practice of friendships.34

Cross-gender friendships are friendships between a male and a female. These friendships diminish in late childhood and early adolescence as boys and girls segregate into separate groups for many activities and socializing, reemerge as possibilities in late adolescence, and reach a peak potential in the college years of early adulthood. Later, adults with spouses or partners are less likely to have cross- sex friendships than single people.35 In any case, research studies have identified several positive outcomes of cross-gender friendships. Men and women report that they get a richer understanding of how the other gender thinks and feels.36 It seems these friendships fulfill interaction needs not as commonly met in same-gender friendships. For example, men reported more than women that they rely on their cross-gender friendships for emotional support.37 Similarly, women reported that they enjoyed the activity-oriented friendships they had with men.38

As discussed earlier regarding friends-with-benefits relationships, sexual attraction presents a challenge in cross-gender heterosexual friendships. Even if the friendship does not include sexual feelings or actions, outsiders may view the relationship as sexual or even encourage the friends to become "more than friends." Aside from the pressures that come with sexual involvement or tension, the exaggerated perceptions of differences between men and women can hinder cross-gender friendships. However, if it were true that men and women are too different to understand each other or be friends, then how could any long-term partnership such as husband/wife, mother/son, father/daughter, or brother/sister be successful or enjoyable?

Key Takeaways

- Friendships are voluntary interpersonal relationships between two people who are usually equals and who mutually influence one another.
- Friendship formation, maintenance, and deterioration/dissolution are influenced by environmental, situational, and interpersonal factors.
- Friendships change throughout our lives as we transition from adolescence to adulthood to later life.
- Cross-gender friendships may offer perspective into gender relationships that same-gender friendships do not, as both men and women report that they get support or enjoyment from their cross- gender friendships. However, there is a potential for sexual tension that complicates these relationships.

Exercises

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't feel like you could "accept applications" for new friends or were more eager than normal to "accept applications" for new friends? What were the environmental or situational factors that led to this situation?
2. Getting integrated: Review the types of friendships (reciprocal, associative, and receptive). Which of these types of friendships do you have more of in academic contexts and why? Answer the same question for professional contexts and personal contexts.
3. Of the life stages discussed in this chapter, which one are you currently in? How do your friendships match up with the book's description of friendships at this stage? From your experience, do friendships change between stages the way the book says they do? Why or why not?

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6.3: Communication and Families

Learning Objectives

- Compare and contrast the various definitions of family.
- Describe various types of family rituals and explain their importance.
- Explain how conformity and conversation orientations work together to create different family climates.

There is no doubt that the definition and makeup of families are changing in the United States. New data from research organizations and the 2010 US Census show the following: people who choose to marry are waiting longer, more couples are cohabitating (living together) before marriage or instead of marrying, households with more than two generations are increasing, and the average household size is decreasing.1 Just as the makeup of families changes, so do the definitions.

Defining Family

Who do you consider part of your family? Many people would initially name people who they are related to by blood. You may also name a person with whom you are in a committed relationship—a partner or spouse. But some people have a person not related by blood that they might refer to as *aunt* or *uncle* or even as a brother or sister. We can see from these examples that it's not simple to define a family.

The definitions people ascribe to families usually fall into at least one of the following categories: structural definitions, task-orientation definitions, and transactional definitions.2 Structural definitions of family focus on form, criteria for membership, and often hierarchy of family members. One example of a structural definition of family is two or more people who live together and are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. From this definition, a father and son, two cousins, or a brother and sister could be considered a family if they live together. However, a single person living alone or with nonrelated friends, or a couple who chooses not to or are not legally able to marry would not be considered a family. These definitions rely on external, "objective" criteria for determining who is in a family and who is not, which makes the definitions useful for groups like the US Census Bureau, lawmakers, and other researchers who need to define family for large-scale data collection. The simplicity and time-saving positives of these definitions are countered by the fact that many family types are left out in general structural definitions; however, more specific structural definitions have emerged in recent years that include more family forms.

Types of Families

Family of origin refers to relatives connected by blood or other traditional legal bonds such as marriage or adoption and includes parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. **Family of orientation** refers to people who share the same household and are connected by blood, legal bond, or who act/live as if they are connected by either.3 Unlike family of origin, this definition is limited to people who share the same household and represents the family makeup we choose. For example, most young people don't get to choose who they live with, but as we get older, we choose our spouse or partner or may choose to have or adopt children.

Different Types of Families

Families come in all shapes and sizes, watch this video to get an overview of family types. Which one best represents your family?

There are several subdefinitions of families of orientation.4 A **nuclear family** includes two heterosexual married parents and one or more children. While this type of family has received a lot of political and social attention, some scholars argue that it was only dominant as a family form for a brief part of human history.5 A **binuclear family** is a nuclear family that was split by divorce into two separate households, one headed by the mother and one by the father, with the original children from the family residing in each home for periods of time. A **single-parent family** includes a mother or father who may or may not have been previously married with one or more children. A **stepfamily** includes a heterosexual couple that lives together with children from a previous relationship. This may also be referred to as a *blended family*. A **cohabitating family** includes a heterosexual couple who lives together in a committed relationship but does not have a legal bond such as marriage. Similarly, a gay or lesbian family includes a couple of the same gender who live together in a committed relationship and may or may not have a legal bond such as marriage, a civil union, or a domestic partnership. Cohabitating families and gay or lesbian families may or may not have children. A **Kinship family** includes individuals who are not blood related, but consider themselves family. This can happen where someone is living in

a rehabilitation facility for a long time, or students live together through college and graduate school, or a student participates in an international study program and lives with a family over the period of a year. Sometimes these bonds become so close that they consider themselves as family in a way that can equal the ties of blood relations.

Is it more important that the structure of a family matches a definition, or should we define family based on the behavior of people or the quality of their interpersonal interactions? Unlike structural definitions of family, functional definitions focus on tasks or interaction within the family unit. **Task-orientation** definitions of family recognize that behaviors like emotional and financial support are more important interpersonal indicators of a family-like connection than biology. In short, anyone who fulfills the typical tasks present in families is considered family. For example, in some cases, custody of children has been awarded to a person not biologically related to a child over a living blood relative because that person acted more like a family member to the child. The most common family tasks include nurturing and socializing other family members. Nurturing family members entails providing basic care and support, both emotional and financial. Socializing family members refers to teaching young children how to speak, read, and practice social skills.

Transactional definitions of family focus on communication and subjective feelings of connection. While task-orientation definitions convey the importance of providing for family members, transactional definitions are concerned with the quality of interaction among family members. Specifically, transactional definitions stress that the creation of a sense of home, group identity, loyalty, and a shared past and future makes up a family. Isn't it true that someone could provide food, shelter, and transportation to school for a child but not create a sense of home? Even though there is no one, all-encompassing definition of *family*, perhaps this is for the best. Given that family is a combination of structural, functional, and communicative elements, it warrants multiple definitions to capture that complexity.

Family Communication Processes

Think about how much time we spend communicating with family members over the course of our lives. As children, most of us spend much of our time talking to parents, grandparents, and siblings. As we become adolescents, our peer groups become more central, and we may even begin to resist communicating with our family during the rebellious teenage years. However, as we begin to choose and form our own families, we once again spend much time engaging in family communication. Additionally, family communication is our primary source of **intergenerational communication**, or communication between people of different age groups.

Family Interaction Rituals

You may have heard or used the term *family time* in your own families. What does *family time* mean? As was discussed earlier, relational cultures are built on interaction routines and rituals. Families also have interaction norms that create, maintain, and change communication climates. The notion of family time hasn't been around for too long but was widely communicated and represented in the popular culture of the 1950s.[6] When we think of family time, or *quality time* as it's sometimes called, we usually think of a romanticized ideal of family time spent together.

While family rituals and routines can definitely be fun and entertaining bonding experiences, they can also bring about interpersonal conflict and strife. Just think about Clark W. Griswold's string of well-intentioned but misguided attempts to manufacture family fun in the *National Lampoon's Vacation* series.

Families engage in a variety of rituals that demonstrate symbolic importance and shared beliefs, attitudes, and values. Three main types of relationship rituals are patterned family interactions, family traditions, and family celebrations.[7] **Patterned family interactions** are the most frequent rituals and do not have the degree of formality of traditions or celebrations. Patterned interactions may include mealtime, bedtime, receiving guests at the house, or leisure activities. Mealtime rituals may include a rotation of who cooks and who cleans, and many families have set seating arrangements at their dinner table. My family has recently adopted a new leisure ritual for family gatherings by playing corn hole (also known as bags). While this family activity is not formal, it's become something expected that we look forward to.

Family traditions are more formal, occur less frequently than patterned interactions, vary widely from family to family, and include birthdays, family reunions, and family vacations. Birthday traditions may involve a trip to a favorite restaurant, baking a cake, or hanging streamers. Family reunions may involve making t-shirts for the group or counting up the collective age of everyone present. Family road trips may involve predictable conflict between siblings or playing car games like "I spy" or trying to find the most number of license plates from different states.

Last, **family celebrations** are also formal, have more standardization between families, may be culturally specific, help transmit values and memories through generations, and include rites of passage and religious and secular holiday celebrations. Thanksgiving, for example, is formalized by a national holiday and is celebrated in similar ways by many families in the United States. Rites of passage mark life-cycle transitions such as graduations, weddings, quinceañeras, or bar mitzvahs. While graduations are secular and may vary in terms of how they are celebrated, quinceañeras have cultural roots in Latin America, and bar mitzvahs are a long-established religious rite of passage in the Jewish faith.

Conversation and Conformity Orientations

The amount, breadth, and depth of conversation between family members varies from family to family. Additionally, some families encourage self-exploration and freedom, while others expect family unity and control. This variation can be better understood by examining two key factors that influence family communication: conversation orientation and conformity orientation.[8] A given family can be higher or lower on either dimension and how a family rates on each of these dimensions can be used to determine a family type.

To determine conversation orientation, we determine to what degree a family encourages members to interact and communicate (converse) about various topics. Members within a family with a **high conversation orientation**26 communicate with each other freely and frequently about activities, thoughts, and feelings. This unrestricted communication style leads to all members, including children, participating in family decisions. Parents in high-conversation-orientation families believe that communicating with their children openly and frequently leads to a more rewarding family life and helps to educate and socialize children, preparing them for interactions outside the family. Members of a family with a **low conversation orientation**[9] do not interact with each other as often, and topics of conversation are more restricted, as some thoughts are considered private. For example, not everyone's input may be sought for decisions that affect everyone in the family, and open and frequent communication is not deemed important for family functioning or for a child's socialization.

Conformity orientation is determined by the degree to which a family communication climate encourages conformity and agreement regarding beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.[10] A family with a **high conformity orientation** fosters a climate of uniformity, and parents decide guidelines for what to conform to. Children are expected to be obedient, and conflict is often avoided to protect family harmony. This more traditional family model stresses interdependence among family members, which means space, money, and time are shared among immediate family, and family relationships take precedent over those outside the family. A family with a **low conformity orientation** encourages diversity of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors and assertion of individuality. Relationships outside the family are seen as important parts of growth and socialization, as they teach lessons about and build confidence for independence. Members of these families also value personal time and space.

"Getting Real" - Family Therapists

Family therapists provide counseling to parents, children, romantic partners, and other members of family units. People may seek out a family therapist to deal with difficult past experiences or current problems such as family conflict, emotional processing related to grief or trauma, marriage/relationship stresses, children's behavioral concerns, and so on. Family therapists are trained to assess the systems of interaction within a family through counseling sessions that may be one-on-one or with other family members present. The therapist then evaluates how a family's patterns are affecting the individuals within the family. Whether through social services or private practice, family therapy is usually short term. Once the assessment and evaluation is complete, goals are established and sessions are scheduled to track the progress toward completion. The demand for family therapists remains strong, as people's lives grow more complex, careers take people away from support networks such as family and friends, and economic hardships affect interpersonal relationships. Family therapists usually have bachelor's and master's degrees and must obtain a license to practice in their state. More information about family and marriage therapists can be found through their professional organization, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, at http://www.aamft.org.

1. List some issues within a family that you think should be addressed through formal therapy. List some issues within a family that you think should be addressed directly with/by family members. What is the line that distinguishes between these two levels?
2. Based on what you've read in this book so far, what communication skills do you think would be most beneficial for a family therapist to possess and why?
3. Determining where your family falls on the conversation and conformity dimensions is more instructive when you know the family types that result, which are consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire. (see Figure 6.3.1: "Family Types Based on Conflict and Conformity Orientations").[11]

A **consensual family**12 is high in both conversation and conformity orientations, and they encourage open communication but also want to maintain the hierarchy within the family that puts parents above children. This creates some tension between a desire for both openness and control. Parents may reconcile this tension by hearing their children's opinions, making the ultimate decision themselves, and then explaining why they made the decision they did. A **pluralistic family**13 is high in conversation orientation and low in conformity. Open discussion is encouraged for all family members, and parents do not strive to control their children's or each other's behaviors or decisions. Instead, they value the life lessons that a family member can learn by spending time with non–family members or engaging in self-exploration. A **protective family**14 is low in conversation orientation and high in conformity, expects children to be obedient to parents, and does not value open communication. Parents make the ultimate decisions and may or may not feel the need to share their reasoning with their children. If a child questions a decision, a parent may simply respond with "Because I said so." A **laissez-faire family**15 is low in conversation and conformity orientations, has infrequent and/or short interactions, and doesn't discuss many topics. Remember that pluralistic families also have a low conformity orientation, which means they encourage children to make their own decisions in order to promote personal exploration and growth. Laissez-faire families are different in that parents don't have an investment in their children's decision making, and in general, members in this type of family are "emotionally divorced" from each other.16

Figure 6.3.1: Family Types Based on Conflict and Conformity Orientations

Key Takeaways

- There are many ways to define a family.
  - Structural definitions focus on form of families and have narrow criteria for membership.
  - Task-orientation definitions focus on behaviors like financial and emotional support.
  - Transactional definitions focus on the creation of subjective feelings of home, group identity, and a shared history and future.
- Family rituals include patterned interactions like a nightly dinner or bedtime ritual, family traditions like birthdays and vacations, and family celebrations like holidays and weddings.
- Conversation and conformity orientations play a role in the creation of family climates.
  - *Conversation orientation* refers to the degree to which family members interact and communicate about various topics.
  - *Conformity orientation* refers to the degree to which a family expects uniformity of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.
  - Conversation and conformity orientations intersect to create the following family climates: consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire.

Exercises

1. Of the three types of definitions for families (structural, task- orientation, or transactional), which is most important to you and why?
2. Identify and describe a ritual you have experienced for each of the following: patterned family interaction, family tradition, and family celebration. How did each of those come to be a ritual in your family?
3. Think of your own family and identify where you would fall on the conversation and conformity orientations. Provide at least one piece of evidence to support your decision.

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6.4: Romantic Relationships

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the influences on attraction and romantic partner selection.
- Discuss the differences between passionate, companionate, and romantic love.
- Explain how social networks affect romantic relationships.
- Explain how sexual orientation and race and ethnicity affect romantic relationships.

Romance has swept humans off their feet for hundreds of years, as is evidenced by countless odes written by love-struck poets, romance novels, and reality television shows like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. Whether pining for love in the pages of a diary or trying to find a soul mate from a cast of suitors, love and romance can seem to take us over at times. As we have learned, communication is the primary means by which we communicate emotion, and it is how we form, maintain, and end our relationships. In this section, we will explore the communicative aspects of romantic relationships including love, sex, social networks, and cultural influences.

Relationship Formation and Maintenance

Much of the research on romantic relationships distinguishes between premarital and marital couples. However, given the changes in marriage and the diversification of recognized ways to couple, I will use the following distinctions: dating, cohabitating, and partnered couples. The category for **dating couples** encompasses the courtship period, which may range from a first date through several years. Once a couple moves in together, they fit into the category of **cohabitating couple**. **Partnered couples** take additional steps to verbally, ceremonially, or legally claim their intentions to be together in a long-term committed relationship. The romantic relationships people have before they become partnered provide important foundations for later relationships. But how do we choose our romantic partners, and what communication patterns affect how these relationships come together and apart?

Family background, values, physical attractiveness, and communication styles are just some of the factors that influence our selection of romantic relationships.Chris Segrin and Jeanne Flora, *Family Communication* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 106. Attachment theory, as discussed earlier, relates to the bond that a child feels with their primary caregiver. Research has shown that the attachment style (secure, anxious, or avoidant) formed as a child influences adult romantic relationships. Other research shows that adolescents who feel like they have a reliable relationship with their parents feel more connection and attraction in their adult romantic relationships.1 Aside from attachment, which stems more from individual experiences as a child, relationship values, which stem more from societal expectations and norms, also affect romantic attraction.

We can see the important influence that communication has on the way we perceive relationships by examining the ways in which relational values have changed over recent decades. Over the course of the twentieth century, for example, the preference for chastity as a valued part of relationship selection decreased significantly. While people used to indicate that it was very important that the person they partner with not have had any previous sexual partners, today people list several characteristics they view as more important in mate selection.2 In addition, characteristics like income and cooking/ housekeeping skills were once more highly rated as qualities in a potential mate. Today, mutual attraction and love are the top mate-selection values.

In terms of mutual attraction, over the past sixty years, men and women have more frequently reported that physical attraction is an important aspect of mate selection. But what characteristics lead to physical attraction? Despite the saying that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” there is much research that indicates body and facial symmetry are the universal basics of judging attractiveness. Further, the **matching hypothesis** states that people with similar levels of attractiveness will pair together despite the fact that people may idealize fitness models or celebrities who appear very attractive.3 However, judgments of attractiveness are also communicative and not just physical. Other research has shown that verbal and nonverbal expressiveness are judged as attractive, meaning that a person’s ability to communicate in an engaging and dynamic way may be able to supplement for some lack of physical attractiveness. In order for a relationship to be successful, the people in it must be able to function with each other on a day-to-day basis, once the initial attraction stage is over. Similarity in preferences for fun activities and hobbies like attending sports and cultural events, relaxation, television and movie tastes, and socializing were correlated to more loving and well-maintained relationships. Similarity in role preference means that couples agree whether one or the other or both of them should engage in activities like indoor and outdoor housekeeping, cooking, and handling the finances and shopping. Couples who were not similar in these areas reported more conflict in their relationship.4

"Getting Critical" - Arranged Marriages

Although romantic love is considered a precursor to marriage in Western societies, this is not the case in other cultures. As was noted earlier, mutual attraction and love are the most important factors in mate selection in research conducted in the United States. In some other countries, like China, India, and Iran, mate selection is primarily decided by family members and may be based on the evaluation of a potential partner's health, financial assets, social status, or family connections. In some cases, families make financial arrangements to ensure the marriage takes place.

Think About It . . . Arranged Marriages

Ashvini Mashru is in an arranged marriage. You can listen to her tell her story here.

Research on marital satisfaction of people in autonomous (self-chosen) marriages and arranged marriages has been mixed, but a recent study found that there was no significant difference in marital satisfaction between individuals in marriages of choice in the United States and those in arranged marriages in India.Jane E. Myers, Jayamala Madathil, and Lynne R. Tingle, "Marriage Satisfaction and Wellness in India and the United States: A Preliminary Comparison of Arranged Marriages and Marriages of Choice," Journal of Counseling and Development 83 (2005): 183–87. While many people undoubtedly question whether a person can be happy in an arranged marriage, in more collectivistic (group-oriented) societies, accommodating family wishes may be more important than individual preferences. Rather than love leading up to a marriage, love is expected to grow as partners learn more about each other and adjust to their new lives together once married.

1. Do you think arranged marriages are ethical? Why or why not?
2. Try to step back and view both types of marriages from an outsider's perspective. The differences between the two types of marriage are fairly clear, but in what ways are marriages of choice and arranged marriages similar?
3. List potential benefits and drawbacks of marriages of choice and arranged marriages.

Love and Sexuality in Romantic Relationships

When most of us think of romantic relationships, we think about love. However, love did not need to be a part of a relationship for it to lead to marriage until recently. In fact, marriages in some cultures are still arranged based on pedigree (family history) or potential gain in money or power for the couple's families. Today, love often doesn't lead directly to a partnership, given that most people don't partner with their first love. Love, like all emotions, varies in intensity and is an important part of our interpersonal communication.

To better understand love, we can make a distinction between passionate love and companionate love.5 **Passionate love** entails an emotionally charged engagement between two people that can be both exhilarating and painful. For example, the thrill of falling for someone can be exhilarating, but feelings of vulnerability or anxiety that the love may not be reciprocated can be painful. **Companionate love** is affection felt between two people whose lives are interdependent. For example, romantic partners may come to find a stable and consistent love in their shared time and activities together. The main idea behind this distinction is that relationships that are based primarily on passionate love will terminate unless the passion cools overtime into a more enduring and stable companionate love. This doesn't mean that passion must completely die out for a relationship to be successful long term. In fact, a lack of passion could lead to boredom or dissatisfaction. Instead, many people enjoy the thrill of occasional passion in their relationship but may take solace in the security of a love that is more stable. While companionate love can also exist in close relationships with friends and family members, passionate love is often tied to sexuality present in romantic relationships.

There are many ways in which sexuality relates to romantic relationships and many opinions about the role that sexuality should play in relationships, but this discussion focuses on the role of sexuality in attraction and relational satisfaction. Compatibility in terms of sexual history and attitudes toward sexuality are more important predictors of relationship formation. For example, if a person finds out that a romantic interest has had a more extensive sexual history than their own, they may not feel compatible, which could lessen attraction.6 Once together, considerable research suggests that a couple's sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are linked such that sexually satisfied individuals report a higher quality relationship, including more love for their partner and more security in the future success of their relationship.7 While sexual activity often strengthens emotional bonds between romantic couples, it is clear that romantic emotional bonds can form in the absence of sexual activity and sexual activity is not the sole predictor of relational satisfaction. In fact, sexual communication may play just as important a role as sexual activity. **Sexual communication** deals with the initiation or refusal of sexual activity and communication about sexual likes and dislikes.8 For example, a sexual communication could involve a couple discussing a decision to abstain from sexual activity until a certain level of closeness or relational milestone (like marriage) has been reached. Sexual communication could also involve talking about

sexual likes and dislikes. **Sexual conflict** can result when couples disagree over frequency or type of sexual activities. Sexual conflict can also result from jealousy if one person believes their partner is focusing sexual thoughts or activities outside of the relationship. While we will discuss jealousy and cheating more in the section on the dark side of relationships, it is clear that love and sexuality play important roles in our romantic relationships.

Romantic Relationships and Social Networks

Social networks influence all our relationships but have gotten special attention in research on romantic relations. Romantic relationships are not separate from other interpersonal connections to friends and family. Is it better for a couple to share friends, have their own friends, or attempt a balance between the two? Overall, research shows that shared social networks are one of the strongest predictors of whether or not a relationship will continue or terminate.

Network overlap refers to the number of shared associations, including friends and family, that a couple has.9 For example, if Dan and Shereece are both close with Dan's sister Bernadette, and all three of them are friends with Kory, then those relationships completely overlap.

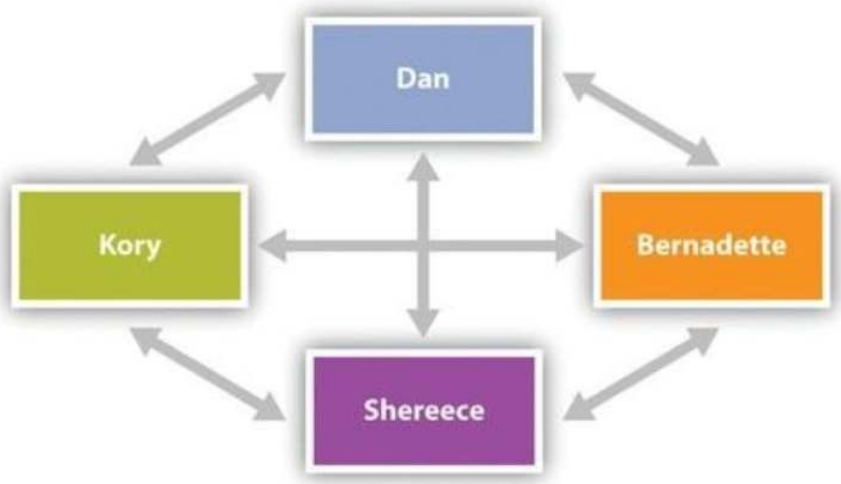

Figure 6.4.1: Network Overlap

Network overlap creates some structural and interpersonal elements that affect relational outcomes. Friends and family who are invested in both relational partners may be more likely to support the couple when one or both parties need it. In general, having more points of connection to provide instrumental support through the granting of favors or emotional support in the form of empathetic listening and validation during times of conflict can help a couple manage common stressors of relationships that may otherwise lead a partnership to deteriorate.10

In addition to providing a supporting structure, shared associations can also help create and sustain a positive relational culture. For example, mutual friends of a couple may validate the relationship by discussing the partners as a "couple" or "pair" and communicate their approval of the relationship to the couple separately or together, which creates and maintains a connection.11 Being in the company of mutual friends also creates positive feelings between the couple, as their attention is taken away from the mundane tasks of work and family life. Imagine Dan and Shereece host a board-game night with a few mutual friends in which Dan wows the crowd with charades, and Kory says to Shereece, "Wow, he's really on tonight. It's so fun to hang out with you two." That comment may refocus attention onto the mutually attractive qualities of the pair and validate their continued interdependence.

"Getting Plugged In" - Online Dating

It is becoming more common for people to initiate romantic relationships through the Internet, and online dating sites are big business, bringing in $470 million a year.Mary Madden and Amanda Lenhart, "Online Dating," Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 5, 2006, accessed September 13, 2011, http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media//.../Reports/2006/PIP_Online_Dating.pdf.pdf. Whether it's through sites like Match.com or OkCupid.com or through chat rooms or social networking, people are taking advantage of some of the conveniences of online dating. But what are the drawbacks?

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online dating?

2. What advice would you give a friend who is considering using online dating to help him or her be a more competent communicator?

Interdependence and relationship networks can also be illustrated through the **theory of triangles** (see Figure 6.4.2 "Theory of Triangles"), which examines the relationship between three domains of activity: the primary partnership (corner 1), the inner self (corner 2), and important outside interests (corner 3).[12]

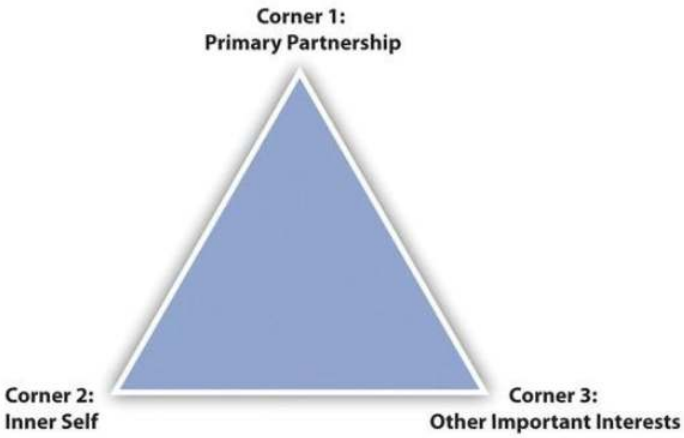

Figure 6.4.2: Theory of Triangles

All of the corners interact with each other, but it is the third corner that connects the primary partnership to an extended network. For example, the inner self (corner 2) is enriched by the primary partnership (corner 1) but also gains from associations that provide support or a chance for shared activities or recreation (corner 3) that help affirm a person's self-concept or identity. Additionally, the primary partnership (corner 1) is enriched by the third-corner associations that may fill gaps not met by the partnership. When those gaps are filled, a partner may be less likely to focus on what they're missing in their primary relationship. However, the third corner can also produce tension in a relationship if, for example, the other person in a primary partnership feels like they are competing with their partner's third-corner relationships. During times of conflict, one or both partners may increase their involvement in their third corner, which may have positive or negative effects. A strong romantic relationship is good, but research shows that even when couples are happily married they reported loneliness if they were not connected to friends. While the dynamics among the three corners change throughout a relationship, they are all important.

Key Takeaways

- Romantic relationships include dating, cohabitating, and partnered couples.
- Family background, values, physical attractiveness, and communication styles influence our attraction to and selection of romantic partners.
- Passionate, companionate, and romantic love and sexuality influence relationships.
- Network overlap is an important predictor of relational satisfaction and success.

Exercises

1. In terms of romantic attraction, which adage do you think is more true and why? "Birds of a feather flock together" or "Opposites attract."
2. List some examples of how you see passionate and companionate love play out in television shows or movies. Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of how love is experienced in romantic relationships? Why or why not?
3. Social network overlap affects a romantic relationship in many ways.
4. What are some positives and negatives of network overlap?

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6.5: Relationships at Work

Learning Objectives

- List the different types of workplace relationships.
- Describe the communication patterns in the supervisor-subordinate relationship.
- Describe the different types of peer coworker relationships.
- Evaluate the positives and negatives of workplace romances.

Although some careers require less interaction than others, all jobs require interpersonal communication skills. Shows like *The Office* and *The Apprentice* offer glimpses into the world of workplace relationships. These humorous examples often highlight the dysfunction that can occur within a workplace. Since many people spend as much time at work as they do with their family and friends, the workplace becomes a key site for relational development. The workplace relationships we'll discuss in this section include supervisor-subordinate relationships, workplace friendships, and workplace romances.[1]

Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships

Given that most workplaces are based on hierarchy, it is not surprising that relationships between supervisors and their subordinates develop.[2] The **supervisor-subordinate relationship** can be primarily based in mentoring, friendship, or romance and includes two people, one of whom has formal authority over the other. In any case, these relationships involve some communication challenges and rewards that are distinct from other workplace relationships.

Information exchange is an important part of any relationship, whether it is self- disclosure about personal issues or disclosing information about a workplace to a new employee. Supervisors are key providers of information, especially for newly hired employees who have to negotiate through much uncertainty as they are getting oriented. The role a supervisor plays in orienting a new employee is important, but it is not based on the same norm of reciprocity that many other relationships experience at their onset. On a first date, for example, people usually take turns communicating as they learn about each other. Supervisors, on the other hand, have information power because they possess information that the employees need to do their jobs. The imbalanced flow of communication in this instance is also evident in the supervisor's role as evaluator. Most supervisors are tasked with giving their employees formal and informal feedback on their job performance. In this role, positive feedback can motivate employees, but what happens when a supervisor has negative feedback? Research shows that supervisors are more likely to avoid giving negative feedback if possible, even though negative feedback has been shown to be more important than positive feedback for employee development. This can lead to strains in a relationship if behavior that is in need of correcting persists, potentially threatening the employer's business and the employee's job.

We're all aware that some supervisors are better than others and may have even experienced working under good and bad bosses. So what do workers want in a supervisor? Research has shown that employees more positively evaluate supervisors when they are of the same gender and race.[3] This isn't surprising, given that we've already learned that attraction is often based on similarity. In terms of age, however, employees prefer their supervisors be older than them, which is likely explained by the notion that knowledge and wisdom come from experience built over time. Additionally, employees are more satisfied with supervisors who exhibit a more controlling personality than their own, likely because of the trust that develops when an employee can trust that their supervisor can handle his or her responsibilities. Obviously, if a supervisor becomes coercive or is an annoying micromanager, the controlling has gone too far. High-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships in a workplace reduce employee turnover and have an overall positive impact on the organizational climate.[4] Another positive effect of high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships is the possibility of mentoring.

The mentoring relationship can be influential in establishing or advancing a person's career, and supervisors are often in a position to mentor select employees. In a **mentoring relationship**, one person functions as a guide, helping another navigate toward career goals.[5] Through workplace programs or initiatives sponsored by professional organizations, some mentoring relationships are formalized. Informal mentoring relationships develop as shared interests or goals bring two people together. Unlike regular relationships between a supervisor and subordinate that focus on a specific job or tasks related to a job, the mentoring relationship is more extensive. In fact, if a mentoring relationship succeeds, it is likely that the two people will be separated as the mentee is promoted within the organization or accepts a more advanced job elsewhere—especially if the mentoring relationship was formalized. Mentoring relationships can continue in spite of geographic distance, as many mentoring tasks can be completed via

electronic communication or through planned encounters at conferences or other professional gatherings. Supervisors aren't the only source of mentors, however, as peer coworkers can also serve in this role.

Workplace Friendships

Relationships in a workplace can range from someone you say hello to almost daily without knowing her or his name, to an acquaintance in another department, to your best friend that you go on vacations with. We've already learned that proximity plays an important role in determining our relationships, and most of us will spend much of our time at work in proximity to and sharing tasks with particular people. However, we do not become friends with all our coworkers.

As with other relationships, perceived similarity and self-disclosure play important roles in workplace relationship formation. Most coworkers are already in close proximity, but they may break down into smaller subgroups based on department, age, or even whether or not they are partnered or have children.[6] As individuals form relationships that extend beyond being acquaintances at work, they become peer coworkers. A **peer coworker relationship** refers to a workplace relationship between two people who have no formal authority over the other and are interdependent in some way. This is the most common type of interpersonal workplace relationship, given that most of us have many people we would consider peer coworkers and only one supervisor.[7]

Figure 6.5.1: Coworkers by Ali Yahya on Unsplash

Peer coworkers can be broken down into three categories: information, collegial, and special peers.[8] **Information peers** communicate about work-related topics only, and there is a low level of self-disclosure and trust. These are the most superficial of the peer coworker relationships, but that doesn't mean they are worthless. Almost all workplace relationships start as information peer relationships. As noted, information exchange is an important part of workplace relationships, and information peers can be very important in helping us through the day-to-day functioning of our jobs. We often form information peers with people based on a particular role they play within an organization. Communicating with a union representative, for example, would be an important information-based relationship for an employee. **Collegial peers** engage in more self-disclosure about work and personal topics and communicate emotional support. These peers also provide informal feedback through daily conversations that help the employee develop a professional identity.[9] In an average-sized workplace, an employee would likely have several people they consider collegial peers. **Special peers** have high levels of self-disclosure with relatively few limitations and are highly interdependent in terms of providing emotional and professional support for one another.[10] Special peer relationships are the rarest and mirror the intimate relationships we might have with a partner, close sibling, or parent. As some relationships with information peers grow toward collegial peers, elements of a friendship develop.

Even though we might not have a choice about whom we work with, we do choose who our friends at work will be. Coworker relationships move from strangers to friends much like other friendships. Perceived similarity may lead to more communication about workplace issues, which may lead to self-disclosure about non- work-related topics, moving a dyad from acquaintances to friends. Coworker friendships may then become closer as a result of personal or professional problems. For example, talking about family or romantic troubles with a coworker may lead to increased closeness as self- disclosure becomes deeper and more personal. Increased time together outside of work may also strengthen a workplace friendship.[11] Interestingly, research has shown that close friendships are more likely to develop among coworkers when they perceive their supervisor to be unfair or

unsupportive. In short, a bad boss apparently leads people to establish closer friendships with coworkers, perhaps as a way to get the functional and relational support they are missing from their supervisor.

Friendships between peer coworkers have many benefits, including making a workplace more intrinsically rewarding, helping manage job-related stress, and reducing employee turnover. Peer friendships may also supplement or take the place of more formal mentoring relationships.12 Coworker friendships also serve communicative functions, creating an information chain, as each person can convey information they know about what's going on in different areas of an organization and let each other know about opportunities for promotion or who to avoid. Friendships across departmental boundaries in particular have been shown to help an organization adapt to changing contexts. Workplace friendships may also have negative effects. Obviously information chains can be used for workplace gossip, which can be unproductive. Additionally, if a close friendship at work leads someone to continue to stay in a job that they don't like for the sake of the friendship, then the friendship is not serving the interests of either person or the organization. Although this section has focused on peer coworker friendships, some friendships have the potential to develop into workplace romances.

Romantic Workplace Relationships

Workplace romances involve two people who are emotionally and physically attracted to one another.13 We don't have to look far to find evidence that this relationship type is the most controversial of all the workplace relationships. For example, the president of the American Red Cross was fired in 2007 for having a personal relationship with a subordinate. That same year, the president of the World Bank resigned after controversy over a relationship with an employee.14 So what makes these relationships so problematic?

Some research supports the claim that workplace romances are bad for business, while other research claims workplace romances enhance employee satisfaction and productivity. Despite this controversy, workplace romances are not rare or isolated, as research shows 75 to 85 percent of people are affected by a romantic relationship at work as a participant or observer.15 People who are opposed to workplace romances cite several common reasons. More so than friendships, workplace romances bring into the office emotions that have the potential to become intense. This doesn't mesh well with a general belief that the workplace should not be an emotional space. Additionally, romance brings sexuality into workplaces that are supposed to be asexual, which also creates a gray area in which the line between sexual attraction and sexual harassment is blurred.16 People who support workplace relationships argue that companies shouldn't have a say in the personal lives of their employees and cite research showing that workplace romances increase productivity. Obviously, this is not a debate that we can settle here. Instead, let's examine some of the communicative elements that affect this relationship type.

Individuals may engage in workplace romances for many reasons, three of which are job motives, ego motives, and love motives.17 Job motives include gaining rewards such as power, money, or job security. Ego motives include the "thrill of the chase" and the self- esteem boost one may get. Love motives include the desire for genuine affection and companionship. Despite the motives, workplace romances impact coworkers, the individuals in the relationship, and workplace policies. Romances at work may fuel gossip, especially if the couple is trying to conceal their relationship. This could lead to hurt feelings, loss of trust, or even jealousy. If coworkers perceive the relationship is due to job motives, they may resent the appearance of favoritism and feel unfairly treated. The individuals in the relationship may experience positive effects such as increased satisfaction if they get to spend time together at work and may even be more productive. Romances between subordinates and supervisors are more likely to slow productivity. If a relationship begins to deteriorate, the individuals may experience more stress than other couples would, since they may be required to continue to work together daily.

Over the past couple decades, there has been a national discussion about whether or not organizations should have policies related to workplace relationships, and there are many different opinions. Company policies range from complete prohibition of romantic relationships, to policies that only specify supervisor-subordinate relationships as off-limits, to policies that don't prohibit but discourage love affairs in the workplace.18 One trend that seeks to find middle ground is the "love contract" or "dating waiver."19 This requires individuals who are romantically involved to disclose their relationship to the company and sign a document saying that it is consensual and they will not engage in favoritism. Some businesses are taking another route and encouraging workplace romances. Southwest Airlines, for example, allows employees of any status to date each other and even allows their employees to ask passengers out on a date. Other companies like AT&T and Ben and Jerry's have similar open policies.20

Key Takeaways

- The supervisor-subordinate relationship includes much information exchange that usually benefits the subordinate. However, these relationships also have the potential to create important mentoring opportunities.

- Peer coworker relationships range from those that are purely information based to those that are collegial and include many or all of the dimensions of a friendship.
- Workplace romances are controversial because they bring the potential for sexuality and intense emotions into the workplace, which many people find uncomfortable. However, research has shown that these relationships also increase employee satisfaction and productivity in some cases.

Exercises

1. Describe a relationship that you have had where you were either the mentor or the mentee. How did the relationship form? What did you and the other person gain from the relationship?
2. Think of a job you have had and try to identify someone you worked with who fit the characteristics of an information and a collegial peer. Why do you think the relationship with the information peer didn't grow to become a collegial peer? What led you to move from information peer to collegial peer with the other person? Remember that special peers are the rarest, so you may not have an experience with one. If you do, what set this person apart from other coworkers that led to such a close relationship?
3. If you were a business owner, what would your policy on workplace romances be and why?

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6.6: Culture and Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships are influenced by society and culture, and still today some people face discrimination based on who they love. Specifically, sexual orientation and race affect societal views of romantic relationships. Although the United States, as a whole, is becoming more accepting of gay and lesbian relationships, there is still a climate of prejudice and discrimination that individuals in same-gender romantic relationships must face. Despite some physical and virtual meeting places for gay and lesbian people, there are challenges for meeting and starting romantic relationships that are not experienced for most heterosexual people.1

Think About It . . . Marriage Equality

Watch this commercial, made by the organization GetUp! Australia. What do you think is the behind the scenes message that the creators were trying to convey?

As we've already discussed, romantic relationships are likely to begin due to merely being exposed to another person at work, through a friend, and so on. But some gay and lesbian people may feel pressured into or just feel more comfortable not disclosing or displaying their sexual orientation at work or perhaps even to some family and friends, which closes off important social networks through which most romantic relationships begin. This pressure to refrain from disclosing one's gay or lesbian sexual orientation in the workplace is not unfounded, as it is still legal in twenty-nine states (as of November 2012) to fire someone for being gay or lesbian.2 There are also some challenges faced by gay and lesbian partners regarding relationship termination. Gay and lesbian couples do not have the same legal and societal resources to manage their relationships as heterosexual couples; for example, gay and lesbian relationships are not legally recognized in most states, it is more difficult for a gay or lesbian couple to jointly own property or share custody of children than heterosexual couples, and there is little public funding for relationship counseling or couples therapy for gay and lesbian couples.

While this lack of barriers may make it easier for gay and lesbian partners to break out of an unhappy or unhealthy relationship, it could also lead couples to termination who may have been helped by the sociolegal support systems available to heterosexuals.3

Despite these challenges, relationships between gay and lesbian people are similar in other ways to those between heterosexuals. Gay, lesbian, and heterosexual people seek similar qualities in a potential mate, and once relationships are established, all these groups experience similar degrees of relational satisfaction.4 Despite the myth that one person plays the man and one plays the woman in a relationship, gay and lesbian partners do not have set preferences in terms of gender role. In fact, research shows that while women in heterosexual relationships tend to do more of the housework, gay and lesbian couples were more likely to divide tasks so that each person has an equal share of responsibility.5 A gay or lesbian couple doesn't necessarily constitute an intercultural relationship, but as we have already discussed, sexuality is an important part of an individual's identity and connects to larger social and cultural systems. Keeping in mind that identity and culture are complex, we can see that gay and lesbian relationships can also be intercultural if the partners are of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

While interracial relationships have occurred throughout history, there have been more historical taboos in the United States regarding relationships between African Americans and white people than other racial groups. **Antimiscegenation laws** were common in states and made it illegal for people of different racial/ethnic groups to marry. It wasn't until 1967 that the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Loving versus Virginia*, declaring these laws to be unconstitutional.6 It wasn't until 1998 and 2000, however, that South Carolina and Alabama removed such language from their state constitutions.7 The organization and website lovingday.org commemorates the landmark case and works to end racial prejudice through education.

Even after these changes, there were more Asian-white and Latino/a-white relationships than there were African American–white relationships.8 Having already discussed the importance of similarity in attraction to mates, it's important to note that partners in an interracial relationship, although culturally different, tend to be similar in occupation and income. This can likely be explained by the situational influences on our relationship formation we discussed earlier—namely, that work tends to be a starting ground for many of our relationships, and we usually work with people who have similar backgrounds to us.

There has been much research on interracial couples that counters the popular notion that partners may be less satisfied in their relationships due to cultural differences. In fact, relational satisfaction isn't significantly different for interracial partners, although the challenges they may face in finding acceptance from other people could lead to stressors that are not as strong for intracultural partners.Stanley O. Gaines Jr. and Kelly A. Brennan, "Establishing and Maintaining Satisfaction in Multicultural Relationships," in *Close Romantic Relationships: Maintenance and Enhancement*, eds. John Harvey and Amy Wenzel (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2011), 241. Although partners in interracial relationships certainly face challenges, there are positives. For example, some

mention that they've experienced personal growth by learning about their partner's cultural background, which helps them gain alternative perspectives. Specifically, white people in interracial relationships have cited an awareness of and empathy for racism that still exists, which they may not have been aware of before.[9]

Key Takeaways

- Studying intercultural communication, communication between people with differing cultural identities, can help us gain more self-awareness and be better able to communicate in a world with changing demographics and technologies.
- Intercultural relationships face some challenges in negotiating the dialectic between similarities and differences but can also produce rewards in terms of fostering self- and other awareness.

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6.7: The Dark Side of Relationships

Learning Objectives

- Define the dark side of relationships.
- Explain how lying affects relationships.
- Explain how sexual and emotional cheating affects relationships.
- Define the various types of interpersonal violence and explain how they are similar and different.

In the course of a given day, it is likely that we will encounter the light and dark sides of interpersonal relationships. So what constitutes the dark side of relationships? There are two dimensions of the **dark side of relationships**: one is the degree to which something is deemed acceptable or not by society; the other includes the degree to which something functions productively to improve a relationship or not.1 These dimensions become more complicated when we realize that there can be overlap between them, meaning that it may not always be easy to identify something as exclusively light or dark.

Some communication patterns may be viewed as appropriate by society but still serve a relationally destructive function. Our society generally presumes that increased understanding of a relationship and relational partner would benefit the relationship. However, numerous research studies have found that increased understanding of a relationship and relational partner may be negative. In fact, by avoiding discussing certain topics that might cause conflict, some couples create and sustain positive illusions about their relationship that may cover up a darker reality. Despite this, the couple may report that they are very satisfied with their relationship. In this case, the old saying "ignorance is bliss" seems appropriate. Likewise, communication that is presumed inappropriate by society may be productive for a given relationship.2 For example, our society ascribes to an ideology of openness that promotes honesty. However, as we will discuss more next, honesty may not always be the best policy. Lies intended to protect a relational partner (called **altruistic lies**) may net an overall positive result improving the functioning of a relationship.

Lying

It's important to start off this section by noting that lying doesn't always constitute a "dark side" of relationships. Although many people have a negative connotation of lying, we have all lied or concealed information in order to protect the feelings of someone else. One research study found that only 27 percent of the participants agreed that a successful relationship must include complete honesty, which shows there is an understanding that lying is a communicative reality in all relationships.3 Given this reality, it is important to understand the types of lies we tell and the motivations for and consequences of lying.

We tend to lie more during the initiating phase of a relationship.4 At this time, people may lie about their personality, past relationships, income, or skill sets as they engage in impression management and try to project themselves as likable and competent. For example, while on a first date, a person may lie and say they recently won an award at work. People sometimes rationalize these lies by exaggerating something that actually happened. So perhaps this person did get recognized at work, but it wasn't actually an award. Lying may be more frequent at this stage, too, because the two people don't know each other, meaning it's unlikely the other person would have any information that would contradict the statement or discover the lie. Aside from lying to make ourselves look better, we may also lie to make someone else feel better. Although trustworthiness and honesty have been listed by survey respondents as the most desired traits in a dating partner, total honesty in some situations could harm a relationship.5 Altruistic lies are lies told to build the self-esteem of our relational partner, communicate loyalty, or bend the truth to spare someone from hurtful information. Part of altruistic lying is telling people what they want to hear. For example, you might tell a friend that his painting is really pretty when you don't actually see the merit of it, or tell your mom you enjoyed her meatloaf when you really didn't. These other-oriented lies may help maintain a smooth relationship, but they could also become so prevalent that the receiver of the lies develops a skewed self-concept and is later hurt. If your friend goes to art school only to be heavily critiqued, did your altruistic lie contribute to that?

As we grow closer to someone, we lie less frequently, and the way we go about lying also changes. In fact, it becomes more common to conceal information than to verbally deceive someone outright. We could conceal information by avoiding communication about subjects that could lead to exposure of the lie. When we are asked a direct question that could expose a lie, we may respond equivocally, meaning we don't really answer a question.6

When we do engage in direct lying in our close relationships, there may be the need to tell supplemental lies to maintain the original lie. So what happens when we suspect or find out that someone is lying?

Research has found that we are a little better at detecting lies than random chance, with an average of about 54 percent detection.[7] In addition, couples who had been together for an average of four years were better at detecting lies in their partner than were friends they had recently made.[8] This shows that closeness can make us better lie detectors. But closeness can also lead some people to put the relationship above the need for the truth, meaning that a partner who suspects the other of lying might intentionally avoid a particular topic to avoid discovering a lie. Generally, people in close relationships also have a truth bias, meaning they think they know their relational partners and think positively of them, which predisposes them to believe their partner is telling the truth. Discovering lies can negatively affect both parties and the relationship as emotions are stirred up, feelings are hurt, trust and commitment are lessened, and perhaps revenge is sought.

Sexual and Emotional Cheating

Extradyadic romantic activity (ERA) includes sexual or emotional interaction with someone other than a primary romantic partner. Given that most romantic couples aim to have sexually exclusive relationships, ERA is commonly referred to as *cheating* or *infidelity* and viewed as destructive and wrong. Despite this common sentiment, ERA is not a rare occurrence. Comparing data from more than fifty research studies shows that about 30 percent of people report that they have cheated on a romantic partner, and there is good reason to assume that the actual number is higher than that.[9]

Although views of what is considered "cheating" vary among cultures and individual couples, sexual activity outside a primary partnership equates to cheating for most. Emotional infidelity is more of a gray area. While some individuals who are secure in their commitment to their partner may not be bothered by their partner's occasional flirting, others consider a double-glance by a partner at another attractive person a violation of the trust in the relationship. You only have to watch a few episodes of *The Jerry Springer Show* to see how actual or perceived infidelity can lead to jealousy, anger, and potentially violence. While research supports the general belief that infidelity leads to conflict, violence, and relational dissatisfaction, it also shows that there is a small percentage of relationships that are unaffected or improve following the discovery of infidelity.[10] This again shows the complexity of the dark side of relationships.

The increase in technology and personal media has made extradyadic relationships somewhat easier to conceal, since smartphones and laptops can be taken anywhere and people can communicate to fulfill emotional and/or sexual desires. In some cases, this may only be to live out a fantasy and may not extend beyond electronic communication. But is sexual or emotional computer-mediated communication considered cheating? You may recall the case of former Congressman Anthony Weiner, who resigned his position in the US House of Representatives after it was discovered that he was engaging in sexually explicit communication with people using Twitter, Facebook, and e-mail. The view of this type of communication as a dark side of relationships is evidenced by the pressure put on Weiner to resign. So what leads people to engage in ERA? Generally, ERA is triggered by jealousy, sexual desire, or revenge.[11]

Jealousy, as we will explore later, is a complicated part of the emotional dark side of interpersonal relationships. Jealousy may also motivate or justify ERA. Let's take the following case as an example. Julie and Mohammed have been together for five years. Mohammed's job as a corporate communication consultant involves travel to meet clients and attend conferences. Julie starts to become jealous when she meets some of Mohammed's new young and attractive coworkers. Julie's jealousy builds as she listens to Mohammed talk about the fun he had with them during his last business trip. The next time Mohammed goes out of town, Julie has a one-night-stand and begins to drop hints about it to Mohammed when he returns. In this case, Julie is engaging in counter-jealousy induction—meaning she cheated on Mohammed in order to elicit in him the same jealousy she feels. She may also use jealousy as a justification for her ERA, claiming that the jealous state induced by Mohammed's behavior caused her to cheat.

Sexual desire can also motivate or be used to justify ERA. Individuals may seek out sexual activity to boost their self-esteem or prove sexual attractiveness. In some cases, sexual incompatibility with a partner such as different sex drives or sexual interests can motivate or be used to justify ERA. Men and women may seek out sexual ERA for the thrill of sexual variety, and affairs can have short-term positive effects on emotional states as an individual relives the kind of passion that often sparks at the beginning of a relationship.[12] However, the sexual gratification and emotional exhilaration of an affair can give way to a variety of negative consequences for psychological and physical health. In terms of physical health, increased numbers of sexual partners increases one's risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and may increase the chance for unplanned pregnancy. While sexual desire is a strong physiological motive for ERA, revenge is a strong emotional motive.

Engaging in ERA to get revenge may result from a sense of betrayal by a partner and a desire to get back at them. In some cases, an individual may try to make the infidelity and the revenge more personal by engaging in ERA with a relative, friend, or ex of their partner. In general, people who would engage in this type of behavior are predisposed to negative reciprocity as a way to deal with

conflict and feel like getting back at someone is the best way to get justice. Whether it is motivated by jealousy, sexual desire, or revenge, ERA has the potential to stir up emotions from the dark side of relationships. Emotionally, anxiety about being "found out" and feelings of guilt and shame by the person who had the affair may be met with feelings of anger, jealousy, or betrayal from the other partner.

Anger and Aggression

We only have to look at some statistics to get a startling picture of violence and aggression in our society: 25 percent of workers are chronically angry; 60 percent of people experience hurt feelings more than once a month; 61 percent of children have experienced rejection at least once in the past month; 25 percent of women and 16 percent of men have been stalked; 46 percent of children have been hit, shoved, kicked, or tripped in the past month; and nearly two million people report being the victim of workplace violence each year.13 Violence and abuse definitely constitute a dark side of interpersonal relationships. Even though we often focus on the physical aspects of violence, communication plays an important role in contributing to, preventing, and understanding interpersonal violence. Unlike violence that is purely situational, like a mugging, interpersonal violence is constituted within ongoing relationships, and it is often not an isolated incident.14 Violence occurs in all types of relationships, but our discussion focuses on intimate partner violence and family violence.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to physical, verbal, and emotional violence that occurs between two people who are in or were recently in a romantic relationship. In order to understand the complexity of IPV, it is important to understand that there are three types: intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence.15 While control is often the cause of violence, it is usually short-term control (e.g., a threat to get you to turn over your money during a mugging). In **intimate terrorism (IT)**, one partner uses violence to have general control over the other. The quest for control takes the following forms: economic abuse by controlling access to money; using children by getting them on the abuser's side and turning them against the abused partner or threatening to hurt or take children away; keeping the abused partner in isolation from their friends and family; and emotional abuse by degrading self-esteem and intimidating the other partner.

Violent resistance (VR) is another type of violence between intimate partners and is often a reaction or response to intimate terrorism (IT). The key pattern in VR is that the person resisting uses violence as a response to a partner that is violent and controlling; however, the resistor is not attempting to control. In short, VR is most often triggered by living with an intimate terrorist. There are very clear and established gender influences on these two types of violence. The overwhelming majority of IT violence is committed by men and directed toward women, and most VR is committed by women and directed at men who are intimate terrorists. Statistics on violence show that more than one thousand women a year are killed by their male partners, while three hundred men are killed by their female partners, mostly as an act of violent resistance to ongoing intimate terrorism.16 The influence of gender on the third type of IPV is not as uneven.

Situational couple violence (SCV) is the most common type of IPV and does not involve a quest for control in the relationship. Instead, SCV is provoked by a particular situation that is emotional or difficult that leads someone to respond or react with violence. SCV can play out in many ways, ranging from more to less severe and isolated to frequent. Even if SCV is frequent and severe, the absence of a drive for control distinguishes it from intimate terrorism. This is the type of violence we most often imagine when we hear the term *domestic violence*. However, domestic violence doesn't capture the various ways that violence plays out between people, especially the way intimate terrorism weaves its way into all aspects of a relationship. Domestic violence also includes other types of abuse such as child-to- parent abuse, sibling abuse, and elder abuse.

Child abuse is another type of interpersonal violence that presents a serious problem in the United States, with over one million cases confirmed yearly by Child Protective Services.17 But what are the communicative aspects of child abuse? Research has found that one interaction pattern related to child abuse is evaluation and attribution of behavior.18 As you'll recall from our earlier discussion, attributions are links we make to identify the cause of a behavior. In the case of abusive parents, they are not as able to distinguish between mistakes and intentional behaviors, often seeing honest mistakes as intended and reacting negatively to the child. Abusive parents also communicate generally negative evaluations to their child by saying, for example, "You can't do anything right!" or "You're a bad girl." When children do exhibit positive behaviors, abusive parents are more likely to use external attributions, which diminish the achievement of the child by saying, for example, "You only won because the other team was off their game." In general, abusive parents have unpredictable reactions to their children's positive and negative behavior, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child. Other negative effects of child abuse include lower self-esteem and erratic or aggressive behavior. Although we most often think of children as the targets of violence, they can also be perpetrators.

Reports of adolescent-to-parent abuse are increasing, although there is no reliable statistic on how prevalent this form of domestic violence is, given that parents may be embarrassed to report it or may hope that they can handle the situation themselves without police intervention. Adolescent-to-parent abuse usually onsets between ages ten and fourteen.19 Mothers are more likely to be the target of this abuse than fathers, and when the abuse is directed at fathers, it most often comes from sons. Abusive adolescents may also direct their aggression at their siblings. Research shows that abusive adolescents are usually not reacting to abuse directed at them. Parents report that their children engage in verbal, emotional, and physical attacks in order to wear them down to get what they want.

While physical violence has great potential for causing injury or even death, psychological and emotional abuse can also be present in any relationship form. A statistic I found surprising states that almost all people have experienced at least one incident of psychological or verbal aggression from a current or past dating partner.20 Psychological abuse is most often carried out through **communicative aggression**, which is recurring verbal or nonverbal communication that significantly and negatively affects a person's sense of self. The following are examples of communicative aggression:21

- Degrading (humiliating, blaming, berating, name-calling)
- Physically or emotionally withdrawing (giving someone the cold shoulder, neglecting)
- Restricting another person's actions (over monitoring/controlling money or access to friends and family)
- Dominating (bossing around, controlling decisions)
- Threatening physical harm (threatening self, relational partner, or friends/family/pets of relational partner)

While incidents of communicative aggression might not reach the level of abuse found in an intimate terrorism situation, it is a pervasive form of abuse. Even though we may view physical or sexual abuse as the most harmful, research indicates that psychological abuse can be more damaging and have more wide- ranging and persistent effects than the other types of abuse.22 Psychological abuse can lead to higher rates of depression, anxiety, stress, eating disorders, and attempts at suicide. The discussion of the dark side of relationships shows us that communication can be hurtful on a variety of fronts.

"Getting Competent" - Handling Communicative Aggression at Work

Workplace bullying is a form of communicative aggression that occurs between coworkers as one employee (the bully) attempts to degrade, intimidate, or humiliate another employee (the target), and research shows that one in three adults has experienced workplace bullying. In fact, there is an organization called Civility Partners, LLC devoted to ending workplace bullying—you can visit their website at http://www.noworkplacebullies.com/home. This type of behavior has psychological and emotional consequences, but it also has the potential to damage a company's reputation and finances. While there are often mechanisms in place to help an employee deal with harassment—reporting to Human Resources for example—the situation may be trickier if the bully is your boss. In this case, many employees may be afraid to complain for fear of retaliation like getting fired, and transferring to another part of the company or getting another job altogether is a less viable option in a struggling economy. Apply the communication concepts you've learned so far to address the following questions.

1. How can you distinguish between a boss who is demanding or a perfectionist and a boss who is a bully?
2. If you were being bullied by someone at work, what would you do?

Key Takeaways

- The dark side of relationships exists in relation to the light side and includes actions that are deemed unacceptable by society at large and actions that are unproductive for those in the relationship.
- Lying does not always constitute a dark side of relationships, as altruistic lies may do more good than harm. However, the closer a relationship, the more potential there is for lying to have negative effects.
- Extradyadic romantic activity involves sexual or emotional contact with someone other than a primary romantic partner and is most often considered cheating or infidelity and can result in jealousy, anger, or aggression.
- There are three main types of intimate partner violence (IPV).
  - Intimate terrorism (IT) involves violence used to have general control over the other person.
  - Violent resistance (VR) is usually a response or reaction to violence from an intimate terrorist.
  - Situational couple violence (SCV) is the most common type of IPV and is a reaction to stressful situations and does not involve a quest for control.
- Communicative aggression is recurring verbal or nonverbal communication that negatively affects another person's sense of self and can take the form of verbal, psychological, or emotional abuse.

Exercises

1. Describe a situation in which lying affected one of your interpersonal relationships. What was the purpose of the lie and how did the lie affect the relationship?
2. How do you think technology has affected extradyadic romantic activity?
3. Getting integrated: In what ways might the "dark side of relationships" manifest in your personal relationships in academic contexts, professional contexts, and civic contexts?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Appendix

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the relationship between new media and the self.
- Identify positive and negative impacts of new media on our interpersonal relationships.

Think about some ways that new media have changed the way you think about yourself and the way you think about and interact in your relationships. Have you ever given your Facebook page a “once-over” before you send or accept a friend request just to make sure that the content displayed is giving off the desired impression? The technological changes of the past twenty years have affected you and your relationships whether you are a heavy user or not. Even people who don’t engage with technology as much as others are still affected by it, since the people they interact with use and are affected by new media to varying degrees.

7.1: New Media and the Self
7.2: New Media and Interpersonal Relationships
7.3: “Getting Competent” - Using Social Media Competently
7.4: Key Takeaways
7.5: Exercises

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7.1: New Media and the Self

The explicit way we become conscious of self-presentation when using new media, social networking sites (SNSs) in particular, may lead to an increase in self- consciousness. You'll recall we talked about the role that communication plays in helping us meet our identity needs and, the role that self-discrepancy theory plays in self-perception. The things that we "like" on Facebook, the pictures we are tagged in, and the news stories or jokes that we share on our timeline all come together to create a database of information that new and old friends can access to form and reform impressions of us. Because we know that others are making impressions based on this database of information and because we have control over most of what appears in this database, people may become over-focused on crafting their online presence to the point that they neglect their offline relationships. This extra level of self-consciousness has also manifested in an increase in self-image and self-esteem issues for some users. For example, some cosmetic surgeons have noted an uptick in patients coming in to have facial surgeries or procedures specifically because they don't like the way their chin looks on the webcam while chatting on Skype or because they feel self-conscious about the way they look in the numerous digital pictures that are now passed around and stored on new media. Since new media are being increasingly used in professional capacities, some people are also seeking cosmetic surgery or procedures as a way of investing in their personal brand or as a way of giving them an edge in a tight job market.1

The personal and social nature of new media also creates an openness that isn't necessarily part of our offline social reality. Although some people try to address this problem by creating more than one Facebook account, according to the terms of use we all agreed to, we are not allowed to create more than one personal profile. People may also have difficulty managing their different commitments, especially if they develop a dependence on or even addiction to new media devices and/or platforms. New media blur the lines between personal and professional in many ways, which can be positive and negative. For example, the constant connection offered by laptops and smartphones increases the expectation that people will continue working from home or while on vacation. At the same time, however, people may use new media for non-work-related purposes while at work, which may help even out the work/life balance. **Cyberslacking**, which is the non-work- related use of new media while on the job, is seen as a problem in many organizations and workplaces. However, some research shows that occasional use of new media for personal reasons while at work can have positive effects, as it may relieve boredom, help reduce stress, or lead to greater job satisfaction.2

Personal media devices bring with them a sense of **constant connectivity** that makes us "reachable" nearly all the time and can be comforting or anxiety inducing. Devices such as smartphones and computers, and platforms such as e-mail, Facebook, and the web, are within an arm's reach of many people. While this can be convenient and make things more efficient in some cases, it can also create a dependence that we might not be aware of until those connections are broken or become unreliable. You don't have to look too far to see people buried in their smartphones, tablets, or laptops all around. While some people have learned to rely on peripheral vision in order to text and walk at the same time, others aren't so graceful. In fact, London saw the creation of a "text safe" street with padding on street signs and lamp poles to help prevent injuries when people inevitably bump into them while engrossed in their gadgets' screens.

Texting and Walking

Follow this link to read a story in *Time* magazine and see a picture of the street.

Additionally, a survey conducted in the United Kingdom found that being away from social networks causes more anxiety than being a user of them. Another study found that 73 percent of people would panic if they lost their smartphone.3

Of course, social media can also increase self-esteem or have other social benefits. A recent survey of fifteen thousand women found that 48 percent of the respondents felt that social media helped them stay in touch with others while also adding a little stress in terms of overstimulation. Forty-two percent didn't mention the stress of overstimulation and focused more on the positive effects of being in touch with others and the world in general. When asked about how social media affects their social lives, 30 percent of the women felt that increased use of social media helped them be more social offline as well.4 Other research supports this finding for both genders, finding that Facebook can help people with social anxiety feel more confident and socially connected.5

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7.2: New Media and Interpersonal Relationships

How do new media affect our interpersonal relationships, if at all? This is a question that has been addressed by scholars, commentators, and people in general. To provide some perspective, similar questions and concerns have been raised along with each major change in communication technology. New media, however, have been the primary communication change of the past few generations, which likely accounts for the attention they receive. Some scholars in sociology have decried the negative effects of new technology on society and relationships in particular, saying that the quality of relationships is deteriorating and the strength of connections is weakening.1

Facebook greatly influenced our use of the word *friend*, although people's conceptions of the word may not have changed as much. When someone "friends you" on Facebook, it doesn't automatically mean that you now have the closeness and intimacy that you have with some offline friends. And research shows that people don't regularly accept friend requests from or send them to people they haven't met, preferring instead to have met a person at least once.2 Some users, though, especially adolescents, engage in what is called "friend-collecting behavior," which entails users friending people they don't know personally or that they wouldn't talk to in person in order to increase the size of their online network.3 As we will discuss later, this could be an impression management strategy, as the user may assume that a large number of Facebook friends will make him or her appear more popular to others.

Although many have critiqued the watering down of the term *friend* when applied to SNSs, specifically Facebook, some scholars have explored how the creation of these networks affects our interpersonal relationships and may even restructure how we think about our relationships. Even though a person may have hundreds of Facebook friends that he or she doesn't regularly interact with on- or offline, just knowing that the network exists in a somewhat tangible form (catalogued on Facebook) can be comforting. Even the people who are distant acquaintances but are "friends" on Facebook can serve important functions. Rather than Facebook users seeing these connections as pointless, frivolous, or stressful, they are often comforting background presences. A **dormant network** is a network of people with whom users may not feel obligated to explicitly interact but may find comfort in knowing the connections exist. Such networks can be beneficial, because when needed, a person may be able to more easily tap into that dormant network than they would an offline extended network. It's almost like being friends on Facebook keeps the communication line open, because both people can view the other's profile and keep up with their lives even without directly communicating. This can help sustain tenuous friendships or past friendships and prevent them from fading away is a common occurrence as we go through various life changes.

A key part of interpersonal communication is impression management, and some forms of new media allow us more tools for presenting ourselves than others. Social networking sites (SNSs) in many ways are platforms for self-presentation. Even more than blogs, web pages, and smartphones, the environment on an SNS like Facebook or Twitter facilitates self-disclosure in a directed way and allows others who have access to our profile to see our other "friends." This convergence of different groups of people (close friends, family, acquaintances, friends of friends, colleagues, and strangers) can present challenges for self-presentation. Although Facebook is often thought of as a social media outlet for teens and young adults, research shows half of all US adults have a profile on Facebook or another SNS.4 The fact that Facebook is expanding to different generations of users has coined a new phrase—"the graying of Facebook." This is due to a large increase in users over the age of fifty-five. In fact, it has been stated the fastest-growing Facebook user group is women fifty-five and older, which is up more than 175 percent since fall 2008.5 So now we likely have people from personal, professional, and academic contexts in our Facebook network, and those people are now more likely than ever to be from multiple generations. The growing diversity of our social media networks creates new challenges as we try to engage in impression management.

We should be aware that people form impressions of us based not just on what we post on our profiles but also on our friends and the content that they post on our profiles. In short, as in our offline lives, we are judged online by the company we keep.6 The difference is, though, that via Facebook a person (unless blocked or limited by privacy settings) can see our entire online social network and friends, which doesn't happen offline. The information on our

Facebook profiles is also archived, meaning there is a record the likes of which doesn't exist in offline interactions. Recent research found that a person's perception of a profile owner's attractiveness is influenced by the attractiveness of the friends shown on the profile. In short, a profile owner is judged more physically attractive when his or her friends are judged as physically attractive, and vice versa. The profile owner is also judged as more socially attractive (likable, friendly) when his or her friends are judged as physically attractive. The study also found that complimentary and friendly statements made about profile owners on their wall or on profile comments increased perceptions of the profile owner's social attractiveness and credibility. An interesting, but not

surprising, gender double standard also emerged. When statements containing sexual remarks or references to the profile owner's excessive drinking were posted on the profile, perceptions of attractiveness increased if the profile owner was male and decreased if female.[7]

Self-disclosure is a fundamental building block of interpersonal relationships, and new media make self-disclosures easier for many people because of the lack of immediacy, meaning the fact that a message is sent through electronic means arouses less anxiety or inhibition than would a face-to-face exchange. SNSs provide opportunities for social support. Research has found that Facebook communication behaviors such as "friending" someone or responding to a request posted on someone's wall lead people to feel a sense of attachment and perceive that others are reliable and helpful.[8] Much of the research on Facebook, though, has focused on the less intimate alliances that we maintain through social media. Since most people maintain offline contact with their close friends and family, Facebook is more of a supplement to interpersonal communication. Since most people's Facebook "friend" networks are composed primarily of people with whom they have less face-to-face contact in their daily lives, Facebook provides an alternative space for interaction that can more easily fit into a person's busy schedule or interest area. For example, to stay connected, both people don't have to look at each other's profiles simultaneously. I often catch up on a friend by scrolling through a couple weeks of timeline posts rather than checking in daily.

The space provided by SNSs can also help reduce some of the stress we feel in regards to relational maintenance or staying in touch by allowing for more convenient contact. The expectations for regular contact with our Facebook friends who are in our extended network are minimal. An occasional comment on a photo or status update or an even easier click on the "like" button can help maintain those relationships. However, when we post something asking for information, help, social support, or advice, those in the extended network may play a more important role and allow us to access resources and viewpoints beyond those in our closer circles. And research shows that many people ask for informational help through their status updates.[9]

These extended networks serve important purposes, one of which is to provide access to new information and different perspectives than those we may get from close friends and family. For example, since we tend to have significant others that are more similar to than different from us, the people that we are closest to are likely to share many or most of our beliefs, attitudes, and values. Extended contacts, however, may expose us to different political views or new sources of information, which can help broaden our perspectives. The content in this section hopefully captures what I'm sure you have already experienced in your own engagement with new media—that new media have important implications for our interpersonal relationships. Given that, we will end this chapter with a "Getting Competent" feature box that discusses some tips on how to competently use social media.

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7.3: “Getting Competent” - Using Social Media Competently

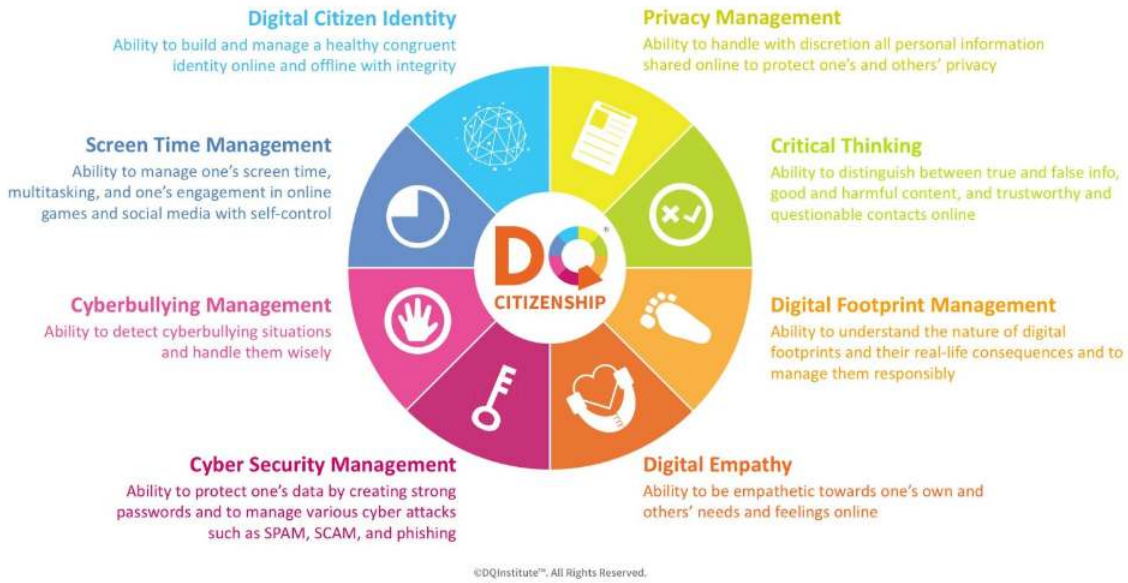

Figure 7.3.1: How to be a Good Digital Citizen is used under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

We all have a growing log of personal information stored on the Internet, and some of it is under our control and some of it isn’t. We also have increasingly diverse social networks that require us to be cognizant of the information we make available and how we present ourselves. While we can’t control all the information about ourselves online or the impressions people form, we can more competently engage with social media so that we are getting the most out of it in both personal and professional contexts.

A quick search on Google for “social media dos and don’ts” will yield around 100,000 results, which shows that there’s no shortage of advice about how to competently use social media. I’ll offer some of the most important dos and don’ts that I found that relate to communication. Feel free to do your own research on specific areas of concern.

Be consistent. Given that most people have multiple social media accounts, it’s important to have some degree of consistency. At least at the top level of your profile (the part that isn’t limited by privacy settings), include information that you don’t mind anyone seeing.

Know what’s out there. Since the top level of many social media sites are visible in Google search results, you should monitor how these appear to others by regularly (about once a month) doing a Google search using various iterations of your name. Putting your name in quotation marks will help target your results. Make sure you’re logged out of all your accounts and then click on the various results to see what others can see.

Think before you post. Software that enable people to take “screen shots” or download videos and tools that archive web pages can be used without our knowledge to create records of what you post. While it is still a good idea to go through your online content and “clean up” materials that may form unfavorable impressions, it is even a better idea to not put that information out there in the first place. Posting something about how you hate school or your job or a specific person may be done in the heat of the moment and forgotten, but a potential employer might find that information and form a negative impression even if it’s months or years old.

Be familiar with privacy settings. If you are trying to expand your social network, it may be counterproductive to put your Facebook or Twitter account on “lockdown,” but it is beneficial to know what levels of control you have and to take advantage of them. For example, I have a “Limited Profile” list on Facebook to which I assign new contacts or people with whom I am not very close. You can also create groups of contacts on various social media sites so that only certain people see certain information.

Be a gatekeeper for your network. Do not accept friend requests or followers that you do not know. Not only could these requests be sent from “bots” that might skim your personal info or monitor your activity; they could be from people that might make you look bad. Remember, we learned earlier that people form impressions based on those with whom we are connected. You can always send a private message to someone asking how he or she knows you or do some research by Googling his or her name or username.

1. Identify information that you might want to limit for each of the following audiences: friends, family, and employers.

2. Google your name (remember to use multiple forms and to put them in quotation marks). Do the same with any usernames that are associated with your name (e.g., you can Google your Twitter handle or an e-mail address). What information came up? Were you surprised by anything?
3. What strategies can you use to help manage the impressions you form on social media?

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7.4: Key Takeaways

- New media affect the self as we develop a higher degree of self- consciousness due to the increased visibility of our lives (including pictures, life events, and communication). The constant connectivity that comes with new media can also help us feel more connected to others and create anxiety due to overstimulation or a fear of being cut off.
- New media affect interpersonal relationships, as conceptions of relationships are influenced by new points of connection such as “being Facebook friends.” While some people have critiqued social media for lessening the importance of face-to-face interaction, some communication scholars have found that online networks provide important opportunities to stay connected, receive emotional support, and broaden our perspectives in ways that traditional offline networks do not.
- Getting integrated: Social networking sites (SNSs) can present interpersonal challenges related to self-disclosure and self-presentation since we use them in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts. Given that people from all those contexts may have access to our profile, we have to be competent in regards to what we disclose and how we present ourselves to people from different contexts (or be really good at managing privacy settings so that only certain information is available to certain people).

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7.5: Exercises

1. Discuss the notion that social media has increased our degree of self- consciousness. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Do you find the constant connectivity that comes with personal media overstimulating or comforting?
3. Have you noticed a “graying” of social media like Facebook and Twitter in your own networks? What opportunities and challenges are presented by intergenerational interactions on social media?

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