

## ACC Interpersonal Communication



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# Introduction

## COM 1250 Interpersonal Communication: SS3

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Welcome, Students, to Interpersonal Communication at Arapahoe Community College. This free, Open Education Resource (OER) textbook was compiled and accessibly designed especially for our Communication student scholars. The following chapters will cover topics such as effective listening, gender equality, culture and identity, and managing conflict. There are Key Terms and Exercises to help you better understand some examples, concepts, figures, tables, and videos. Plus you will find references by social scientists and experts in the field of human communication throughout each

chapter. We hope you will become a more effective and thoughtful communicator after reading this textbook!

PART I  
CHAPTER ONE



# Learning Objectives

- Define interpersonal communication and distinguish it from other forms of communication.
- Explain the importance of interpersonal communication in personal and professional life.
- Identify the key components of the interpersonal communication process.
- Describe the various models of interpersonal communication.
- Understand the key principles of interpersonal communication.

# I. 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 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 want 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

## 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

- 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?
- 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

# 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.<sup>5</sup> 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. 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.

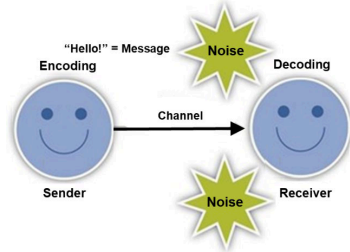


Figure 1.1 The Transmission Model of Communication – Sender (encoding) speaks “Hello!” (message channel) to the receiver (decoding) amongst noise.

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.

## Interaction Model of Communication

The **interaction model of communication**<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

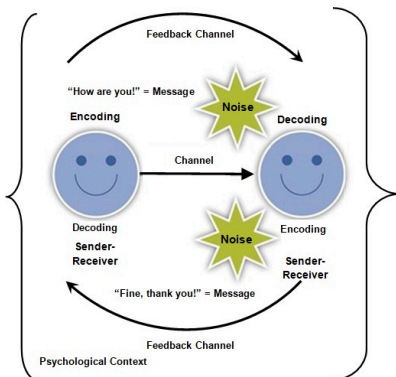


Figure 1.3 The Interaction Model of Communication

In physical and psychological context the sender (encoding) speaks “Hello!” (message channel) to the receiver (decoding) amongst noise. A feedback channel goes between them “Fine, thank you.”

**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.<sup>8</sup>

To review, each model incorporates a different understanding of what communication is and what communication does. The transmission model views communication as a thing, like an information packet, that is sent from one place to another. From this view, communication is defined as sending and receiving messages. The interaction model views communication as an interaction in which a message is sent and then followed by a reaction (feedback), which is then followed by another reaction, and so on. From this view, communication is defined as producing conversations and interactions within physical communities. In short, we don't communicate about our realities; communication helps to construct our realities 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 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.

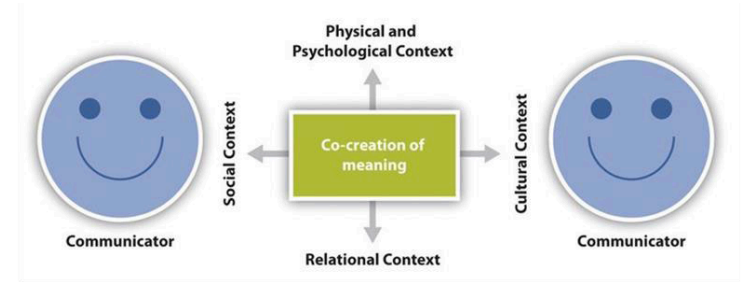


Figure 1.4 Communicators – Two communicators with a co-creation of meaning of meaning of social, relational, cultural, physical, and psychological context.

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 may 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

- 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?

- What communication situations does the transmission model best represent? The interaction model? The transaction model?
- 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).

# 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?

### **Think About It . . . *Solitary Confinement***

*Watch Life in Solitary Confinement 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.

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.<sup>15</sup> 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. The well-known scholar Erving Goffman compared self- presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts.<sup>16</sup> 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 1.6 Woman in Orange by Alex 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.<sup>17</sup> Visit the AiCi website and read about image consulting, including the “How to Choose,” “How to Become,” and “FAQs” sections. Then consider the following questions:

- If you were to hire an image consultant for yourself, what would you have them “work on” for you? Why?
- 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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. 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. The influential scholar Erving Goffman compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts.<sup>24</sup> 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),<sup>25</sup>.

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.<sup>25</sup>

**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:

Person	Statement
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:

Person	Statement
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

- 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?
- Identify some physical, instrumental, relational, and identity needs that communication helps you meet in a given day.
- 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?
- 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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PART II  
CHAPTER TWO



# 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 self-no perception.
- Discuss how social norms, family, culture, and media influence self-no 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.

# I. 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.**<sup>27</sup>

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

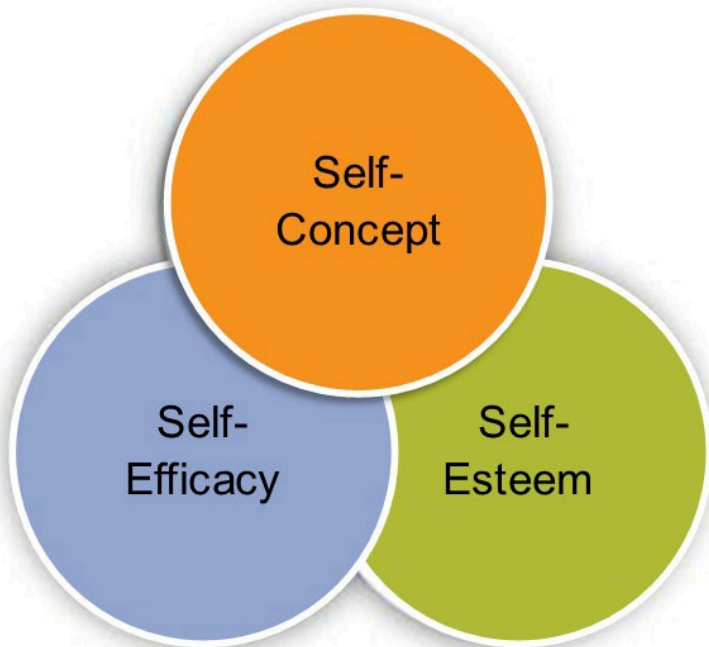
**Self-esteem** refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is a more specifically an evaluation of the self.<sup>28</sup> If I again prompted you to "Tell me who you are," and then asked you to evaluate (label 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> As you can see in Figure 2.1 “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 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.

## 2. Self-Discrepancy Theory

**Self-discrepancy theory**<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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



*Figure 2.2 Reading to very young children helps shape their perception of the world and view of self. Photo by Picsea on Unsplash*

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

Parents and peers shape our self-perceptions in positive and negative ways. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can lead to positive views of self.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> 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-no 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**<sup>28</sup>, meaning that we tend to emphasize our desirable qualities relative to other people.<sup>39</sup> 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.



Figure 2.3 Three Women Performing a Traditional Dance by Pavan Gupta on Unsplash

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.<sup>40</sup>

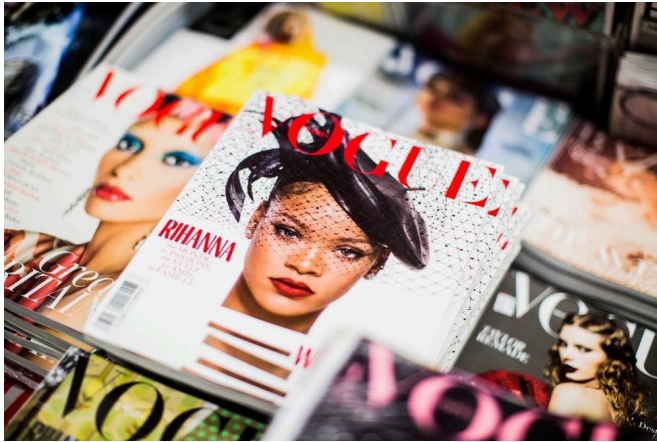
Race also plays a role in self-perception. For example, positive self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to be higher in African American adolescent girls than Caucasian girls.<sup>41</sup> In fact, more recent studies have discounted much of the early research on race and self-esteem that purported that 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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> In terms of actual and ideal selves, men and women in a variety of countries both described their ideal self as more masculine.<sup>44</sup> 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



*Figure 2.4 Vogue by Charisse Kenion on Unsplash.*

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.<sup>45</sup> Aside from overall attractiveness, the media also offers narrow representations of acceptable body weight.

Researchers have found that only 12 percent of prime-time characters are overweight, which is dramatically less than the national statistics for obesity among the actual US population.<sup>46</sup> 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 2.5 Photoshopping women in magazines 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

- How do you think the media influences your self-perception and body image?
- 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?
- 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?

## 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup>

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.<sup>51</sup>

There are two main types of self-presentation: prosocial and self-serving.<sup>52</sup> **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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

## 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

- 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?

- 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?
- 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.
- 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.

# 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-perception 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.<sup>55</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup>

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.

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.<sup>59</sup>

### *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."

# 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>



Figure 2.6 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.<sup>63</sup> 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 2.7 “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.

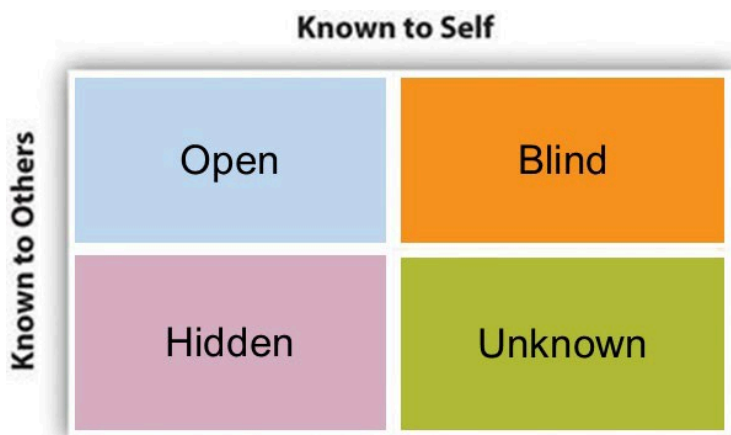


Figure 2.7 Johari Window. Source: Joseph Luft, *Of Human Interaction* (Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books, 1969).

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.

## 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup>

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.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup>

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.<sup>70</sup> 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!<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup>

## 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

- 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?
- 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?
- Under what circumstances is it OK to share information that someone has disclosed to you?
- Under what circumstances is it not OK to share the information?

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PART III

# CHAPTER THREE



# Learning Objectives

- Define perception.
- Discuss how salience influences the selection of perceptual information.
- Explain the ways in which we organize perceptual information.
- Discuss the role of schemata in the interpretation of perceptual information.

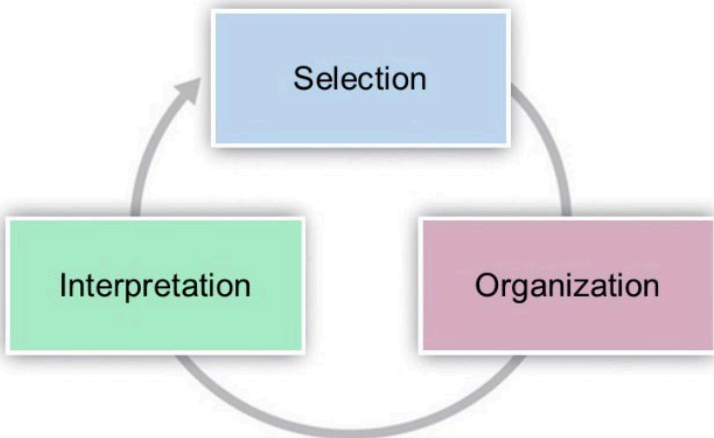
# I. Perception Process

**Perception** is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This process, which is shown in Figure 3.1 includes the perception of select stimuli that pass through our perceptual filters, are organized into our existing structures and patterns, and are then interpreted based on previous experiences. Although perception is a largely cognitive and psychological process, how we perceive the people and objects around us affects our communication. We respond differently to an object or person that we perceive favorably than we do to something we find unfavorable. But how do we filter through the mass amounts of incoming information, organize it, and make meaning from what makes it through our perceptual filters and into our social realities?

## Selecting Information

We take in information through all five of our senses, but our perceptual field (the world around us) includes so many stimuli that it is impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all. So, as information comes in through our senses, various factors influence what actually continues on through the perception process. Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 1991). **Selecting** is the first part of the perception process, in which we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information. Think about how, out of many other possible stimuli to pay attention to, you may hear a familiar voice in the hallway, see a pair of shoes you want to buy from across the mall, or smell something cooking for dinner when you get home

from work. We quickly cut through and push to the background all kinds of sights, smells, sounds, and other stimuli, but how do we decide what to select and what to leave out?



*Figure 3.1 The Perception Process*

We tend to pay attention to information that is salient. **Salience** is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. The thing attracting our attention can be abstract, like a concept, or concrete, like an object. For example, a person's identity as a Native American may become salient when they are protesting at the Columbus Day parade

in Denver, Colorado. Or a bright flashlight shining in your face while camping at night is sure to be salient. The degree of salience depends on three features. Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 1991), 186. We tend to find salient things that are visually or aurally stimulating and things that meet our needs or interests. Lastly, expectations affect what we find salient.

## Visual and Aural Stimulation

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

## Needs and Interests

We tend to pay attention to information that we perceive to meet our needs or interests in some way. This type of selective attention can help us meet instrumental needs and get things done. When you need t

- o speak with a financial aid officer about your scholarships and loans, you sit in the waiting room and listen for your name to be called. Paying close attention to whose name is called means you can be ready to start your meeting and hopefully get your business handled. When we don't think certain messages meet our needs, stimuli

that would normally get our attention may be completely lost.

Imagine you are in the grocery store and you hear someone say your name. You turn around, only to hear that person say, “Finally! I said your name three times. I thought you forgot who I was!” A few seconds before, when you were focused on figuring out which kind of orange juice to get, you were attending to the various pulp options to the point that you tuned other stimuli out, even something as familiar as the sound of someone calling your name.

Whether a sign helps us find the nearest gas station, the sound of a ringtone helps us find our missing cell phone, or a speaker tells us how avoiding processed foods will improve our health, we select and attend to

information that meets our needs.

We also find salient information that interests us. Of course, many times, stimuli that meet our needs are also interesting, but it’s worth discussing these two items separately because sometimes we find things interesting that don’t necessarily meet our needs. I’m sure we’ve all gotten sucked into a television show, video game, or random project and paid attention to that at the expense of something that actually meets our needs like cleaning or spending time with a significant other. Paying attention to things that interest us but don’t meet specific needs seems like the basic formula for procrastination that we are all familiar with.

In many cases we know what interests us and we automatically gravitate toward stimuli that match up with that. For example, as you filter through radio stations, you likely already have an idea of what kind of music interests you and will stop on a station playing something in that genre while skipping right past stations playing something you aren’t interested in. Because of this tendency, we often have to end up being forced into

or accidentally experiencing something new in order to create or discover new interests. For example, you may not realize you are interested in Asian history until you are required to take such a course and have an engaging professor who sparks that interest in you. Or you may accidentally stumble on a new area of interest when you take a class you wouldn't otherwise because it fits into your schedule. As communicators, you can take advantage of this perceptual tendency by adapting your topic and content to the interests of your audience.

## Expectations

The relationship between salience and expectations is a little more complex. Basically, we can find expected things salient and find things that are unexpected salient. While this may sound

confusing, a couple examples should illustrate this point. If you are expecting a package to be delivered, you might pick up on the slightest noise of a truck engine or someone's footsteps approaching your front door. Since we expect something to happen, we may be extra tuned in to clues that it is coming. In terms of the unexpected, if you have a shy and soft-spoken friend who you overhear raising the volume and pitch of his voice while talking to another friend, you may pick up on that and assume that something out of the ordinary is going on. For something unexpected to become salient, it has to reach a certain threshold of difference. If you walked into your regular class and there were one or two more students there than normal, you may not even notice. If you walked into your class and there was someone dressed up as a wizard, you would probably notice. So, if we expect to experience

something out of the routine, like a package delivery, we will find stimuli related to that expectation salient. If we experience something that we weren't expecting and that is significantly different from our routine experiences, then we will likely find it salient.

There is a middle area where slight deviations from routine experiences may go unnoticed because we aren't expecting them. To go back to the earlier example, if you aren't expecting a package, and you regularly hear vehicle engines and sidewalk foot traffic outside your house, those pretty routine sounds wouldn't be as likely to catch your attention, even if it were slightly more or less traffic than expected. This is because our expectations are often based on previous experience and patterns we have observed and internalized, which allows our brains to go on "autopilot" sometimes and fill in things that are missing or overlook extra things. Look at the following sentence and read it aloud: Perception is based on patterns, meaning we often reach a conclusion without considering each individual element. This example illustrates a test of our expectation and an annoyance to every college student. We have all had the experience of getting a paper back with typos and spelling errors circled. This can be frustrating, especially if we actually took the time to proofread.

Since we know what to expect when we see a certain pattern of letters, and know what comes next in a sentence since we wrote the paper, we don't take the time to look at each letter as we proofread. This can lead us to overlook common typos and spelling errors, even if we proofread something multiple times. Now that we know

how we select stimuli, let's turn our attention to how we organize the information we receive.

## Organizing Information

**Organizing** is the second part of the perception process, in which we sort and categorize information that we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns. Three ways we sort things into patterns are by using proximity, similarity, and difference. Stanley Coren, “Principles of Perceptual Organization and Spatial Distortion: The Gestalt Illusions,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 6, no. 3 (1980): 404–12. In terms of proximity, we tend to think that things that are close together go together. For example, have you ever been waiting to be helped in a business and the clerk assumes that you and the person standing beside you are together? The slightly awkward moment usually ends when you and the other person in line look at each other, then back at the clerk, and one of you explains that you are not together. Even though you may have never met that other person in your life, the clerk used a basic perceptual organizing cue to group you together because you were standing in proximity to one another.

We also group things together based on similarity

y. We tend to think similar-looking or similar-acting things belong together. I have two friends that I occasionally go out with, and we are all three males, around the same age, of the same race, with short hair and glasses. Aside from that, we don’t really look alike, but on more than one occasion a server at a restaurant has assumed that we’re brothers. Despite the fact that many of our other features are different, the salient features are organized based on similarity and the three of us are suddenly related.



*Figure 3.3 Since we organize perceptual information based on proximity, a person may perceive that two people are together, just because they are standing close together in line. © Thinkstock*

We also organize information that we take in based on difference. In this case, we assume that the item that looks or acts different from the rest doesn't belong with the group. Perceptual errors involving people and assumptions of difference can be especially awkward, if not offensive. My friend's mother, who is Vietnamese American, was attending a conference at which another attendee assumed she was a hotel worker and asked her to throw something away for her. In this case, my friend's mother was a person of color at a convention with mostly white attendees, so an impression was formed based on the other person's perception of this difference.

These strategies for organizing information are so common that they are built into how we teach our children basic skills and how we function in our daily lives. I'm sure we all had to look at pictures in grade school and determine which things went together and which thing didn't belong. If you think of the literal act of organizing something, like your desk at home or work, we follow these same strategies. You may have one drawer for pens, pencils, and other supplies and another drawer for files. In this case you are grouping items based on similarities and

differences. You may also group things based on proximity, for example, by putting financial items like your checkbook, a calculator, and your pay stubs in one area so you can update your budget efficiently. In summary, we simplify information and look for patterns to help us more efficiently communicate and get through life.

Simplification and categorizing based on patterns isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, without this capability we would likely not have the ability to speak, read, or engage in other complex cognitive/behavioral functions. Our brain innately categorizes and files information and experiences away for later retrieval, and different parts of the brain are responsible for different sensory experiences. In short, it is natural for things to group together in some ways. There are differences among people, and looking for patterns helps us in many practical ways. However, the judgments we place on various patterns and categories are not natural; they are learned and culturally and contextually relative. Our perceptual patterns do become unproductive and even unethical when the judgments we associate with certain patterns are based on stereotypical or prejudicial thinking.

We also organize interactions and interpersonal experiences based on our firsthand experiences. When two people experience the same encounter differently, misunderstandings and conflict may result.

**Punctuation** refers to the structuring of information into a timeline to determine the cause (stimulus) and effect (response) of our communication interactions. Allan L. Sillars, "Attributions and Communication in Roommate Conflicts," *Communication Monographs* 47, no. 3 (1980): 180–200.

Applying this concept to interpersonal conflict can help us see how the perception process extends beyond the

individual to the interpersonal level. This concept also helps illustrate how organization and interpretation can happen together and how interpretation can influence how we organize information and vice versa.

Where does a conflict begin and end? The answer to this question depends on how the people involved in the conflict punctuate, or structure, their conflict experience. Punctuation differences can often escalate conflict, which can lead to a variety of relationship problems. *Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson, Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1967), 56.* For example, Linda and Joe are on a project team at work and have a deadline approaching. Linda has been working on the project over the weekend in anticipation of her meeting with Joe first thing Monday morning. She has had some questions along the way and has e-mailed Joe for clarification and input, but he hasn't responded. On Monday morning, Linda walks into the meeting room, sees Joe, and says, "I've been working on this project all weekend and needed your help. I e-mailed you three times! What were you doing?" Joe responds, "I had no idea you e-mailed me. I was gone all weekend on a camping trip." In this instance, the conflict started for Linda two days ago and has just started for Joe. So, for the two of them to most effectively manage this conflict, they need to communicate so that their punctuation, or where the conflict started for each one, is clear and matches up. In this example, Linda made an impression about Joe's level of commitment to the project based on an interpretation she made after selecting and organizing incoming information. Being aware of punctuation is an important part of perception checking, which we will discuss later. Let's now

take a closer look at how interpretation plays into the perception process.

## Interpreting Information

Although selecting and organizing incoming stimuli happens very quickly, and sometimes without much conscious thought, **interpretation** can be a much more deliberate and conscious step in the perception process. Interpretation is the third part of the perception process, in which we assign meaning to our experiences using mental structures known as schemata. **Schemata** are like databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences. We all have fairly complicated schemata that have developed over time as small units of information combine to make more meaningful complexes of information.

We have an overall schema about education and how to interpret experiences with teachers and classmates. This schema started developing before we even went to preschool based on things that parents, peers, and the media told us about school. For example, you learned that certain symbols and objects like an apple, a ruler, a calculator, and a notebook are associated with being a student or teacher. You learned new concepts like grades and recess, and you engaged in new practices like doing homework, studying, and taking tests. You also formed new relationships with teachers, administrators, and classmates. As you progressed through your education, your schema adapted to the changing environment. How smooth or troubling schema reevaluation and revision is varies from situation to situation and person to person. For example, some students adapt their schema relatively

easily as they move from elementary, to middle, to high school, and on to college and are faced with new expectations for behavior and academic engagement.

Other students don't adapt as easily, and holding onto their old schema creates problems as they try to interpret new information through old, incompatible schema. We've all been in a similar situation at some point in our lives, so we know that revising our schemata can be stressful and that such revision takes effort and usually involves some mistakes, disappointments, and frustrations. But being able to adapt our schemata is a sign of cognitive complexity, which is an important part of communication competence. So, even though the process may be challenging, it can also be a time for learning and growth.

It's important to be aware of schemata because our interpretations affect our behavior. For example, if you are doing a group project for class and you perceive a group member to be shy based on your schema of how shy people communicate, you may avoid giving him presentation responsibilities in your group project because you do not think shy people make good public speakers. Schemata also guide our interactions, providing a script for our behaviors. We know, in general, how to act and communicate in a waiting room, in a classroom, on a first date, and on a game show. Even a person who has never been on a game show can develop a schema for how to act in that environment by watching *The Price Is Right*, for example. People go to great lengths to make shirts with clever sayings or act enthusiastically in hopes of being picked to be a part of the studio audience and hopefully become a contestant on the show.

As we have seen, schemata are used to interpret others' behavior and form impressions about who they are as a person. To help this process along, we often

solicit information from people to help us place them into a preexisting schema.

In the United States and many other Western cultures, people's identities are often closely tied to what they do for a living. When we introduce others, or ourselves, occupation is usually one

of the first things we mention. Think about how your communication with someone might differ if he or she were introduced to you as an artist versus a doctor. We make similar interpretations based on where people are from, their age, their race, and other social and cultural factors. We will learn more about how culture, gender, and other factors influence our perceptions as we continue through the chapter. In summary, we have schemata about individuals, groups, places, and things, and these schemata filter our perceptions before, during, and after interactions. As schemata are retrieved from memory, they are executed, like computer programs or apps on your smartphone, to help us interpret the world around us. Just like computer programs and apps must be regularly updated to improve their functioning, competent communicators update and adapt their schemata as they have new experiences.



*Figure 3.5 We often include what we do for a living in our self-introductions, which then provides a schema through which others interpret our communication. © Thinkstock*

- What communication skills do you think are key for a law enforcement officer to have in order to do their job effectively and why?
- Describe an encounter that you have had with a law enforcement officer (if you haven't had a direct experience you can use a hypothetical or fictional example). What were your perceptions of the officer? What do you think his or her perceptions were of you? What schemata do you think contributed to each of your interpretations?
- What perceptual errors create potential ethical challenges in law enforcement? For example, how should the organizing principles of proximity, similarity, and difference be employed?



A TED element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://pressbooks.ccconline.org/accinterpersonal/?p=116>

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This process affects our communication because we respond to stimuli differently, whether they are objects or persons, based on how we perceive them.
- Given the massive amounts of stimuli taken in by our senses, we only select a portion of the incoming information to organize and interpret. We select information based on salience. We tend to find salient things that are visually or aurally stimulating and things that meet our needs and interests. Expectations also influence what information we select.
- We organize information that we select into patterns based on proximity, similarity, and difference.
- We interpret information using schemata, which allow us to

assign meaning to information based on accumulated knowledge and previous experience.

## EXERCISES

- Take a moment to look around wherever you are right now. Take in the perceptual field around you. What is salient for you in this moment and why? Explain the degree of salience using the three reasons for salience discussed in this section.
- As we organize information (sensory information, objects, and people) we simplify and categorize information into patterns. Identify some cases in which this aspect of the perception process is beneficial. Identify some cases in which it could be harmful or negative.
- Getting integrated: Think about some of the schemata you have that help you make sense of the world around you. For each of the following contexts—academic, professional, personal, and civic—identify a schema that you commonly rely on or think you will rely on. For each schema you identified note a few ways that it has already been challenged or may be challenged in the future.

## 2. Perceiving Others

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Differentiate between internal and external attributions.
- Explain two common perceptual errors: the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias.
- Discuss how the primacy and recency effects relate to first and last impressions.
- Discuss how physical and environmental factors influence perception.
- Explain the horn and halo effects.
- Recognize the roles that culture and personality play in the perception of others.

Are you a good judge of character? How quickly can you “size someone up?” Interestingly, research shows that many people are surprisingly accurate at predicting how an interaction with someone will unfold based on initial impressions. Fascinating research has also been done on the ability of people to make a judgment about a person’s competence after as little as 100 milliseconds of exposure to politicians’ faces. Even more surprising is that people’s judgments of competence, after exposure to two candidates for senate elections, accurately predicted election outcomes. Charles C. Ballew II and Alexander Todorov, “Predicting Political Elections from Rapid and Unreflective Face Judgments,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 46 (2007): 17948. In short, after only minimal exposure to a candidate’s facial expressions, people made judgments about the person’s competence, and those candidates

judged more competent were people who actually won elections! As you read this section, keep in mind that these principles apply to how you perceive others and to how others perceive you. Just as others make impressions on us, we make impressions on others. We have already learned how the perception process works in terms of selecting, organizing, and interpreting. In this section, we will focus on how we perceive others, with specific attention to how we interpret our perceptions of others.

## Attribution and Interpretation

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

## *Attribution*

In most interactions, we are constantly running an attribution script in our minds, which essentially tries to come up with explanations for what is happening. Why did my neighbor slam the door when she saw me walking down the hall? Why is my partner being extra nice to me today? Why did my officemate miss our project team meeting this morning? In general, we seek to attribute the cause of others' behaviors to internal or external factors. **Internal attributions** connect the cause of behaviors to personal aspects such as personality traits. **External attributions** connect the cause of behaviors to situational factors. Attributions are important to consider because our reactions to others' behaviors are strongly influenced by the explanations we reach. Imagine that Gloria and Jerry are dating. One day, Jerry gets frustrated and raises his voice to Gloria. She may find that behavior more offensive and even consider breaking up with him if she attributes the cause of the blow up to his personality, since personality traits are usually fairly stable and difficult to control or change.

Conversely, Gloria may be more forgiving if she attributes the cause of his behavior to situational factors beyond Jerry's control, since external factors are usually temporary. If she makes an internal attribution, Gloria may think, "Wow, this person is really a loose cannon. Who knows when he will lose it again?" If she makes an external attribution, she may think, "Jerry has been under a lot of pressure to meet deadlines at work and hasn't been getting much sleep. Once this project is over, I'm sure he'll be more relaxed." This process of attribution is ongoing, and, as with many aspects of perception, we are sometimes aware of the attributions we make, and sometimes they are automatic and/or unconscious. Attribution has received much scholarly

attention because it is in this part of the perception process that some of the most common perceptual errors or biases occur.

One of the most common perceptual errors is the **fundamental attribution error**, which refers to our tendency to explain others' behaviors using internal rather than external attributions. Allan L. Sillars, "Attributions and Communication in Roommate Conflicts," *Communication Monographs* 47, no. 3 (1980): 183. For example, when I worked at an urban college in Denver, Colorado, I often had students come into class irritated, saying, "I got a parking ticket! I can't believe those people. Why don't they get a real job and stop ruining my life!" If you Google some clips from the reality television show *Parking Wars*, you will see the ire that people often direct at parking enforcement officers. In this case, illegally parked students attribute the cause of their situation to the malevolence of the parking officer, essentially saying they got a ticket because the officer was a mean/bad person, which is an internal attribution. Students were much less likely to acknowledge that the officer was just doing his or her job (an external attribution) and the ticket was a result of the student's decision to park illegally.

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

error and the self-serving bias together, we can see that we are likely to judge ourselves more favorably than another person, or at least less personally.

The professor-student relationship offers a good case example of how these concepts can play out. I have often heard students who earned an unsatisfactory grade on an assignment attribute that grade to the strictness, unfairness, or incompetence of their professor. I have also heard professors attribute a poor grade to the student's laziness, attitude, or intelligence. In both cases, the behavior is explained using an internal attribution and is an example of the fundamental attribution error. Students may further attribute their poor grade to their busy schedule or other external, situational factors rather than their lack of motivation, interest, or preparation (internal attributions). On the other hand, when students get a good grade on a paper, they will likely attribute that cause to their intelligence or hard work rather than an easy assignment or an "easy grading" professor. Both of these examples illustrate the self-serving bias. These psychological processes have implications for our communication because when we attribute causality to another person's personality, we tend to have a stronger emotional reaction and tend to assume that this personality characteristic is stable, which may lead us to avoid communication with the person or to react negatively. Now that you are aware of these common errors, you can monitor them more and engage in perception checking, which we will learn more about later, to verify your attributions.

## Impressions and Interpretation

As we perceive others, we make impressions about their

personality, likeability, attractiveness, and other characteristics. Although much of our impressions are personal, what forms them is sometimes based more on circumstances than personal characteristics. All the information we take in isn't treated equally. How important are first impressions? Does the last thing you notice about a person stick with you longer because it's more recent? Do we tend to remember the positive or negative things we notice about a person? This section will help answer these questions, as we explore how the timing of information and the content of the messages we receive can influence our perception.

### *First and Last Impressions*

The old saying “You never get a second chance to make a good impression” points to the fact that first impressions matter. The brain is a predictive organ in that it wants to know, based on previous experiences and patterns, what to expect next, and first impressions function to fill this need, allowing us to determine how we will proceed with an interaction after only a quick assessment of the person with whom we are interacting. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 280. Research shows that people are surprisingly good at making accurate first impressions about how an interaction will unfold and at identifying personality characteristics of people they do not know. Studies show that people are generally able to predict how another person will behave toward them based on an initial interaction. People's accuracy and ability to predict interaction based on first impressions vary, but people with high accuracy are typically socially skilled and popular and have less loneliness, anxiety, and

depression; more satisfying relationships; and more senior positions and higher salaries. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 281. So not only do first impressions matter, but having the ability to form accurate first impressions seems to correlate to many other positive characteristics.

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

The **recency effect** leads us to put more weight on the most recent impression we have of a person's communication over earlier impressions. Even a positive first impression can be tarnished by a negative final impression. Imagine that a professor has maintained a relatively high level of credibility with you over the course of the semester. She made a good first impression by being organized, approachable, and interesting during the first days of class. The rest of the semester went fairly well with no major conflicts. However, during the last week of the term, she didn't have final papers graded

and ready to turn back by the time she said she would, which left you with some uncertainty about how well you needed to do on the final exam to earn an A in the class. When you did get your paper back, on the last day of class, you saw that your grade was much lower than you expected. If this happened to you, what would you write on the instructor evaluation? Because of the recency effect, many students would likely give a disproportionate amount of value to the professor's actions in the final week of the semester, negatively skewing the evaluation, which is supposed to be reflective of the entire semester. Even though the professor only returned one assignment late, that fact is very recent in students' minds and can overshadow the positive impression that formed many weeks earlier.

### *Physical and Environmental Influences on Perception*

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

You would likely be able to offer some descriptors of how a person would look and act from the following categories: a goth person, a prep, a jock, a fashionista, a hipster. The schema associated with these various cliques or styles are formed through personal experience and through exposure to media representations of these groups. Different professions also have schema for appearance and dress.

Imagine a doctor, mechanic, congressperson, exotic

dancer, or mail carrier. Each group has clothing and personal styles that create and fit into general patterns. Of course, the mental picture we have of any of the examples above is not going to be representative of the whole group, meaning that stereotypical thinking often exists within our schema. We will learn more about the negative effects of stereotypical thinking later in the chapter, but it's important to understand how persuasive various physical perceptual influences can be.

Think about the harm that has been done when people pose as police or doctors to commit crimes or other acts of malice. Seeing someone in a white lab coat automatically leads us to see that person as an authority figure, and we fall into a scripted pattern of deferring to the “doctor” and not asking too many questions. The Milgram experiments offer a startling example of how powerful these influences are. In the experiments, participants followed instructions from a man in a white lab coat (who was actually an actor), who prompted them to deliver electric shocks to a person in another room every time the other person answered a memory question incorrectly. The experiment was actually about how people defer to authority figures instead of acting independently. Although no one was actually being shocked in the other room, many participants continued to “shock,” at very high levels of voltage, the other person even after that person supposedly being shocked complained of chest pains and became unresponsive. Gregorio Billikopf Encina, “Milgram’s Experiment on Obedience to Authority,” *The Regents of the University of California*, 2003, accessed June 6, 2012, <http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7article/article35.htm>.

Just as clothing and personal style help us form impressions of others, so do physical body features. The degree to which we perceive people to be attractive

influences our attitudes about and communication with them. Facial attractiveness and body weight tend to be common features used in the perception of physical attractiveness. In general people find symmetrical faces and nonoverweight bodies attractive. People perceived as attractive are generally evaluated more positively and seen as more kind and competent than people evaluated as less attractive. Additionally, people rated as attractive receive more eye contact, more smiles, and closer proximity to others (people stand closer to them). Unlike clothing and personal style, these physical features are more difficult, if not impossible, to change.



*Figure 3.8 Clothing, like a doctor's lab coat, forms powerful impressions that have noticeable effects on people's behavior. © Thinkstock*

Finally, the material objects and people that surround a person influence our perception. In the MTV show *Room Raiders*, contestants go into the bedrooms of three potential dates and choose the one they want to go on the date with based on the

impressions made while examining each potential date's cleanliness, decorations, clothes, trophies and awards, books, music, and so on. Research supports the reliability of such impressions, as people have been shown to make reasonably accurate judgments about a person's personality after viewing his or her office or bedroom. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 282. Although the artificial scenario set up in *Room Raiders* doesn't exactly match up with typical encounters, the link between environmental cues and perception is important enough for many companies to create policies about what can and can't be displayed in personal office spaces.

It would seem odd for a bank manager to have an *Animal House* poster hanging in his office, and that would definitely influence customers' perceptions of the manager's personality and credibility. The arrangement of furniture also creates impressions. Walking into a meeting and sitting on one end of a long boardroom table is typically less inviting than sitting at a round table or on a sofa.

Although some physical and environmental features are easier to change than others, it is useful to become aware of how these factors, which aren't necessarily related to personality or verbal and nonverbal communication, shape our perceptions. These early impressions also affect how we interpret and perceive later encounters, which can be further explained through the halo and horn effects.

### *The Halo and Horn Effects*

We have a tendency to adapt information that conflicts

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

The **halo effect** occurs when initial positive perceptions lead us to view later interactions as positive. The **horn effect** occurs when initial negative perceptions lead us to view later interactions as negative. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 281. Since impressions are especially important when a person is navigating the job market, let's imagine how the horn and halo effects could play out for a recent college graduate looking to land her first real job. Nell has recently graduated with her degree in communication studies and is looking to start her career as a corporate trainer. If one of Nell's professors has a relationship with an executive at an area business, his positive verbal recommendation will likely result in a halo effect for Nell. Since the executive thinks highly of his friend the professor, and the professor thinks highly of Nell, then the executive will start his interaction with Nell with a positive impression and interpret her behaviors more positively than he would otherwise. The halo effect initiated by the professor's recommendation may even lead the executive to dismiss or overlook some negative behaviors. Let's say Nell doesn't have a third party to help make a connection and arrives late for her interview. That negative impression may create a horn effect that carries through the interview. Even if Nell presents as competent and friendly, the negative first impression could lead the executive to minimize or ignore those positive characteristics, and the company may not hire her.

### **Culture, Personality, and Perception**

Our cultural identities and our personalities affect our perceptions. Sometimes we are conscious of the effects and sometimes we are not. In either case, we have a tendency to favor others who exhibit cultural or personality traits that match up with our own. This tendency is so strong that it often leads us to assume that people we like are more similar to us than they actually are. Knowing more about how these forces influence our perceptions can help us become more aware of and competent in regards to the impressions we form of others.

### **Culture**

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

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

- **Sight.** People in different cultures “read” art in different ways, differing in terms of where they start to look at an image and the types of information they perceive and process.
- **Sound.** “Atonal” music in some Asian cultures is displeasing to some; it is uncomfortable to people who aren’t taught that these combinations of sounds are pleasing.
- **Touch.** In some cultures it would be very offensive for a man to touch—even tap on the shoulder—a woman who isn’t a relative.
- **Taste.** Tastes for foods vary greatly around the world. “Stinky tofu,” which is a favorite snack of people in Taipei, Taiwan’s famous night market, would likely be very off-putting in terms of taste and smell to many foreign tourists.
- **Smell.** While US Americans spend considerable effort to mask natural body odor, which we typically find unpleasant, with soaps, sprays, and lotions, some other cultures would not find unpleasant or even notice what we consider “b.o.” Those same cultures may find a US American’s “clean” (soapy, perfumed, deodorized) smell unpleasant.

Aside from differences in reactions to basic information we take in through our senses, there is also cultural variation in how we perceive more complicated constructs, like marriage, politics, and privacy. In May of 2012, French citizens elected a new president. François Hollande moved into the presidential palace with his partner of five years, Valerie Trierweiler. They are the first unmarried couple in the country’s history to occupy the presidential palace. Maa de la Baume, “First Lady without a Portfolio (or a Ring) Seeks Her Own Path,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 2012, accessed June 6, 2012, <http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7article/article35.htm>.

Even though new census statistics show that more unmarried couples are living together than ever before in the United States, many still disapprove of the practice, and it is hard to imagine a US president in a similar

circumstance as France's Hollande. Other places like Saudi Arabia and the Vatican have strong cultural aversions to such a practice, which could present problems when France's first couple travels abroad.

As we've already learned, our brain processes information by putting it into categories and looking for predictability and patterns. The previous examples have covered how we do this with sensory information and with more abstract concepts like marriage and politics, but we also do this with people. When we categorize people, we generally view them as "like us" or "not like us." This simple us/them split affects subsequent interaction, including impressions and attributions. For example, we tend to view people we perceive to be like us as more trustworthy, friendly, and honest than people we perceive to be not like us. Marilynn B. Brewer, "The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love or Outgroup Hate?" *Journal of Social Issues* 55, no. 3 (1999): 429–44.

We are also more likely to use internal attribution to explain negative behavior of people we perceive to be different from us. If a person of a different race cuts another driver off in traffic, the driver is even more likely to attribute that action to the other driver's internal qualities (thinking, for example, "He or she is inconsiderate and reckless!") than they would someone of their own race. Having such inflexible categories can have negative consequences, and later we will discuss how forcing people into rigid categories leads to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Of course, race isn't the only marker of difference that influences our perceptions, and the problem with our rough categorization of people into "like us" and "not like us" categories is that these differences aren't really as easy to perceive as we think. We cannot always tell whether or not someone is culturally like us through visual cues.

For some cultural identities, like sexual orientation and ability, our awareness of any differences may only come when the other person discloses their identity to us.

You no doubt frequently hear people talking and writing about the “vast differences” between men and women. Whether it’s communication, athletic ability, expressing emotions, or perception, people will line up to say that women are one way and men are the other way. While it is true that gender affects our perception, the reason for this difference stems more from social norms than genetic, physical, or psychological differences between men and women. We are socialized to perceive differences between men and women, which leads us to exaggerate and amplify what differences there actually are. Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/ St Martin’s, 2007), 93. We basically see the stereotypes and differences we are told to see, which helps to create a reality in which gender differences are “obvious.” However, numerous research studies have found that, especially in relation to multiple aspects of communication, men and women communicate much more similarly than differently. In summary, various cultural identities shape how we perceive others because beliefs, attitudes, and values of the cultural groups to which we belong are incorporated into our schema. Our personalities also present interesting perceptual advantages and challenges that we will now discuss.

## *Personality*

I occasionally have potential employers of students I have taught or supervised call me to do “employment verifications” during which they ask general questions

about the applicant. While they may ask a few questions about intellectual ability or academic performance, they typically ask questions that try to create a personality profile of the applicant. They basically want to know what kind of leader, coworker, and person he or she is. This is a smart move on their part, because our personalities greatly influence how we see ourselves in the world and how we perceive and interact with others.

**Personality** refers to a person's general way of thinking, feeling, and behaving based on underlying motivations and impulses. Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's, 2007), 95. These underlying motivations and impulses form our personality traits. Personality traits are "underlying," but they are fairly enduring once a person reaches adulthood. That is not to say that people's personalities do not change, but major changes in personality are not common unless they result from some form of trauma. Although personality scholars believe there are thousands of personalities, they all comprise some combination of the same few traits. Much research has been done on personality traits, and the "Big Five" that are most commonly discussed are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. Robert R. McCrea, "Trait Psychology and Culture," *Journal of Personality* 69, no. 6 (2001): 825. These five traits appear to be representative of personalities across cultures, and you can read more about what each of these traits entails below. If you are interested in how you rank in terms of personality traits, there are many online tests you can take. A Big Five test can be taken at the following website: <http://www.outofservice.com/bigfive>.

## *The Big Five Personality Traits*

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

Scholarship related to personality serves many purposes, and some of them tie directly to perception. Corporations and television studios spend millions of dollars on developing personality profiles and personality testing. Corporations can make hiring and promotion decisions based on personality test results, which can save them money and time if they can weed

out those who don't "fit" the position before they get in the door and drain resources. Television studios make casting decisions based on personality profiles because they know that certain personalities evoke strong and specific reactions from viewers. Think about the reality television stars that you love to root for, want to see lose, and can't stand to look at or look away from. Shows like *Celebrity Rehab* intentionally cast fading stars who already have strong personalities and emotional and addiction issues in order to create the kind of human train wrecks that attract millions of viewers. So why does this work?

It is likely that you have more in common with that reality TV star than you care to admit. We tend to focus on personality traits in others that we feel are important to our own personality. What we like in ourselves, we like in others, and what we dislike in ourselves, we dislike in others. Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's, 2007), 95. If you admire a person's loyalty, then loyalty is probably a trait that you think you possess as well. If you work hard to be positive and motivated and suppress negative and unproductive urges within yourself, you will likely think harshly about those negative traits in someone else. After all, if you can suppress your negativity, why can't they do the same? This way of thinking isn't always accurate or logical, but it is common.

The concept of **assumed similarity** refers to our tendency to perceive others as similar to us. When we don't have enough information about a person to know their key personality traits, we fill in the gaps— usually assuming they possess traits similar to those we see in ourselves. We also tend to assume that people have similar attitudes, or likes and dislikes, as us. If you set your friend

up with a man you think she'll really like only to find out there was no chemistry when they met, you may be surprised to realize your friend doesn't have the same taste in men as you. Even though we may assume more trait and taste similarity between our significant others and ourselves than there actually is, research generally finds that while people do interpersonally group based on many characteristics including race, class, and intelligence, the findings don't show that people with similar personalities group together. Andrew Beer and David Watson, "Personality Judgement at Zero Acquaintance: Agreement, Assumed Similarity, and Implicit Simplicity," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 90, no. 3 (2008): 252.

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

This process of assuming has its advantages and drawbacks. In terms of advantages, the use of implicit

personality theories offers us a perceptual shortcut that can be useful when we first meet someone. Our assessment of their traits and subsequent assumptions about who they are as a person makes us feel like we “know the person,” which reduces uncertainty and facilitates further interaction. In terms of drawbacks, our experience-based assumptions aren’t always correct, but they are still persuasive and enduring.

As we have already learned, first impressions carry a lot of weight in terms of how they influence further interaction. Positive and negative impressions formed early can also lead to a halo effect or a horn effect, which we discussed earlier. Personality-based impressions can also connect to impressions based on physical and environmental cues to make them even stronger. For example, perceiving another person as attractive can create a halo effect that then leads you to look for behavioral cues that you can then tie to positive personality traits. You may notice that the attractive person also says “please” and “thank you,” which increases his or her likeability. You may notice that the person has clean and fashionable shoes, which leads you to believe he or she is professional and competent but also trendy and hip. Now you have an overall positive impression of this person that will affect your subsequent behaviors. Andrew Beer and David Watson, “Personality Judgement at Zero Acquaintance: Agreement, Assumed Similarity, and Implicit Simplicity,” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 90, no. 3 (2008): 252. But how accurate were your impressions? If on your way home you realize you just bought a car from this person, who happened to be a car salesperson, that was \$7,000 over your price range, you might have second thoughts about how good a person he or she actually is.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We use attributions to interpret perceptual information, specifically, people's behavior. Internal attributions connect behavior to internal characteristics such as personality traits. External attributions connect behavior to external characteristics such as situational factors.
- Two common perceptual errors that occur in the process of attribution are the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias.
- The fundamental attribution error refers to our tendency to overattribute other people's behaviors to internal rather than external causes.
- The self-serving bias refers to our tendency to overattribute our successes to internal factors and overattribute our failures to external factors.
- First and last impressions are powerful forces in the perception process. The primacy effect is a perceptual tendency to place more importance on initial impressions than later impressions. The recency effect is the perceptual tendency to place more importance on the most recent impressions over earlier impressions.
- Physical and environmental cues such as clothing, grooming, attractiveness, and material objects influence the impressions that we form of people.
- The halo effect describes a perceptual effect that occurs when initial positive impressions lead us to view later interactions as positive. The horn effect describes a perceptual effect that occurs when initial negative impressions lead us to view later interactions as negative.
- Cultural identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, nationality, and age all affect the perceptions that we make about basic sensory information such as sounds and smells as well as larger concepts such as marriage and privacy.

Despite the fact that much popular knowledge claims that women and men communicate very differently, communication processes for each gender are more similar than different.

- Personality affects perception in many ways. Our personality traits, which are our underlying and enduring motivations for thinking and behaving the way we do, affect how we see others and ourselves. We use observed and implied personality traits to form impressions of others, which then influence how we act toward them.

## EXERCISES

- Think of a recent conflict and how you explained the behavior that caused the conflict and subsequently formed impressions about the other person based on your perceptions. Briefly describe the conflict situation and then identify internal and external attributions for your behavior and the behavior of the other person. Is there any evidence of the fundamental attribution error or self-serving bias in this conflict encounter? If so, what?
- Describe a situation in which you believe the primacy and/or recency effect influenced your perceptions of a person or event.
- Has your perception of something ever changed because of exposure to cultural difference? For example, have you grown to like a kind of food, music, clothing, or other custom that you earlier perceived unfavorably?

## Overcoming Barriers to Perceiving Others

There are many barriers that prevent us from competently perceiving others. While some are more difficult to overcome than others, they can all be addressed by raising our awareness of the influences around us and committing to monitoring, reflecting on, and changing some of our communication habits. Whether it is our lazy listening skills, lack of empathy, or stereotypes and prejudice, various filters and blinders influence how we perceive and respond to others.

### *Develop Empathetic Listening Skills*

Effective listening is not easy, and most of us do not make a concerted effort to overcome common barriers to listening. Our fast-paced lives and cultural values that emphasize speaking over listening sometimes make listening feel like a chore. But we 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 also help us expand our self- and social awareness by learning from other people's experiences and taking on different perspectives. Empathetic listening is challenging because it requires cognitive and emotional investment that goes beyond the learning of a skill set.

I didn't know what a lazy listener I was until I started teaching and realized how much time and effort teachers have to put into their jobs. Honestly, at first it was challenging to attentively listen to student issues, thoughts, and questions, but I immediately saw the value

in it. To be a good teacher, I had to become a better listener. As a result, I also gained more empathy skills and became a lot more patient. A valuable lesson I learned during this time is best stated as follows: “Everyone’s biggest problem is his or her biggest problem.” If one person’s biggest problem is getting enough money together to buy a new cell phone and another person’s biggest problem is getting enough money together to get much needed medication, each of these people is likely experiencing a similar amount of stress. As an outsider, we might look at this example and think about how a cell phone isn’t necessary to live but the medication is. But everyone’s reality is his or her reality, and when you can concede that someone’s reality isn’t like yours and you are OK with that, then you have overcome a significant barrier to becoming more aware of the perception process

I recently had a good student inform me that he was leaving school to pursue other things. He had given speeches about wildfire firefighting and beer brewing and was passionate about both of those things, but not school. As an academic and lover of and advocate for higher education, I wouldn’t have made that choice for myself or for him. But I am not him, and I can’t assume his perceptions are consistent with mine. I think he was surprised when I said, “I think you are a smart and capable adult, and this is your decision to make, and I respect that. School is not going anywhere, so it’ll be here when you’re ready to come back. In the meantime, I’d be happy to be a reference for any jobs you’re applying for. Just let me know.” I wanted to make it clear that I didn’t perceive him as irresponsible, immature, misguided, or uncommitted. He later told me that he appreciated my reaction that day.

## *Beware of Stereotypes and Prejudice*

**Stereotypes** are sets of beliefs that we develop about groups, which we then apply to individuals from that group. Stereotypes are schemata that are taken too far, as they reduce and ignore a person's individuality and the diversity present within a larger group of people. Stereotypes can be based on cultural identities, physical appearance, behavior, speech, beliefs, and values, among other things, and are often caused by a lack of information about the target person or group. Max Guyll et al., "The Potential Roles of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies, Stigma Consciousness, and Stereotype Threat in Linking Latino/a Ethnicity and Educational Outcomes," *Social Issues* 66, no. 1 (2010): 117. Stereotypes can be positive, negative, or neutral, but all run the risk of lowering the quality of our communication.

While the negative effects of stereotypes are pretty straightforward in that they devalue people and prevent us from adapting and revising our schemata, positive stereotypes also have negative consequences. For example, the "model minority" stereotype has been applied to some Asian cultures in the United States. Seemingly positive stereotypes of Asian Americans as hardworking, intelligent, and willing to adapt to "mainstream" culture are not always received as positive and can lead some people within these communities to feel objectified, ignored, or overlooked.

**Prejudice** is negative feelings or attitudes toward people based on their identity or identities. Prejudice can have individual or widespread negative effects. At the individual level, a hiring manager may not hire a young man with a physical disability (even though that would be illegal if it were the only reason), which negatively affects that one man. However, if pervasive cultural thinking that people

with physical disabilities are mentally deficient leads hiring managers all over the country to make similar decisions, then the prejudice has become a social injustice. In another example, when the disease we know today as AIDS started killing large numbers of people in the early 1980s, response by some health and government officials was influenced by prejudice. Since the disease was primarily affecting gay men, Haitian immigrants, and drug users, the disease was prejudged to be a disease that affected only “deviants” and therefore didn’t get the same level of attention it would have otherwise. It took many years, investment of much money, and education campaigns to help people realize that HIV and AIDS do not prejudice based on race or sexual orientation and can affect any human.



*Figure 3.12 Prejudice surrounding the disease we now know as*

*AIDS delayed government investment in researching its causes and developing treatments. © Thinkstock*

## *Engage in Self-Reflection*

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

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

We can also become more aware of how our self-concepts influence how we perceive others. We often hold other people to the standards we hold for ourselves or assume that their self-concept should be consistent with our own. For example, if you consider yourself a neat person and think that sloppiness in your personal appearance would show that you are unmotivated, rude, and lazy, then you are likely to think the same of a person you judge to have a sloppy appearance. So asking questions like "Is my

impression based on how this person wants to be, or how I think this person should want to be?” can lead to enlightening moments of self-reflection. Asking questions in general about the perceptions you are making is an integral part of perception checking, which we will discuss next.

## Checking Perception

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

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

police who is harming himself or herself or others, but sometimes the circumstances are much more uncertain.

The Tony Award-winning play *Doubt: A Parable* and the Academy Award-winning movie based on it deal with the interplay of perception, doubt, and certainty. In the story, which is set in a Bronx, New York, Catholic school in 1964, a young priest with new ideas comes into the school, which is run by a traditional nun who, like many, is not fond of change. The older nun begins a campaign to get the young priest out of her school after becoming convinced that he has had an inappropriate relationship with one of the male students. No conclusive evidence is offered during the course of the story, and the audience is left, as are the characters in the story, to determine for themselves whether or not the priest is “guilty.” The younger priest doesn’t fit into the nun’s schema of how a priest should look and act. He has longer fingernails than other priests, he listens to secular music, and he takes three sugars in his tea. A series of perceptions like this lead the nun to certainty of the priest’s guilt, despite a lack of concrete evidence. Although this is a fictional example, it mirrors many high-profile cases of abuse that have been in the news in recent years. Hopefully we will not find ourselves in such an uncertain and dire position, but in these extreme cases and more mundane daily interactions, perception checking can be useful.

## “Getting Competent”

### Perception Checking

Perception checking helps us slow down perception and communication processes and allows us to have more control over both. Perception checking involves being able

to describe what is happening in a given situation, provide multiple interpretations of events or behaviors, and ask yourself and others questions for clarification. Some of this process happens inside our heads, and some happens through interaction. Let's take an interpersonal conflict as an example.

Stefano and Patrick are roommates. Stefano is in the living room playing a video game when he sees Patrick walk through the room with his suitcase and walk out the front door. Since Patrick didn't say or wave good-bye, Stefano has to make sense of this encounter, and perception checking can help him do that. First, he needs to try to describe (not evaluate yet) what just happened. This can be done by asking yourself, "What is going on?" In this case, Patrick left without speaking or waving good-bye. Next, Stefano needs to think of some possible interpretations of what just happened. One interpretation could be that Patrick is mad about something (at him or someone else). Another could be that he was in a hurry and simply forgot, or that he didn't want to interrupt the video game. In this step of perception checking, it is good to be aware of the attributions you are making. You might try to determine if you are overattributing internal or external causes. Lastly, you will want to verify and clarify. So Stefano might ask a mutual friend if she knows what might be bothering Patrick or going on in his life that made him leave so suddenly. Or he may also just want to call, text, or speak to Patrick. During this step, it's important to be aware of punctuation. Even though Stefano has already been thinking about this incident, and is experiencing some conflict, Patrick may have no idea that his actions caused Stefano to worry. If Stefano texts and asks why he's mad (which wouldn't be a good idea because it's an assumption) Patrick may become defensive, which could escalate the conflict. Stefano could just describe the behavior (without

judging Patrick) and ask for clarification by saying, “When you left today you didn’t say bye or let me know where you were going. I just wanted to check to see if things are OK.”

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

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

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We can improve our perceptions of others by developing empathetic listening skills, becoming aware of stereotypes and prejudice, and engaging in self-reflection.
- Perception checking is a strategy that allows us to monitor our perceptions of and reactions to others and communication.

## EXERCISES

- Which barrier(s) to self-perception do you think present the most challenge to you and why? What can you do to start to overcome these barriers?
- Which barrier(s) to perceiving others do you think present the most challenge to you and why? What can you do to start to overcome these barriers?

- Recount a recent communication encounter in which perception checking may have led to a more positive result. What could you have done differently?

PART IV  
CHAPTER FOUR



# 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.

# I. 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.

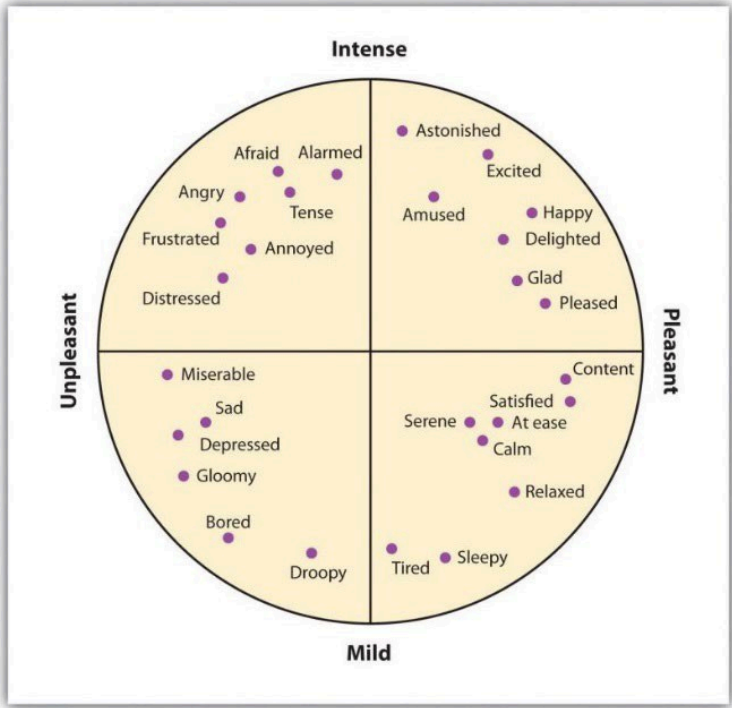
**Emotions** are physiological, behavioral, and/or communicative reactions to stimuli that are cognitively processed and experienced as emotional.<sup>73</sup> This definition includes several important dimensions of emotions. First, emotions are often internally experienced through physiological changes 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.<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup>

**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.<sup>76</sup> 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.



Level of Arousal	Unpleasant	Pleasant
<b>Mild</b>	Miserable Sad Depressed Gloomy Bored Droopy	Content Satisfied At ease Serene Calm Relaxed Sleepy Tired
<b>Intense</b>	Alarmed Afraid Angry Intense Annoyed Frustrated Distressed	Astonished Excited Amused Happy Delighted Glad Pleased

Figure 4.1 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.<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> 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**<sup>26</sup> 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**<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup> 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**<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup> 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, 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.

## 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.<sup>87</sup>

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**<sup>31</sup>, or the spreading of emotion from one person to another.<sup>88</sup> 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.

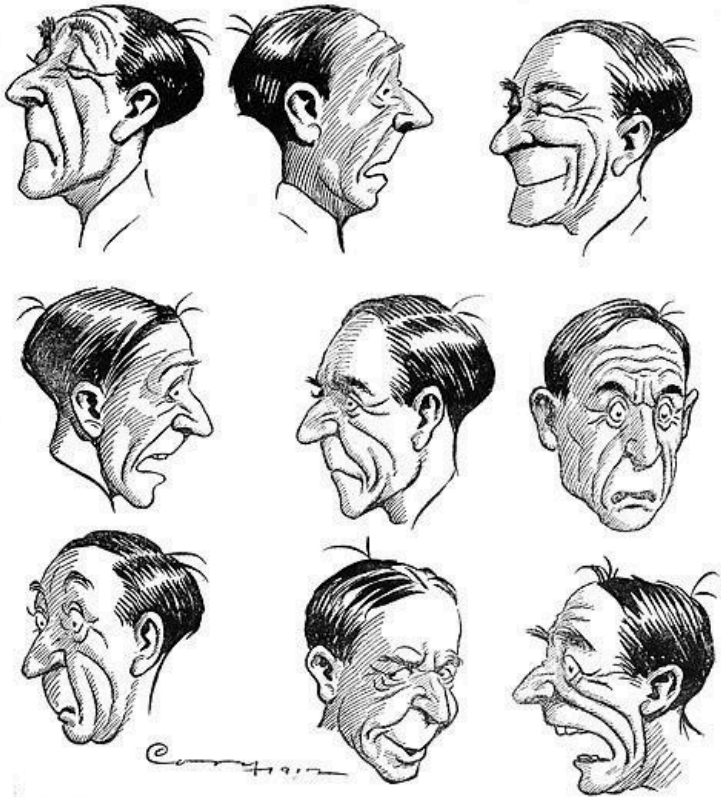


Figure 4.2 Facial Expressions. Photo is in the Public Domain

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.<sup>89</sup> 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.”<sup>90</sup>

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.<sup>91</sup>

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.<sup>92</sup> 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

- In what situations would you be more likely to communicate emotions through electronic means rather than in person? Why?
- 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?
- When you are trying to determine someone's emotional state, what nonverbal communication do you look for and why?
- 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?

## 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.

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.<sup>94</sup> 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.<sup>95</sup> 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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PART V  
CHAPTER FIVE



# Learning Objectives

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define culture.
- Define personal, social, and cultural identities.
- Summarize nondominant and dominant identity development.
- Explain why difference matters in the study of culture and identity.

# I. Foundations of Culture and Identity

*Culture* is a complicated word to define, as there are at least six common ways that culture is used in the United States. For the purposes of exploring the communicative aspects of culture, we will define **culture** as the ongoing negotiation of learned and patterned beliefs, attitudes, values, and

behaviors. Unpacking the definition, we can see that culture shouldn't be conceptualized as stable and unchanging. Culture is "negotiated," and as we will learn later in this chapter, culture is dynamic, and cultural changes can be traced and analyzed to better understand why our society is the way it is. The definition also points out that culture is learned, which accounts for the importance of socializing institutions like family, school, peers, and the media. Culture is patterned in that there are recognizable widespread similarities among people within a cultural group. There is also deviation from and resistance to those patterns by individuals and subgroups within a culture, which is why cultural patterns change over time. Last, the definition acknowledges that culture influences our beliefs about what is true and false, our attitudes including our likes and dislikes, our values regarding what is right and wrong, and our behaviors. It is from these cultural influences that our identities are formed.

## Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities

Ask yourself the question “Who am I?” Recall from our earlier discussion of self-concept that we develop a sense of who we are based on what is reflected back on us from other people. Our parents, friends, teachers, and the media help shape our identities. While this happens from birth, most people in Western societies reach a stage in adolescence where maturing cognitive abilities and increased social awareness lead them to begin to reflect on who they are. This begins a lifelong process of thinking about who we are now, who we were before, and who we will become. Beverly Daniel Tatum, “The Complexity of Identity: ‘Who Am I?’” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, eds. Maurianne Adams, Warren J. Blumfeld, Rosie Casteneda, Heather W. Hackman, Madeline L. Peters, Ximena Zuniga (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9. Our identities make up an important part of our self-concept and can be broken down into three main categories: personal, social, and cultural identities (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities

<b>Personal</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Cultural</b>
Antique Collector	Member of Historical Society	Irish American
Dog Lover	Member of Humane Society	Male/Female
Cyclist	Fraternity/Sorority Member	Greek American
Singer	High School Music Teacher	Multiracial
Shy	Book Club Member	Heterosexual
Athletic		Gay/Lesbian

We must avoid the temptation to think of our identities as constant. Instead, our identities are formed through

processes that started before we were born and will continue after we are gone; therefore our identities aren't something we achieve or complete. Two related but distinct components of our identities are our personal and social identities. Janet Spreckels and Helga Kotthoff, "Communicating Identity in Intercultural Communication," in *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*, eds. Helga Kotthoff and Helen Spencer-Oatey (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 415-19.

**Personal identities** include the components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences. For example, I consider myself a puzzle lover, and you may identify as a fan of hip-hop music. Our **social identities** are the components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed. For example, we may derive aspects of our social identity from our family or from a community of fans for a sports team. Social identities differ from personal identities because they are externally organized through membership. Our membership may be voluntary (Greek organization on campus) or involuntary (family) and explicit (we pay dues to our labor union) or implicit (we purchase and listen to hip-hop music). There are innumerable options for personal and social identities. While our personal identity choices express who we are, our social identities align us with particular groups. Through our social identities, we make statements about who we are and who we are not.



Figure 5.1 Pledging a fraternity or sorority is an example of a social identity. Source: Photo courtesy of Jim.henderson,

Personal identities may change often as people have new experiences and develop new interests and hobbies. A current interest in online video games may give way to an interest in graphic design. Social identities do not change as often because they take more time to develop, as you must become interpersonally invested. For example, if an interest in online video games leads someone to become a member of a MMORPG, or a massively multiplayer online role-playing game community, that personal identity has led to a social identity that is now interpersonal and more entrenched. **Cultural identities** are based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for social behavior or ways of acting. Gust A. Yep, “My Three Cultures: Navigating the Multicultural Identity Landscape,” in *Intercultural Communication: Experiences and Contexts*, eds. Judith N. Martin,

Lisa A. Flores, and Thomas K. Nakayama (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 61. S

Since we are often a part of them since birth, cultural identities are the least changeable of the three. The ways of being and the social expectations for behavior within cultural identities do change over time, but what separates them from most social identities is their historical roots. Mary Jane Collier, "Communication Competence Problematics in Ethnic Friendships," *Communication Monographs* 63, no. 4 (1996): 318. For example, think of how ways of being and acting have changed for African Americans since the civil rights movement. Additionally, common ways of being and acting within a cultural identity group are expressed through communication. In order to be accepted as a member of a cultural group, members must be acculturated, essentially learning and using a code that other group members will be able to recognize. Mary Jane Collier, "Communication Competence Problematics in Ethnic Friendships," *Communication Monographs* 63, no. 4 (1996): 316. We are acculturated into our various cultural identities in obvious and less obvious ways. We may literally have a parent or friend tell us what it means to be a man or a woman. We may also unconsciously consume messages from popular culture that offer representations of gender.

Any of these identity types can be ascribed or avowed. Ascribed identities are personal, social, or cultural identities that are placed on us by others, while avowed identities are those that we claim for ourselves. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 166. Sometimes people ascribe an identity to someone else based on stereotypes. You may see a person who likes to read science-fiction books, watches documentaries, has glasses, and collects Star Trek memorabilia and label him or her a nerd. If the person doesn't avow that identity, it can create friction, and that label may even hurt the other person's

feelings. But ascribed and avowed identities can match up. To extend the previous example, there has been a movement in recent years to reclaim the label *nerd* and turn it into a positive, and a nerd subculture has been growing in popularity. For example, MC Frontalot, a leader in the nerdcore hip-hop movement, says that being branded a nerd in school was terrible, but now he raps about “nerdy” things like blogs to sold-out crowds. Tim Shipman, “Nerds Get Their Revenge as at Last It’s Hip to Be Square,” *The Sunday Telegraph*, July 22, 2007, 35. We can see from this example that our ascribed and avowed identities change over the course of our lives, and sometimes they match up and sometimes not.

Although some identities are essentially permanent, the degree to which we are aware of them, also known as salience, changes. The intensity with which we avow an identity also changes based on context. For example, an African American may not have difficulty deciding which box to check on the demographic section of a survey. But if an African American becomes president of her college’s Black Student Union, she may more intensely avow her African American identity, which has now become more salient. If she studies abroad in Africa her junior year, she may be ascribed an identity of American by her new African friends rather than African American. For the Africans, their visitor’s identity as American is likely more salient than her identity as someone of African descent. If someone is biracial or multiracial, they may change their racial identification as they engage in an identity search. One intercultural communication scholar writes of his experiences as an “Asianlatinoamerican.” Gust A. Yep, “My Three Cultures: Navigating the Multicultural Identity Landscape,” in *Intercultural Communication: Experiences and Contexts*, eds. Judith N. Martin, Lisa A. Flores, and Thomas K. Nakayama (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 60–62. He notes

repressing his Chinese identity as an adolescent living in Peru and then later embracing his Chinese identity and learning about his family history while in college in the United States. This example shows how even national identity fluctuates. Obviously one can change nationality by becoming a citizen of another country, although most people do not. My identity as a US American became very salient for me for the first time in my life when I studied abroad in Sweden.

Throughout modern history, cultural and social influences have established dominant and nondominant groups. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 4. **Dominant identities** historically had and currently have more resources and influence, while **nondominant identities** historically had and currently have less resources and influence. It's important to remember that these distinctions are being made at the societal level, not the individual level. There are obviously exceptions, with people in groups considered nondominant obtaining more resources and power than a person in a dominant group. However, the overall trend is that difference based on cultural groups has been institutionalized, and exceptions do not change this fact. Because of this uneven distribution of resources and power, members of dominant groups are granted privileges while nondominant groups are at a disadvantage. The main nondominant groups must face various forms of institutionalized discrimination, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. As we will discuss later, privilege and disadvantage, like similarity and difference, are not "all or nothing." No two people are completely different or completely similar, and no one person is completely privileged or completely disadvantaged.

# Identity Development

There are multiple models for examining identity development. Given our focus on how difference matters, we will examine similarities and differences in nondominant and dominant identity formation. While the stages in this model help us understand how many people experience their identities, identity development is complex, and there may be variations. We must also remember that people have multiple identities that intersect with each other. So, as you read, think about how circumstances may be different for an individual with multiple nondominant and/or dominant identities.

## *Nondominant Identity Development*

There are four stages of nondominant identity development. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 173–76. The first stage is unexamined identity, which is characterized by a lack of awareness of or lack of interest in one's identity. For example, a young woman who will later identify as a lesbian may not yet realize that a nondominant sexual orientation is part of her identity. Also, a young African American man may question his teachers or parents about the value of what he's learning during Black History Month.

When a person's lack of interest in their own identity is replaced by an investment in a dominant group's identity, they may move to the next stage, which is conformity.

In the conformity stage, an individual internalizes or adopts the values and norms of the dominant group, often

in an effort not to be perceived as different. Individuals may attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture by changing their appearance, their mannerisms, the way they talk, or even their name. Moises, a Chicano man interviewed in a research project about identities, narrated how he changed his “Mexican sounding” name to Moses, which was easier for his middle-school classmates and teachers to say. Richard G. Jones Jr., “Communicating Queer Identities through Personal Narrative and Intersectional Reflexivity” (PhD diss., University of Denver, 2009), 130–32. He also identified as white instead of Mexican American or Chicano because he saw how his teachers treated the other kids with “brown skin.” Additionally, some gay or lesbian people in this stage of identity development may try to “act straight.” In either case, some people move to the next stage, resistance and separation, when they realize that despite their efforts they are still perceived as different by and not included in the dominant group.

In the resistance and separation stage, an individual with a nondominant identity may shift away from the conformity of the previous stage to engage in actions that challenge the dominant identity group. Individuals in this stage may also actively try to separate themselves from the dominant group, interacting only with those who share their nondominant identity. For example, there has been a Deaf culture movement in the United States for decades. This movement includes people who are hearing impaired and believe that their use of a specific language, American Sign Language (ASL), and other cultural practices constitutes a unique culture, which they symbolize by capitalizing the D in Deaf. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 148.

While this is not a separatist movement, a person who is hearing impaired may find refuge in such a group after experiencing discrimination from hearing people. Staying

in this stage may indicate a lack of critical thinking if a person endorses the values of the nondominant group without question.



*Figure 5.2 Many hearing-impaired people in the United States use American Sign Language (ASL), which is recognized as an official language. © Thinkstock*

The integration stage marks a period where individuals with a nondominant identity have achieved a balance between embracing their own identities and valuing other dominant and nondominant identities. Although there may still be residual anger from the discrimination and prejudice they have faced, they may direct this energy into positive outlets such as working to end discrimination for their own or other groups. Moises, the Chicano man I mentioned earlier, now works to support the Chicano community in his city and also has actively supported gay rights and women's rights.

### *Dominant Identity Development*

Dominant identity development consists of five stages. Judith N.

Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 177–80. The unexamined stage of dominant identity formation is similar to nondominant in that individuals in this stage do not think about their or others' identities. Although they may be aware of differences—for example, between races and genders—they either don't realize there is a hierarchy that treats some people differently than others or they don't think the hierarchy applies to them. For example, a white person may take notice that a person of color was elected to a prominent office. However, he or she may not see the underlying reason that it is noticeable—namely, that the overwhelming majority of our country's leaders are white. Unlike people with a nondominant identity who usually have to acknowledge the positioning of their identity due to discrimination and prejudice they encounter, people with dominant identities may stay in the unexamined stage for a long time.

In the acceptance stage, a person with a dominant identity passively or actively accepts that some people are treated differently than others but doesn't do anything internally or externally to address it. In the passive acceptance stage, we must be cautious not to blame individuals with dominant identities for internalizing racist, sexist, or heterosexist “norms.” The socializing institutions we discussed earlier (family, peers, media, religion, and education) often make oppression seem normal and natural. For example, I have had students who struggle to see that they are in this stage say things like “I know that racism exists, but my parents taught me to be a good person and see everyone as equal.” While this is admirable, seeing everyone as equal doesn't make it so. And people who insist that we are all equal may claim that minorities are exaggerating their circumstances or “whining” and just need to “work harder” or “get over it.” The person making these statements acknowledges difference but doesn't see their privilege or the institutional perpetuation

of various “-isms.” Although I’ve encountered many more people in the passive state of acceptance than the active state, some may progress to an active state where they acknowledge inequality and are proud to be in the “superior” group. In either case, many people never progress from this stage. If they do, it’s usually because of repeated encounters with individuals or situations that challenge their acceptance of the status quo, such as befriending someone from a nondominant group or taking a course related to culture.

The resistance stage of dominant identity formation is a major change from the previous in that an individual acknowledges the unearned advantages they are given and feels guilt or shame about it. Having taught about various types of privilege for years, I’ve encountered many students who want to return their privilege or disown it. These individuals may begin to disassociate with their own dominant group because they feel like a curtain has been opened and their awareness of the inequality makes it difficult for them to interact with others in their dominant group. But it’s important to acknowledge that becoming aware of your white privilege, for instance, doesn’t mean that every person of color is going to want to accept you as an ally, so retreating to them may not be the most productive move. While moving to this step is a marked improvement in regards to becoming a more aware and socially just person, getting stuck in the resistance stage isn’t productive, because people are often retreating rather than trying to address injustice. For some, deciding to share what they’ve learned with others who share their dominant identity moves them to the next stage.

People in the redefinition stage revise negative views of their identity held in the previous stage and begin to acknowledge their privilege and try to use the power they are granted to work for social justice. They realize that they can claim their dominant identity as heterosexual, able-

bodied, male, white, and so on, and perform their identity in ways that counter norms. A male participant in a research project on identity said the following about redefining his male identity:

I don't want to assert my maleness the same way that maleness is asserted all around us all the time. I don't want to contribute to sexism. So I have to be conscious of that. There's that guilt. But then, I try to utilize my maleness in positive ways, like when I'm talking to other men about male privilege. Richard G. Jones Jr., "Communicating Queer Identities through Personal Narrative and Intersectional Reflexivity" (PhD diss., University of Denver, 2009), 127.

The final stage of dominant identity formation is integration. This stage is reached when redefinition is complete and people can integrate their dominant identity into all aspects of their life, finding opportunities to educate others about privilege while also being a responsive ally to people in nondominant identities. As an example, some heterosexual people who find out a friend or family member is gay or lesbian may have to confront their dominant heterosexual identity for the first time, which may lead them through these various stages. As a sign of integration, some may join an organization like PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), where they can be around others who share their dominant identity as heterosexuals but also empathize with their loved ones.

Knowing more about various types of identities and some common experiences of how dominant and nondominant identities are formed prepares us to delve into more specifics about why difference matters.



*Figure 5.3 Heterosexual people with gay family members or friends may join the group PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) as a part of the redefinition and/or integration stage of their dominant identity development. Source: Photo courtesy of Jason Reidy.*

## Difference Matters

Whenever we encounter someone, we notice similarities and differences. While both are important, it is often the differences that are highlighted and that contribute to communication troubles. We don't only see similarities and differences on an individual level. In fact, we also place people into in-groups and out-groups based on the similarities and differences we perceive. This is important because we then tend to react to someone we perceive as a member of an out-group based on the characteristics we attach to the group rather than the individual. Brenda J.

Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 14. In these situations, it is more likely that stereotypes and prejudice will influence our communication. Learning about difference and why it matters will help us be more competent communicators. The flip side of emphasizing difference is to claim that no differences exist and that you see everyone as a human being. Rather than trying to ignore difference and see each person as a unique individual, we should know the history of how differences came to be so socially and culturally significant and how they continue to affect us today.

Culture and identity are complex. You may be wondering how some groups came to be dominant and others nondominant. These differences are not natural, which can be seen as we unpack how various identities have changed over time in the next section. There is, however, an **ideology of domination** that makes it seem natural and normal to many that some people or groups will always have power over others. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 32. In fact, hierarchy and domination, although prevalent throughout modern human history, were likely not the norm among early humans. So one of the first reasons difference matters is that people and groups are treated unequally, and better understanding how those differences came to be can help us create a more just society. Difference also matters because demographics and patterns of interaction are changing.

In the United States, the population of people of color is increasing and diversifying, and visibility for people who are gay or lesbian and people with disabilities has also increased. The 2010 Census shows that the Hispanic and Latino/a populations in the United States are now the second largest group in the country, having grown 43 percent since the last census in 2000. Arlette Saenz, "Census Data Shows a Changed American Landscape," *ABC News*, March 21, 2011, accessed October 9, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/>

census-data-reveals-changed-american-landscape/story?id=13206427. By 2030, racial and ethnic minorities will account for one-third of the population. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 5. Additionally, legal and social changes have created a more open environment for sexual minorities and people with disabilities. These changes directly affect our interpersonal relationships. The workplace is one context where changing demographics has become increasingly important. Many organizations are striving to comply with changing laws by implementing policies aimed at creating equal access and opportunity. Some organizations are going further than legal compliance to try to create inclusive climates where diversity is valued because of the interpersonal and economic benefits it has the potential to produce.

We can now see that difference matters due to the inequalities that exist among cultural groups and due to changing demographics that affect our personal and social relationships. Unfortunately, there are many obstacles that may impede our valuing of difference. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 6–10. Individuals with dominant identities may not validate the experiences of those in nondominant groups because they do not experience the oppression directed at those with nondominant identities. Further, they may find it difficult to acknowledge that not being aware of this oppression is due to privilege associated with their dominant identities. Because of this lack of recognition of oppression, members of dominant groups may minimize, dismiss, or question the experiences of nondominant groups and view them as “complainers” or “whiners.” Recall from our earlier discussion of identity formation that people with

dominant identities may stay in the unexamined or acceptance stages for a long time. Being stuck in these stages makes it much more difficult to value difference.

Members of nondominant groups may have difficulty valuing difference due to negative experiences with the dominant group, such as not having their experiences validated. Both groups may be restrained from communicating about difference due to norms of political correctness, which may make people feel afraid to speak up because they may be perceived as insensitive or racist. All these obstacles are common and they are valid. However, as we will learn later, developing intercultural communication competence can help us gain new perspectives, become more mindful of our communication, and intervene in some of these negative cycles.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Culture is an ongoing negotiation of learned patterns of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.
- Each of us has personal, social, and cultural identities.
- Personal identities are components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connect to our individual interests and life experiences.
- Social identities are components of self that are derived from our involvement in social groups to which we are interpersonally invested.
- Cultural identities are components of self based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for our thoughts and behaviors.
- Nondominant identity formation may include a person moving from unawareness of the importance of their identities, to

adopting the values of dominant society, to separating from dominant society, to integrating components of identities. \Dominant identity formation may include a person moving from unawareness of their identities, to accepting the identity hierarchy, to separation from and guilt regarding the dominant group, to redefining and integrating components of identities.

- Difference matters because people are treated differently based on their identities and demographics and patterns of interaction are changing. Knowing why and how this came to be and how to navigate our increasingly diverse society can make us more competent communicators.

## EXERCISES

- List some of your personal, social, and cultural identities. Are there any that relate? If so, how? For your cultural identities, which ones are dominant and which ones are nondominant? What would a person who looked at this list be able to tell about you?
- Describe a situation in which someone ascribed an identity to you that didn't match with your avowed identities. Why do you think the person ascribed the identity to you? Were there any stereotypes involved?
- Getting integrated: Review the section that explains why difference matters. Discuss the ways in which difference may influence how you communicate in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, and personal.

## 2. Exploring Specific Cultural Identities

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define the social constructionist view of culture and identity.
- Trace the historical development and construction of the four cultural identities discussed.
- Discuss how each of the four cultural identities discussed affects and/or relates to communication.

We can get a better understanding of current cultural identities by unpacking how they came to be. By looking at history, we can see how cultural identities that seem to have existed forever actually came to be constructed for various political and social reasons and how they have changed over time.

Communication plays a central role in this construction. As we have already discussed, our identities are relational and communicative; they are also constructed. **Social constructionism** is a view that argues the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relationship to social, cultural, and political contexts. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 12. In this section, we'll explore how the cultural identities of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been constructed in the United States and how communication relates to those identities. There are other important identities that could be discussed, like religion, age, nationality, and class. Although

they are not given their own section, consider how those identities may intersect with the identities discussed next.

## Race

Would it surprise you to know that human beings, regardless of how they are racially classified, share 99.9 percent of their DNA? This finding by the Human Genome Project asserts that race is a social construct, not a biological one. The American Anthropological Association agrees, stating that race is the product of “historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances.” Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 77. Therefore, we’ll define **race** as a socially constructed category based on differences in appearance that has been used to create hierarchies that privilege some and disadvantage others.

Race didn’t become a socially and culturally recognized marker until European colonial expansion in the 1500s. As Western Europeans traveled to parts of the world previously unknown to them and encountered people who were different from them, a hierarchy of races began to develop that placed lighter skinned Europeans above darker skinned people. At the time, newly developing fields in natural and biological sciences took interest in examining the new locales, including the plant and animal life, natural resources, and native populations. Over the next three hundred years, science that we would now undoubtedly recognize as flawed, biased, and racist legitimated notions that native populations were less evolved than white Europeans, often calling them savages. In fact, there were scientific debates as to whether some of the native populations should be considered human or animal. Racial

distinctions have been based largely on phenotypes, or physiological features such as skin color, hair texture, and body/facial features. Western “scientists” used these differences as “proof” that native populations were less evolved than the Europeans, which helped justify colonial expansion, enslavement, genocide, and exploitation on massive scales. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 66. Even though there is a consensus among experts that race is social rather than biological, we can’t deny that race still has meaning in our society and affects people as if it were “real.”



Figure 5.4 There is actually no biological basis for racial classification among humans, as we share 99.9 percent of our DNA. © Thinkstock

Given that race is one of the first things we notice about someone, it’s important to know how race and communication relate. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 65. Discussing race in the United States is difficult for many reasons. One is due to uncertainty about language use. People may be frustrated by their perception

that labels change too often or be afraid of using an “improper” term and being viewed as racially insensitive. It is important, however, that we not let political correctness get in the way of meaningful dialogues and learning opportunities related to difference. Learning some of the communicative history of race can make us more competent communicators and open us up to more learning experiences.

Racial classifications used by the government and our regular communication about race in the United States have changed frequently, which further points to the social construction of race. Currently, the primary racial groups in the United States are African American, Asian American, European American, Latino/a, and Native American, but a brief look at changes in how the US Census Bureau has defined race clearly shows that this hasn’t always been the case (see Table 5.2). In the 1900s alone, there were twenty-six different ways that race was categorized on census forms. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 61–72. The way we communicate about race in our regular interactions has also changed, and many people are still hesitant to discuss race for fear of using “the wrong” vocabulary.

Table 5.2 Racial Classifications in the US Census

<b>Year(s)</b>	<b>Development</b>
1790	No category for race
1800s	Race was defined by the percentage of African “blood.” <i>Mulatto</i> was one black and one white parent, <i>quadroon</i> was one-quarter African blood, and <i>octoroon</i> was one-eighth.
1830–1940	The term <i>color</i> was used instead of <i>race</i> .
1900	Racial categories included white, black, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian. Census takers were required to check one of these boxes based on visual cues. Individuals did not get to select a racial classification on their own until 1970.
1950	The term <i>color</i> was dropped and replaced by <i>race</i> .
1960, 1970	Both <i>race</i> and <i>color</i> were used on census forms.
1980–2010	<i>Race</i> again became the only term.
2000	Individuals were allowed to choose more than one racial category for the first time in census history.
2010	The census included fifteen racial categories and an option to write in races not listed on the form.

Source: Adapted from Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011), 71–72.

The five primary racial groups noted previously can still be broken down further to specify a particular region, country, or nation. For example, Asian Americans are diverse in terms of country and language of origin and cultural practices. While the category of Asian Americans can be useful when discussing broad trends, it can also generalize among groups, which can lead to stereotypes. You may find that someone identifies as Chinese American or Korean American instead of Asian American. In this case, the label further highlights a person’s cultural lineage. We should not assume, however,

that someone identifies with his or her cultural lineage, as many people have more in common with their US American peers than a culture that may be one or more generations removed.

History and personal preference also influence how we communicate about race. Culture and communication scholar Brenda Allen notes that when she was born in 1950, her birth certificate included an N for Negro. Later she referred to herself as *colored* because that's what people in her community referred to themselves as. During and before this time, the term *black* had negative connotations and would likely have offended someone. There was a movement in the 1960s to reclaim the word *black*, and the slogan "black is beautiful" was commonly used. Brenda Allen acknowledges the newer label of *African American* but notes that she still prefers *black*. The terms *colored* and *Negro* are no longer considered appropriate because they were commonly used during a time when black people were blatantly discriminated against. Even though that history may seem far removed to some, it is not to others. Currently, the terms *African American* and *black* are frequently used, and both are considered acceptable. The phrase *people of color* is acceptable for most and is used to be inclusive of other racial minorities. If you are unsure what to use, you could always observe how a person refers to himself or herself, or you could ask for his or her preference. In any case, a competent communicator defers to and respects the preference of the individual.

The label *Latin American* generally refers to people who live in Central American countries. Although Spain colonized much of what is now South and Central America and parts of the Caribbean, the inhabitants of these areas are now much more diverse. Depending on the region or country, some people primarily trace their lineage to the indigenous people who lived in these areas before colonization, or to a Spanish

and indigenous lineage, or to other combinations that may include European, African, and/or indigenous heritage. *Latina* and *Latino* are labels that are preferable to *Hispanic* for many who live in the United States and trace their lineage to South and/or Central America and/or parts of the Caribbean. Scholars who study *Latina/o* identity often use the label *Latina/o* in their writing to acknowledge women who avow that identity label. Bernadette Marie Calafell, *Latina/o Communication Studies: Theorizing Performance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 1–9. In verbal communication you might say “*Latina*” when referring to a particular female or “*Latino*” when referring to a particular male of Latin American heritage. When referring to the group as a whole, you could say “*Latinas and Latinos*” instead of just “*Latinos*,” which would be more gender inclusive.

While *Hispanic* is used by the US Census, it refers primarily to people of Spanish origin, which doesn’t account for the diversity of background of many *Latinos/as*. The term *Hispanic* also highlights the colonizer’s influence over the indigenous, which erases a history that is important to many. Additionally, there are people who claim Spanish origins and identify culturally as *Hispanic* but racially as white.

Labels such as *Puerto Rican* or *Mexican American*, which further specify region or country of origin, may also be used. Just as with other cultural groups, if you are unsure of how to refer to someone, you can always ask for and honor someone’s preference.

The history of immigration in the United States also ties to the way that race has been constructed. The metaphor of the melting pot has been used to describe the immigration history of the United States but doesn’t capture the experiences of many immigrant groups. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 65. Generally, immigrant groups who were white, or light skinned, and spoke English

were better able to assimilate, or melt into the melting pot. But immigrant groups that we might think of as white today were not always considered so. Irish immigrants were discriminated against and even portrayed as black in cartoons that appeared in newspapers. In some Southern states, Italian immigrants were forced to go to black schools, and it wasn't until 1952 that Asian immigrants were allowed to become citizens of the United States. All this history is important, because it continues to influence communication among races today.

## Interracial Communication

Race and communication are related in various ways. Racism influences our communication about race and is not an easy topic for most people to discuss. Today, people tend to view racism as overt acts such as calling someone a derogatory name or discriminating against someone in thought or action.

However, there is a difference between racist acts, which we can attach to an individual, and institutional racism, which is not as easily identifiable. It is much easier for people to recognize and decry racist actions than it is to realize that racist patterns and practices go through societal institutions, which means that racism exists and doesn't have to be committed by any one person. As competent communicators and critical thinkers, we must challenge ourselves to be aware of how racism influences our communication at individual and societal levels.

We tend to make assumptions about people's race based on how they talk, and often these assumptions are based on stereotypes. Dominant groups tend to define what is correct or incorrect usage of a language, and since language is so

closely tied to identity, labeling a group's use of a language as incorrect or deviant challenges or negates part of their identity. George Yancy, "The Scholar Who Coined the Term Ebonics: A Conversation with Dr. Robert L. Williams," *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 10, no. 1 (2011): 41-51. We know there isn't only one way to speak English, but there have been movements to identify a standard. This becomes problematic when we realize that "standard English" refers to a way of speaking English that is based on white, middle-class ideals that do not match up with the experiences of many. When we create a standard for English, we can label anything that deviates from that "nonstandard English." Differences between standard English and what has been called "Black English" have gotten national attention through debates about whether or not instruction in classrooms should accommodate students who do not speak standard English. Education plays an important role in language acquisition, and class relates to access to education. In general, whether someone speaks standard English themselves or not, they tend to negatively judge people whose speech deviates from the standard.

Another national controversy has revolved around the inclusion of Spanish in common language use, such as Spanish as an option at ATMs, or other automated services, and Spanish language instruction in school for students who don't speak or are learning to speak English. As was noted earlier, the Latino/a population in the United States is growing fast, which has necessitated inclusion of Spanish in many areas of public life. This has also created a backlash, which some scholars argue is tied more to the race of the immigrants than the language they speak and a fear that white America could be engulfed by other languages and cultures. Barbara Lynn Speicher, "Problems with English-Only Policies," *Management Communication Quarterly* 15, no.

4 (2002): 621. This backlash has led to a revived movement to make English the official language of the United States.

The US Constitution does not stipulate a national language, and Congress has not designated one either. While nearly thirty states have passed English-language legislation, it has mostly been symbolic, and court rulings have limited any enforceability. Michael A. Zuckerman, “Constitutional Clash: When English-Only Meets Voting Rights,” *Yale Law and Policy Review* 28 (2010): 353–54. The Linguistic Society of America points out that immigrants are very aware of the social and economic advantages of learning English and do not need to be forced. They also point out that the United States has always had many languages represented, that national unity hasn’t rested on a single language, and that there are actually benefits to having a population that is multilingual. Linguistic Society of America, “Resolution: English Only,” December 28, 1986, accessed October 12,

2011, <http://www.lsadc.org/info/lisa-res-english.cfm>. Interracial communication presents some additional verbal challenges.



Figure 5.5 The “English only” movement of recent years is largely a backlash targeted at immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries. © Thinkstock

**Code-switching** involves changing from one way of speaking to another between or within interactions. Some people of color may engage in code-switching when communicating with dominant group members because they fear they will be negatively judged. Adopting the language practices of the dominant group may minimize perceived differences. This code-switching creates a linguistic dual consciousness in which people are able to maintain their linguistic identities with their in-group peers but can still acquire tools and gain access needed to function in dominant society. George Yancy, “The Scholar Who Coined the Term Ebonics: A Conversation with Dr. Robert L. Williams,” *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 10, no. 1 (2011): 46. White people may also feel anxious about communicating with people of color out of fear of being perceived as racist. In other situations, people in dominant groups may spotlight nondominant members by asking them to comment on or educate others about their race. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 87. For example, I once taught at a private university that was predominantly white.

Students of color talked to me about being asked by professors to weigh in on an issue when discussions of race came up in the classroom. While a professor may have been well-intentioned, spotlighting can make a student feel conspicuous, frustrated, or defensive. Additionally, I bet the professors wouldn’t think about asking a white, male, or heterosexual student to give the perspective of their whole group.

## Gender

When we first meet a newborn baby, we ask whether it's a boy or a girl. This question illustrates the importance of gender in organizing our social lives and our interpersonal relationships. A Canadian family became aware of the deep emotions people feel about gender and the great discomfort people feel when they can't determine gender when they announced to the world that they were not going to tell anyone the gender of their baby, aside from the baby's siblings. Their desire for their child, named Storm, to be able to experience early life without the boundaries and categories of gender brought criticism from many. Linsey Davis and Susan Donaldson James, "Canadian Mother Raising Her 'Genderless' Baby, Storm, Defends Her Family's Decision," *ABC News*, May 30, 2011, accessed October 12, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/genderless-baby-controversy-mom-defends-choice-reveal-sex/story?id=13718047>. Conversely, many parents consciously or unconsciously "code" their newborns in gendered ways based on our society's associations of pink clothing and accessories with girls and blue with boys. While it's obvious to most people that colors aren't gendered, they take on new meaning when we assign gendered characteristics of masculinity and femininity to them. Just like race, gender is a socially constructed category. While it is true that there are biological differences between who we label male and female, the meaning our society places on those differences is what actually matters in our day-to-day lives. And the biological differences are interpreted differently around the world, which further shows that although we think gender is a natural, normal, stable way of classifying things, it is actually not. There is a long history of appreciation for

people who cross gender lines in Native American and South Central Asian cultures, to name just two.

You may have noticed I use the word **gender** instead of *sex*. That's because gender is an identity based on internalized cultural notions of masculinity and femininity that is constructed through communication and interaction. There are two important parts of this definition to unpack. First, we internalize notions of gender based on socializing institutions, which helps us form our gender identity. Then we attempt to construct that gendered identity through our interactions with others, which is our gender expression. **Sex** is based on biological characteristics, including external genitalia, internal sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones. Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 19. While the biological characteristics between men and women are obviously different, it's the meaning that we create and attach to those characteristics that makes them significant. The cultural differences in how that significance is ascribed are proof that "our way of doing things" is arbitrary. For example, cross-cultural research has found that boys and girls in most cultures show both aggressive and nurturing tendencies, but cultures vary in terms of how they encourage these characteristics between genders. In a group in Africa, young boys are responsible for taking care of babies and are encouraged to be nurturing. Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 51.

Gender has been constructed over the past few centuries in political and deliberate ways that have tended to favor men in terms of power. And various academic fields joined in the quest to "prove" there are "natural" differences between men and women. While the "proof" they presented was credible to many at the time, it seems blatantly sexist and inaccurate today. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, scientists

who measure skulls, also known as craniometrists, claimed that men were more intelligent than women because they had larger brains. Leaders in the fast-growing fields of sociology and psychology argued that women were less evolved than men and had more in common with “children and savages” than an adult (white) males. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 43. Doctors and other decision makers like politicians also used women’s menstrual cycles as evidence that they were irrational, or hysterical, and therefore couldn’t be trusted to vote, pursue higher education, or be in a leadership position. These are just a few of the many instances of how knowledge was created by seemingly legitimate scientific disciplines that we can now clearly see served to empower men and disempower women. This system is based on the ideology of **patriarchy**, which is a system of social structures and practices that maintains the values, priorities, and interests of men as a group. Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 99. One of the ways patriarchy is maintained is by its relative invisibility. While women have been the focus of much research on gender differences, males have been largely unexamined. Men have been treated as the “generic” human being to which others are compared. But that ignores that fact that men have a gender, too. Masculinities studies have challenged that notion by examining how masculinities are performed.

There have been challenges to the construction of gender in recent decades. Since the 1960s, scholars and activists have challenged established notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. The women’s rights movement in the United States dates back to the 1800s, when the first women’s rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication*,

*Gender, and Culture*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 62. Although most women's rights movements have been led by white, middle-class women, there was overlap between those involved in the abolitionist movement to end slavery and the beginnings of the women's rights movement. Although some of the leaders of the early women's rights movement had class and education privilege, they were still taking a risk by organizing and protesting. Black women were even more at risk, and Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave, faced those risks often and gave a much noted extemporaneous speech at a women's rights gathering in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, which came to be called "Ain't I a Woman?" Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 63. Her speech highlighted the multiple layers of oppression faced by black women. You can watch actress Alfre Woodard deliver an interpretation of the speech in Video Clip 5.1.

### *Video Clip 5.1 Alfre Woodard Interprets Sojourner Truth's Speech "Ain't I a Woman?"*

Feminism as an intellectual and social movement advanced women's rights and our overall understanding of gender. Feminism has gotten a bad reputation based on how it has been portrayed in the media and by some politicians. When I teach courses about gender, I often ask my students to raise their hand if they consider themselves feminists. I usually only have a few, if any, who do. I've found that students I teach are hesitant to identify as a feminist because of connotations of the word. However, when I ask students to raise their hand if they believe women have been treated unfairly and that there should be more equity, most students raise their hand. Gender and communication scholar Julia

Wood has found the same trend and explains that a desire to make a more equitable society for everyone is at the root of feminism. She shares comments from a student that capture this disconnect: Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 4–5.

“I would never call myself a feminist, because that word has so many negative connotations. I don’t hate men or anything, and I’m not interested in protesting. I don’t want to go around with hacked-off hair and no makeup and sit around bashing men. I do think women should have the same kinds of rights, including equal pay for equal work. But I wouldn’t call myself a feminist.”

It’s important to remember that there are many ways to be a feminist and to realize that some of the stereotypes about feminism are rooted in sexism and homophobia, in that feminists are reduced to “men haters” and often presumed to be lesbians. The feminist movement also gave some momentum to the transgender rights movement. **Transgender** is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression do not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender people may or may not seek medical intervention like surgery or hormone treatments to help match their physiology with their gender identity. The term *transgender* includes other labels such as *transsexual*, *transvestite*, *cross-dresser*, and *intersex*, among others. Terms like *hermaphrodite* and *she-male* are not considered appropriate. As with other groups, it is best to allow someone to self-identify first and then honor their preferred label. If you are unsure of which pronouns to use when addressing someone, you can use gender-neutral language or you can ask which pronouns are appropriate. You can also introduce yourself with your own pronouns as an invitation for that person to share theirs.

Gender as a cultural identity has implications for many

aspects of our lives, including real-world contexts like education and work. Schools are primary grounds for socialization, and the educational experience for males and females is different in many ways from preschool through college. Although not always intentional, schools tend to recreate the hierarchies and inequalities that exist in society.

Given that we live in a patriarchal society, there are communicative elements present in school that support this. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 47–52. For example, teachers are more likely to call on and pay attention to boys in a classroom, giving them more feedback in the form of criticism, praise, and help. This sends an implicit message that boys are more worthy of attention and valuable than girls. Teachers are also more likely to lead girls to focus on feelings and appearance and boys to focus on competition and achievement. The focus on appearance for girls can lead to anxieties about body image. Gender inequalities are also evident in the administrative structure of schools, which puts males in positions of authority more than females. While females make up 75 percent of the educational workforce, only 22 percent of superintendents and 8 percent of high school principals are women. Similar trends exist in colleges and universities, with women only accounting for 26 percent of full professors. These inequalities in schools correspond to larger inequalities in the general workforce. While there are more women in the workforce now than ever before, they still face a glass ceiling, which is a barrier for promotion to upper management. Many of my students have been surprised at the continuing pay gap that exists between men and women. In 2010, women earned about seventy-seven cents to every dollar earned by men.

National Committee on Pay Equity, “Wage Gap over Time,” accessed October 12, 2011, <http://www.pay-equity.org/>

info-time.html. To put this into perspective, the National Committee on Pay Equity started an event called Equal Pay Day. In 2011, Equal Pay Day was on April 11. This signifies that for a woman to earn the same amount of money a man earned in a year, she would have to work more than three months extra, until April 11, to make up for the difference. National Committee on Pay Equity, “Equal Pay Day,” accessed October 12, 2011, <http://www.pay-equity.org/day.html>.

## *Sexuality*

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

Sexuality relates to culture and identity in important ways that extend beyond sexual orientation, just as race is more than the color of one’s skin and gender is more than one’s biological and physiological manifestations of masculinity and femininity. Sexuality isn’t just physical; it is social in that we communicate with others about sexuality. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 115–34. Sexuality is also biological in that it connects to physiological functions that carry significant social and political meaning like puberty, menstruation, and pregnancy. Sexuality connects to public health issues like sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and teen pregnancy. Sexuality is at the center of political issues like abortion, sex education, and gay and lesbian rights. While all

these contribute to sexuality as a cultural identity, the focus in this section is on sexual orientation.

The most obvious way sexuality relates to identity is through sexual orientation. **Sexual orientation** refers to a person's primary physical and emotional sexual attraction and activity. The terms we most often use to categorize sexual orientation are *heterosexual*, *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual*. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are sometimes referred to as sexual minorities. While the term *sexual preference* has been used previously, *sexual orientation* is more appropriate, since *preference* implies a simple choice. Although someone's preference for a restaurant or actor may change frequently, sexuality is not as simple. The term *homosexual* can be appropriate in some instances, but it carries with it a clinical and medicalized tone. As you will see in the timeline that follows, the medical community has a recent history of "treating homosexuality" with means that most would view as inhumane today.

So many people prefer a term like *gay*, which was chosen and embraced by gay people, rather than *homosexual*, which was imposed by a then discriminatory medical system. The gay and lesbian rights movement became widely recognizable in the United States in the 1950s and continues on today, as evidenced by prominent issues regarding sexual orientation in national news and politics. National and international groups like the Human Rights Campaign advocate for rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) communities. While these communities are often grouped together within one acronym (GLBTQ), they are different. Gays and lesbians constitute the most visible of the groups and receive the most attention and funding. Bisexuals are rarely visible or included in popular cultural discourses or in social and political movements, which leads to misunderstandings and stereotyping

of those who identify as bisexual. Transgender issues have received much more attention in recent years, but transgender identity connects to gender more than it does to sexuality. Last, *queer* is a term used to describe a group that is diverse in terms of identities but usually takes a more activist and at times radical stance that critiques sexual categories. While *queer* was long considered a derogatory label, and still is by some, the queer activist movement that emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s reclaimed the word and embraced it as a positive. As you can see, there is a diversity of identities among sexual minorities, just as there is variation within races and genders.

As with other cultural identities, notions of sexuality have been socially constructed in different ways throughout human history. Sexual orientation didn't come into being as an identity category until the late 1800s. Before that, sexuality was viewed in more physical or spiritual senses that were largely separate from a person's identity. Table 5.3 traces some of the developments relevant to sexuality, identity, and communication that show how this cultural identity has been constructed over the past 3,000 years.

Table 5.3 Developments Related to Sexuality, Identity, and Communication

Year(s)	Development
1400 BCE–5 65 BCE	During the Greek and Roman era, there was no conception of sexual orientation as an identity. However, sexual relationships between men were accepted for some members of society. Also at this time, Greek poet Sappho wrote about love between women.
533	Byzantine Emperor Justinian makes adultery and same-sex sexual acts punishable by death.
1533	Civil law in England indicates the death penalty can be given for same-sex sexual acts between men.
1810	Napoleonic Code in France removes all penalties for any sexual activity between consenting adults.
1861	England removes death penalty for same-sex sexual acts.
1892	The term <i>heterosexuality</i> is coined to refer a form of “sexual perversion” in which people engage in sexual acts for reasons other than reproduction.
1897	Dr. Magnus Hirschfield founds the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in Berlin. It is the first gay rights organization.

<b>Year(s)</b>	<b>Development</b>
1900–1930	Doctors “treat” homosexuality with castration, electro-shock therapy, and incarceration in mental hospitals.
1924	The first gay rights organization in the United States, the Chicago Society for Human Rights, is founded.
1933–44	Tens of thousands of gay men are sent to concentration camps under Nazi rule. The prisoners are forced to wear pink triangles on their uniforms. The pink triangle was later reclaimed as a symbol of gay rights.
1934	The terms <i>heterosexuality</i> and <i>homosexuality</i> appear in Webster’s dictionary with generally the same meaning the terms hold today.
1948	American sexologist Alfred Kinsey’s research reveals that more people than thought have engaged in same-sex sexual activity. His research highlights the existence of bisexuality.
1969	On June 27, patrons at the Stonewall Inn in New York City fight back as police raid the bar (a common practice used by police at the time to harass gay people). “The Stonewall Riot,” as it came to be called, was led by gay, lesbian, and transgender patrons of the bar, many of whom were working class and/or people of color.
1974	The American Psychiatric Association removes its reference to homosexuality as a mental illness.
1999	The Vermont Supreme Court rules that the state must provide legal rights to same-sex couples. In 2000, Vermont becomes the first state to offer same-sex couples civil unions.
2003	The US Supreme Court rules that Texas’s sodomy law is unconstitutional, which effectively decriminalizes consensual same-sex relations.
2011	The US military policy “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” is repealed, allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly.

Source: Adapted from Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011), 117–25; and University of Denver Queer and Ally Commission, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer History,” *Queer Ally Training Manual*, 2008.

## Ability

There is resistance to classifying ability as a cultural identity, because we follow a **medical model of disability** that places disability as an individual and medical rather than social and cultural issue. While much of what distinguishes able-bodied and cognitively able from disabled is rooted in science, biology, and physiology, there are important sociocultural dimensions. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines an individual with a disability as “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.” Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 141–42. An impairment is defined as “any temporary or permanent loss or abnormality of a body structure or function, whether physiological or psychological.” Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 142. This definition is important because it notes the social aspect of disability in that people’s life activities are limited and the relational aspect of disability in that the perception of a disability by others can lead someone to be classified as such.

Ascribing an identity of disabled to a person can be problematic. If there is a mental or physical impairment, it should be diagnosed by a credentialed expert. If there isn’t an impairment, then the label of *disabled* can have negative impacts, as this label carries social and cultural significance. People are tracked into various educational programs based on their physical and cognitive abilities, and there are many cases of people being mistakenly labeled disabled who were treated differently despite their protest of the ascribed label. Students who did not speak English as a first language, for

example, were—and perhaps still are—sometimes put into special education classes.

Ability, just as the other cultural identities discussed, has institutionalized privileges and disadvantages associated with it. **Ableism** is the system of beliefs and practices that produces a physical and mental standard that is projected as normal for a human being and labels deviations from it abnormal, resulting in unequal treatment and access to resources. Ability privilege refers to the unearned advantages that are provided for people who fit the cognitive and physical norms. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 142. I once attended a workshop about ability privilege led by a man who was visually impaired. He talked about how, unlike other cultural identities that are typically stable over a lifetime, ability fluctuates for most people. We have all experienced times when we are more or less able.

Perhaps you broke your leg and had to use crutches or a wheelchair for a while. Getting sick for a prolonged period of time also lessens our abilities, but we may fully recover from any of these examples and regain our ability privilege. Whether you've experienced a short-term disability or not, the majority of us will become less physically and cognitively able as we get older. Statistically, people with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the United States, with an estimated 20 percent of people five years or older living with some form of disability. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 139. Medical advances have allowed some people with disabilities to live longer and more active lives than before, which has led to an increase in the number of people with disabilities. This number could continue to increase, as we have thousands of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with physical disabilities

or psychological impairments such as posttraumatic stress disorder.

As disability has been constructed in US history, it has intersected with other cultural identities. For example, people opposed to “political and social equality for women cited their supposed physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws, deficits, and deviations from the male norm.” They framed women as emotional, irrational, and unstable, which was used to put them into the “scientific” category of “feble-mindedness,” which led them to be institutionalized. Licia Carlson, “Cognitive Ableism and Disability Studies: Feminist Reflections on the History of Mental Retardation,” *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (2001): 127. Arguments supporting racial inequality and tighter immigration restrictions also drew on notions of disability, framing certain racial groups as prone to mental retardation, mental illness, or uncontrollable emotions and actions. See Table 5.4 for a timeline of developments related to ability, identity, and communication. These thoughts led to a dark time in US history, as the eugenics movement sought to limit reproduction of people deemed as deficient.

Table 5.4 Developments Related to Ability, Identity, and Communication

<b>Year(s)</b>	<b>Development</b>
400 BCE	The Greeks make connections between biology, physiology, and actions. For example, they make a connection between epilepsy and a disorder of the mind but still consider the source to be supernatural or divine.
30–480	People with disabilities are viewed with pity by early Christians and thought to be so conditioned because of an impurity that could possibly be addressed through prayer.
500– 1500	As beliefs in the supernatural increase during the Middle Ages, people with disabilities are seen as manifestations of evil and are ridiculed and persecuted.
1650– 1789	During the Enlightenment, the first large-scale movements toward the medical model are made, as science and medicine advance and society turns to a view of human rationality.
1900s	The eugenics movement in the United States begins. Laws are passed to sterilize the “socially inadequate,” and during this time, more than sixty thousand people were forcibly sterilized in thirty-three states.
1930s	People with disabilities become the first targets of experimentation and mass execution by the Nazis.
1970s	The independent living movement becomes a prominent part of the disability rights movement.
1990	The Americans with Disabilities Act is passed through Congress and signed into law.

Source: Maggie Shreve, “The Movement for Independent Living: A Brief History,” *Independent Living Research Utilization*, accessed October 14, 2011, [http://ilru.org/html/publications/infopaks/IL\\_paradigm.doc](http://ilru.org/html/publications/infopaks/IL_paradigm.doc).



*Figure 5.6 As recently disabled veterans integrate back into civilian life, they will be offered assistance and accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. © Thinkstock*

Since many people are unsure of how to communicate with a person with disabilities, following are the “Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities” to help you in communicating with persons with disabilities: SPACE “Effective Interaction: Communication with and about People with Disabilities in the Workplace,” accessed November 5, 2012, <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/effectiveinteraction.htm#.UJgp8RjqJJ8>. When talking with a

person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign- language interpreter.

- When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign-language interpreter.
- When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)
- When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. (Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.)
- Leaning on or hanging on to a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on to a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.
- Listen attentively when you're talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or a shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.
- When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.

- To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. Not all people who are deaf can read lips. For those who do lip read, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes, and food away from your mouth when speaking.
- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The social constructionist view of culture and identity states that the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relation to social, cultural, and political contexts.
- Race, gender, sexuality, and ability are socially constructed cultural identities that developed over time in relation to historical, social, and political contexts.
- Race, gender, sexuality, and ability are cultural identities that affect our communication and our relationships.

## EXERCISES

- Do you ever have difficulty discussing different cultural identities due to terminology? If so, what are your uncertainties? What did you learn in this chapter that can help you overcome them?
- What comes to mind when you hear the word *feminist*? How

did you come to have the ideas you have about feminism?

- How do you see sexuality connect to identity in the media? Why do you think the media portrays sexuality and identity the way it does?
- Think of an instance in which you had an interaction with someone with a disability. Would knowing the “Ten Commandments for Communicating with People with Disabilities” have influenced how you communicated in this instance? Why or why not?

# 3. Intercultural Communication

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define intercultural communication.
- List and summarize the six dialectics of intercultural communication.
- Discuss how intercultural communication affects interpersonal relationships.

It is through intercultural communication that we come to create, understand, and transform culture and identity.

**Intercultural communication** is communication between people with differing cultural identities. One reason we should study intercultural communication is to foster greater self-awareness.

Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 4. Our thought process regarding culture is often “other focused,” meaning that the culture of the other person or group is what stands out in our perception. However, the old adage “know thyself” is appropriate, as we become more aware of our own culture by better understanding other cultures and perspectives. Intercultural communication can allow us to step outside of our comfortable, usual frame of reference and see our culture through a different lens.

Additionally, as we become more self-aware, we may also become more ethical communicators as we challenge our

**ethnocentrism**, or our tendency to view our own culture as superior to other cultures.

As was noted earlier, difference matters, and studying intercultural communication can help us better negotiate our changing world. Changing economies and technologies intersect with culture in meaningful ways. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 17–21. As was noted earlier, technology has created for some a **global village** where vast distances are now much shorter due to new technology that make travel and communication more accessible and convenient. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967). However, as the following “Getting Plugged In” box indicates, there is also a **digital divide**, which refers to the unequal access to technology and related skills that exists in much of the world. People in most fields will be more successful if they are prepared to work in a globalized world. Obviously, the global market sets up the need to have intercultural competence for employees who travel between locations of a multinational corporation. Perhaps less obvious may be the need for teachers to work with students who do not speak English as their first language and for police officers, lawyers, managers, and medical personnel to be able to work with people who have various cultural identities.

## “Getting Plugged In”

### The Digital Divide

Many people who are now college age struggle to imagine a time without cell phones and the Internet. As “digital natives” it is probably also surprising to realize the number

of people who do not have access to certain technologies. The *digital divide* was a term that initially referred to gaps in access to computers. The term expanded to include access to the Internet since it exploded onto the technology scene and is now connected to virtually all computing. Alexander van Deursen and Jan van Dijk, "Internet Skills and the Digital Divide," *New Media and Society* 13, no. 6 (2010): 893. doi:10.1177/1461444810386774. Approximately two billion people around the world now access the Internet regularly, and those who don't face several disadvantages. Patricia Smith, "The Digital Divide," *New York Times Upfront*, May 9, 2011, 6. Discussions of the digital divide are now turning more specifically to high-speed Internet access, and the discussion is moving beyond the physical access divide to include the skills divide, the economic opportunity divide, and the democratic divide. This divide doesn't just exist in developing countries; it has become an increasing concern in the United States. This is relevant to cultural identities because there are already inequalities in terms of access to technology based on age, race, and class. Dari E. Sylvester and Adam J. McGlynn, "The Digital Divide, Political Participation, and Place," *Social Science Computer Review* 28, no. 1 (2010): 64–65. doi:10.1177/0894439309335148. Scholars argue that these continued gaps will only serve to exacerbate existing cultural and social inequalities. From an international perspective, the United States is falling behind other countries in terms of access to high-speed Internet. South Korea, Japan, Sweden, and Germany now all have faster average connection speeds than the United States. Patricia Smith, "The Digital Divide," *New York Times Upfront*, May 9, 2011, 6. And Finland in 2010 became the first country in the world to declare that all its citizens have a legal right to broadband Internet access. Diana ben- Aaron, "Bringing Broadband to Finland's Bookdocks," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, July 19, 2010, 42. People in rural areas in the

United States are especially disconnected from broadband service, with about 11 million rural Americans unable to get the service at home. As so much of our daily lives go online, it puts those who aren't connected at a disadvantage. From paying bills online, to interacting with government services, to applying for jobs, to taking online college classes, to researching and participating in political and social causes, the Internet connects to education, money, and politics.

- What do you think of Finland's inclusion of broadband access as a legal right? Is this something that should be done in other countries? Why or why not?
- How does the digital divide affect the notion of the global village?
- How might limited access to technology negatively affect various nondominant groups?

## Intercultural Communication: A Dialectical Approach

Intercultural communication is complicated, messy, and at times contradictory. Therefore it is not always easy to conceptualize or study. Taking a dialectical approach allows us to capture the dynamism of intercultural communication. A **dialectic** is a relationship between two opposing concepts that constantly push and pull one another. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 73. To put it another way, thinking dialectically helps us realize that our experiences often occur in between two different phenomena. This perspective is especially useful for interpersonal and intercultural communication, because when we think dialectically, we think relationally. This means

we look at the relationship between aspects of intercultural communication rather than viewing them in isolation. Intercultural communication occurs as a dynamic in-betweenness that, while connected to the individuals in an encounter, goes beyond the individuals, creating something unique. Holding a dialectical perspective may be challenging for some Westerners, as it asks us to hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously, which goes against much of what we are taught in our formal education. Thinking dialectically helps us see the complexity in culture and identity because it doesn't allow for dichotomies. **Dichotomies** are dualistic ways of thinking that highlight opposites, reducing the ability to see gradations that exist in between concepts. Dichotomies such as good/evil, wrong/right, objective/subjective, male/female, in-group/out-group, black/white, and so on form the basis of much of our thoughts on ethics, culture, and general philosophy, but this isn't the only way of thinking. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, "Thinking Dialectically about Culture and Communication," *Communication Theory* 9, no. 1 (1999): 14. Many Eastern cultures acknowledge that the world isn't dualistic. Rather, they accept as part of their reality that things that seem opposite are actually interdependent and complement each other. I argue that a dialectical approach is useful in studying intercultural communication because it gets us out of our comfortable and familiar ways of thinking. Since so much of understanding culture and identity is understanding ourselves, having an unfamiliar lens through which to view culture can offer us insights that our familiar lenses will not. Specifically, we can better understand intercultural communication by examining six dialectics (see Figure 5.7). Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, "Thinking Dialectically about Culture and Communication," *Communication Theory* 9, no. 1 (1999): 1-25.



Figure 5.7 Source: Adapted from Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, “Thinking Dialectically about Culture and Communication,” *Communication Theory* 9, no. 1 (1999): 1–25.

The **cultural-individual dialectic** captures the interplay between patterned behaviors learned from a cultural group and individual behaviors that may be variations on or counter to those of the larger culture. This dialectic is useful because it helps us account for exceptions to cultural norms. For example, earlier we learned that the United States is said to be a low-context culture, which means that we value verbal communication as our primary, meaning-rich form of communication. Conversely, Japan is said to be a high-context culture, which means they often look for nonverbal clues like tone, silence, or what is not said for meaning. However, you can find people in the United States who intentionally put much meaning into *how* they say things, perhaps because they are not as comfortable speaking directly what’s on their mind. We often do this in situations where we may hurt someone’s feelings or damage a relationship. Does that mean we come from a high-context culture? Does the Japanese man who speaks more than is socially acceptable come from a low-context culture? The answer to both questions is no. Neither the behaviors of a small percentage of individuals nor occasional situational choices constitute a cultural pattern.

The **personal-contextual dialectic highlights** the connection between our personal patterns of and preferences for communicating and how various contexts influence the personal. In some cases, our communication patterns and preferences will stay the same across many contexts. In other cases, a context shift may lead us to alter our communication and adapt. For example, an American businesswoman may prefer to communicate with her

employees in an informal and laid-back manner. When she is promoted to manage a department in her company's office in Malaysia, she may again prefer to communicate with her new Malaysian employees the same way she did with those in the United States. In the United States, we know that there are some accepted norms that communication in work contexts is more formal than in personal contexts. However, we also know that individual managers often adapt these expectations to suit their own personal tastes. This type of managerial discretion would likely not go over as well in Malaysia where there is a greater emphasis put on power distance. Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Softwares of the Mind* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 26. So while the American manager may not know to adapt to the new context unless she has a high degree of intercultural communication competence, Malaysian managers would realize that this is an instance where the context likely influences communication more than personal preferences. The **differences-similarities dialectic** allows us to examine how we are simultaneously similar to and different from others. As was noted earlier, it's easy to fall into a view of intercultural communication as "other oriented" and set up dichotomies between "us" and "them." When we overfocus on differences, we can end up polarizing groups that actually have things in common. When we overfocus on similarities, we **essentialize**, or reduce/overlook important variations within a group. This tendency is evident in most of the popular, and some of the academic, conversations regarding "gender differences." The book *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus* makes it seem like men and women aren't even species that hail from the same planet. The media is quick to include a blurb from a research study indicating again how men and women are "wired" to communicate differently. However, the overwhelming majority of current research on gender and communication finds that while

there are differences between how men and women communicate, there are far more similarities. Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 55. Even the language we use to describe the genders sets up dichotomies. That's why I suggest that my students use the term *other gender* instead of the commonly used *opposite sex*. I have a mom, a sister, and plenty of female friends, and I don't feel like any of them are the opposite of me. Perhaps a better title for a book would be *Women and Men Are Both from Earth*.

The **static-dynamic dialectic** suggests that culture and communication change over time yet often appear to be and are experienced as stable. Although it is true that our cultural beliefs and practices are rooted in the past, we have already discussed how cultural categories that most of us assume to be stable, like race and gender, have changed dramatically in just the past fifty years. Some cultural values remain relatively consistent over time, which allows us to make some generalizations about a culture.

For example, cultures have different orientations to time. The Chinese have a longer-term orientation to time than do Europeans. Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester, *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication across Cultures*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2006), 128–29. This is evidenced in something that dates back as far as astrology. The Chinese zodiac is done annually (The Year of the Monkey, etc.), while European astrology was organized by month (Taurus, etc.). While this cultural orientation to time has been around for generations, as China becomes more Westernized in terms of technology, business, and commerce, it could also adopt some views on time that are more short term.

The **history/past-present/future dialectic** reminds us to understand that while current cultural conditions are important and that our actions now will inevitably affect our

future, those conditions are not without a history. We always view history through the lens of the present. Perhaps no example is more entrenched in our past and avoided in our present as the history of slavery in the United States. Where I grew up in the Southern United States, race was something that came up frequently. The high school I attended was 30 percent minorities (mostly African American) and also had a noticeable number of white teens (mostly male) who proudly displayed Confederate flags on their clothing or vehicles.

I remember an instance in a history class where we were discussing slavery and the subject of repatriation, or compensation for descendants of slaves, came up. A white male student in the class proclaimed, “I’ve never owned slaves. Why should I have to care about this now?” While his statement about not owning slaves is valid, it doesn’t acknowledge that effects of slavery still linger today and that the repercussions of such a long and unjust period of our history don’t disappear over the course of a few generations.

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

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

As these dialectics reiterate, culture and communication are complex systems that intersect with and diverge from many contexts. A better understanding of all these dialectics helps us be more critical thinkers and competent communicators in a changing world.

### **“Getting Critical”**

#### Immigration, Laws, and Religion

France, like the United States, has a constitutional separation between church and state. As many countries in Europe, including France, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, have experienced influxes of immigrants, many of them Muslim, there have been growing tensions among immigration, laws, and religion. In 2011, France passed a law banning the wearing of a niqab (pronounced knee-cobb), which is an Islamic facial covering worn by some women that only exposes the eyes.

This law was aimed at “assimilating its Muslim population” of more than five million people and “defending French values and women’s rights.” Maia De La Baume and J. David Goodman, “First Fines over Wearing Veils in France,” *The New York Times* (*The Lede: Blogging the News*), September 22, 2011, accessed October 10, 2011, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/22/first-fines-over-wearing-full-veils-in-france>. Women found wearing the veil can now be cited and fined \$150 euros. Although the law went into effect in April of 2011, the first fines were issued in late September of 2011. Hind Ahmas, a woman who

was fined, says she welcomes the punishment because she wants to challenge the law in the European Court of Human Rights. She also stated that she respects French laws but cannot abide by this one. Her choice to wear the veil has been met with more than a fine. She recounts how she has been denied access to banks and other public buildings and was verbally harassed by a woman on the street and then punched in the face by the woman's husband. Another Muslim woman named Kenza Drider, who can be seen in Video Clip 5.2, announced that she will run for the presidency of France in order to challenge the law. The bill that contained the law was broadly supported by politicians and the public in France, and similar laws are already in place in Belgium and are being proposed in Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Christian Fraser, "The Women Defying France's Fall-Face Veil Ban," *BBC News*, September 22, 2011, accessed October 10,

2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15023308>.

- Some people who support the law argue that part of integrating into Western society is showing your face. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- Part of the argument for the law is to aid in the assimilation of Muslim immigrants into French society. What are some positives and negatives of this type of assimilation?
- 3. Identify which of the previously discussed dialectics can be seen in this case. How do these dialectics capture the tensions involved?

## Intercultural Communication and Relationships

**Intercultural relationships** are formed between people with different cultural identities and include friends, romantic

partners, family, and coworkers. Intercultural relationships have benefits and drawbacks. Some of the benefits include increasing cultural knowledge, challenging previously held stereotypes, and learning new skills. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 383. For example, I learned about the Vietnamese New Year celebration Tet from a friend I made in graduate school. This same friend also taught me how to make some delicious Vietnamese foods that I continue to cook today. I likely would not have gained this cultural knowledge or skill without the benefits of my intercultural friendship.

Intercultural relationships also present challenges, however. The dialectics discussed earlier affect our intercultural relationships. The similarities-differences dialectic in particular may present challenges to relationship formation. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 384–87. While differences between people’s cultural identities may be obvious, it takes some effort to uncover commonalities that can form the basis of a relationship. Perceived differences in general also create anxiety and uncertainty that is not as present in intracultural relationships. Once some similarities are found, the tension within the dialectic begins to balance out and uncertainty and anxiety lessen. Negative stereotypes may also hinder progress toward relational development, especially if the individuals are not open to adjusting their preexisting beliefs. Intercultural relationships may also take more work to nurture and maintain. The benefit of increased cultural awareness is often achieved, because the relational partners explain their cultures to each other. This type of explaining requires time, effort, and patience and may be an extra burden that some are not willing to carry. Last, engaging in intercultural relationships can lead to questioning or even

backlash from one's own group. I experienced this type of backlash from my white classmates in middle school who teased me for hanging out with the African American kids on my bus. While these challenges range from mild inconveniences to more serious repercussions, they are important to be aware of. As noted earlier, intercultural relationships can take many forms. The focus of this section is on friendships and romantic relationships, but much of the following discussion can be extended to other relationship types.

## Intercultural Friendships

Even within the United States, views of friendship vary based on cultural identities. Research on friendship has shown that Latinos/as value relational support and positive feedback, Asian Americans emphasize exchanges of ideas like offering feedback or asking for guidance, African Americans value respect and mutual acceptance, and European Americans value recognition of each other as individuals. Mary Jane Coller, "Communication Competence Problematics in Ethnic Friendships," *Communication Monographs* 63, no. 4 (1996): 324-25. Despite the differences in emphasis, research also shows that the overall definition of a close friend is similar across cultures. A close friend is thought of as someone who is helpful and nonjudgmental, who you enjoy spending time with but can also be independent, and who shares similar interests and personality traits. Pei-Wen Lee, "Bridging Cultures: Understanding the Construction of Relational Identity in Intercultural Friendships," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 35, no. 1 (2006): 11. doi:10.1080/17475740600739156.

Intercultural friendship formation may face challenges

that other friendships do not. Prior intercultural experience and overcoming language barriers increase the likelihood of intercultural friendship formation. Patricia M. Sias, Jolanta A. Drzewiecka, Mary Meares, Rhiannon Bent, Yoko Konomi, Maria Ortega, and Colene White, "Intercultural Friendship Development," *Communication Reports* 21, no. 1 (2008): 9. doi:10.1080/08934210701643750. In some cases, previous intercultural experience, like studying abroad in college or living in a diverse place, may motivate someone to pursue intercultural friendships once they are no longer in that context. When friendships cross nationality, it may be necessary to invest more time in common understanding, due to language barriers. With sufficient motivation and language skills, communication exchanges through self-disclosure can then further relational formation. Research has shown that individuals from different countries in intercultural friendships differ in terms of the topics and depth of self-disclosure, but that as the friendship progresses, self-disclosure increases in depth and breadth. Yea-Wen Chen and Masato Nakazawa, "Influences of Culture on Self-Disclosure as Relationally Situated in Intercultural and Interracial Friendships from a Social Penetration Perspective," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 38, no. 2 (2009): 94. doi:10.1080/17475750903395408.

Further, as people overcome initial challenges to initiating an intercultural friendship and move toward mutual self-disclosure, the relationship becomes more intimate, which helps friends work through and move beyond their cultural differences to focus on maintaining their relationship. In this sense, intercultural friendships can be just as strong and enduring as other friendships. Pei-Wen Lee, "Bridging Cultures: Understanding the Construction of Relational Identity in Intercultural Friendships," *Journal of Intercultural*

*Communication Research* 35, no. 1 (2006): 6. doi:10.1080/17475740600739156.

The potential for broadening one's perspective and learning more about cultural identities is not always balanced, however. In some instances, members of a dominant culture may be more interested in sharing their culture with their intercultural friend than they are in learning about their friend's culture, which illustrates how context and power influence friendships. Pei-Wen Lee, "Bridging Cultures: Understanding the Construction of Relational Identity in Intercultural Friendships," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 35, no. 1 (2006): 19. doi:10.1080/17475740600739156. A research study found a similar power dynamic, as European Americans in intercultural friendships stated they were open to exploring everyone's culture but also communicated that culture wasn't a big part of their intercultural friendships, as they just saw their friends as people. As the researcher states, "These types of responses may demonstrate that it is easiest for the group with the most socioeconomic and socio-cultural power to ignore the rules, assume they have the power as individuals to change the rules, or assume that no rules exist, since others are adapting to them rather than vice versa." Mary Jane Collier, "Communication Competence Problematics in Ethnic Friendships," *Communication Monographs* 63, no. 4 (1996): 332. Again, intercultural friendships illustrate the complexity of culture and the importance of remaining mindful of your communication and the contexts in which it occurs.

## 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. Letitia Anne Peplau and Leah R. Spalding, "The Close Relationships of Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals," in *Close Relationships: A Sourcebook*, eds. Clyde Hendrick and Susan S. Hendrick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 113.

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. "Pass ENDA Now," Human Rights Campaign, accessed November 5, 2012, <http://www.hrc.org/campaigns/employment-non-discrimination-act>. 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. Letitia Anne Peplau and Leah R. Spalding, “The Close Relationships of Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals,” in *Close Relationships: A Sourcebook*, eds. Clyde Hendrick and Susan S. Hendrick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 120–21.

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. Letitia Anne Peplau and Leah R. Spalding, “The Close Relationships of Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals,” in *Close Relationships: A Sourcebook*, eds. Clyde Hendrick and Susan S. Hendrick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 114. 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. Letitia Anne Peplau and Leah R. Spalding, “The Close Relationships of Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals,” in *Close Relationships: A Sourcebook*, eds. Clyde Hendrick and Susan S. Hendrick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 117. 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. Robert A. Pratt, "Crossing the Color Line: A Historical Assessment and Personal Narrative of *Loving v. Virginia*," *Howard Law Journal* 41, no. 2 (1995): 229–36. It wasn't until 1998 and 2000, however, that South Carolina and Alabama removed such language from their state constitutions. Loving Day, "The Last Laws to Go," *Lovingday.org*, accessed October 11, 2011, <http://lovingday.org/last-laws-to-go>. 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. 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), 239. 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. Stanley O. Gaines Jr. and James H. Liu, "Multicultural/Multiracial Relationships," in *Close Relationships: A Sourcebook*, eds. Clyde Hendrick and Susan S. Hendrick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 105.



*Figure 5.9 The Supreme Court ruled in the 1967 Loving v. Virginia case that states could not enforce laws banning interracial marriages. © Thinkstock*

## 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.
- A dialectical approach to studying intercultural communication is useful because it allows us to think about culture and identity in complex ways, avoiding dichotomies and acknowledging the tensions that must be negotiated.
- 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.

## EXERCISES

- Why is the phrase “Know thyself” relevant to the study of intercultural communication?
- Apply at least one of the dialectics to a recent intercultural interaction that you had. How does this dialectic help you understand or analyze the situation?
- Do some research on your state’s laws by answering the following questions: Did your state have antimiscegenation laws? If so, when were they repealed? Does your state legally recognize gay and lesbian relationships? If so, how?

PART VI  
CHAPTER SIX



# Learning Objectives

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

# I. Understanding How and Why We Listen

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.<sup>97</sup> Our memory consists of multiple “storage units,” including sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory.<sup>98</sup>

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** is a mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for twenty seconds to one minute. **Long-term memory** is a mental storage capability to which stimuli in short-term memory can be transferred if they are connected to existing schema and in which information can be stored indefinitely.<sup>99</sup> 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 7.1 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 stand-alone 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). 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.<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup>

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.<sup>102</sup> 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. The following list reviews some of the main functions of listening that are relevant in multiple contexts.

The main purposes of listening are<sup>104</sup>

- 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.

## 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.<sup>105</sup> The main types of listening we will discuss are discriminative, informational, critical, empathetic<sup>106</sup> 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.<sup>107</sup> 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 listening** 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.<sup>108</sup> 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.<sup>109</sup> 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.<sup>110</sup> 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** 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** 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.<sup>111</sup> 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 listeners** 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

- 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?
- Getting integrated: Identify how critical listening might be useful for you in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic.
- Listening scholars have noted that empathetic listening is the most difficult type of listening. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Which style of listening best describes you and why? Which style do you have the most difficulty with or like the least and why?

# 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.<sup>112</sup> 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.<sup>113</sup> 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.

## 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.<sup>114</sup> 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.<sup>115</sup> 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:

Person	Statement
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** is a form of self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them.<sup>116</sup> 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...”<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>118</sup> 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

- 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?
- Bad speakers and messages are a common barrier to effective listening.
- Describe a time recently when your ability to listen was impaired by the poor delivery and/or content of another person.
- 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?

# 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:<sup>119</sup>

To improve listening at the receiving stage,

- prepare yourself to listen,
- discern between intentional messages and noise,
- concentrate on stimuli most relevant to your listening purpose(s) or goal(s),
- be mindful of the selection and attention process as much as possible,
- pay attention to turn-taking signals so you can follow the conversational flow, and
- avoid interrupting someone while they are speaking in order to maintain your ability to receive stimuli and listen.

To improve listening at the interpreting stage,

- identify main points and supporting points;
- use contextual clues from the person or environment to discern additional meaning;
- be aware of how a relational, cultural, or situational context can influence meaning;
- be aware of the different meanings of silence; and
- note differences in tone of voice and other paralinguistic cues that influence meaning.

To improve listening at the recalling stage,

- use multiple sensory channels to decode messages and make more complete memories;
- repeat, rephrase, and reorganize information to fit your cognitive preferences; and
- use mnemonic devices as a gimmick to help with recall.

To improve listening at the evaluating stage,

- separate facts, inferences, and judgments;
- be familiar with and able to identify persuasive strategies and fallacies of reasoning;
- assess the credibility of the speaker and the message; and
- be aware of your own biases and how your perceptual filters can create barriers to effective listening.

To improve listening at the responding stage,

- ask appropriate clarifying and follow-up questions and paraphrase information to check understanding,
- give feedback that is relevant to the speaker's purpose/ motivation for speaking,
- adapt your response to the speaker and the context, and
- 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."<sup>120</sup> 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:

- "What are my goals for listening to this message?"

- “How does this message relate to me / affect my life?”
- “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.<sup>121</sup> 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:<sup>122</sup>

- **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.<sup>123</sup> 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.<sup>124</sup> 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 thinkthrough 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.<sup>125</sup>

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.”

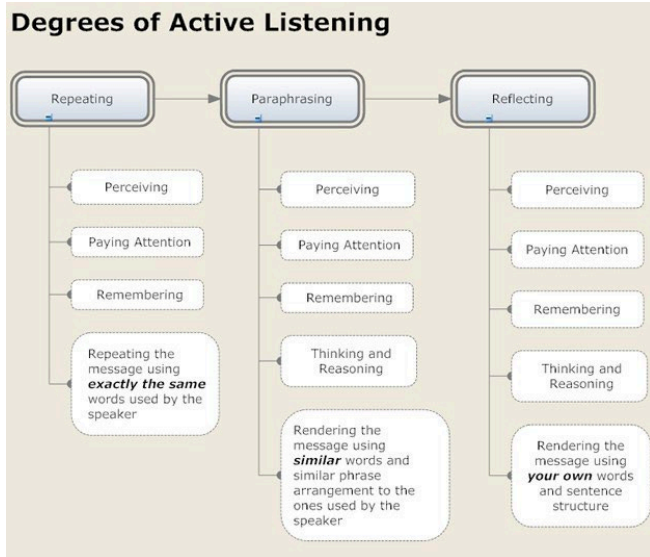


Figure 7.2 Degrees of Active Listening is used under a CC BY-SA license.

<b>Repeating</b>	<b>Paraphrasing</b>	<b>Reflecting</b>
Perceiving	Perceiving	Perceiving
Paying Attention	Paying Attention	Paying Attention
Remembering	Remembering	Remembering
Repeating the message using <b>exactly the same</b> words used by the speaker	Thinking and Reasoning	Thinking and Reasoning
Rendering	Rendering the message using similar words and <b>similar</b> phrase	Rendering the message using <b>your own</b> words and sentence structure

<b>Repeating</b>	<b>Paraphrasing</b>	<b>Reflecting</b>
	arrangement to the ones used by the speaker	

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.<sup>126</sup>

## Listening in Relational Contexts

Listening plays a central role in establishing and maintaining our relationships.<sup>127</sup> 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.<sup>128</sup> 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.<sup>129</sup> 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.<sup>130</sup> 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.<sup>131</sup> 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.<sup>132</sup> 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.<sup>133</sup> 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.

## EXERCISE

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?

# End Notes

What strategies could you apply to your listening challenges to improve your listening competence?

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PART VII  
CHAPTER SEVEN



# Learning Objectives

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain how the triangle of meaning describes the symbolic nature of language.
- Distinguish between denotation and connotation.
- Discuss the function of the rules of language.
- Describe the process of language acquisition.

# I. Language and Meaning

The relationship between language and meaning is not a straightforward one. One reason for this complicated relationship is the limitlessness of modern language systems like English. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 8–9. Language is productive in the sense that there are an infinite number of utterances we can make by connecting existing words in new ways. In addition, there is no limit to a language’s vocabulary, as new words are coined daily. Of course, words aren’t the only things we need to communicate, and although verbal and nonverbal communication are closely related in terms of how we make meaning, nonverbal communication is not productive and limitless. Although we can only make a few hundred physical signs, we have about a million words in the English language. So with all this possibility, how does communication generate meaning?

You’ll recall that “generating meaning” was a central part of the definition of communication we learned earlier. We arrive at meaning through the interaction between our nervous and sensory systems and some stimulus outside of them. It is here, between what the communication models we discussed earlier labeled as encoding and decoding, that meaning is generated as sensory information is interpreted. The indirect and sometimes complicated relationship between language and meaning can lead to confusion, frustration, or even humor. We may even experience a little of all three, when we stop to think about how there are some twenty-five definitions available to tell us the meaning of word *meaning*! David Crystal, *How*

*Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 187. Since language and symbols are the primary vehicle for our communication, it is important that we not take the components of our verbal communication for granted.

## Language Is Symbolic

Our language system is primarily made up of symbols. A **symbol** is something that stands in for or represents something else. Symbols can be communicated verbally (speaking the word *hello*), in writing (putting the letters H-E-L-L-O together), or nonverbally (waving your hand back and forth). In any case, the symbols we use stand in for something else, like a physical object or an idea; they do not actually correspond to the thing being referenced in any direct way. Unlike hieroglyphics in ancient Egypt, which often did have a literal relationship between the written symbol and the object being referenced, the symbols used in modern languages look nothing like the object or idea to which they refer.

The symbols we use combine to form language systems or codes. **Codes** are culturally agreed on and ever-changing systems of symbols that help us organize, understand, and generate meaning. Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, *Semiotics and Communication: Signs, Codes, Cultures* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), 53. There are about 6,000 language codes used in the world, and around 40 percent of those (2,400) are only spoken and do not have a written version. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 17, 24. Remember that for most of human history the spoken word and nonverbal communication were the primary means of communication.

Even languages with a written component didn't see widespread literacy, or the ability to read and write, until a little over one hundred years ago.

The symbolic nature of our communication is a quality unique to humans. Since the words we use do not have to correspond directly to a "thing" in our "reality," we can communicate in abstractions. This property of language is called **displacement** and specifically refers to our ability to talk about events that are removed in space or time from a speaker and situation. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 10.

The earliest human verbal communication was not very symbolic or abstract, as it likely mimicked sounds of animals and nature. Such a simple form of communication persisted for thousands of years, but as later humans turned to settled agriculture and populations grew, things needed to be more distinguishable. More terms (symbols) were needed to accommodate the increasing number of things like tools and ideas like crop rotation that emerged as a result of new knowledge about and experience with farming and animal domestication. There weren't written symbols during this time, but objects were often used to represent other objects; for example, a farmer might have kept a pebble in a box to represent each chicken he owned. As further advancements made keeping track of objects- representing-objects more difficult, more abstract symbols and later written words were able to stand in for an idea or object. Despite the fact that these transitions occurred many thousands of years ago, we can trace some words that we still use today back to their much more direct and much less abstract origins.

For example, the word *calculate* comes from the Latin word *calculus*, which means "pebble." But what does a pebble have to do with calculations? Pebbles were used, very long ago, to calculate things before we developed verbal or written

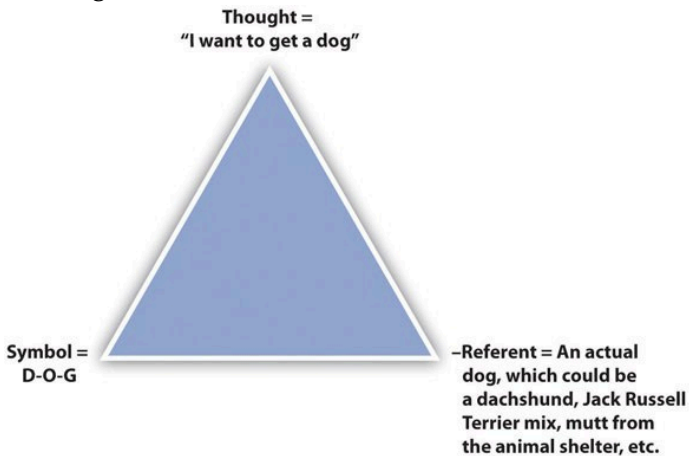
numbering systems. S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 87. As I noted earlier, a farmer may have kept, in a box, one pebble for each of his chickens. Each pebble represented one chicken, meaning that each symbol (the pebble) had a direct correlation to another thing out in the world (its chicken). This system allowed the farmer to keep track of his livestock. He could periodically verify that each pebble had a corresponding chicken. If there was a discrepancy, he would know that a chicken was lost, stolen, or killed. Later, symbols were developed that made accounting a little easier. Instead of keeping track of boxes of pebbles, the farmer could record a symbol like the word five or the numeral 15 that could stand in for five or fifteen pebbles.

This demonstrates how our symbols have evolved and how some still carry that ancient history with them, even though we are unaware of it. While this evolution made communication easier in some ways, it also opened up room for misunderstanding, since the relationship between symbols and the objects or ideas they represented became less straightforward. Although the root of *calculate* means “pebble,” the word *calculate* today has at least six common definitions.

### *The Triangle of Meaning*

The **triangle of meaning** is a model of communication that indicates the relationship among a thought, symbol, and referent and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and referent. Ivor A. Richards and Charles K. Ogden, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Tubner, 1923). As you can see in Figure 8.2 “Triangle of Meaning”, the thought is the concept or idea a person references. The symbol is the word that represents the

thought, and the referent is the object or idea to which the symbol refers. This model is useful for us as communicators because when we are aware of the indirect relationship between symbols and referents, we are aware of how common misunderstandings occur, as the following example illustrates: Jasper and Abby have been thinking about getting a new dog. So each of them is having a similar thought. They are each using the same symbol, the word *dog*, to communicate about their thought. Their referents, however, are different.



Jasper is thinking about a small dog like a dachshund, and Abby is thinking about an Australian shepherd. Since the word *dog* doesn't refer to one specific object in our reality, it is possible for them to have the same thought, and use the same symbol, but end up in an awkward moment when they get to the shelter and fall in love with their respective referents only to find out the other person didn't have the same thing in mind.

*Figure 8.2 Triangle of Meaning. Source: Adapted from Ivor A. Richards and Charles K. Ogden, The Meaning of Meaning (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Tubner, 1923).*

Being aware of this indirect relationship between symbol and referent, we can try to compensate for it by getting clarification. Some of what we learned in the chapter on

perception can be useful here. Abby might ask Jasper, “What kind of dog do you have in mind?” This question would allow Jasper to describe his referent, which would allow for more shared understanding. If Jasper responds, “Well, I like short-haired dogs. And we need a dog that will work well in an apartment,” then there’s still quite a range of referents. Abby could ask questions for clarification, like “Sounds like you’re saying that a smaller dog might be better. Is that right?” Getting to a place of shared understanding can be difficult, even when we define our symbols and describe our referents.

## *Definitions*

Definitions help us narrow the meaning of particular symbols, which also narrows a symbol’s possible referents. They also provide more words (symbols) for which we must determine a referent. If a concept is abstract and the words used to define it are also abstract, then a definition may be useless. Have you ever been caught in a verbal maze as you look up an unfamiliar word, only to find that the definition contains more unfamiliar words? Although this can be frustrating, definitions do serve a purpose.

Words have denotative and connotative meanings. **Denotation** refers to definitions that are accepted by the language group as a whole, or the dictionary definition of a word. For example, the denotation of the word cowboy is a man who takes care of cattle. Another denotation is a reckless and/or independent person. A more abstract word, like change, would be more difficult to understand due to the multiple denotations. Since both cowboy and change have multiple meanings, they are considered polysemic words. Monosemic words have only one use in a language, which makes their denotation more straightforward. Specialized academic or scientific words, like monosemic, are often

monosemic, but there are fewer commonly used monosemic words, for example, handkerchief. As you might guess based on our discussion of the complexity of language so far, monosemic words are far outnumbered by polysemic words.

**Connotation** refers to definitions that are based on emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word. To go back to our previous words, change can have positive or negative connotations depending on a person's experiences. A person who just ended a long-term relationship may think of change as good or bad depending on what he or she thought about his or her former partner. Even monosemic words like handkerchief that only have one denotation can have multiple connotations. A handkerchief can conjure up thoughts of dainty Southern belles or disgusting snot-rags.

A polysemic word like *cowboy* has many connotations, and philosophers of language have explored how connotations extend beyond one or two experiential or emotional meanings of a word to constitute cultural myths. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1972). *Cowboy*, for example, connects to the frontier and the western history of the United States, which has mythologies associated with it that help shape the narrative of the nation. The Marlboro Man is an enduring advertising icon that draws on connotations of the cowboy to attract customers. While people who grew up with cattle or have family that ranch may have a very specific connotation of the word *cowboy* based on personal experience, other people's connotations may be more influenced by popular cultural symbolism like that seen in westerns.

## Language Is Learned

As we just learned, the relationship between the symbols that

make up our language and their referents is arbitrary, which means they have no meaning until we assign it to them. In order to effectively use a language system, we have to learn, over time, which symbols go with which referents, since we can't just tell by looking at the symbol. Like me, you probably learned what the word *apple* meant by looking at the letters A-P-P-L-E and a picture of an apple and having a teacher or caregiver help you sound out the letters until you said the whole word. Over time, we associated that combination of letters with the picture of the red delicious apple and no longer had to sound each letter out. This is a deliberate process that may seem slow in the moment, but as we will see next, our ability to acquire language is actually quite astounding. We didn't just learn individual words and their meanings, though; we also learned rules of grammar that help us put those words into meaningful sentences.

### *The Rules of Language*

Any language system has to have rules to make it learnable and usable. Grammar refers to the rules that govern how words are used to make phrases and sentences. Someone would likely know what you mean by the question "Where's the remote control?" But "The control remote where's?" is likely to be unintelligible or at least confusing. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 180.



Knowing the rules of grammar is important in order to be able to write and speak to be understood, but knowing these rules isn't enough to make you an effective communicator. As we will learn later, creativity and play also have a role in effective verbal communication. Even though teachers have long enforced the idea that there are right and wrong ways to write and say words, there really isn't anything inherently right or wrong about the individual choices we make in our language use. Rather, it is our collective agreement that gives power to the rules that govern language.

*Figure 8.3 We learn the rules of language as we learn to speak and read. © Thinkstock*

Some linguists have viewed the rules of language as fairly rigid and limiting in terms of the possible meanings that we can derive from words and sentences created from within that system. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974). Others have viewed these rules as more open and flexible, allowing a person to make choices to determine meaning. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976). Still others have claimed that there is no real meaning and that possibilities for meaning are limitless.

Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978). For our purposes in this chapter, we will take the middle perspective, which allows for the possibility of individual choice but still acknowledges that there is a system of rules and logic that guides our decision making.

Looking back to our discussion of connotation, we can see how individuals play a role in how meaning and language are related, since we each bring our own emotional and experiential associations with a word that are often more meaningful than a dictionary definition. In addition, we have quite a bit of room for creativity, play, and resistance with the symbols we use. Have you ever had a secret code with a friend that only you knew? This can allow you to use a code word in a public place to get meaning across to the other person who is “in the know” without anyone else understanding the message. The fact that you can take a word, give it another meaning, have someone else agree on that meaning, and then use the word in your own fashion clearly shows that meaning is in people rather than words. As we will learn later, many slang words developed because people wanted a covert way to talk about certain topics like drugs or sex without outsiders catching on.

### *Language Acquisition*

**Language acquisition** refers to the process by which we learn to understand, produce, and use words to communicate within a given language group. The way we acquire language is affected by many factors. We know that learning a language is not just about learning words. We have to learn how to correctly connect the words to what they mean in a given context and be able to order the words in such a way, within the rules of grammar for the language code we are using, that

other people will be able to understand us. S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 86. As if that didn't seem like enough to learn, we also have to learn various conversational patterns that we regularly but often unconsciously follow to make our interactions smooth and successful. A brief overview of language acquisition from birth to adulthood offers us a look at the amazing and still somewhat mysterious relationships between our brain, eyes, ears, voice, and other physiological elements. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 80–89. In terms of language acquisition, there is actually a great deal of variation between individuals due to physical and contextual differences, but this overview presumes “typical development.”

Much is being taken in during the first year of life as brain development accelerates and senses are focused and tuned. Primary caregivers are driven, almost instinctively, to begin instilling conversational abilities in babies from birth. As just about anyone who has spent time around a baby during this phase of rapid development can attest, there is a compulsion to interact with the child, which is usually entertaining for adult and baby. This compulsion isn't random or accidental, and we would be wrong to assume that our communication is useless or just for fun. We would also be wrong to assume that language acquisition doesn't begin until a baby says his or her first words. By the time this happens, babies have learned much, through observation and practice, about our verbal communication and interaction patterns. These key developments include the following:

- **2–4 months.** Babies can respond to different tones of voice (angry, soothing, or playful).
- **6 months.** Babies can associate some words, like *bye-bye*, with

a corresponding behavior, and they begin “babbling,” which is actually practice for more intelligible speech to come.

- **8–10 months.** Babies learn that pointing can attract or direct attention, and they begin to follow adult conversations, shifting eye contact from one speaker to the next.
- **1 year.** Babies recognize some individual words (people’s names, *no*) and basic rituals of verbal interaction such as question–pause–answer and various greetings. Shortly before or after this time, babies begin to use “melodic utterances” echoing the variety in pitch and tone in various verbal interactions such as questioning, greeting, or wanting.

Language acquisition after the age of two seems sluggish compared to the pace of development during the first year or so. By the end of the first year, babies have learned most of the basic phonetic components necessary for speech. The second year represents a time of intense practice—of verbal trial and error. From three to five we continue to develop our pronunciation ability, which develops enough by our teens to allow us to engage in everyday communication. Of course, our expressive repertoire, including ways of speaking and the vocabulary we use, continues to develop. A person’s life and career choices determine to a large degree how much further development occurs. But the language abilities we have acquired can decrease or disappear as a result of disease or trauma. Additionally, if such things occur early in life, or before birth, the process of language acquisition can be quite different. Barriers to speech and language acquisition are common and are the domain of a related but distinct field of study often housed in departments of communication sciences and disorders.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The triangle of meaning is a model of communication that indicates the relationship among a thought, symbol, and referent, and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and the referent. The model explains how for any given symbol there can be many different referents, which can lead to misunderstanding.
- *Denotation* refers to the agreed on or dictionary definition of a word. *Connotation* refers to definitions that are based on emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word.
- The rules of language help make it learnable and usable. Although the rules limit some of the uses of language, they still allow for the possibility of creativity and play.
- Language acquisition refers to the process by which we learn to understand, produce, and use words to communicate within a given language group. This process happens at an amazing speed during the first two years of life, and we attain all the linguistic information we need to participate in everyday conversations, assuming normal development, by our early teens.

## 2. Functions of Language

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify and discuss the main types of linguistic expressions.
- Discuss the power of language to express our identities, affect our credibility, control others, and perform actions.
- Discuss some of the sources of fun within language.
- Explain how neologisms and slang contribute to the dynamic nature of language.
- Identify the ways in which language can separate people and bring them together.

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

### Language Is Expressive

Verbal communication helps us meet various needs through our ability to express ourselves. In terms of instrumental needs, we use verbal communication to ask questions that provide us with specific information. We also use verbal communication to describe things, people, and ideas. Verbal

communication helps us inform, persuade, and entertain others, which as we will learn later are the three general purposes of public speaking. It is also through our verbal expressions that our personal relationships are formed. At its essence, language is expressive. **Verbal expressions** help us communicate our observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs. Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 34–36.

### *Expressing Observations*

When we express observations, we report on the sensory information we are taking or have taken in. Eyewitness testimony is a good example of communicating observations. Witnesses are not supposed to make judgments or offer conclusions; they only communicate factual knowledge as they experienced it. For example, a witness could say, “I saw a white Mitsubishi Eclipse leaving my neighbor’s house at 10:30 pm.” Observation and description occur in the first step of the perception-checking process.

When you are trying to make sense of an experience, expressing observations in a descriptive rather than evaluative way can lessen defensiveness, which facilitates competent communication.

### *Expressing Thoughts*

When we express thoughts, we draw conclusions based on what we have experienced. In the perception process, this is similar to the interpretation step. We take various observations and evaluate and interpret them to assign them meaning (a conclusion). Whereas our observations are based on sensory

information (what we saw, what we read, what we heard), thoughts are connected to our beliefs (what we think is true/false), attitudes (what we like and dislike), and values (what we think is right/wrong or good/bad). Jury members are expected to express thoughts based on reported observations to help reach a conclusion about someone's guilt or innocence. A juror might express the following thought: "The neighbor who saw the car leaving the night of the crime seemed credible. And the defendant seemed to have a shady past—I think he's trying to hide something." Sometimes people intentionally or unintentionally express thoughts as if they were feelings. For example, when people say, "I feel like you're too strict with your attendance policy," they aren't really expressing a feeling; they are expressing a judgment about the other person (a thought).

### *Expressing Feelings*

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

Expressing feelings can be uncomfortable for those listening. Some people are generally not good at or comfortable with

receiving and processing other people's feelings. Even those with good empathetic listening skills can be positively or negatively affected by others' emotions. Expressions of anger can be especially difficult to manage because they represent a threat to the face and self-esteem of others.

Despite the fact that expressing feelings is more complicated than other forms of expression, emotion sharing is an important part of how we create social bonds and empathize with others, and it can be improved.

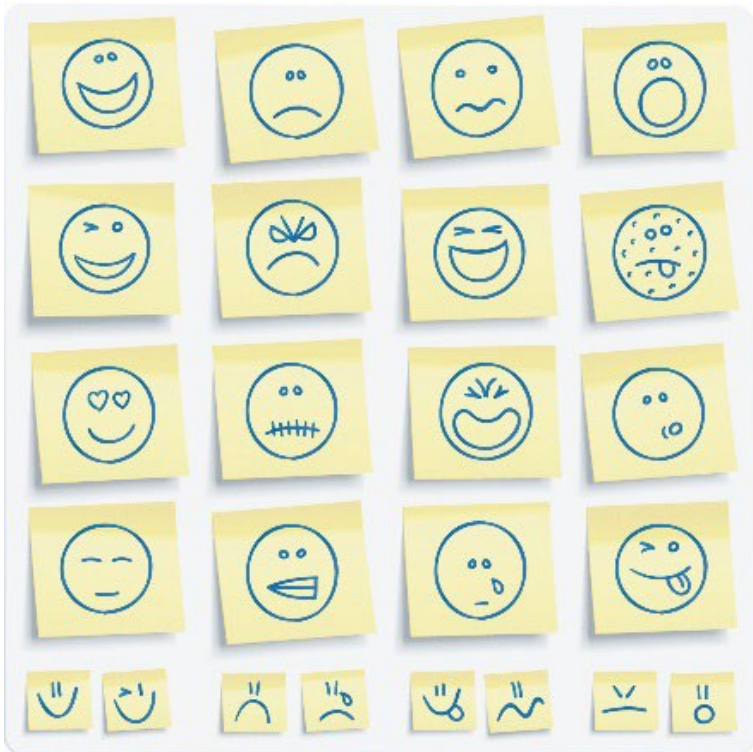


Figure 8.5 Expressing feelings is often the most difficult form of verbal expression. © Thinkstock

In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous our emotions will be for the person decoding our

message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, *happy* is mild, *delighted* is moderate, and *ecstatic* is intense; *ignored* is mild, *rejected* is moderate, and *abandoned* is intense. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 166.

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

### *Expressing Needs*

When we express needs, we are communicating in an instrumental way to help us get things done. Since we almost always know our needs more than others do, it's important for us to be able to convey those needs to others. Expressing needs can help us get a project done at work or help us navigate the changes of a long-term romantic partnership. Not expressing needs can lead to feelings of abandonment,

frustration, or resentment. For example, if one romantic partner expresses the following thought “I think we’re moving too quickly in our relationship” but doesn’t also express a need, the other person in the relationship doesn’t have a guide for what to do in response to the expressed thought.

Stating, “I need to spend some time with my hometown friends this weekend. Would you mind if I went home by myself?” would likely make the expression more effective. Be cautious of letting evaluations or judgments sneak into your expressions of need. Saying “I need you to stop suffocating me!” really expresses a thought-feeling mixture more than a need.

Table 8.1 Four Types of Verbal Expressions

Type	Description	Example
Observation	Report of sensory experiences or memories	“Pauline asked me to bring this file to you.”
Thought	Conclusion about or judgment of experiences and observations	“Students today have much less respect for authority.”

Type	Description	Example
Feeling	Communicating emotions	“I feel at peace when we’re together.”
Need	Stating wants or requesting help or support	“I’m saving money for summer vacation. Is it OK if we skip our regular night out this week?”

Source: Adapted from Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 34–36.

## Language Is Powerful

The contemporary American philosopher David Abram wrote, “Only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world.” David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997), 89. This statement encapsulates many of the powerful features of language. Next, we will discuss how language expresses our identities, affects our credibility, serves as a means of control, and performs actions.

The power of language to express our identities varies depending on the origin of the label (self-chosen or other imposed) and the context. People are usually comfortable with the language they use to describe their own identities but may have issues with the labels others place on them. In terms of context, many people express their “Irish” identity on St. Patrick’s Day, but they may not think much about it over the rest of the year. There are many examples of people who have taken a label that was imposed on them, one that usually has negative connotations, and intentionally used it in ways that counter previous meanings. Some country music singers and comedians have reclaimed the label *redneck*, using it as an identity marker they are proud of rather than a pejorative term. Other examples of people reclaiming identity labels is the “black is beautiful” movement of the 1960s that repositioned *black* as a positive identity marker for African Americans and the “queer” movement of the 1980s and ’90s that reclaimed *queer* as a positive identity marker for some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Even though some people embrace reclaimed words, they still carry their negative connotations and are not openly accepted by everyone.

## *Language Affects Our Credibility*

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

## *Language Is a Means of Control*

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

communication or use it in a critical, aggressive, or hurtful way as a form of negative reinforcement. **Directives** are utterances that try to get another person to do something. They can range from a rather polite ask or request to a more forceful command or insist. Context informs when and how we express directives and how people respond to them. Promises are often paired with directives in order to persuade people to comply, and those promises, whether implied or stated, should be kept in order to be an ethical communicator. Keep this in mind to avoid arousing false expectations on the part of the other person. S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 67.

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

George Brown, "Explaining," in *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, ed. Owen Hargie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 220.

### *Language Is Performative*

Some language is actually more like an action than a packet of information. Saying, "I promise," "I guarantee," or "I pledge," does more than convey meaning; it communicates intent. Such utterances are called **commissives**, as they mean a speaker is committed to a certain course of action. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die*

(Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 277. Of course, promises can be broken, and there can be consequences, but other verbal communication is granted official power that can guarantee action. The two simple words *I do* can mean that a person has agreed to an oath before taking a witness stand or assuming the presidency. It can also mean that two people are now bound in a relationship recognized by the government and/or a religious community. These two words, if said in the right context and in front of the right person, such as a judge or a reverend, bring with them obligations that cannot be undone without additional steps and potential negative repercussions. In that sense, language is much more than “mere words.”

Performative language can also be a means of control, especially in legal contexts. In some cases, the language that makes our laws is intentionally vague. In courts all over the nation, the written language intersects with spoken language as lawyers advocate for particular interpretations of the written law.

The utterances of judges and juries set precedents for reasonable interpretations that will then help decide future cases. Imagine how powerful the words *We the jury find the defendant...* seem to the defendant awaiting his or her verdict. The sentences handed down by judges following a verdict are also performative because those words impose fines, penalties, or even death. Some language is deemed so powerful that it is regulated. Hate speech, which we will learn more about later, and slander, libel, and defamation are considered powerful enough to actually do damage to a person and have therefore been criminalized.



*Figure 8.7 Judges' words perform actions ranging from holding someone in contempt of court to sentencing someone to death.*  
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## Language Is Fun

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

The productivity and limitlessness of language we discussed earlier leads some people to spend an inordinate amount of time discovering things about words. Two examples that I have found fascinating are palindromes and contranymy. Palindromes, as noted, are words that read the same from left to right and from right to left. *Racecar* is a commonly cited example, but a little time spent looking through Google results for palindromes exposes many more, ranging from “Live not on evil” to “Doc, note I dissent. A fast never prevents a fatness. I diet on cod.” “Neil/Fred’s Gigantic List of Palindromes,” accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.derf.net/palindromes/old.palindrome.html>.

Contranymy are words that have multiple meanings, two of which are opposites. For example, *sanction* can mean “to allow” and “to prevent,” and *dust* can mean “to remove particles” when used in reference to furniture or “to add

particles” when used in reference to a cake. These are just two examples of humorous and contradictory features of the English language—the book *Crazy English* by Richard Lederer explores dozens more. A fun aspect of language enjoyed by more people than a small community of word enthusiasts is humor.

There are more than one hundred theories of humor, but none of them quite captures the complex and often contradictory nature of what we find funny. Hugh Foot and May McCreddie, “Humour and Laughter,” in *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, ed. Owen Hargie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006),

295. Humor is a complicated social phenomenon that is largely based on the relationship between language and meaning. Humor functions to liven up conversations, break the ice, and increase group cohesion. We also use humor to test our compatibility with others when a deep conversation about certain topics like politics or religion would be awkward. Bringing up these topics in a lighthearted way can give us indirect information about another person’s beliefs, attitudes, and values. Based on their response to the humorous message, we can either probe further or change the subject and write it off as a poor attempt at humor. Hugh Foot and May McCreddie, “Humour and Laughter,” in *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, ed. Owen Hargie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 299. Using humor also draws attention to us, and the reactions that we get from others feeds into our self-concept. We also use humor to disclose information about ourselves that we might not feel comfortable revealing in a more straightforward way. Humor can also be used to express sexual interest or to cope with bad news or bad situations.

We first start to develop an understanding of humor as children when we realize that the words we use for objects are really arbitrary and can be manipulated. This manipulation creates a distortion or incongruous moment in the reality that we had previously known. Some humor scholars believe that

this early word play—for example, calling a horse a turtle and a turtle a horse—leads us to appreciate language-based humor like puns and riddles. Hugh Foot and May McCreddie, “Humour and Laughter,” in *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, ed. Owen Hargie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 294–95. It is in the process of encoding and decoding that humor emerges. People use encoding to decide how and when to use humor, and people use decoding to make sense of humorous communication. Things can go wrong in both of those processes. I’m sure we can all relate to the experience of witnessing a poorly timed or executed joke (a problem with encoding) and of not getting a joke (a problem with decoding).

## Language Is Dynamic

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

### *Neologisms*

**Neologisms** are newly coined or used words. Newly coined words are those that were just brought into linguistic existence. Newly used words make their way into languages in several ways, including borrowing and changing structure. *Taking* is actually a more fitting descriptor than *borrowing*, since we take words but don’t really give them back. In any case, borrowing is the primary means through which languages expand. English is a good case in point, as most of

its vocabulary is borrowed and doesn't reflect the language's Germanic origins. English has been called the "vacuum cleaner of languages." David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 225. Weekend is a popular English word based on the number of languages that have borrowed it. We have borrowed many words, like chic from French, karaoke from Japanese, and caravan from Arabic.

Structural changes also lead to new words. Compound words are neologisms that are created by joining two already known words. Keyboard, newspaper, and giftcard are all compound words that were formed when new things were created or conceived. We also create new words by adding something, subtracting something, or blending them together. For example, we can add affixes, meaning a prefix or a suffix, to a word. Affixing usually alters the original meaning but doesn't completely change it. Ex-husband and kitchenette are relatively recent examples of such changes. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 226. New words are also formed when clipping a word like examination, which creates a new word, exam, that retains the same meaning. And last, we can form new words by blending old ones together. Words like breakfast and lunch blend letters and meaning to form a new word—brunch.

Existing words also change in their use and meaning. The digital age has given rise to some interesting changes in word usage. Before Facebook, the word *friend* had many meanings, but it was mostly used as a noun referring to a companion. The sentence, *I'll friend you*, wouldn't have made sense to many people just a few years ago because *friend* wasn't used as a verb. *Google* went from being a proper noun referring to the company to a more general verb that refers to searching

for something on the Internet (perhaps not even using the Google search engine). Meanings can expand or contract without changing from a noun to a verb. *Gay*, an adjective for feeling happy, expanded to include *gay* as an adjective describing a person's sexual orientation. Perhaps because of the confusion that this caused, the meaning of *gay* has contracted again, as the earlier meaning is now considered archaic, meaning it is no longer in common usage.

The American Dialect Society names an overall “Word of the Year” each year and selects winners in several more specific categories. The winning words are usually new words or words that recently took on new meaning.“ All of the Words of the Year 1990 to Present,” American Dialect Society, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.americandialect.org/woty/all-of-the-words-of-the-year-1990-to-present>. In 2011, the overall winner was *occupy* as a result of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The word named the “most likely to succeed” was *cloud* as a result of Apple unveiling its new online space for file storage and retrieval. Although languages are dying out at an alarming rate, many languages are growing in terms of new words and expanded meanings, thanks largely to advances in technology, as can be seen in the example of *cloud*.

## *Slang*

**Slang** is a great example of the dynamic nature of language. Slang refers to new or adapted words that are specific to a group, context, and/or time period; regarded as less formal; and representative of people's creative play with language. Research has shown that only about 10 percent of the slang terms that emerge over a fifteen-year period survive. Many more take their place though, as new slang words are created using inversion, reduction, or old-fashioned creativity. Keith

Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69–71.

Inversion is a form of word play that produces slang words like *sick*, *wicked*, and *bad* that refer to the opposite of their typical meaning. Reduction creates slang words such as *pic*, *sec*, and *later* from *picture*, *second*, and *see you later*. New slang words often represent what is edgy, current, or simply relevant to the daily lives of a group of people. Many creative examples of slang refer to illegal or socially taboo topics like sex, drinking, and drugs. It makes sense that developing an alternative way to identify drugs or talk about taboo topics could make life easier for the people who partake in such activities. Slang allows people who are in “in the know” to break the code and presents a linguistic barrier for unwanted outsiders. Taking a moment to think about the amount of slang that refers to being intoxicated on drugs or alcohol or engaging in sexual activity should generate a lengthy list.

When I first started teaching this course in the early 2000s, Cal Poly Pomona had been compiling a list of the top twenty college slang words of the year for a few years. The top slang word for 1997 was *da bomb*, which means “great, awesome, or extremely cool,” and the top word for 2001 and 2002 was *tight*, which is used as a generic positive meaning “attractive, nice, or cool.” Unfortunately, the project didn’t continue, but I still enjoy seeing how the top slang words change and sometimes recycle and come back. I always end up learning some new words from my students. When I asked a class what the top college slang word should be for 2011, they suggested *deuces*, which is used when leaving as an alternative to good-bye and stems from another verbal/nonverbal leaving symbol—holding up two fingers for “peace” as if to say, “peace out.”

It’s difficult for my students to identify the slang they use at any given moment because it is worked into our everyday

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

## "Getting Plugged In"

Is "Textese" Hurting Our Verbal Communication?

Textese, also called text-message-ese and txt talk, among other things, has been called a "new dialect" of English that mixes letters and numbers, abbreviates words, and drops vowels and punctuation to create concise words and statements. Although this "dialect" has primarily been relegated to the screens of smartphones and other text-capable devices, it has slowly been creeping into our spoken language. Lily Huang, "Technology: Textese May Be the Death of English," *Newsweek*, August 2011, 8. Some critics say textese is "destroying" language by "pillaging punctuation" and "savaging our sentences." John Humphrys, "I h8 txt msgs: How Texting Is Wrecking Our Language," *Daily Mail*, September 24, 2007, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-483511/I-h8-txt-msgs-How-texting-wrecking-language.html?printingPage=true>. A relatively straightforward *tk*s for "thanks" or *u* for "you" has now given way to textese sentences like *IMHO U R GR8*. If you translated that into "In my humble opinion, you are great," then you are fluent in

textese. Although teachers and parents seem convinced that this type of communicating will eventually turn our language into emoticons and abbreviations, some scholars aren't. David Crystal, a well-known language expert, says that such changes to the English language aren't new and that texting can actually have positive effects. He points out that Shakespeare also abbreviated many words, played with the rules of language, and made up several thousand words, and he is not considered an abuser of language. He also cites research that found, using experimental data, that children who texted more scored higher on reading and vocabulary tests. Crystal points out that in order to play with language, you must first have some understanding of the rules of language. Lily Huang, "Technology: Textese May Be the Death of English," *Newsweek*, August 2011, 8.

- What effects, if any, do you think textese has had on your non-text-message communication?
- Overall do you think textese and other forms of computer-mediated communication have affected our communication? Try to identify one potential positive and negative influence that textese has had on our verbal communication.

## Language Is Relational

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

use. When negative feelings arrive and persist, or for many other reasons, we often use verbal communication to end a relationship.

### **Language Can Bring Us Together**

Interpersonally, verbal communication is key to bringing people together and maintaining relationships. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, our use of words like *I*, *you*, *we*, *our*, and *us* affect our relationships. “We language” includes the words *we*, *our*, and *us* and can be used to promote a feeling of inclusiveness. “I language” can be useful when expressing thoughts, needs, and feelings because it leads us to “own” our expressions and avoid the tendency to mistakenly attribute the cause of our thoughts, needs, and feelings to others. Communicating emotions using “I language” may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying, “You’re making me crazy!” you could say, “I’m starting to feel really anxious because we can’t make a decision about this.” Conversely, “you language” can lead people to become defensive and feel attacked, which could be divisive and result in feelings of interpersonal separation.

Aside from the specific words that we use, the frequency of communication impacts relationships. Of course, the content of what is said is important, but research shows that romantic partners who communicate frequently with each other and with mutual friends and family members experience less stress and uncertainty in their relationship and are more likely to stay together. Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/ St Martin’s, 2007), 237. When frequent communication combines with supportive messages, which are messages communicated in an open, honest, and nonconfrontational way, people are sure to come together.

Moving from the interpersonal to the sociocultural level, we can see that speaking the same language can bring people

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

Serious attempts to create a common language, sometimes referred to as a *lingua franca* or auxiliary language, began in the 1600s as world exploration brought increased trade and Latin was no longer effective as the language of international business. Since then, hundreds of auxiliary languages have been recorded but none have achieved widespread international usage or been officially recognized as an international language. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 423. While some such movements were primarily motivated by business and profit, others hoped to promote mutual understanding, more effective diplomacy, and peaceful coexistence. Esperanto, which means "hopeful," is the most well-known and widely used auxiliary language that was intended to serve as a common international language. Esperanto was invented by a Polish eye doctor at the end of the 1800s and today has between one and two million fluent speakers worldwide. Many works of literature and important manuscripts like the Bible and the Qur'an have been translated into Esperanto, and many original works of literature and academic articles have been written in the language. Some countries also broadcast radio programs in Esperanto. Several barriers will have to be overcome in order for an auxiliary language like Esperanto

to gain international acceptance. First, there would have to be a massive effort put into a period of simultaneous learning—otherwise it is difficult to motivate people to learn a language that is not necessary for their daily lives and that no one else speaks.

Second, as we have learned, people take pride in their linguistic identity and find pleasure in playing with the rules of language, creatively inventing new words and meanings that constantly change a language. Such changes may be impossible to accommodate in an auxiliary language. Lastly, the optimism of an internationally shared language eventually gives way to realism. If a shared language really brings peaceful coexistence, how do we explain all the civil wars and other conflicts that have been fought between people who speak the same language?

As new languages are invented, many more languages are dying. Linguists and native speakers of endangered languages have also rallied around so-called dying languages to preserve them. In the United States, Cajun French in Louisiana, French Canadian in Maine, and Pennsylvania Dutch are examples of language communities that are in danger of losing the language that has united them, in some cases for hundreds of years. Nancy C. Dorian, “Abrupt Transmission Failure in Obsolescing Languages: How Sudden the ‘Tip’ to the Dominant Language in Communities and Families?” *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (1986): 72. Although American English is in no danger of dying soon, there have been multiple attempts to make English the official language of the United States. Sometimes the argument supporting this proposition seems to be based on the notion that a shared language will lead to more solidarity and in-group identification among the speakers. However, many of these movements are politically and ideologically motivated and actually seek to marginalize and/or expel immigrants—typically immigrants who are also people of color.

The United States isn't the only country that has debated the merits of officially recognizing only certain languages. Similar debates have been going on for many years regarding whether French, English, or both should be the official language in Quebec, Canada, and which language(s)—French, Dutch, or Flemish—should be used in what contexts in Belgium. *Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, Intercultural Communication in Contexts, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 251–52.* In such cases, we can see that verbal communication can also divide people.

### *Language Can Separate Us*

Whether it's criticism, teasing, or language differences, verbal communication can also lead to feelings of separation. Language differences alone do not present insurmountable barriers. We can learn other languages with time and effort, there are other people who can translate and serve as bridges across languages, and we can also communicate quite a lot nonverbally in the absence of linguistic compatibility. People who speak the same language can intentionally use language to separate. The words *us* and *them* can be a powerful start to separation. Think of how language played a role in segregation in the United States as the notion of “separate but equal” was upheld by the Supreme Court and how apartheid affected South Africa as limits, based on finances and education, were placed on the black majority's rights to vote.

Symbols, both words and images, were a very important part of Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s and '40s in Europe. Various combinations of colored stars, triangles, letters, and other symbols were sewn onto the clothing or uniforms of people persecuted by the Nazis in order to classify them. People were labeled and reduced to certain characteristics

rather than seen as complete humans, which facilitated the Nazis' oppression, violence, and killing. Holocaust and Human Rights Education Center, "Lesson 4: 1939-1942, Persecution and Segregation," accessed June 9, 2012, <http://www.holocausteducationctr.org/index.php?submenu=testimony&src=gendocs&ref=DownloadCurriculum&category=testimony>.

At the interpersonal level, **unsupportive messages** can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and actual separation or dissolution of a relationship. It's impossible to be supportive in our communication all the time, but consistently unsupportive messages can hurt others' self-esteem, escalate conflict, and lead to defensiveness. People who regularly use unsupportive messages may create a toxic win/lose climate in a relationship. Six verbal tactics that can lead to feelings of defensiveness and separation are global labels, sarcasm, dragging up the past, negative comparisons, judgmental "you" messages, and threats. Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 48.

### *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.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Language helps us express observations (reports on sensory information), thoughts (conclusions and judgments based on observations or ideas), feelings, and needs.
- Language is powerful in that it expresses our identities through labels used by and on us, affects our credibility based on how we support our ideas, serves as a means of control, and performs actions when spoken by certain people in certain contexts.
- The productivity and limitlessness of language creates the

possibility for countless word games and humorous uses of language.

- Language is dynamic, meaning it is always changing through the addition of neologisms, new words or old words with new meaning, and the creation of slang.
- Language is relational and can be used to bring people together through a shared reality but can separate people through unsupportive and divisive messages.

## EXERCISES

- Based on what you are doing and how you are feeling at this moment, write one of each of the four types of expressions—an observation, a thought, a feeling, and a need.
- Getting integrated: A key function of verbal communication is expressing our identities. Identify labels or other words that are important for your identity in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic. (Examples include honors student for academic, trainee for professional, girlfriend for personal, and independent for civic.)
- Review the types of unsupportive messages discussed earlier. Which of them do you think has the potential to separate people the most? Why? Which one do you have the most difficulty avoiding (directing toward others)? Why?

# 3. Using Words Well

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discuss how the process of abstraction and the creation of whole messages relate to language clarity.
- Employ figurative and evocative language.
- Identify strategies for using language ethically.

Have you ever gotten lost because someone gave you directions that didn't make sense to you? Have you ever puzzled over the instructions for how to put something like a bookshelf or grill together?

When people don't use words well, there are consequences that range from mild annoyance to legal actions. When people do use words well, they can be inspiring and make us better people. In this section, we will learn how to use words well by using words clearly, using words affectively, and using words ethically.

## Using Words Clearly

The level of clarity with which we speak varies depending on whom we talk to, the situation we're in, and our own intentions and motives. We sometimes make a deliberate effort to speak as clearly as possible. We can indicate this concern for clarity nonverbally by slowing our rate and increasing our volume or verbally by saying, "Frankly..." or "Let me be clear..." Sometimes it can be difficult to speak clearly—for example, when we are speaking about something

with which we are unfamiliar. Emotions and distractions can also interfere with our clarity. Being aware of the varying levels of abstraction within language can help us create clearer and more “whole” messages.

### *Level of Abstraction*

The **ladder of abstraction** is a model used to illustrate how language can range from concrete to abstract. As we follow a concept up the ladder of abstraction, more and more of the “essence” of the original object is lost or left out, which leaves more room for interpretation, which can lead to misunderstanding.

This process of abstracting, of leaving things out, allows us to communicate more effectively because it serves as a shorthand that keeps us from having a completely unmanageable language filled with millions of words—each referring to one specific thing. S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 85–86. But it requires us to use context and often other words to generate shared meaning. Some words are more directly related to a concept or idea than others. If I asked you to go take a picture of a book, you could do that. If I asked you to go and take a picture of “work,” you couldn’t because *work* is an abstract word that was developed to refer to any number of possibilities from the act of writing a book, to repairing an air conditioner, to fertilizing an organic garden. You could take a picture of any of those things, but you can’t take a picture of “work.”

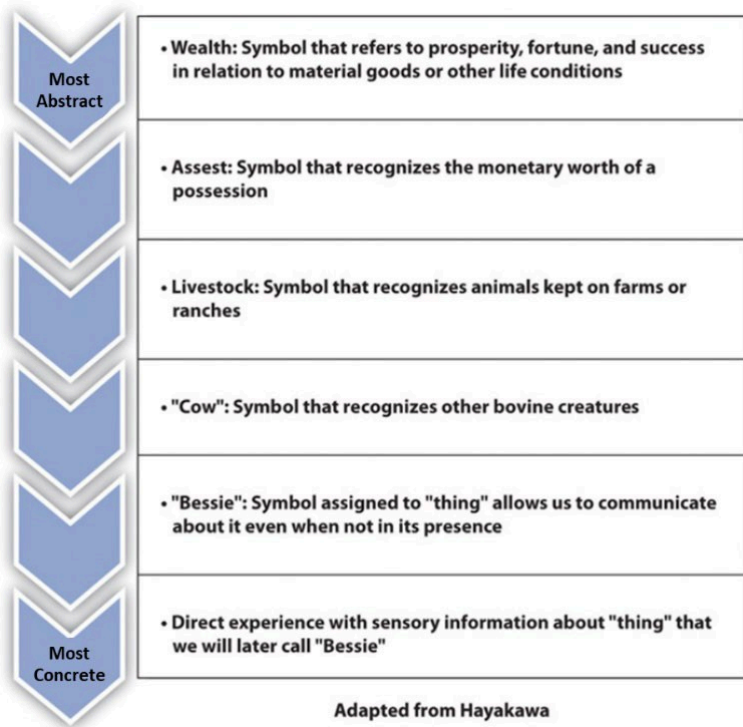


Figure 8.10 Ladder of Abstraction. Source: Adapted from S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 85.

You can see the semanticist S. I. Hayakawa’s classic example of the abstraction ladder with “Bessie the cow” in Figure 8.10 “Ladder of Abstraction.” S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 85. At the lowest level, we have something that is very concrete. At this level we are actually in the moment of experiencing the stimuli that is coming in through our senses. We perceive the actual “thing,” which is the “cow” in front of us (either in person or as an image). This is concrete, because it is unmediated, meaning it is actually the moment of experience. As we move up a level, we give the experience a name—we are looking at “Bessie.” So now,

instead of the direct experience with the “thing” in front of us, we have given the thing a name, which takes us one step away from the direct experience to the use of a more abstract symbol. Now we can talk and think about Bessie even when we aren’t directly experiencing her. At the next level, the word *cow* now lumps Bessie in with other bovine creatures that share similar characteristics. As we go on up the ladder, *cow* becomes *livestock*, *livestock* becomes an *asset*, and then an *asset* becomes *wealth*.

Note that it becomes increasingly difficult to define the meaning of the symbol as we go up the ladder and how with each step we lose more of the characteristics of the original concrete experience.

When shared referents are important, we should try to use language that is lower on the ladder of abstraction. Being intentionally concrete is useful when giving directions, for example, and can help prevent misunderstanding. We sometimes intentionally use abstract language. Since abstract language is often unclear or vague, we can use it as a means of testing out a potential topic (like asking a favor), offering negative feedback indirectly (to avoid hurting someone’s feelings or to hint), or avoiding the specifics of a topic.

### *Definitions and Clarity*

Knowing more about the role that abstraction plays in the generation of meaning can help us better describe and define the words we use. As we learned earlier, denotative definitions are those found in the dictionary—the official or agreed-on definition. Since definitions are composed of other words, people who compile dictionaries take for granted that there is a certain amount of familiarity with the words they use to define another word—otherwise we would just be going in circles. One challenge we face when defining words is our tendency to go

up the ladder of abstraction rather than down. S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 88–89.

For example, if I asked you to define the word *blue*, you'd likely say it's a color. If I asked you what a color is, you'd tell me it's a tint or characteristic of the appearance of a particular thing. To define more clearly, by going down the ladder of abstraction, you could say, "It's the color of Frank Sinatra's eyes," or "It's what the sky looks like on a clear day." People often come to understanding more quickly when a definition is descriptive and/or ties into their personal experiences. Definitions aren't useless, but they are usually best when paired with examples. You'll notice that I include many key terms and definitions in this book, but knowing some of the challenges of generating meaning through language, I also include many examples and narratives that come from real life.

**Jargon** refers to specialized words used by a certain group or profession. Since jargon is specialized, it is often difficult to relate to a diverse audience and should therefore be limited when speaking to people from outside the group—or at least be clearly defined when it is used.

### *Creating Whole Messages*

Earlier we learned about the four types of expressions, which are observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs. **Whole messages** include all the relevant types of expressions needed to most effectively communicate in a given situation, including what you see, what you think, what you feel, and what you need. Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 30–40. **Partial messages** are missing a relevant type of expression and can lead to misunderstanding and conflict. Whole messages help keep

lines of communication open, which can help build solid relationships. On the other hand, people can often figure out a message is partial even if they can't readily identify what is left out. For example, if Roscoe says to Rachel, "I don't trust Bob anymore," Rachel may be turned off or angered by Roscoe's conclusion (an expression of thought) about their mutual friend. However, if Roscoe recounted his observation of Bob's behavior, how that behavior made him feel, and what he needs from Rachel in this situation, she will be better able to respond.

While partial messages lack relevant expressions needed to clearly communicate, **contaminated messages** include mixed or misleading expressions. Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 37–39. For example, if Alyssa says to her college-aged daughter, "It looks like you wasted another semester," she has contaminated observations, feelings, and thoughts. Although the message appears to be an observation, there are underlying messages that are better brought to the surface. To decontaminate her message, and make it more whole and less alienating, Alyssa could more clearly express herself by saying, "Your dad and I talked, and he said you told him you failed your sociology class and are thinking about changing your major" (observation). "I think you're hurting your chances of graduating on time and getting started on your career" (thought). "I feel anxious because you and I are both taking out loans to pay for your education" (feeling).

Messages in which needs are contaminated with observations or feelings can be confusing. For example, if Shea says to Duste, "You're so lucky that you don't have to worry about losing your scholarship over this stupid biology final," it seems like he's expressing an observation, but it's really a thought, with an underlying feeling and need. To make the message more whole, Shea could bring the need and feeling to the surface: "I noticed you did really well on the last exam in our biology class" (observation). "I'm really

stressed about the exam next week and the possibility of losing my scholarship if I fail it” (feeling). “Would you be willing to put together a study group with me?” (need). More clarity in language is important, but as we already know, communication isn’t just about exchanging information—the words we use also influence our emotions and relationships.

### *Using Words Affectively*

**Affective language** refers to language used to express a person’s feelings and create similar feelings in another person. S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 75. Affective language can be intentionally used in relational contexts to create or enhance interpersonal bonds and can also be effectively employed in public speaking to engage an audience and motivate them in particular ways. We also use affective language spontaneously and less intentionally.

People who “speak from the heart” connect well with others due to the affective nature of their words. Sometimes people become so filled with emotion that they have to express it, and these exclamations usually arouse emotions in others. Hearing someone exclaim, “I’m so happy!” can evoke similar feelings of joy, while hearing someone exclaim, “Why me!?” while sobbing conjures up similar feelings of sadness and frustration. There are also specific linguistic devices that facilitate affective communication.

### *Figurative Language*

When people say something is a “figure of speech,” they are referring to a word or phrase that deviates from expectations in some way in meaning or usage. Marina Yaguello, *Language*

through the *Looking Glass: Exploring Language and Linguistics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 130. Figurative language is the result of breaking semantic rules, but in a way that typically enhances meaning or understanding rather than diminishes it. To understand figurative language, a person has to be familiar with the semantic rules of a language and also with social norms and patterns within a cultural and/or language group, which makes it difficult for nonnative speakers to grasp. Figurative language has the ability to convey much meaning in fewer words, because some of the meaning lies in the context of usage (what a listener can imply by the deviation from semantic norms) and in the listener (how the listener makes meaning by connecting the figurative language to his or her personal experience). Some examples of figurative speech include simile, metaphor, and personification.

A **simile** is a direct comparison of two things using the words like or as. Similes can be very explicit for the purpose of conveying a specific meaning and can help increase clarity and lead people to personally connect to a meaning since they have to visualize the comparison in their mind. For example, Forrest Gump's famous simile, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get," conjures up feelings of uncertainty and excitement. More direct similes like "I slept like a baby" and "That bread was hard as a rock" do not necessarily stir the imagination but still offer an alternative way of expressing something.

A **metaphor** is an implicit comparison of two things that are not alike and/or are not typically associated. They become meaningful as people realize the speaker's purpose for relating the two seemingly disparate ideas. Metaphors are figurative devices that can make our writing and speaking richer, but they require a person to balance creative associations among ideas with the common rules of the language if people are expected to figure out the meaning behind the association. A speaker must have the linguistic knowledge and insight to

realize when a nonliteral use of words or ideas will be more meaningful than a literal and conventional use of those words. Metaphors challenge the imagination, which can cause each person to make sense of the metaphor in his or her own way. Thomas H. Olbricht, *Informative Speaking* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1968), 81.

In 1946, just after World War II ended, Winston Churchill stated the following in a speech: “An iron curtain has descended across the continent of Europe.” Even though people knew there was no literal heavy metal curtain that had been lowered over Europe, the concepts of iron being strong and impenetrable and curtains being a divider combined to create a stirring and powerful image of a continent divided by the dark events of the previous years. Ronald H. Carpenter, *Choosing Powerful Words: Eloquence That Works* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 84. Some communication scholars argue that metaphors serve a much larger purpose and function to structure our human thought processes. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6. The metaphor “time is money” doesn’t just represent an imaginative connection; it shapes our social realities. We engage in specific actions that “save time,” “spend time,” or “waste time” because we have been socialized to see time as a resource.

Many metaphors spring from our everyday experiences. For example, many objects have been implicitly compared to human body parts; for example, we say a clock has hands and a face. **Personification** refers to the attribution of human qualities or characteristics of other living things to nonhuman objects or abstract concepts. This can be useful when trying to make something abstract more concrete and can create a sense of urgency or “realness” out of something that is hard for people to conceive.

Personification has been used successfully in public awareness campaigns because it allows people to identify with

something they think might not be relevant to them, as you can see in the following examples: “Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sleeping enemy that lives in many people and will one day wake up and demand your attention if you do not address it now.” “Crystal meth is a stalking your children whether you see it or not. You never know where it’s hiding.”

### *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. The rich fantasy worlds conceived in *Star Trek*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Twilight*, and *Harry Potter* show the power of figurative and evocative language to capture our attention and our imagination.

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. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 31–34. 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.

## “Getting Competent”

### Using Words Well

This chapter discusses several playful, creative, and engaging aspects of verbal communication. Employing language in an engaging way requires some effort for most people in terms of learning the rules of a language system, practicing, and expanding your vocabulary and expressive repertoire. Only milliseconds pass before a thought is verbalized and “out there” in the world. Since we’ve already learned that we have to be accountable for the short- and long-term effects of our communication, we know being able to monitor our verbal communication and follow the old adage to “think before we speak” is an asset. Using language for effect is difficult, but it can make your speech unique whether it is in a conversation or in front of a larger audience. Aside from communicating ideas, speech also leaves lasting impressions. The following are some tips for using words well that can apply to various settings but may be particularly useful in situations where one person is trying to engage the attention of an audience.

- Use concrete words to make new concepts or ideas relevant to the experience of your listeners.
- Use an appropriate level of vocabulary. It is usually obvious when people are trying to speak at a level that is out of their comfort zone, which can hurt credibility.
- Avoid public speeches that are too rigid and unnatural. Even though public speaking is more formal than conversation, it is usually OK to use contractions and personal pronouns. Not doing so would make the speech awkward and difficult to deliver since it is not a typical way of speaking.
- Avoid “bloating” your language by using unnecessary words. Don’t say “it is ever apparent” when you can just say “it’s clear.”
- Use vivid words to paint mental images for your listeners. Take them to places outside of the immediate setting through rich description.
- Use repetition to emphasize key ideas.
- When giving a formal speech that you have time to prepare for, record your speech and listen to your words. Have your outline with you and take note of areas that seem too bland, bloated, or confusing and then edit them before you deliver the speech.

## Using Words Ethically

Communication is irreversible. Among other things, the National Communication Association’s “Credo for Ethical Communication” states that we should be accountable for the long- and short-term effects of our communication. National Communication Association, “NCA Credo for Ethical Communication”, accessed May 18, 2012, [http://natcom.org/Tertiary.aspx?id=2119&terms=ethical %20credo](http://natcom.org/Tertiary.aspx?id=2119&terms=ethical%20credo). The way we talk, the words we choose to use, and the actions we take after we are done speaking are all important aspects of communication ethics. Earlier we learned that language is

performative, meaning that it can exceed the exchange of information and actually perform certain actions. Knowing that language can have real effects for people increases our need to be aware of the ethical implications of what we say.

Hate speech and bias are important aspects of communication ethics. In this section, we will focus on civility and accountability.

## *Civility*

Our strong emotions regarding our own beliefs, attitudes, and values can sometimes lead to incivility in our verbal communication. Incivility occurs when a person deviates from established social norms and can take many forms, including insults, bragging, bullying, gossiping, swearing, deception, and defensiveness, among others. Rowland S. Miller, “Breaches of Propriety,” in *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, ed. Robin M. Kowalski (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 42. Some people lament that we live in a time when civility is diminishing, but since standards and expectations for what is considered civil communication have changed over time, this isn’t the only time such claims have been made. Rowland S. Miller, “Breaches of Propriety,” in *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, ed. Robin M. Kowalski (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 30–31. As individualism and affluence have increased in many societies, so have the number of idiosyncratic identities that people feel they have the right to express. These increases could contribute to the impression that society is becoming less civil, when in fact it is just becoming different. As we learned in our section on perception and personality, we tend to assume other people are like us, and we may be disappointed or offended when we realize they are not. Cultural changes have probably contributed to making people

less willing to engage in self-restraint, which again would be seen as uncivil by people who prefer a more restrained and self-controlled expression. Rowland S. Miller, “Breaches of Propriety,” in *Behaving Badly: Aversive*

*Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, ed. Robin M. Kowalski (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000). Some journalists, media commentators, and scholars have argued that the “flaming” that happens on comment sections of websites and blogs is a type of verbal incivility that presents a threat to our democracy. Deborah Jordan Brooks and John G. Greer, “Beyond Negativity: The Effects of Incivility on the Electorate,” *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2007): 1-16. Other scholars of communication and democracy have not as readily labeled such communication “uncivil.” Bart Cammaerts, “Radical Pluralism and Free Speech in Online Public Spaces: The Case of North Belgian Extreme Right Discourses,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 6 (2009): 555-75. It has long been argued that civility is important for the functioning and growth of a democracy. Mark Kingwell, *A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). But in the new digital age of democracy where technologies like Twitter and Facebook have started democratic revolutions, some argue that the Internet and other new media have opened spaces in which people can engage in cyberactivism and express marginal viewpoints that may otherwise not be heard. Lincoln Dahlberg, “Rethinking the Fragmentation of the Cyberpublic: From Consensus to Contestation,” *New Media & Society* 9, no. 5 (2007): 827-47. In any case, researchers have identified several aspects of language use online that are typically viewed as negative: name-calling, character assassination, and the use of obscene language. Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey Berry, “From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News,” *Political Communication* 28 (2011): 19-41. So what contributes to such

uncivil behavior—online and offline? The following are some common individual and situational influences that may lead to breaches of civility: Rowland S. Miller, “Breaches of Propriety,” in *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, ed. Robin M. Kowalski (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 35–42. Psychological Association, 2001), 33–35.

- **Individual differences.** Some people differ in their interpretations of civility in various settings, and some people have personality traits that may lead to actions deemed uncivil on a more regular basis.
- **Ignorance.** In some cases, especially in novel situations involving uncertainty, people may not know what social norms and expectations are.
- **Lack of skill.** Even when we know how to behave, we may not be able to do it. Such frustrations may lead a person to revert to undesirable behavior such as engaging in personal attacks during a conflict because they don’t know what else to do.
- **Lapse of control.** Self-control is not an unlimited resource. Even when people know how to behave and have the skill to respond to a situation appropriately, they may not do so. Even people who are careful to monitor their behavior have occasional slipups.
- **Negative intent.** Some people, in an attempt to break with conformity or challenge societal norms, or for self-benefit (publicly embarrassing someone in order to look cool or edgy), are openly uncivil. Such behavior can also result from mental or psychological stresses or illnesses.

### *Polarizing Language*

Philosophers of language have long noted our tendency to verbally represent the world in very narrow ways when we

feel threatened. S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 112–24. 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. Avoiding sweeping generalizations allows us to speak more clearly and hopefully avoid defensive reactions from others that result from such blanket statements.

## Swearing

Scholars have identified two main types of swearing: social swearing and annoyance swearing. Yehuda Baruch and Stuart Jenkins, “Swearing at Work and Permissive Leadership Culture: When Anti-social Becomes Social and Incivility Is Acceptable,” *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 28, no. 6 (2007): 495–96. People engage in **social swearing** to create social bonds or for impression management (to seem cool or attractive). This type of swearing is typically viewed as male dominated, but some research studies have shown that the differences in frequency and use of swearing by men and women aren’t as vast as perceived. Nevertheless, there is generally more of a social taboo against women swearing than men, but as you already know, communication is contextual. **Annoyance swearing** provides a sense of relief, as people use it to manage stress and tension, which can be a preferred alternative to physical aggression. In some cases, swearing can be cathartic, allowing a person to release emotions that might otherwise lead to more aggressive or violent actions.

In the past few decades, the amount of profanity used in regular conversations and on television shows and movies has increased. This rise has been connected to a variety of factors, including increasing social informality since the 1960s and a decrease in the centrality of traditional/conservative religious views in many Western cultures. Yehuda Baruch and Stuart Jenkins, “Swearing at Work and Permissive Leadership Culture: When Anti-social Becomes Social and Incivility Is Acceptable,” *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 28, no. 6 (2007): 494. As a result of these changes, the shock value that swearing once had is lessening, and this desensitization has contributed to its spread. You have probably even noticed in your lifetime that the amount of swearing on television has increased, and in June of 2012 the Supreme Court stripped the Federal Communications Commission of some of its authority

to fine broadcasters for obscenities. Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Rejects F.C.C. Fines for Indecency," *NYTimes.com*, June 21, 2012, accessed September 20, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/business/media/justices-reject-indecency-fines-on-narrow-grounds.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/business/media/justices-reject-indecency-fines-on-narrow-grounds.html?_r=0). There has also been a reaction, or backlash, to this spread, which is most publicly evidenced by the website, book, and other materials produced by the Cuss Control Academy (<http://www.cusscontrol.com>).“ Cuss Control Academy,” James V. O’Connor, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.cusscontrol.com>. Although swearing is often viewed as negative and uncivil, some scholars argue for its positive effects. Yehuda Baruch and Stuart Jenkins, “Swearing at Work and Permissive Leadership Culture: When Anti-social Becomes Social and Incivility Is Acceptable,” *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 28, no. 6 (2007): 492–93. Specifically, swearing can help people to better express their feelings and to develop social bonds. In fact, swearing is typically associated more with the emotional part of the brain than the verbal part of the brain, as evidenced by people who suffer trauma to the verbal part of their brain and lose all other language function but are still able to swear. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 78.

### *Accountability*

The complexity of our verbal language system allows us to present inferences as facts and mask judgments within seemingly objective or oblique language. As an ethical speaker and a critical listener, it is important to be able to distinguish between facts, inferences, and judgments. S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and*

Action, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 22–32. **Inferences** are conclusions based on thoughts or speculation, but not direct observation. **Facts** are conclusions based on direct observation or group consensus. **Judgments** are expressions of approval or disapproval that are subjective and not verifiable.

Linguists have noted that a frequent source of miscommunication is **inference-observation confusion**, or the misperception of an inference (conclusion based on limited information) as an observation (an observed or agreed-on fact). William V. Haney, *Communication and Interpersonal Relations*, 6th ed. (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1992), 236–37. We can see the possibility for such confusion in the following example: If a student posts on a professor-rating site the statement “This professor grades unfairly and plays favorites,” then they are presenting an inference and a judgment that could easily be interpreted as a fact. Using some of the strategies discussed earlier for speaking clearly can help present information in a more ethical way—for example, by using concrete and descriptive language and owning emotions and thoughts through the use of “I language.” To help clarify the message and be more accountable, the student could say, “I worked for three days straight on my final paper and only got a C,” which we will assume is a statement of fact. This could then be followed up with “But my friend told me she only worked on hers the day before it was due and she got an A. I think that’s unfair and I feel like my efforts aren’t recognized by the professor.” Of the last two statements, the first states what may be a fact (note, however, that the information is secondhand rather than directly observed) and the second states an inferred conclusion and expresses an owned thought and feeling. Sometimes people don’t want to mark their statements as inferences because they want to believe them as facts. In this case, the student may have attributed her grade to the professor’s “unfairness” to cover up or avoid thoughts that

her friend may be a better student in this subject area, a better writer, or a better student in general. Distinguishing between facts, inferences, and judgments, however, allows your listeners to better understand your message and judge the merits of it, which makes us more accountable and therefore more ethical speakers.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The symbolic nature of language means that misunderstanding can easily occur when words and their definitions are abstract (far removed from the object or idea to which the symbol refers). The creation of whole messages, which contain relevant observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs, can help reduce misunderstandings.
- Affective language refers to language used to express a person's feelings and create similar feelings in another person. Metaphor, simile, personification, and vivid language can evoke emotions in speaker and listener.
- Incivility occurs when people deviate from accepted social norms for communication and behavior and manifests in swearing and polarized language that casts people and ideas as opposites. People can reduce incivility by being more accountable for the short- and long-term effects of their communication.

## EXERCISES

- Following the example in the ladder of abstraction, take a common word referring to an object (like *bicycle* or *smartphone*) and write its meaning, in your own words, at each

step from most concrete to most abstract. Discuss how the meaning changes as the word/idea becomes more abstract and how the word becomes more difficult to define.

- Decontaminate the following messages by rewriting them in a way that makes them whole (separate out each type of relevant expression). You can fill in details if needed to make your expressions more meaningful.
- “I feel like you can’t ever take me seriously.”
- “It looks like you’ve ruined another perfectly good relationship.”
- Find a famous speech (for example, at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com>) and identify components of figurative language. How do these elements add to the meaning of the speech?
- Getting integrated: Review the section on using words ethically. Identify a situation in which language could be used unethically in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic. Specifically tie your example to civility, polarizing language, swearing, or accountability.

# 4. Language, Society, and Culture

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discuss some of the social norms that guide conversational interaction.
- Identify some of the ways in which language varies based on cultural context.
- Explain the role that accommodation and code-switching play in communication.
- Discuss cultural bias in relation to specific cultural identities.

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

Although English used to employ formal (*thou*, *thee*) and informal pronouns (*you*), today *you* can be used when speaking to a professor, a parent, or a casual acquaintance. Other languages still have social norms and rules about who is to be referred to informally and formally. My friend, as was typical in the German language, referred to his professor with the formal pronoun *Sie* but used the informal pronoun *Du* with his fellow

students since they were peers. When the professor invited some of the American exchange students to dinner, they didn't know they were about to participate in a cultural ritual that would change the way they spoke to their professor from that night on. Their professor informed them that they were going to *duzen*, which meant they were going to now be able to refer to her with the informal pronoun—an honor and sign of closeness for the American students. As they went around the table, each student introduced himself or herself to the professor using the formal pronoun, locked arms with her and drank (similar to the champagne toast ritual at some wedding ceremonies), and reintroduced himself or herself using the informal pronoun. For the rest of the semester, the American students still respectfully referred to the professor with her title, which translated to “Mrs. Doctor,” but used informal pronouns, even in class, while the other students not included in the ceremony had to continue using the formal. Given that we do not use formal and informal pronouns in English anymore, there is no equivalent ritual to the German *duzen*, but as we will learn next, there are many rituals in English that may be just as foreign to someone else.

## Language and Social Context

We arrive at meaning through conversational interaction, which follows many social norms and rules. As we've already learned, rules are explicitly stated conventions (“Look at me when I'm talking to you.”) and norms are implicit (saying you've got to leave before you actually do to politely initiate the end to a conversation). To help conversations function meaningfully, we have learned social norms and internalized them to such an extent that we do not often consciously enact them. Instead, we rely on routines and roles (as determined

by social forces) to help us proceed with verbal interaction, which also helps determine how a conversation will unfold. Our various social roles influence meaning and how we speak. For example, a person may say, “As a longtime member of this community...” or “As a first-generation college student...” Such statements cue others into the personal and social context from which we are speaking, which helps them better interpret our meaning.

One social norm that structures our communication is turn taking. People need to feel like they are contributing something to an interaction, so turn taking is a central part of how conversations play out. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 155. Although we sometimes talk at the same time as others or interrupt them, there are numerous verbal and nonverbal cues, almost like a dance, that are exchanged between speakers that let people know when their turn will begin or end. Conversations do not always neatly progress from beginning to end with shared understanding along the way. There is a back and forth that is often verbally managed through rephrasing (“Let me try that again,”) and clarification (“Does that make sense?”). David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 268.

We also have certain units of speech that facilitate turn taking. **Adjacency pairs** are related communication structures that come one after the other (adjacent to each other) in an interaction. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 277. For example, questions are followed by answers, greetings are followed by responses, compliments are followed by a thank you, and informative comments are followed by an acknowledgment.

These are the skeletal components that make up our verbal interactions, and they are largely social in that they facilitate our interactions. When these sequences don't work out, confusion, miscommunication, or frustration may result, as you can see in the following sequences:

Name	Statement
Travis:	"How are you?"
Wanda:	"Did someone tell you I'm sick?"
Darrell:	"I just wanted to let you know the meeting has been moved to three o'clock."
Leigh:	"I had cake for breakfast this morning."

Some conversational elements are highly scripted or ritualized, especially the beginning and end of an exchange and topic changes. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 268. Conversations often begin with a standard greeting and then proceed to "safe" exchanges about things in the immediate field of experience of the communicators (a comment on the weather or noting something going on in the scene). At this point, once the ice is broken, people can move on to other more content-specific exchanges. Once conversing, before we can initiate a topic change, it is a social norm that we let the current topic being discussed play itself out or continue until the person who introduced the topic seems satisfied. We then usually try to find a relevant tie-in or segue that acknowledges the previous topic, in turn acknowledging the speaker, before actually moving on. Changing the topic without following such social conventions might indicate to the other person that you were not listening or are simply rude.

Ending a conversation is similarly complex. I'm sure we've all

been in a situation where we are “trapped” in a conversation that we need or want to get out of. Just walking away or ending a conversation without engaging in socially acceptable “leave-taking behaviors” would be considered a breach of social norms. Topic changes are often places where people can leave a conversation, but it is still routine for us to give a special reason for leaving, often in an apologetic tone (whether we mean it or not).

Generally though, conversations come to an end through the cooperation of both people, as they offer and recognize typical signals that a topic area has been satisfactorily covered or that one or both people need to leave. It is customary in the United States for people to say they have to leave before they actually do and for that statement to be dismissed or ignored by the other person until additional leave-taking behaviors are enacted. When such cooperation is lacking, an awkward silence or abrupt ending can result, and as we’ve already learned, US Americans are not big fans of silence. Silence is not viewed the same way in other cultures, which leads us to our discussion of cultural context.



Figure 8.12 Social norms influence how conversations start and end and how speakers take turns to keep the conversation going.  
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## Language and Cultural Context

Culture isn't solely determined by a person's native language or nationality. It's true that languages vary by country and region and that the language we speak influences our realities, but even people who speak the same language experience cultural differences because of their various intersecting cultural identities and personal experiences. We have a tendency to view our language as a whole more favorably than other languages. Although people may make persuasive arguments regarding which languages are more pleasing to the ear or difficult or easy to learn than others, no one language enables speakers to communicate more effectively than another. Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's, 2007), 224-25.

From birth we are socialized into our various cultural identities. As with the social context, this acculturation process is a combination of explicit and implicit lessons. A child in Colombia, which is considered a more collectivist country in which people value group membership and cohesion over individualism, may not be explicitly told, "You are a member of a collectivistic culture, so you should care more about the family and community than yourself." This cultural value would be transmitted through daily actions and through language use. Just as babies acquire knowledge of language practices at an astonishing rate in their first two years of life, so do they acquire cultural knowledge and values that are embedded in those language practices. At nine

months old, it is possible to distinguish babies based on their language. Even at this early stage of development, when most babies are babbling and just learning to recognize but not wholly reproduce verbal interaction patterns, a Colombian baby would sound different from a Brazilian baby, even though neither would actually be using words from their native languages of Spanish and Portuguese. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 84.

The actual language we speak plays an important role in shaping our reality. Comparing languages, we can see differences in how we are able to talk about the world. In English, we have the words *grandfather* and *grandmother*, but no single word that distinguishes between a maternal grandfather and a paternal grandfather. But in Swedish, there's a specific word for each grandparent: *morfar* is mother's father, *farfar* is father's father, *farmor* is father's mother, and *mormor* is mother's mother. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 188. In this example, we can see that the words available to us, based on the language we speak, influence how we talk about the world due to differences in and limitations of vocabulary. The notion that language shapes our view of reality and our cultural patterns is best represented by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Although some scholars argue that our reality is determined by our language, we will take a more qualified view and presume that language plays a central role in influencing our realities but doesn't determine them. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 222–24.

Culturally influenced differences in language and meaning can lead to some interesting encounters, ranging from awkward to informative to disastrous. In terms of

awkwardness, you have likely heard stories of companies that failed to exhibit communication competence in their naming and/or advertising of products in another language. For example, in Taiwan, Pepsi used the slogan “Come Alive with Pepsi” only to later find out that when translated it meant, “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead.” “Results of Poor Cross Cultural Awareness,” *Kwintessential Limited*, accessed June 7, 2012, [http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cultural-services/articles/Results of Poor Cross Cultural Awareness.html](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cultural-services/articles/Results%20of%20Poor%20Cross%20Cultural%20Awareness.html). Similarly, American Motors introduced a new car called the Matador to the Puerto Rico market only to learn that *Matador* means “killer,” which wasn’t very comforting to potential buyers. “Cross Cultural Business Blunders,” *Kwintessential Limited*, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cultural-services/articles/crosscultural-blunders.html>. At a more informative level, the words we use to give positive reinforcement are culturally relative. In the United States and England, parents commonly positively and negatively reinforce their child’s behavior by saying, “Good girl” or “Good boy.” There isn’t an equivalent for such a phrase in other European languages, so the usage in only these two countries has been traced back to the puritan influence on beliefs about good and bad behavior. Anna Wierzbicka, “The English Expressions *Good Boy* and *Good Girl* and Cultural Models of Child Rearing,” *Culture and Psychology* 10, no. 3 (2004): 251–78. In terms of disastrous consequences, one of the most publicized and deadliest cross-cultural business mistakes occurred in India in 1984. Union Carbide, an American company, controlled a plant used to make pesticides. The company underestimated the amount of cross-cultural training that would be needed to allow the local workers, many of whom were not familiar with the technology or language/jargon used in the instructions for plant operations to do their jobs. This lack of competent communication led to a gas leak that immediately killed more than two thousand people and

over time led to more than five hundred thousand injuries. Subodh Varma, “Arbitrary? 92% of All Injuries Termed Minor,” *The Times of India*, June 20, 2010, accessed June 7, 2012, [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-06-20/india/28309628\\_1\\_injuries-gases-cases](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-06-20/india/28309628_1_injuries-gases-cases).

### *Accents and Dialects*

The documentary *American Tongues*, although dated at this point, is still a fascinating look at the rich tapestry of accents and dialects that makes up American English. **Dialects** are versions of languages that have distinct words, grammar, and pronunciation. **Accents** are distinct styles of pronunciation.

Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester, *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication across Cultures*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2006), 199–200. There can be multiple accents within one dialect. For example, people in the Appalachian Mountains of the eastern United States speak a dialect of American English that is characterized by remnants of the linguistic styles of Europeans who settled the area a couple hundred years earlier. Even though they speak this similar dialect, a person in Kentucky could still have an accent that is distinguishable from a person in western North Carolina.

Dialects and accents can vary by region, class, or ancestry, and they influence the impressions that we make of others. When I moved to Colorado from North Carolina, I was met with a very strange look when I used the word *buggy* to refer to a shopping cart. Research shows that people tend to think more positively about others who speak with a dialect similar to their own and think more negatively about people who speak differently. Of course, many people think they speak normally and perceive others to have an accent or dialect. Although dialects include the use of different words and phrases, it's the

tone of voice that often creates the strongest impression. For example, a person who speaks with a Southern accent may perceive a New Englander's accent to be grating, harsh, or rude because the pitch is more nasal and the rate faster. Conversely, a New Englander may perceive a Southerner's accent to be syrupy and slow, leading to an impression that the person speaking is uneducated.



Figure 8.13 American English has several dialects that vary based on region, class, and ancestry. © Thinkstock

### *Customs and Norms*

Social norms are culturally relative. The words used in politeness rituals in one culture can mean something completely different in another. For example, *thank you* in American English acknowledges receiving something (a gift, a favor, a compliment), in British English it can mean “yes” similar to American English’s *yes, please*, and in French *merci* can mean “no” as in “no, thank you.” David Crystal, *How Language Works*:

*How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 276. Additionally, what is considered a powerful language style varies from culture to culture. Confrontational language, such as swearing, can be seen as powerful in Western cultures, even though it violates some language taboos, but would be seen as immature and weak in Japan. Patricia J. Wetzel, "Are 'Powerless' Communication Strategies the Japanese Norm?" *Language in Society* 17, no. 4 (1988): 555-64.

Gender also affects how we use language, but not to the extent that most people think. Although there is a widespread belief that men are more likely to communicate in a clear and straightforward way and women are more likely to communicate in an emotional and indirect way, a meta-analysis of research findings from more than two hundred studies found only small differences in the personal disclosures of men and women. Kathryn Dindia and Mike Allen, "Sex Differences in Self-Disclosure: A Meta Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 112, no. 1 (1992): 106-24. Men and women's levels of disclosure are even more similar when engaging in cross-gender communication, meaning men and woman are more similar when speaking to each other than when men speak to men or women speak to women. This could be due to the internalized pressure to speak about the other gender in socially sanctioned ways, in essence reinforcing the stereotypes when speaking to the same gender but challenging them in cross-gender encounters. Researchers also dispelled the belief that men interrupt more than women do, finding that men and women interrupt each other with similar frequency in cross-gender encounters. Kathryn Dindia, "The Effect of Sex of Subject and Sex of Partner on Interruptions," *Human Communication Research* 13, no. 3 (1987): 345-71. These findings, which state that men and women communicate more similarly during cross-gender encounters and then communicate in more stereotypical ways in same-

gender encounters, can be explained with communication accommodation theory.

### *Communication Accommodation and Code-Switching*

**Communication accommodation theory** is a theory that explores why and how people modify their communication to fit situational, social, cultural, and relational contexts. Howard Giles, Donald M. Taylor, and Richard Bourhis, “Toward a Theory of Interpersonal Accommodation through Language: Some Canadian Data,” *Language and Society* 2, no. 2 (1973): 177–92. Within communication accommodation, conversational partners may use **convergence**, meaning a person makes his or her communication more like another person’s. People who are accommodating in their communication style are seen as more competent, which illustrates the benefits of communicative flexibility. In order to be flexible, of course, people have to be aware of and monitor their own and others’ communication patterns. Conversely, conversational partners may use **divergence**, meaning a person uses communication to emphasize the differences between his or her conversational partner and his or herself.

Convergence and divergence can take place within the same conversation and may be used by one or both conversational partners. Convergence functions to make others feel at ease, to increase understanding, and to enhance social bonds. Divergence may be used to intentionally make another person feel unwelcome or perhaps to highlight a personal, group, or cultural identity. For example, African American women use certain verbal communication patterns when communicating with other African American women as a way to highlight their racial identity and create group solidarity. In situations where multiple races interact, the women usually don’t use those

same patterns, instead accommodating the language patterns of the larger group. While communication accommodation might involve anything from adjusting how fast or slow you talk to how long you speak during each turn, code-switching refers to changes in accent, dialect, or language. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010),

249. There are many reasons that people might code-switch. Regarding accents, some people hire vocal coaches or speech-language pathologists to help them alter their accent. If a Southern person thinks their accent is leading others to form unfavorable impressions, they can consciously change their accent with much practice and effort. Once their ability to speak without their Southern accent is honed, they may be able to switch very quickly between their native accent when speaking with friends and family and their modified accent when speaking in professional settings.

Additionally, people who work or live in multilingual settings may code-switch many times throughout the day, or even within a single conversation. Increasing outsourcing and globalization have produced heightened pressures for code-switching. Call center workers in India have faced strong negative reactions from British and American customers who insist on “speaking to someone who speaks English.” Although many Indians learn English in schools as a result of British colonization, their accents prove to be off-putting to people who want to get their cable package changed or book an airline ticket. Now some Indian call center workers are going through intense training to be able to code-switch and accommodate the speaking style of their customers. What is being called the “Anglo-Americanization of India” entails “accent-neutralization,” lessons on American culture (using things like *Sex and the City* DVDs), and the use of Anglo-American-sounding names like Sean and Peggy. Amitabh Pal, “Indian by Day, American by Night,” *The Progressive*, August

2004, accessed June 7, 2012, [http://www.progressive.org/mag\\_pal0804](http://www.progressive.org/mag_pal0804). As our interactions continue to occur in more multinational contexts, the expectations for code-switching and accommodation are sure to increase. It is important for us to consider the intersection of culture and power and think critically about the ways in which expectations for code-switching may be based on cultural biases.



*Figure 8.14 People who work or live in multilingual settings may engage in code-switching several times a day © Thinkstock*

## Language and Cultural Bias

In the previous example about code-switching and communication accommodation in Indian call centers, the move toward accent neutralization is a response to the “racist abuse” these workers receive from customers. Shehzad Nadeem, “Accent Neutralisation and a Crisis of Identity in India’s Call Centres,” *The Guardian*, February 9, 2011, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/09/india-call-centres-accent-neutralisation>. Anger in Western countries about job losses and economic uncertainty has increased the amount of racially targeted verbal attacks on international call center employees. It was recently reported that more call center workers are now quitting their jobs as a result of the verbal abuse and that 25 percent of workers who have recently quit say such abuse was a major source of stress. Amelia Gentleman, “Indiana Call Staff Quit over Abuse on the Line,” *The Guardian*, May 28, 2005, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/may/29/india.ameliagentleman>. Such verbal attacks are not new; they represent a common but negative way that cultural bias explicitly manifests in our language use.

**Cultural bias** is a skewed way of viewing or talking about a group that is typically negative. Bias has a way of creeping into our daily language use, often under our awareness. Culturally biased language can make reference to one or more cultural identities, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability. There are other sociocultural identities that can be the subject of biased language, but we will focus our discussion on these five. Much biased language is based on stereotypes and myths that influence the words we use. Bias is both intentional and unintentional, but as we’ve already discussed, we have to be accountable for what we say even if we didn’t “intend” a particular meaning—remember, meaning is generated; it

doesn't exist inside our thoughts or words. We will discuss specific ways in which cultural bias manifests in our language and ways to become more aware of bias. Becoming aware of and addressing cultural bias is not the same thing as engaging in "political correctness." Political correctness takes awareness to the extreme but doesn't do much to address cultural bias aside from make people feel like they are walking on eggshells. That kind of pressure can lead people to avoid discussions about cultural identities or avoid people with different cultural identities. Our goal is not to eliminate all cultural bias from verbal communication or to never offend anyone, intentionally or otherwise. Instead, we will continue to use guidelines for ethical communication that we have already discussed and strive to increase our competence.

## *Race*

People sometimes use euphemisms for race that illustrate bias because the terms are usually implicitly compared to the dominant group. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 71–76. For example, referring to a person as "urban" or a neighborhood as "inner city" can be an accurate descriptor, but when such words are used as a substitute for racial identity, they illustrate cultural biases that equate certain races with cities and poverty. Using adjectives like *articulate* or *well-dressed* in statements like "My black coworker is articulate" reinforces negative stereotypes even though these words are typically viewed as positive.

Terms like *nonwhite* set up whiteness as the norm, which implies that white people are the norm against which all other races should be compared. Biased language also reduces the diversity within certain racial groups—for example, referring to anyone who looks like they are of Asian descent as Chinese

or everyone who “looks” Latino/a as Mexicans. Some people with racial identities other than white, including people who are multiracial, use the label *person/people of color* to indicate solidarity among groups, but it is likely that they still prefer a more specific label when referring to an individual or referencing a specific racial group.

## *Gender*

Language has a tendency to exaggerate perceived and stereotypical differences between men and women. The use of the term *opposite sex* presumes that men and women are opposites, like positive and negative poles of a magnet, which is obviously not true or men and women wouldn't be able to have successful interactions or relationships. A term like *other gender* doesn't presume opposites and acknowledges that male and female identities and communication are more influenced by gender, which is the social and cultural meanings and norms associated with males and females, than sex, which is the physiology and genetic makeup of a male and female. One key to avoiding gendered bias in language is to avoid the generic use of *he* when referring to something relevant to males and females. Instead, you can informally use a gender-neutral pronoun like *they* or *their* or you can use *his* or *her*.

*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 71–76. When giving a series of examples, you can alternate usage of masculine and feminine pronouns, switching with each example. We have lasting gendered associations with certain occupations that have tended to be male or female dominated, which erase the presence of both genders. Other words reflect the general masculine bias present in English. The following word pairs show the gender-biased term

followed by an unbiased term: waitress/server, chairman / chair or chairperson, mankind/people, cameraman / camera operator, mailman / postal worker, sportsmanship / fair play. Common language practices also tend to infantilize women but not men, when, for example, women are referred to as *chicks*, *girls*, or *babes*. Since there is no linguistic equivalent that indicates the marital status of men before their name, using Ms. instead of Miss or Mrs. helps reduce bias.

## *Age*

Language that includes age bias can be directed toward older or younger people. Descriptions of younger people often presume recklessness or inexperience, while those of older people presume frailty or disconnection. The term *elderly* generally refers to people over sixty-five, but it has connotations of weakness, which isn't accurate because there are plenty of people over sixty-five who are stronger and more athletic than people in their twenties and thirties. Even though it's generic, *older people* doesn't really have negative implications. More specific words that describe groups of older people include *grandmothers/grandfathers* (even though they can be fairly young too), *retirees*, or *people over sixty-five*. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 71–76. Referring to people over the age of eighteen as *boys* or *girls* isn't typically viewed as appropriate.

## *Sexual Orientation*

Discussions of sexual and affectional orientation range from everyday conversations to contentious political and personal debates. The negative stereotypes that have been associated

with homosexuality, including deviance, mental illness, and criminal behavior, continue to influence our language use. “Supplemental Material: Writing Clearly and Concisely,” American Psychological Association, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.apastyle.org/manual/supplement/redirects/pubman-ch03.13.aspx>. Terminology related to gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) people can be confusing, so let’s spend some time raise our awareness about preferred labels. First, *sexual orientation* is the term preferred to *sexual preference*. *Preference* suggests a voluntary choice, as in someone has a preference for cheddar or American cheese, which doesn’t reflect the experience of most GLB people or research findings that show sexuality is more complex. You may also see *affectional orientation* included with *sexual orientation* because it acknowledges that GLB relationships, like heterosexual relationships, are about intimacy and closeness (affection) that is not just sexually based. Most people also prefer the labels *gay*, *lesbian*, or *bisexual* to *homosexual*, which is clinical and doesn’t so much refer to an identity as a sex act. Language regarding romantic relationships contains bias when heterosexuality is assumed. Comments comparing GLB people to “normal” people, although possibly intended to be positive, reinforces the stereotype that GLB people are abnormal. Don’t presume you can identify a person’s sexual orientation by looking at them or talking to them. Don’t assume that GLB people will “come out” to you. Given that many GLB people have faced and continue to face regular discrimination, they may be cautious about disclosing their identities. However, using gender neutral terminology like *partner* and avoiding other biased language mentioned previously may create a climate in which a GLB person feels comfortable disclosing his or her sexual orientation identity. Conversely, the casual use of phrases like *that’s gay* to mean “that’s stupid” may create an environment in which GLB people do not feel comfortable. Even though people don’t often use the phrase to actually refer

to sexual orientation, campaigns like “ThinkB4YouSpeak.com” try to educate people about the power that language has and how we should all be more conscious of the words we use.



*Figure 8.15 Age bias can appear in language directed toward younger or older people. © Thinkstock*

### *Ability*

People with disabilities make up a diverse group that has increasingly come to be viewed as a cultural/social identity group. People without disabilities are often referred to as

*able-bodied*. As with sexual orientation, comparing people with disabilities to “normal” people implies that there is an agreed-on definition of what “normal” is and that people with disabilities are “abnormal.” Disability is also preferred to the word *handicap*. Just because someone is disabled doesn’t mean he or she is also handicapped. The environment around them rather than their disability often handicaps people with disabilities. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 71–76. Ignoring the environment as the source of a handicap and placing it on the person fits into a pattern of reducing people with disabilities to their disability—for example, calling someone a paraplegic instead of a person with paraplegia. In many cases, as with sexual orientation, race, age, and gender, verbally marking a person as disabled isn’t relevant and doesn’t need spotlighting. Language used in conjunction with disabilities also tends to portray people as victims of their disability and paint pictures of their lives as gloomy, dreadful, or painful. Such descriptors are often generalizations or completely inaccurate.

## “Getting Critical”

### Hate Speech

*Hate* is a term that has many different meanings and can be used to communicate teasing, mild annoyance, or anger. The term *hate*, as it relates to hate speech, has a much more complex and serious meaning. *Hate* refers to extreme negative beliefs and feelings toward a group or member of a group because of their race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or ability. Michael Waltman and John Haas, *The Communication of Hate* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 33. We can get a better

understanding of the intensity of hate by distinguishing it from anger, which is an emotion that we experience much more regularly. First, anger is directed toward an individual, while hate is directed toward a social or cultural group. Second, anger doesn't prevent a person from having sympathy for the target of his or her anger, but hate erases sympathy for the target. Third, anger is usually the result of personal insult or injury, but hate can exist and grow even with no direct interaction with the target.

Fourth, anger isn't an emotion that people typically find pleasure in, while hatred can create feelings of self-righteousness and superiority that lead to pleasure. Last, anger is an emotion that usually dissipates as time passes, eventually going away, while hate can endure for much longer. Michael Waltman and John Haas, *The Communication of Hate* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 33–34. Hate speech is a verbal manifestation of this intense emotional and mental state.

Hate speech is usually used by people who have a polarized view of their own group (the in-group) and another group (the out-group). Hate speech is then used to intimidate people in the out-group and to motivate and influence members of the in-group. Hate speech often promotes hate-based violence and is also used to solidify in-group identification and attract new members. Michael Waltman and John Haas, *The Communication of Hate* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 3. Perpetrators of hate speech often engage in totalizing, which means they define a person or a group based on one quality or characteristic, ignoring all others. A Lebanese American may be the target of hate speech because the perpetrators reduce him to a Muslim—whether he actually is Muslim or not would be irrelevant.

Grouping all Middle Eastern- or Arab-looking people together is a dehumanizing activity that is typical to hate speech.

Incidents of hate speech and hate crimes have increased over the past fifteen years. Hate crimes, in particular, have gotten

more attention due to the passage of more laws against hate crimes and the increased amount of tracking by various levels of law enforcement. The Internet has also made it easier for hate groups to organize and spread their hateful messages. As these changes have taken place over the past fifteen years, there has been much discussion about hate speech and its legal and constitutional implications. While hate crimes resulting in damage to a person or property are regularly prosecuted, it is sometimes argued that hate speech that doesn't result in such damage is protected under the US Constitution's First Amendment, which guarantees free speech. Just recently, in 2011, the Supreme Court found in the *Snyder v. Phelps* case that speech and actions of the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, who regularly protest the funerals of American soldiers with signs reading things like "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" and "Fag Sin = 9/11," were protected and not criminal. Chief Justice Roberts wrote in the decision, "We cannot react to [the Snyder family's] pain by punishing the speaker. As a nation we have chosen a different course—to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate." "Regulation of Fighting Words and Hate Speech," *Exploring Constitutional Conflicts*, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/hatespeech.htm>.

- Do you think the First Amendment of the Constitution, guaranteeing free speech to US citizens, should protect hate speech? Why or why not?
- Visit the Southern Poverty Law Center's "Hate Map" "Hate Map," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-map> . (<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-map>) to see what hate groups they have identified in your state. Are you surprised by the number/nature of the groups listed in your state? Briefly describe a group that you didn't know about and identify the target of its hate and the reasons it gives for its

hate speech.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Getting integrated: Social context influences the ways in which we use language, and we have been socialized to follow implicit social rules like those that guide the flow of conversations, including how we start and end our interactions and how we change topics. The way we use language changes as we shift among academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts.
- The language that we speak influences our cultural identities and our social realities. We internalize norms and rules that help us function in our own culture but that can lead to misunderstanding when used in other cultural contexts.
- We can adapt to different cultural contexts by purposely changing our communication. Communication accommodation theory explains that people may adapt their communication to be more similar to or different from others based on various contexts.
- We should become aware of how our verbal communication reveals biases toward various cultural identities based on race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability.

## EXERCISES

- Recall a conversation that became awkward when you or the other person deviated from the social norms that manage conversation flow. Was the awkwardness at the beginning, end, or during a topic change? After reviewing some of the common norms discussed in the chapter, what do you think was the source of the awkwardness?

- Describe an accent or a dialect that you find pleasing/interesting. Describe an accent/dialect that you do not find pleasing/interesting. Why do you think you evaluate one positively and the other negatively?
- Review how cultural bias relates to the five cultural identities discussed earlier. Identify something you learned about bias related to one of these identities that you didn't know before. What can you do now to be more aware of how verbal communication can reinforce cultural biases?



PART VIII

# CHAPTER EIGHT



# Learning Objectives

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define nonverbal communication.
- Compare and contrast verbal communication and nonverbal communication.
- Discuss the principles of nonverbal communication.
- Provide examples of the functions of nonverbal communication.

# I. Principles and Functions of Nonverbal Communication

As you'll recall from an earlier chapter, a channel is the sensory route on which a message travels. Oral communication only relies on one channel, because spoken language is transmitted through sound and picked up by our ears. Nonverbal communication, on the other hand, can be taken in by all five of our senses. Since most of our communication relies on visual and auditory channels, those will be the focus of this chapter. But we can also receive messages and generate meaning through touch, taste, and smell. Touch is an especially powerful form of nonverbal communication that we will discuss in this chapter, but we will not get into taste and smell, which have not received as much scholarly attention in relation to nonverbal communication as the other senses.

To further define nonverbal communication, we need to distinguish between vocal and verbal aspects of communication. Verbal and nonverbal communication include both vocal and nonvocal elements, and Table 9.1 “Vocal and Nonvocal Elements of Communication” shows the relationship among vocal, nonvocal, verbal, and nonverbal aspects of communication. A vocal element of verbal communication is spoken words—for example, “Come back here.” A vocal element of nonverbal communication is **paralanguage**, which is the vocalized but not verbal part of a spoken message, such as speaking rate, volume, and pitch. Nonvocal elements of verbal communication include the use of unspoken symbols to convey meaning. Writing and American Sign Language (ASL) are nonvocal examples of verbal communication and are not considered nonverbal communication. Nonvocal elements of nonverbal communication include body language such as gestures, facial

expressions, and eye contact. Gestures are nonvocal and nonverbal since most of them do not refer to a specific word like a written or signed symbol does.

Table 9.1 Vocal and Nonvocal Elements of Communication

Type	Verbal Communication	Nonverbal Communication
Vocal	Spoken words	Paralanguage (pitch, volume, speaking rate, etc.)
Nonvocal	Writing, sign language	Body language (gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, etc.)

Source: Adapted from Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 45.

## Principles of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication has a distinct history and serves separate evolutionary functions from verbal communication. For example, nonverbal communication is primarily biologically based while verbal communication is primarily culturally based. This is evidenced by the fact that some nonverbal communication has the same meaning across cultures while no verbal communication systems share that same universal recognizability. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 17. Nonverbal communication also evolved earlier than verbal communication and served an early and important survival function that helped humans later develop verbal communication. While some of our nonverbal communication abilities, like our sense of smell, lost strength as our verbal

capacities increased, other abilities like paralanguage and movement have grown alongside verbal complexity. The fact that nonverbal communication is processed by an older part of our brain makes it more instinctual and involuntary than verbal communication.

***Nonverbal Communication Conveys Important Interpersonal and Emotional Messages*** You've probably heard that more meaning is generated from nonverbal communication than from verbal. Some studies have claimed that 90 percent of our meaning is derived from nonverbal signals, but more recent and reliable findings claim that it is closer to 65 percent. Laura K. Guerrero and Kory Floyd, *Nonverbal Communication in Close Relationships* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006): 2. We may rely more on nonverbal signals in situations where verbal and nonverbal messages conflict and in situations where emotional or relational communication is taking place. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 47. For example, when someone asks a question and we're not sure about the "angle" they are taking, we may hone in on nonverbal cues to fill in the meaning. For example, the question "What are you doing tonight?" could mean any number of things, but we could rely on posture, tone of voice, and eye contact to see if the person is just curious, suspicious, or hinting that they would like company for the evening. We also put more weight on nonverbal communication when determining a person's credibility. For example, if a classmate delivers a speech in class and her verbal content seems well-researched and unbiased, but her nonverbal communication is poor (her voice is monotone, she avoids eye contact, she fidgets), she will likely not be viewed as credible. Conversely, in some situations, verbal communication might carry more meaning than nonverbal. In interactions where information exchange is the focus, at a briefing at work, for example, verbal communication likely accounts for much more of the meaning generated. Despite this

exception, a key principle of nonverbal communication is that it often takes on more meaning in interpersonal and/or emotional exchanges.

### *Nonverbal Communication Is More Involuntary than Verbal*

There are some instances in which we verbally communicate involuntarily. These types of exclamations are often verbal responses to a surprising stimulus. For example, we say “owww!” when we stub our toe or scream “stop!” when we see someone heading toward danger.



*Figure 9.1 Involuntary nonverbal signals are much more common, and although most nonverbal communication isn't completely involuntary, it is more below our consciousness than verbal communication and therefore more difficult to control.*

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The involuntary nature of much nonverbal communication

makes it more difficult to control or “fake.” For example, although you can consciously smile a little and shake hands with someone when you first see them, it’s difficult to fake that you’re “happy” to meet someone. Nonverbal communication leaks out in ways that expose our underlying thoughts or feelings. Spokespeople, lawyers, or other public representatives who are the “face” of a politician, celebrity, corporation, or organization must learn to control their facial expressions and other nonverbal communication so they can effectively convey the message of their employer or client without having their personal thoughts and feelings leak through. Poker players, therapists, police officers, doctors, teachers, and actors are also in professions that often require them to have more awareness of and control over their nonverbal communication.

Have you ever tried to conceal your surprise, suppress your anger, or act joyful even when you weren’t? Most people whose careers don’t involve conscious manipulation of nonverbal signals find it difficult to control or suppress them. While we can consciously decide to stop sending verbal messages, our nonverbal communication always has the potential of generating meaning for another person. The teenager who decides to shut out his dad and not communicate with him still sends a message with his “blank” stare (still a facial expression) and lack of movement (still a gesture). In this sense, nonverbal communication is “irrepressible.” Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 21.

### *Nonverbal Communication Is More Ambiguous*

Symbolic and abstract nature of language can lead to misunderstandings, but nonverbal communication is even more ambiguous. As with verbal communication, most of our nonverbal signals can be linked to multiple meanings, but unlike words, many nonverbal signals do not have any one specific

meaning. If you've ever had someone wink at you and didn't know why, you've probably experienced this uncertainty. Did they wink to express their affection for you, their pleasure with something you just did, or because you share some inside knowledge or joke?

Just as we look at context clues in a sentence or paragraph to derive meaning from a particular word, we can look for context clues in various sources of information like the physical environment, other nonverbal signals, or verbal communication to make sense of a particular nonverbal cue. Unlike verbal communication, however, nonverbal communication doesn't have explicit rules of grammar that bring structure, order, and agreed-on patterns of usage. Instead, we implicitly learn norms of nonverbal communication, which leads to greater variance. In general, we exhibit more idiosyncrasies in our usage of nonverbal communication than we do with verbal communication, which also increases the ambiguity of nonverbal communication.

### *Nonverbal Communication Is More Credible*

Although we can rely on verbal communication to fill in the blanks sometimes left by nonverbal expressions, we often put more trust into what people do over what they say. This is especially true in times of stress or danger when our behaviors become more instinctual and we rely on older systems of thinking and acting that evolved before our ability to speak and write. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 18. This innateness creates intuitive feelings about the genuineness of nonverbal communication, and this genuineness relates back to our earlier discussion about the sometimes involuntary and often subconscious nature of nonverbal communication. An example of the innateness of nonverbal signals can be found

in children who have been blind since birth but still exhibit the same facial expressions as other children. In short, the involuntary or subconscious nature of nonverbal communication makes it less easy to fake, which makes it seem more honest and credible. We will learn more about the role that nonverbal communication plays in deception later in this chapter.

### *Functions of Nonverbal Communication*

A primary function of nonverbal communication is to convey meaning by reinforcing, substituting for, or contradicting verbal communication. Nonverbal communication is also used to influence others and regulate conversational flow. Perhaps even more important are the ways in which nonverbal communication functions as a central part of relational communication and identity expression.

### *Nonverbal Communication Conveys Meaning*

Nonverbal communication conveys meaning by reinforcing, substituting for, or contradicting verbal communication. As we've already learned, verbal and nonverbal communication are two parts of the same system that often work side by side, helping us generate meaning. In terms of reinforcing verbal communication, gestures can help describe a space or shape that another person is unfamiliar with in ways that words alone cannot. Gestures also reinforce basic meaning—for example, pointing to the door when you tell someone to leave. Facial expressions reinforce the emotional states we convey through verbal communication. For example, smiling while telling a funny story better conveys your emotions. Owen Hargie, *Skilled*

*Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 51. Vocal variation can help us emphasize a particular part of a message, which helps reinforce a word or sentence's meaning. For example, saying "How was your weekend?" conveys a different meaning than "How was your *weekend*?"

Nonverbal communication can substitute for verbal communication in a variety of ways. Nonverbal communication can convey much meaning when verbal communication isn't effective because of language barriers. Language barriers are present when a person hasn't yet learned to speak or loses the ability to speak. For example, babies who have not yet developed language skills make facial expressions, at a few months old, that are similar to those of adults and therefore can generate meaning. Harriet Oster, Douglas Hegley, and Linda Nagel, "Adult Judgments and Fine-Grained Analysis of Infant Facial Expressions: Testing the Validity of A Priori Coding Formulas," *Developmental Psychology* 28, no. 6 (1992): 1115–31. People who have developed language skills but can't use them because they have temporarily or permanently lost them or because they are using incompatible language codes, like in some cross-cultural encounters, can still communicate nonverbally. Although it's always a good idea to learn some of the local language when you travel, gestures such as pointing or demonstrating the size or shape of something may suffice in basic interactions.

Nonverbal communication is also useful in a quiet situation where verbal communication would be disturbing; for example, you may use a gesture to signal to a friend that you're ready to leave the library. Crowded or loud places can also impede verbal communication and lead people to rely more on nonverbal messages. Getting a server or bartender's attention with a hand gesture is definitely more polite than yelling, "Hey you!" Finally, there are just times when we know it's better not to say something aloud. If you want to point out a person's unusual

outfit or signal to a friend that you think his or her date is a loser, you're probably more likely to do that nonverbally.

Last, nonverbal communication can convey meaning by contradicting verbal communication. As we learned earlier, we often perceive nonverbal communication to be more credible than verbal communication. This is especially true when we receive **mixed messages**, or messages in which verbal and nonverbal signals contradict each other. For example, a person may say, "You can't do anything right!" in a mean tone but follow that up with a wink, which could indicate the person is teasing or joking. Mixed messages lead to uncertainty and confusion on the part of receivers, which leads us to look for more information to try to determine which message is more credible. If we are unable to resolve the discrepancy, we are likely to react negatively and potentially withdraw from the interaction. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 52. Persistent mixed messages can lead to relational distress and hurt a person's credibility in professional settings.

### *Nonverbal Communication Influences Others*

Nonverbal communication can be used to influence people in a variety of ways, but the most common way is through deception. Deception is typically thought of as the intentional act of altering information to influence another person, which means that it extends beyond lying to include concealing, omitting, or exaggerating information. While verbal communication is to blame for the content of the deception, nonverbal communication partners with the language through deceptive acts to be more convincing.

Since most of us intuitively believe that nonverbal communication is more credible than verbal communication, we often intentionally try to control our nonverbal communication

when we are engaging in deception. Likewise, we try to evaluate other people's nonverbal communication to determine the veracity of their messages. Students initially seem surprised when we discuss the prevalence of deception, but their surprise diminishes once they realize that deception isn't always malevolent, mean, or hurtful. Deception obviously has negative connotations, but people engage in deception for many reasons, including to excuse our own mistakes, to be polite to others, or to influence others' behaviors or perceptions.



*Figure 9.2 We send mixed messages when our verbal and nonverbal communication contradict each other. If this woman said she was excited about seeing you, would you believe her? © Thinkstock*

The fact that deception served an important evolutionary purpose helps explain its prevalence among humans today.

Species that are capable of deception have a higher survival rate. Other animals engage in nonverbal deception that helps them attract mates, hide from predators, and trap prey. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 276. To put it bluntly, the better at deception a creature is, the more likely it is to survive. So, over time, the humans that were better liars were the ones that got their genes passed on. But the fact that lying played a part in our survival as a species doesn't give us a license to lie.

Aside from deception, we can use nonverbal communication to “take the edge off” a critical or unpleasant message in an attempt to influence the reaction of the other person. We can also use eye contact and proximity to get someone to move or leave an area. For example, hungry diners waiting to snag a first-come-first-serve table in a crowded restaurant send messages to the people who have already eaten and paid that it's time to go. People on competition reality television shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* play what they've come to term a “social game.” The social aspects of the game involve the manipulation of verbal and nonverbal cues to send strategic messages about oneself in an attempt to influence others. Nonverbal cues such as length of conversational turn, volume, posture, touch, eye contact, and choices of clothing and accessories can become part of a player's social game strategy. Although reality television isn't a reflection of real life, people still engage in competition and strategically change their communication to influence others, making it important to be aware of how we nonverbally influence others and how they may try to influence us.

### *Nonverbal Communication Regulates Conversational Flow*

Conversational interaction has been likened to a dance, where each person has to make moves and take turns without stepping on the other's toes. Nonverbal communication helps us regulate

our conversations so we don't end up constantly interrupting each other or waiting in awkward silences between speaker turns. Pitch, which is a part of vocalics, helps us cue others into our conversational intentions. A rising pitch typically indicates a question and a falling pitch indicates the end of a thought or the end of a conversational turn. We can also use a falling pitch to indicate closure, which can be very useful at the end of a speech to signal to the audience that you are finished, which cues the applause and prevents an awkward silence that the speaker ends up filling with "That's it" or "Thank you." We also signal our turn is coming to an end by stopping hand gestures and shifting our eye contact to the person who we think will speak next. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 53. Conversely, we can "hold the floor" with nonverbal signals even when we're not exactly sure what we're going to say next. Repeating a hand gesture or using one or more verbal fillers can extend our turn even though we are not verbally communicating at the moment.

### *Nonverbal Communication Affects Relationships*

To successfully relate to other people, we must possess some skill at encoding and decoding nonverbal communication. The nonverbal messages we send and receive influence our relationships in positive and negative ways and can work to bring people together or push them apart. Nonverbal communication in the form of tie signs, immediacy behaviors, and expressions of emotion are just three of many examples that illustrate how nonverbal communication affects our relationships.

**Tie signs** are nonverbal cues that communicate intimacy and signal the connection between two people. These relational indicators can be objects such as wedding rings or tattoos that are symbolic of another person or the relationship, actions such as sharing the same drinking glass, or touch behaviors such

as hand-holding. Walid A. Afifi and Michelle L. Johnson, “The Nature and Function of Tie-Signs,” in *The Sourcebook of Nonverbal Measures: Going beyond Words*, ed. Valerie Manusov (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005): 190. Touch behaviors are the most frequently studied tie signs and can communicate much about a relationship based on the area being touched, the length of time, and the intensity of the touch. Kisses and hugs, for example, are considered tie signs, but a kiss on the cheek is different from a kiss on the mouth and a full embrace is different from a half embrace. If you consider yourself a “people watcher,” take note of the various tie signs you see people use and what they might say about the relationship.

Immediacy behaviors play a central role in bringing people together and have been identified by some scholars as the most important function of nonverbal communication. Peter A. Andersen and Janis F. Andersen, “Measures of Perceived Nonverbal Immediacy,” in *The Sourcebook of Nonverbal Measures: Going beyond Words*, ed. Valerie Manusov (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005): 113–26. Immediacy behaviors are verbal and nonverbal behaviors that lessen real or perceived physical and psychological distance between communicators and include things like smiling, nodding, making eye contact, and occasionally engaging in social, polite, or professional touch. Mark E. Comadena, Stephen K. Hunt, and Cheri J. Simonds, “The Effects of Teacher Clarity, Nonverbal Immediacy, and Caring on Student Motivation, Affective and Cognitive Learning,” *Communication Research Reports* 24, no. 3 (2007): 241. **Immediacy behaviors** are a good way of creating rapport, or a friendly and positive connection between people. Skilled nonverbal communicators are more likely to be able to create rapport with others due to attention-getting expressiveness, warm initial greetings, and an ability to get “in tune” with others, which conveys empathy. Ronald E. Riggio, “Social Interaction Skills and Nonverbal Behavior,” in *Applications of Nonverbal Behavior Theories and Research*, ed. Robert S.

Feldman (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 12. These skills are important to help initiate and maintain relationships.

While verbal communication is our primary tool for solving problems and providing detailed instructions, nonverbal communication is our primary tool for communicating emotions. This makes sense when we remember that nonverbal communication emerged before verbal communication and was the channel through which we expressed anger, fear, and love for thousands of years of human history. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 27. Touch and facial expressions are two primary ways we express emotions nonverbally. Love is a primary emotion that we express nonverbally and that forms the basis of our close relationships. Although no single facial expression for love has been identified, it is expressed through prolonged eye contact, close interpersonal distances, increased touch, and increased time spent together, among other things. Given many people's limited emotional vocabulary, nonverbal expressions of emotion are central to our relationships.

## “Getting Real”

### Teachers and Immediacy Behaviors

A considerable amount of research has been done on teachers' use of immediacy behaviors, which points to the importance of this communication concept in teaching professions. Virginia P. Richmond, Derek R. Lane, and James C. McCroskey, “Teacher Immediacy and the Teacher-Student Relationship,” in *Handbook of Instructional Communication: Rhetorical and Relational Perspectives*, eds. Timothy P. Mottet, Virginia P. Richmond, and James C. McCroskey (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2006), 168. Immediacy behaviors are verbal and nonverbal behaviors that lessen real or perceived physical and

psychological distance between communicators. Mark E. Comadena, Stephen K. Hunt, and Cheri J. Simonds, "The Effects of Teacher Clarity, Nonverbal Immediacy, and Caring on Student Motivation, Affective and Cognitive Learning," *Communication Research Reports* 24, no. 3 (2007): 241. Specific nonverbal behaviors have been found to increase or decrease perceived levels of immediacy, and such behaviors impact student learning, teacher's evaluations, and the teacher-student relationship. Virginia P. Richmond, Derek R. Lane, and James C. McCroskey, "Teacher Immediacy and the Teacher-Student Relationship," in *Handbook of Instructional Communication: Rhetorical and Relational Perspectives*, eds. Timothy P. Mottet, Virginia P. Richmond, and James C. McCroskey (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2006), 169, 184–85. Even those who do not plan on going into teaching as a career can benefit from learning about immediacy behaviors, as they can also be used productively in other interpersonal contexts such as between a manager and employee, a salesperson and a client, or a politician and constituent. Much of this research in teaching contexts has focused on the relationship between immediacy behaviors and student learning, and research consistently shows that effective use of immediacy behaviors increases learning in various contexts and at various levels. Aside from enhancing student learning, the effective use of immediacy behaviors also leads to better evaluations by students, which can have a direct impact on a teacher's career. While student evaluations of teachers take various factors into consideration, judgments of personality may be formed, Teachers, after only brief initial impressions. Research shows that students make character assumptions about teachers after only brief exposure to their nonverbal behaviors. Based on nonverbal cues such as frowning, head nodding, pointing, sitting, smiling, standing, strong gestures, weak gestures, and walking, students may or may not evaluate a teacher as open, attentive, confident, dominant, honest, likable, anxious,

professional, supportive, or enthusiastic. The following are examples of immediacy behaviors that can be effectively used by teachers:

- Moving around the classroom during class activities, lectures, and discussions (reduces physical distance)
- Keeping the line of sight open between the teacher's body and the students by avoiding or only briefly standing behind lecterns / computer tables or sitting behind a desk while directly interacting with students (reduces physical distance)
- Being expressive and animated with facial expressions, gestures, and voice (demonstrates enthusiasm)
- Smiling (creates a positive and open climate)
- Making frequent eye contact with students (communicates attentiveness and interest)
- Calling students by name (reduces perceived psychological distance)
- Making appropriate self-disclosures to students about personal thoughts, feelings, or experiences (reduces perceived psychological distance, creates open climate)

Teachers who are judged as less immediate are more likely to sit, touch their heads, shake instead of nod their heads, use sarcasm, avoid eye contact, and use less expressive nonverbal behaviors. Finally, immediacy behaviors affect the teacher-student relationship. Immediacy behaviors help establish rapport, which is a personal connection that increases students' investment in the class and material, increases motivation, increases communication between teacher and student, increases liking, creates a sense of mutual respect, reduces challenging behavior by students, and reduces anxiety.

- Recall a teacher you have had that exhibited effective immediacy behaviors. Recall a teacher you have had that didn't exhibit immediacy behaviors. Make a column for each teacher

and note examples of specific behaviors of each. Discuss your list with a classmate and compare and contrast your lists.

- Think about the teachers that you listed in the previous question. Discuss how their behaviors affected your learning and your relationship.
- How much should immediacy behaviors, relative to other characteristics such as professionalism, experience, training, and content knowledge, factor into the evaluation of teachers by their students, peers, and supervisors? What, if anything, should schools do to enhance teachers' knowledge of immediacy behaviors?

### *Nonverbal Communication Expresses Our Identities*

Nonverbal communication expresses who we are. Our identities (the groups to which we belong, our cultures, our hobbies and interests, etc.) are conveyed nonverbally through the way we set up our living and working spaces, the clothes we wear, the way we carry ourselves, and the accents and tones of our voices. Our physical bodies give others impressions about who we are, and some of these features are more under our control than others. Height, for example, has been shown to influence how people are treated and perceived in various contexts. Our level of attractiveness also influences our identities and how people perceive us. Although we can temporarily alter our height or looks—for example, with different shoes or different color contact lenses—we can only permanently alter these features using more invasive and costly measures such as cosmetic surgery. We have more control over some other aspects of nonverbal communication in terms of how we communicate our identities. For example, the way we carry and present ourselves through posture, eye contact, and tone of voice can be altered to present ourselves as warm or distant depending on the context.

Aside from our physical body, artifacts, which are the objects

and possessions that surround us, also communicate our identities. Examples of artifacts include our clothes, jewelry, and space decorations. In all the previous examples, implicit norms or explicit rules can affect how we nonverbally present ourselves. For example, in a particular workplace it may be a norm (implicit) for people in management positions to dress casually, or it may be a rule (explicit) that different levels of employees wear different uniforms or follow particular dress codes. We can also use nonverbal communication to express identity characteristics that do not match up with who we actually think we are. Through changes to nonverbal signals, a capable person can try to appear helpless, a guilty person can try to appear innocent, or an uninformed person can try to appear credible.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Nonverbal communication is a process of generating meaning using behavior other than words. Nonverbal communication includes vocal elements, which is referred to as *paralanguage* and includes pitch, volume, and rate, and nonvocal elements, which are usually referred to as *body language* and includes gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact, among other things.
- Although verbal communication and nonverbal communication work side by side as part of a larger language system, there are some important differences between the two. They are processed by different hemispheres of the brain, nonverbal communication conveys more emotional and affective meaning than does verbal communication, nonverbal communication isn't governed by an explicit system of rules in the same way that grammar guides verbal communication, and while verbal communication is a uniquely human ability, many creatures including plants, birds, and mammals communicate

nonverbally.

- Nonverbal communication operates on the following principles: nonverbal communication typically conveys more meaning than verbal communication, nonverbal communication is more involuntary than verbal communication, nonverbal communication is often more ambiguous than verbal communication, and nonverbal communication is often more credible than verbal communication.
- Nonverbal communication serves several functions.
- Nonverbal communication affects verbal communication in that it can complement, reinforce, substitute, or contradict verbal messages.
- Nonverbal communication influences others, as it is a key component of deception and can be used to assert dominance or to engage in compliance gaining.
- Nonverbal communication regulates conversational flow, as it provides important cues that signal the beginning and end of conversational turns and facilitates the beginning and end of an interaction.
- Nonverbal communication affects relationships, as it is a primary means through which we communicate emotions, establish social bonds, and engage in relational maintenance.
- Nonverbal communication expresses our identities, as who we are is conveyed through the way we set up our living and working spaces, the clothes we wear, our personal presentation, and the tones in our voices.

## EXERCISES

- Getting integrated: To better understand nonverbal communication, try to think of an example to illustrate each of the four principles discussed in the chapter. Be integrative in

your approach by including at least one example from an academic, professional, civic, and personal context.

- When someone sends you a mixed message in which the verbal and nonverbal messages contradict each other, which one do you place more meaning on? Why?
- Our personal presentation, style of dress, and surroundings such as a dorm room, apartment, car, or office send nonverbal messages about our identities. Analyze some of the nonverbal signals that your personal presentation or environment send. What do they say about who you are? Do they create the impression that you desire?

## 2. Types of Nonverbal Communication

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define kinesics.
- Define haptics.
- Define vocalics.
- Define proxemics.
- Define chronemics.
- Provide examples of types of nonverbal communication that fall under these categories.
- Discuss the ways in which personal presentation and environment provide nonverbal cues.

Just as verbal language is broken up into various categories, there are also different types of nonverbal communication. As we learn about each type of nonverbal signal, keep in mind that nonverbals often work in concert with each other, combining to repeat, modify, or contradict the verbal message being sent.

### Kinesics

The word **kinesics** comes from the root word *kinesis*, which means “movement,” and refers to the study of hand, arm, body, and face movements. Specifically, this section will outline the use of gestures, head movements and posture, eye contact, and facial expressions as nonverbal communication.

## Gestures

There are three main types of gestures: adaptors, emblems, and illustrators. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 36. **Adaptors** are touching behaviors and movements that indicate internal states typically related to arousal or anxiety. Adaptors can be targeted toward the self, objects, or others. In regular social situations, adaptors result from uneasiness, anxiety, or a general sense that we are not in control of our surroundings. Many of us subconsciously click pens, shake our legs, or engage in other adaptors during classes, meetings, or while waiting as a way to do something with our excess energy. Public speaking students who watch video recordings of their speeches notice nonverbal adaptors that they didn't know they used. In public speaking situations, people most commonly use self- or object-focused adaptors. Common self-touching behaviors like scratching, twirling hair, or fidgeting with fingers or hands are considered self-adaptors. Some self-adaptors manifest internally, as coughs or throat-clearing sounds. My personal weakness is object adaptors. Specifically, I subconsciously gravitate toward metallic objects like paper clips or staples holding my notes together and catch myself bending them or fidgeting with them while I'm speaking. Other people play with dry-erase markers, their note cards, the change in their pockets, or the lectern while speaking. Use of object adaptors can also signal boredom as people play with the straw in their drink or peel the label off a bottle of beer. Smartphones have become common object adaptors, as people can fiddle with their phones to help ease anxiety. Finally, as noted, other adaptors are more common in social situations than in public speaking situations given the speaker's distance from audience members. Other adaptors involve adjusting or grooming others, similar to how primates like chimpanzees pick things off each other. It would definitely be strange for a speaker to approach an audience member and pick lint off his or her sweater,

fix a crooked tie, tuck a tag in, or pat down a flyaway hair in the middle of a speech.

**Emblems** are gestures that have a specific agreed-on meaning. These are still different from the signs used by hearing-impaired people or others who communicate using American Sign Language (ASL). Even though they have a generally agreed-on meaning, they are not part of a formal sign system like ASL that is explicitly taught to a group of people. A hitchhiker's raised thumb, the "OK" sign with thumb and index finger connected in a circle with the other three fingers sticking up, and the raised middle finger are all examples of emblems that have an agreed-on meaning or meanings with a culture.

Emblems can be still or in motion; for example, circling the index finger around at the side of your head says "He or she is crazy," or rolling your hands over and over in front of you says "Move on."

Just as we can trace the history of a word, or its etymology, we can also trace some nonverbal signals, especially emblems, to their origins. Holding up the index and middle fingers in a "V" shape with the palm facing in is an insult gesture in Britain that basically means "up yours." This gesture dates back centuries to the period in which the primary weapon of war was the bow and arrow. When archers were captured, their enemies would often cut off these two fingers, which was seen as the ultimate insult and worse than being executed since the archer could no longer shoot his bow and arrow. So holding up the two fingers was a provoking gesture used by archers to show their enemies that they still had their shooting fingers. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 121.



*Figure 9.3 Emblems are gestures that have a specific meaning. In the United States, a thumbs-up can mean “I need a ride” or “OK!”*  
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**Illustrators** are the most common type of gesture and are used to illustrate the verbal message they accompany. For example, you might use hand gestures to indicate the size or shape of an object. Unlike emblems, illustrators do not typically have meaning on their own and are used more subconsciously than emblems. These largely involuntary and seemingly natural

gestures flow from us as we speak but vary in terms of intensity and frequency based on context. Although we are never explicitly taught how to use illustrative gestures, we do it automatically. Think about how you still gesture when having an animated conversation on the phone even though the other person can't see you.

### *Head Movements and Posture*

I group head movements and posture together because they are often both used to acknowledge others and communicate interest or attentiveness. In terms of head movements, a head nod is a universal sign of acknowledgement in cultures where the formal bow is no longer used as a greeting. In these cases, the head nod essentially serves as an abbreviated bow. An innate and universal head movement is the headshake back and forth to signal “no.” This nonverbal signal begins at birth, even before a baby has the ability to know that it has a corresponding meaning. Babies shake their head from side to side to reject their mother’s breast and later shake their head to reject attempts to spoon- feed. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 232. This biologically based movement then sticks with us to be a recognizable signal for “no.” We also move our head to indicate interest. For example, a head up typically indicates an engaged or neutral attitude, a head tilt indicates interest and is an innate submission gesture that exposes the neck and subconsciously makes people feel more trusting of us, and a head down signals a negative or aggressive attitude. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 232–34.

There are four general human postures: standing, sitting, squatting, and lying down. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London:

Routledge, 2011), 63. Within each of these postures there are many variations, and when combined with particular gestures or other nonverbal cues they can express many different meanings. Most of our communication occurs while we are standing or sitting. One interesting standing posture involves putting our hands on our hips and is a nonverbal cue that we use subconsciously to make us look bigger and show assertiveness. When the elbows are pointed out, this prevents others from getting past us as easily and is a sign of attempted dominance or a gesture that says we're ready for action. In terms of sitting, leaning back shows informality and indifference, straddling a chair is a sign of dominance (but also some insecurity because the person is protecting the vulnerable front part of his or her body), and leaning forward shows interest and attentiveness. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 243–44.

### *Eye Contact*

We also communicate through eye behaviors, primarily eye contact. While eye behaviors are often studied under the category of kinesics, they have their own branch of nonverbal studies called **oculesics**, which comes from the Latin word *oculus*, meaning “eye.” The face and eyes are the main point of focus during communication, and along with our ears our eyes take in most of the communicative information around us. The saying “The eyes are the window to the soul” is actually accurate in terms of where people typically think others are “located,” which is right behind the eyes. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 40. Certain eye behaviors have become tied to personality traits or emotional states, as illustrated in phrases like “hungry eyes,” “evil eyes,” and “bedroom eyes.” To better understand oculesics, we will discuss the characteristics and functions of eye contact and pupil dilation.

Eye contact serves several communicative functions ranging from regulating interaction to monitoring interaction, to conveying information, to establishing interpersonal connections. In terms of regulating communication, we use eye contact to signal to others that we are ready to speak or we use it to cue others to speak. I'm sure we've all been in that awkward situation where a teacher asks a question, no one else offers a response, and he or she looks directly at us as if to say, "What do you think?" In that case, the teacher's eye contact is used to cue us to respond. During an interaction, eye contact also changes as we shift from speaker to listener. US Americans typically shift eye contact while speaking— looking away from the listener and then looking back at his or her face every few seconds. Toward the end of our speaking turn, we make more direct eye contact with our listener to indicate that we are finishing up. While listening, we tend to make more sustained eye contact, not glancing away as regularly as we do while speaking. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 276.

Aside from regulating conversations, eye contact is also used to monitor interaction by taking in feedback and other nonverbal cues and to send information. Our eyes bring in the visual information we need to interpret people's movements, gestures, and eye contact. A speaker can use his or her eye contact to determine if an audience is engaged, confused, or bored and then adapt his or her message accordingly. Our eyes also send information to others. People know not to interrupt when we are in deep thought because we naturally look away from others when we are processing information. Making eye contact with others also communicates that we are paying attention and are interested in what another person is saying. Eye contact is a key part of active listening.

Eye contact can also be used to intimidate others. We have social norms about how much eye contact we make with people, and those norms vary depending on the setting and the person.

Staring at another person in some contexts could communicate intimidation, while in other contexts it could communicate flirtation. As we learned, eye contact is a key immediacy behavior, and it signals to others that we are available for communication. Once communication begins, if it does, eye contact helps establish rapport or connection. We can also use our eye contact to signal that we do not want to make a connection with others. For example, in a public setting like an airport or a gym where people often make small talk, we can avoid making eye contact with others to indicate that we do not want to engage in small talk with strangers. Another person could use eye contact to try to coax you into speaking, though. For example, when one person continues to stare at another person who is not reciprocating eye contact, the person avoiding eye contact might eventually give in, become curious, or become irritated and say, “Can I help you with something?” As you can see, eye contact sends and receives important communicative messages that help us interpret others’ behaviors, convey information about our thoughts and feelings, and facilitate or impede rapport or connection. This list reviews the specific functions of eye contact:

- Regulate interaction and provide turn-taking signals
- Monitor communication by receiving nonverbal communication from others
- Signal cognitive activity (we look away when processing information)
- Express engagement (we show people we are listening with our eyes)
- Convey intimidation
- Express flirtation

- Establish rapport or connection

Pupil dilation is a subtle component of oculosics that doesn't get as much scholarly attention in communication as eye contact does. Pupil dilation refers to the expansion and contraction of the black part of the center of our eyes and is considered a biometric form of measurement; it is involuntary and therefore seen as a valid and reliable form of data collection as opposed to self-reports on surveys or interviews that can be biased or misleading. Our pupils dilate when there is a lack of lighting and contract when light is plentiful. Laura K. Guerrero and Kory Floyd, *Nonverbal Communication in Close Relationships* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006): 176. Pain, sexual attraction, general arousal, anxiety/stress, and information processing (thinking) also affect pupil dilation. Researchers measure pupil dilation for a number of reasons. For example, advertisers use pupil dilation as an indicator of consumer preferences, assuming that more dilation indicates arousal and attraction to a product. We don't consciously read others' pupil dilation in our everyday interactions, but experimental research has shown that we subconsciously perceive pupil dilation, which affects our impressions and communication. In general, dilated pupils increase a person's attractiveness. Even though we may not be aware of this subtle nonverbal signal, we have social norms and practices that may be subconsciously based on pupil dilation. Take for example the notion of mood lighting and the common practice of creating a "romantic" ambiance with candlelight or the light from a fireplace. Softer and more indirect light leads to pupil dilation, and although we intentionally manipulate lighting to create a romantic ambiance, not to dilate our pupils, the dilated pupils are still subconsciously perceived, which increases perceptions of attraction. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 40–41.

## *Facial Expressions*

Our faces are the most expressive part of our bodies. Think of how photos are often intended to capture a particular expression “in a flash” to preserve for later viewing. Even though a photo is a snapshot in time, we can still interpret much meaning from a human face caught in a moment of expression, and basic facial expressions are recognizable by humans all over the world. Much research has supported the universality of a core group of facial expressions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust. The first four are especially identifiable across cultures. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 35. However, the triggers for these expressions and the cultural and social norms that influence their displays are still culturally diverse. If you’ve spent much time with babies you know that they’re capable of expressing all these emotions. Getting to see the pure and innate expressions of joy and surprise on a baby’s face is what makes playing peek-a-boo so entertaining for adults. As we get older, we learn and begin to follow display rules for facial expressions and other signals of emotion and also learn to better control our emotional expression based on the norms of our culture.

Smiles are powerful communicative signals and, as you’ll recall, are a key immediacy behavior. Although facial expressions are typically viewed as innate and several are universally recognizable, they are not always connected to an emotional or internal biological stimulus; they can actually serve a more social purpose. For example, most of the smiles we produce are primarily made for others and are not just an involuntary reflection of an internal emotional state. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 35. These social smiles, however, are slightly but perceptibly different from more genuine smiles. People generally perceive smiles as more genuine when the other

person smiles “with their eyes.” This particular type of smile is difficult if not impossible to fake because the muscles around the eye that are activated when we spontaneously or genuinely smile are not under our voluntary control. It is the involuntary and spontaneous contraction of these muscles that moves the skin around our cheeks, eyes, and nose to create a smile that’s distinct from a fake or polite smile. Dylan Evans, *Emotion: The Science of Sentiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 107. People are able to distinguish the difference between these smiles, which is why photographers often engage in cheesy joking with adults or use props with children to induce a genuine smile before they snap a picture.

Since you are likely giving speeches in this class, let’s learn about the role of the face in public speaking. Facial expressions help set the emotional tone for a speech. In order to set a positive tone before you start speaking, briefly look at the audience and smile to communicate friendliness, openness, and confidence. Beyond your opening and welcoming facial expressions, facial expressions communicate a range of emotions and can be used to infer personality traits and make judgments about a speaker’s credibility and competence. Facial expressions can communicate that a speaker is tired, excited, angry, confused, frustrated, sad, confident, smug, shy, or bored. Even if you aren’t bored, for example, a slack face with little animation may lead an audience to think that you are bored with your own speech, which isn’t likely to motivate them to be interested. So make sure your facial expressions are communicating an emotion, mood, or personality trait that you think your audience will view favorably, and that will help you achieve your speech goals. Also make sure your facial expressions match the content of your speech. When delivering something light-hearted or humorous, a smile, bright eyes, and slightly raised eyebrows will nonverbally enhance your verbal message. When delivering something serious or somber, a furrowed brow, a tighter mouth, and even a slight head nod

can enhance that message. If your facial expressions and speech content are not consistent, your audience could become confused by the mixed messages, which could lead them to question your honesty and credibility.



*Figure 9.4 Our faces are the most expressive part of our body and can communicate an array of different emotions. © Thinkstock*

## Haptics

Think of how touch has the power to comfort someone in moment of sorrow when words alone cannot. This positive power of touch is countered by the potential for touch to be threatening because of its connection to sex and violence. To

learn about the power of touch, we turn to **haptics**, which refers to the study of communication by touch. We probably get more explicit advice and instruction on how to use touch than any other form of nonverbal communication. A lack of nonverbal communication competence related to touch could have negative interpersonal consequences; for example, if we don't follow the advice we've been given about the importance of a firm handshake, a person might make negative judgments about our confidence or credibility. A lack of competence could have more dire negative consequences, including legal punishment, if we touch someone inappropriately (intentionally or unintentionally). Touch is necessary for human social development, and it can be welcoming, threatening, or persuasive. Research projects have found that students evaluated a library and its staff more favorably if the librarian briefly touched the patron while returning his or her library card, that female restaurant servers received larger tips when they touched patrons, and that people were more likely to sign a petition when the petitioner touched them during their interaction. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 46.

There are several types of touch, including functional-professional, social-polite, friendship-warmth, love-intimacy, and sexual-arousal touch. Richard Heslin and Tari Apler, "Touch: A Bonding Gesture," in *Nonverbal Interaction*, eds. John M. Weimann and Randall Harrison (Longon: Sage, 1983), 47-76. At the functional-professional level, touch is related to a goal or part of a routine professional interaction, which makes it less threatening and more expected. For example, we let barbers, hairstylists, doctors, nurses, tattoo artists, and security screeners touch us in ways that would otherwise be seen as intimate or inappropriate if not in a professional context. At the social-polite level, socially sanctioned touching behaviors help initiate interactions and show that others are included and respected. A handshake, a pat on

the arm, and a pat on the shoulder are examples of social-polite touching. A handshake is actually an abbreviated hand-holding gesture, but we know that prolonged hand-holding would be considered too intimate and therefore inappropriate at the functional-professional or social-polite level. At the functional-professional and social-polite levels, touch still has interpersonal implications. The touch, although professional and not intimate, between hair stylist and client, or between nurse and patient, has the potential to be therapeutic and comforting. In addition, a social-polite touch exchange plays into initial impression formation, which can have important implications for how an interaction and a relationship unfold.

Of course, touch is also important at more intimate levels. At the friendship-warmth level, touch is more important and more ambiguous than at the social-polite level. At this level, touch interactions are important because they serve a relational maintenance purpose and communicate closeness, liking, care, and concern. The types of touching at this level also vary greatly from more formal and ritualized to more intimate, which means friends must sometimes negotiate their own comfort level with various types of touch and may encounter some ambiguity if their preferences don't match up with their relational partner's. In a friendship, for example, too much touch can signal sexual or romantic interest, and too little touch can signal distance or unfriendliness. At the love-intimacy level, touch is more personal and is typically only exchanged between significant others, such as best friends, close family members, and romantic partners. Touching faces, holding hands, and full frontal embraces are examples of touch at this level. Although this level of touch is not sexual, it does enhance feelings of closeness and intimacy and can lead to sexual-arousal touch, which is the most intimate form of touch, as it is intended to physically stimulate another person.

Touch is also used in many other contexts—for example, during play (e.g., arm wrestling), during physical conflict (e.g., slapping), and during conversations (e.g., to get someone's

attention). Stanley E. Jones, "Communicating with Touch," in *The Nonverbal Communication Reader: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd ed., eds. Laura K. Guerrero, Joseph A. Devito, and Michael L. Hecht (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1999). We also inadvertently send messages through accidental touch (e.g., bumping into someone). One of my interpersonal communication professors admitted that she enjoyed going to restaurants to observe "first-date behavior" and boasted that she could predict whether or not there was going to be a second date based on the couple's nonverbal communication. What sort of touching behaviors would indicate a good or bad first date?

During a first date or less formal initial interactions, quick fleeting touches give an indication of interest. For example, a pat on the back is an abbreviated hug. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 4. In general, the presence or absence of touching cues us into people's emotions. So as the daters sit across from each other, one person may lightly tap the other's arm after he or she said something funny. If the daters are sitting side by side, one person may cross his or her legs and lean toward the other person so that each person's knees or feet occasionally touch. Touching behavior as a way to express feelings is often reciprocal. A light touch from one dater will be followed by a light touch from the other to indicate that the first touch was OK. While verbal communication could also be used to indicate romantic interest, many people feel too vulnerable at this early stage in a relationship to put something out there in words. If your date advances a touch and you are not interested, it is also unlikely that you will come right out and say, "Sorry, but I'm not really interested." Instead, due to common politeness rituals, you would be more likely to respond with other forms of nonverbal communication like scooting back, crossing your arms, or simply not acknowledging the touch.



Figure 9.5 On a first date, it is less likely that you will see couples sitting “school-bus style” (sharing the same side of a table or booth) or touching for an extended time. © Thinkstock

I find hugging behavior particularly interesting, perhaps because of my experiences growing up in a very hug-friendly environment in the Southern United States and then living elsewhere where there are different norms. A hug can be obligatory, meaning that you do it because you feel like you have to, not because you want to. Even though you may think that this type of hug doesn’t communicate emotions, it definitely does. A limp, weak, or retreating hug may communicate anger, ambivalence, or annoyance. Think of other types of hugs and how you hug different people. Some types of hugs are the crisscross hug, the neck-waist hug, and the engulfing hug. Kory Floyd, *Communicating Affection: Interpersonal Behavior and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 33–34. The crisscross hug is a rather typical hug where each person’s arm is below or above the other person’s arm. This hug is common among friends, romantic partners, and family members, and perhaps even coworkers. The neck-waist hug usually occurs in more intimate relationships as it involves one

person's arms around the other's neck and the other person's arms around the other's waist. I think of this type of hug as the "slow-dance hug." The engulfing hug is similar to a bear hug in that one person completely wraps the arms around the other as that person basically stands there. This hugging behavior usually occurs when someone is very excited and hugs the other person without warning.

Some other types of hugs are the "shake-first-then-tap hug" and the "back-slap hug." I observe that these hugs are most often between men. The shake-first-then-tap hug involves a modified hand-shake where the hands are joined more with the thumb and fingers than the palm and the elbows are bent so that the shake occurs between the two huggers' chests. The hug comes after the shake has been initiated with one arm going around the other person for usually just one tap, then a step back and release of the handshake. In this hugging behavior, the handshake that is maintained between the chests minimizes physical closeness and the intimacy that may be interpreted from the crisscross or engulfing hug where the majority of the huggers' torsos are touching. This move away from physical closeness likely stems from a US norm that restricts men's physical expression of affection due to homophobia or the worry of being perceived as gay. The slap hug is also a less physically intimate hug and involves a hug with one or both people slapping the other person's back repeatedly, often while talking to each other. I've seen this type of hug go on for many seconds and with varying degrees of force involved in the slap. When the slap is more of a tap, it is actually an indication that one person wants to let go. The video footage of then-president Bill Clinton hugging Monica Lewinsky that emerged as allegations that they had an affair were being investigated shows her holding on, while he was tapping from the beginning of the hug.

## “Getting Critical”

### Airport Pat-Downs: The Law, Privacy, and Touch

Everyone who has flown over the past ten years has experienced the steady increase in security screenings. Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, airports around the world have had increased security. While passengers have long been subject to pat-downs if they set off the metal detector or arouse suspicion, recently foiled terrorist plots have made passenger screening more personal. The “shoe bomber” led to mandatory shoe removal and screening, and the more recent use of nonmetallic explosives hidden in clothing or in body cavities led to the use of body scanners that can see through clothing to check for concealed objects. Andrew R. Thomas, *Soft Landing: Airline Industry Strategy, Service, and Safety* (New York, NY: Apress, 2011), 117–23. Protests against and anxiety about the body scanners, more colloquially known as “naked x-ray machines,” led to the new “enhanced pat-down” techniques for passengers who refuse to go through the scanners or passengers who are randomly selected or arouse suspicion in other ways. The strong reactions are expected given what we’ve learned about the power of touch as a form of nonverbal communication. The new pat-downs routinely involve touching the areas around a passenger’s breasts and/or genitals with a sliding hand motion. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) notes that the areas being examined haven’t changed, but the degree of the touch has, as screeners now press and rub more firmly but used to use a lighter touch. Derek Kravitz, “Airport ‘Pat-Downs’ Cause Growing Passenger Backlash,” *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2010, accessed June 23, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/12/AR2010111206580.html?sid=ST2010113005385>.

Interestingly, police have long been able to use more invasive pat-downs, but only with probable cause. In the case of random selection at the airport, no probable cause provision has to be met,

giving TSA agents more leeway with touch than police officers. Experts in aviation security differ in their assessment of the value of the pat-downs and other security procedures. Several experts have called for a revision of the random selection process in favor of more targeted screenings. What civil rights organizations critique as racial profiling, consumer rights activists and some security experts say allows more efficient use of resources and less inconvenience for the majority of passengers. Andrew R. Thomas, *Soft Landing: Airline Industry Strategy, Service, and Safety* (New York, NY: Apress, 2011), 120. Although the TSA has made some changes to security screening procedures and have announced more to come, some passengers have started a backlash of their own. There have been multiple cases of passengers stripping down to their underwear or getting completely naked to protest the pat-downs, while several other passengers have been charged with assault for “groping” TSA agents in retaliation. Footage of pat-downs of toddlers and grandmothers in wheelchairs and self-uploaded videos of people recounting their pat-down experiences have gone viral on YouTube.

- What limits, if any, do you think there should be on the use of touch in airport screening procedures?
- In June of 2012 a passenger was charged with battery after “groping” a TSA supervisor to, as she claims, demonstrate the treatment that she had received while being screened. You can read more about the story and see the video here: <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/carol-jean-price-accused-groping-tsa-agent-florida-woman-demonstrating-treatment-received-article-1.1098521>. Do you think that her actions were justified? Why or why not?
- Do you think that more targeted screening, as opposed to random screenings in which each person has an equal chance of being selected for enhanced pat-downs, is a good idea? Why? Do you think such targeted screening could be seen as a case of unethical racial profiling? Why or why not?

# Vocalics

We learned earlier that *paralanguage* refers to the vocalized but nonverbal parts of a message. **Vocalics** is the study of paralanguage, which includes the vocal qualities that go along with verbal messages, such as pitch, volume, rate, vocal quality, and verbal fillers. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 69–70.

Pitch helps convey meaning, regulate conversational flow, and communicate the intensity of a message. Even babies recognize a sentence with a higher pitched ending as a question. We also learn that greetings have a rising emphasis and farewells have falling emphasis. Of course, no one ever tells us these things explicitly; we learn them through observation and practice. We do not pick up on some more subtle and/or complex patterns of paralanguage involving pitch until we are older. Children, for example, have a difficult time perceiving sarcasm, which is usually conveyed through paralinguistic characteristics like pitch and tone rather than the actual words being spoken. Adults with lower than average intelligence and children have difficulty reading sarcasm in another person's voice and instead may interpret literally what they say. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 26.

Paralanguage provides important context for the verbal content of speech. For example, volume helps communicate intensity. A louder voice is usually thought of as more intense, although a soft voice combined with a certain tone and facial expression can be just as intense. We typically adjust our volume based on our setting, the distance between people, and the relationship. In our age of computer-mediated communication, TYPING IN ALL CAPS is usually seen as offensive, as it is equated with yelling. A voice at a low volume or a whisper can be very appropriate when sending a covert message or flirting with a

romantic partner, but it wouldn't enhance a person's credibility if used during a professional presentation.

Speaking rate refers to how fast or slow a person speaks and can lead others to form impressions about our emotional state, credibility, and intelligence. As with volume, variations in speaking rate can interfere with the ability of others to receive and understand verbal messages. A slow speaker could bore others and lead their attention to wander. A fast speaker may be difficult to follow, and the fast delivery can actually distract from the message. Speaking a little faster than the normal 120–150 words a minute, however, can be beneficial, as people tend to find speakers whose rate is above average more credible and intelligent. David B. Buller and Judee K. Burgoon, “The Effects of Vocalics and Nonverbal Sensitivity on Compliance,” *Human Communication Research* 13, no. 1 (1986): 126–44. When speaking at a faster-than-normal rate, it is important that a speaker also clearly articulate and pronounce his or her words. Boomhauer, a character on the show *King of the Hill*, is an example of a speaker whose fast rate of speech combines with a lack of articulation and pronunciation to create a stream of words that only he can understand. A higher rate of speech combined with a pleasant tone of voice can also be beneficial for compliance gaining and can aid in persuasion.

Our tone of voice can be controlled somewhat with pitch, volume, and emphasis, but each voice has a distinct quality known as a vocal signature. Voices vary in terms of resonance, pitch, and tone, and some voices are more pleasing than others. People typically find pleasing voices that employ vocal variety and are not monotone, are lower pitched (particularly for males), and do not exhibit particular regional accents. Many people perceive nasal voices negatively and assign negative personality characteristics to them. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 71. Think about people who have very distinct voices. Whether they are a public figure like President Bill Clinton, a celebrity like Snooki from the

*Jersey Shore*, or a fictional character like Peter Griffin from *Family Guy*, some people's voices stick with us and make a favorable or unfavorable impression.

Verbal fillers are sounds that fill gaps in our speech as we think about what to say next. They are considered a part of nonverbal communication because they are not like typical words that stand in for a specific meaning or meanings. Verbal fillers such as “um,” “uh,” “like,” and “ah” are common in regular conversation and are not typically disruptive. As we learned earlier, the use of verbal fillers can help a person “keep the floor” during a conversation if they need to pause for a moment to think before continuing on with verbal communication. Verbal fillers in more formal settings, like a public speech, can hurt a speaker's credibility.

The following is a review of the various communicative functions of vocalics:

- **Repetition.** Vocalic cues reinforce other verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., saying “I'm not sure” with an uncertain tone).
- **Complementing.** Vocalic cues elaborate on or modify verbal and nonverbal meaning (e.g., the pitch and volume used to say “I love sweet potatoes” would add context to the meaning of the sentence, such as the degree to which the person loves sweet potatoes or the use of sarcasm).
- **Accenting.** Vocalic cues allow us to emphasize particular parts of a message, which helps determine meaning (e.g., “She is my friend,” or “She is *my* friend,” or “She is my *friend*”).
- **Substituting.** Vocalic cues can take the place of other verbal or nonverbal cues (e.g., saying “uh huh” instead of “I am listening and understand what you're saying”).
- **Regulating.** Vocalic cues help regulate the flow of conversations (e.g., falling pitch and slowing rate of speaking usually indicate the end of a speaking turn).
- **Contradicting.** Vocalic cues may contradict other verbal or nonverbal signals (e.g., a person could say “I'm fine” in a quick,

short tone that indicates otherwise).

## Proxemics

**Proxemics** refers to the study of how space and distance influence communication. We only need look at the ways in which space shows up in common metaphors to see that space, communication, and relationships are closely related. For example, when we are content with and attracted to someone, we say we are “close” to him or her. When we lose connection with someone, we may say he or she is “distant.” In general, space influences how people communicate and behave. Smaller spaces with a higher density of people often lead to breaches of our personal space bubbles. If this is a setting in which this type of density is expected beforehand, like at a crowded concert or on a train during rush hour, then we make various communicative adjustments to manage the space issue. Unexpected breaches of personal space can lead to negative reactions, especially if we feel someone has violated our space voluntarily, meaning that a crowding situation didn’t force them into our space. Additionally, research has shown that crowding can lead to criminal or delinquent behavior, known as a “mob mentality.” Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 44. To better understand how proxemics functions in nonverbal communication, we will more closely examine the proxemic distances associated with personal space and the concept of territoriality.

### *Proxemic Distances*

We all have varying definitions of what our “personal space” is, and these definitions are contextual and depend on the situation

and the relationship. Although our bubbles are invisible, people are socialized into the norms of personal space within their cultural group. Scholars have identified four zones for US Americans, which are public, social, personal, and intimate distance. Edward T. Hall, “Proxemics,” *Current Anthropology* 9, no. 2 (1968): 83–95. The zones are more elliptical than circular, taking up more space in our front, where our line of sight is, than at our side or back where we can’t monitor what people are doing. You can see how these zones relate to each other and to the individual in Figure 9.6 “Proxemic Zones of Personal Space.” Even within a particular zone, interactions may differ depending on whether someone is in the outer or inner part of the zone.

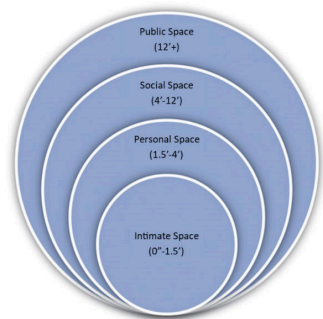


Figure 9.6 Proxemic Zones of Personal Space

### *Public Space (12 Feet or More)*

Public and social zones refer to the space four or more feet away from our body, and the communication that typically occurs in these zones is formal and not intimate. Public space starts about twelve feet from a person and extends out from there. This is the least personal of the four zones and would typically be used when a person is engaging in a formal speech and is removed from the audience to allow the audience to see or when a high-profile or powerful person like a celebrity or executive maintains such a distance as a sign of power or for safety and

security reasons. In terms of regular interaction, we are often not obligated or expected to acknowledge or interact with people who enter our public zone. It would be difficult to have a deep conversation with someone at this level because you have to speak louder and don't have the physical closeness that is often needed to promote emotional closeness and/or establish rapport.

### *Social Space (4–12 Feet)*

Communication that occurs in the social zone, which is four to twelve feet away from our body, is typically in the context of a professional or casual interaction, but not intimate or public. This distance is preferred in many professional settings because it reduces the suspicion of any impropriety. The expression “keep someone at an arm's length” means that someone is kept out of the personal space and kept in the social/professional space. If two people held up their arms and stood so just the tips of their fingers were touching, they would be around four feet away from each other, which is perceived as a safe distance because the possibility for intentional or unintentional touching doesn't exist. It is also possible to have people in the outer portion of our social zone but not feel obligated to interact with them, but when people come much closer than six feet to us then we often feel obligated to at least acknowledge their presence. In many typically sized classrooms, much of your audience for a speech will actually be in your social zone rather than your public zone, which is actually beneficial because it helps you establish a better connection with them. Students in large lecture classes should consider sitting within the social zone of the professor, since students who sit within this zone are more likely to be remembered by the professor, be acknowledged in class, and retain more information because they are close enough to take in important nonverbal and visual

cues. Students who talk to me after class typically stand about four to five feet away when they speak to me, which keeps them in the outer part of the social zone, typical for professional interactions. When students have more personal information to discuss, they will come closer, which brings them into the inner part of the social zone.

### *Personal Space (1.5–4 Feet)*

Personal and intimate zones refer to the space that starts at our physical body and extends four feet. These zones are reserved for friends, close acquaintances, and significant others. Much of our communication occurs in the personal zone, which is what we typically think of as our “personal space bubble” and extends from 1.5 feet to 4 feet away from our body. Even though we are getting closer to the physical body of another person, we may use verbal communication at this point to signal that our presence in this zone is friendly and not intimate. Even people who know each other could be uncomfortable spending too much time in this zone unnecessarily. This zone is broken up into two subzones, which helps us negotiate close interactions with people we may not be close to interpersonally. Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 59. The outer-personal zone extends from 2.5 feet to 4 feet and is useful for conversations that need to be private but that occur between people who are not interpersonally close. This zone allows for relatively intimate communication but doesn’t convey the intimacy that a closer distance would, which can be beneficial in professional settings. The inner-personal zone extends from 1.5 feet to 2.5 feet and is a space reserved for communication with people we are interpersonally close to or trying to get to know. In this subzone, we can easily touch the other person as we talk to them, briefly

placing a hand on his or her arm or engaging in other light social touching that facilitates conversation, self-disclosure, and feelings of closeness.

### *Intimate Space*

As we breach the invisible line that is 1.5 feet from our body, we enter the intimate zone, which is reserved for only the closest friends, family, and romantic/intimate partners. It is impossible to completely ignore people when they are in this space, even if we are trying to pretend that we're ignoring them. A breach of this space can be comforting in some contexts and annoying or frightening in others. We need regular human contact that isn't just verbal but also physical. We have already discussed the importance of touch in nonverbal communication, and in order for that much-needed touch to occur, people have to enter our intimate space. Being close to someone and feeling their physical presence can be very comforting when words fail. There are also social norms regarding the amount of this type of closeness that can be displayed in public, as some people get uncomfortable even seeing others interacting in the intimate zone. While some people are comfortable engaging in or watching others engage in PDAs (public displays of affection) others are not.

So what happens when our space is violated? Although these zones are well established in research for personal space preferences of US Americans, individuals vary in terms of their reactions to people entering certain zones, and determining what constitutes a "violation" of space is subjective and contextual. For example, another person's presence in our social or public zones doesn't typically arouse suspicion or negative physical or communicative reactions, but it could in some situations or with certain people. However, many situations lead to our personal and intimate space being breached by others

against our will, and these breaches are more likely to be upsetting, even when they are expected. We've all had to get into a crowded elevator or wait in a long line. In such situations, we may rely on some verbal communication to reduce immediacy and indicate that we are not interested in closeness and are aware that a breach has occurred. People make comments about the crowd, saying,

"We're really packed in here like sardines," or use humor to indicate that they are pleasant and well adjusted and uncomfortable with the breach like any "normal" person would be. Interestingly, as we will learn in our discussion of territoriality, we do not often use verbal communication to defend our personal space during regular interactions. Instead, we rely on more nonverbal communication like moving, crossing our arms, or avoiding eye contact to deal with breaches of space.

## *Territoriality*

Territoriality is an innate drive to take up and defend spaces. This drive is shared by many creatures and entities, ranging from packs of animals to individual humans to nations. Whether it's a gang territory, a neighborhood claimed by a particular salesperson, your preferred place to sit in a restaurant, your usual desk in the classroom, or the seat you've marked to save while getting concessions at a sporting event, we claim certain spaces as our own. There are three main divisions for territory: primary, secondary, and public. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 70–71. Sometimes our claim to a space is official. These spaces are known as our primary territories because they are marked or understood to be exclusively ours and under our control. A person's house, yard, room, desk, side of the bed, or shelf in the medicine cabinet could be considered primary territories.

Secondary territories don't belong to us and aren't exclusively under our control, but they are associated with us, which may lead us to assume that the space will be open and available to us when we need it without us taking any further steps to reserve it. This happens in classrooms regularly.

Students often sit in the same desk or at least same general area as they did on the first day of class. There may be some small adjustments during the first couple of weeks, but by a month into the semester, I don't notice students moving much voluntarily. When someone else takes a student's regular desk, she or he is typically annoyed. I do classroom observations for the graduate teaching assistants I supervise, which means I come into the classroom toward the middle of the semester and take a seat in the back to evaluate the class session. Although I don't intend to take someone's seat, on more than one occasion, I've been met by the confused or even glaring eyes of a student whose routine is suddenly interrupted when they see me sitting in "their seat."

Public territories are open to all people. People are allowed to mark public territory and use it for a limited period of time, but space is often up for grabs, which makes public space difficult to manage for some people and can lead to conflict. To avoid this type of situation, people use a variety of objects that are typically recognized by others as nonverbal cues that mark a place as temporarily reserved—for example, jackets, bags, papers, or a drink. There is some ambiguity in the use of markers, though. A half-empty cup of coffee may be seen as trash and thrown away, which would be an annoying surprise to a person who left it to mark his or her table while visiting the restroom. One scholar's informal observations revealed that a full drink sitting on a table could reserve a space in a university cafeteria for more than an hour, but a cup only half full usually only worked as a marker of territory for less than ten minutes. People have to decide how much value they want their marker to have. Obviously, leaving a laptop on a table indicates that the table is

occupied, but it could also lead to the laptop getting stolen. A pencil, on the other hand, could just be moved out of the way and the space usurped.

## Chronemics

**Chronemics** refers to the study of how time affects communication. Time can be classified into several different categories, including biological, personal, physical, and cultural time. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 65–66. Biological time refers to the rhythms of living things. Humans follow a circadian rhythm, meaning that we are on a daily cycle that influences when we eat, sleep, and wake. When our natural rhythms are disturbed, by all-nighters, jet lag, or other scheduling abnormalities, our physical and mental health and our communication competence and personal relationships can suffer. Keep biological time in mind as you communicate with others. Remember that early morning conversations and speeches may require more preparation to get yourself awake enough to communicate well and a more patient or energetic delivery to accommodate others who may still be getting warmed up for their day.

Personal time refers to the ways in which individuals experience time. The way we experience time varies based on our mood, our interest level, and other factors. Think about how quickly time passes when you are interested in and therefore engaged in something. I have taught fifty-minute classes that seemed to drag on forever and three-hour classes that zipped by. Individuals also vary based on whether or not they are future or past oriented. People with past-time orientations may want to reminisce about the past, reunite with old friends, and put considerable time into preserving memories and keepsakes in

scrapbooks and photo albums. People with future-time orientations may spend the same amount of time making career and personal plans, writing out to-do lists, or researching future vacations, potential retirement spots, or what book they're going to read next.

Physical time refers to the fixed cycles of days, years, and seasons. Physical time, especially seasons, can affect our mood and psychological states. Some people experience seasonal affective disorder that leads them to experience emotional distress and anxiety during the changes of seasons, primarily from warm and bright to dark and cold (summer to fall and winter).

Cultural time refers to how a large group of people view time. Polychronic people do not view time as a linear progression that needs to be divided into small units and scheduled in advance. Polychronic people keep more flexible schedules and may engage in several activities at once. Monochronic people tend to schedule their time more rigidly and do one thing at a time. A polychronic or monochronic orientation to time influences our social realities and how we interact with others.

Additionally, the way we use time depends in some ways on our status. For example, doctors can make their patients wait for extended periods of time, and executives and celebrities may run consistently behind schedule, making others wait for them. Promptness and the amount of time that is socially acceptable for lateness and waiting varies among individuals and contexts. Chronemics also covers the amount of time we spend talking. We've already learned that conversational turns and turn-taking patterns are influenced by social norms and help our conversations progress. We all know how annoying it can be when a person dominates a conversation or when we can't get a person to contribute anything.

## Personal Presentation and Environment

Personal presentation involves two components: our physical characteristics and the artifacts with which we adorn and surround ourselves. Physical characteristics include body shape, height, weight, attractiveness, and other physical features of our bodies. We do not have as much control over how these nonverbal cues are encoded as we do with many other aspects of nonverbal communication.

These characteristics play a large role in initial impression formation even though we know we “shouldn’t judge a book by its cover.” Although ideals of attractiveness vary among cultures and individuals, research consistently indicates that people who are deemed attractive based on physical characteristics have distinct advantages in many aspects of life. This fact, along with media images that project often unrealistic ideals of beauty, have contributed to booming health and beauty, dieting, gym, and plastic surgery industries. While there have been some controversial reality shows that seek to transform people’s physical characteristics, like *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, and *The Biggest Loser*, the relative ease with which we can change the artifacts that send nonverbal cues about us has led to many more style and space makeover shows. Have you ever tried to consciously change your “look?” I can distinctly remember two times in my life when I made pretty big changes in how I presented myself in terms of clothing and accessories. In high school, at the height of the “thrift store” craze, I started wearing clothes from the local thrift store daily. Of course, most of them were older clothes, so I was basically going for a “retro” look, which I thought really suited me at the time. Then in my junior year of college, as graduation finally seemed on the horizon and I felt myself entering a new stage of adulthood, I started wearing business-casual clothes to school every day, embracing the “dress for the job you

want” philosophy. In both cases, these changes definitely impacted how others perceived me.

Television programs like *What Not to Wear* seek to show the power of wardrobe and personal style changes in how people communicate with others.

Aside from clothes, jewelry, visible body art, hairstyles, and other political, social, and cultural symbols send messages to others about who we are. In the United States, body piercings and tattoos have been shifting from subcultural to mainstream over the past few decades. The physical location, size, and number of tattoos and piercings play a large role in whether or not they are deemed appropriate for professional contexts, and many people with tattoos and/or piercings make conscious choices about when and where they display their body art. Hair also sends messages whether it is on our heads or our bodies. Men with short hair are generally judged to be more conservative than men with long hair, but men with shaved heads may be seen as aggressive. Whether a person has a part in their hair, a mohawk, faux-hawk, ponytail, curls, or bright pink hair also sends nonverbal signals to others.

Jewelry can also send messages with varying degrees of direct meaning. A ring on the “ring finger” of a person’s left hand typically indicates that they are married or in an otherwise committed relationship. A thumb ring or a right-hand ring on the “ring finger” doesn’t send such a direct message. People also adorn their clothes, body, or belongings with religious or cultural symbols, like a cross to indicate a person’s Christian faith or a rainbow flag to indicate that a person is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or an ally to one or more of those groups. People now wear various types of rubber bracelets, which have become a popular form of social cause marketing, to indicate that they identify with the “Livestrong” movement or support breast cancer awareness and research.

Last, the environment in which we interact affects our verbal and nonverbal communication. This is included because we can

often manipulate the nonverbal environment similar to how we would manipulate our gestures or tone of voice to suit our communicative needs. The books that we display on our coffee table, the magazines a doctor keeps in his or her waiting room, the placement of fresh flowers in a foyer, or a piece of mint chocolate on a hotel bed pillow all send particular messages and can easily be changed. The placement of objects and furniture in a physical space can help create a formal, distant, friendly, or intimate climate. In terms of formality, we can use nonverbal communication to convey dominance and status, which helps define and negotiate power and roles within relationships. Fancy cars and expensive watches can serve as symbols that distinguish a CEO from an entry-level employee. A room with soft lighting, a small fountain that creates ambient sounds of water flowing, and a comfy chair can help facilitate interactions between a therapist and a patient. In summary, whether we know it or not, our physical characteristics and the artifacts that surround us communicate much.



*Figure 9.7 The objects that surround us send nonverbal cues that may influence how people perceive us. What impression does a messy, crowded office make? © Thinkstock*

## “Getting Plugged In”

### Avatars

Avatars are computer-generated images that represent users in online environments or are created to interact with users in online and offline situations. Avatars can be created in the likeness of humans, animals, aliens, or other nonhuman creatures. Katrin Allmendinger, “Social Presence in Synchronous Virtual Learning Situations: The Role of Nonverbal Signals Displayed by Avatars,” *Educational Psychology Review* 22, no. 1 (2010): 42. Avatars vary in terms of functionality and technical sophistication and can include stationary pictures like buddy icons, cartoonish but humanlike animations like a Mii character on the Wii, or very humanlike animations designed to teach or assist people in virtual environments.

More recently, 3-D holographic avatars have been put to work helping travelers at airports in Paris and New York. Steve Strunksy, “New Airport Service Rep Is Stiff and Phony, but She’s Friendly,” NJ.COM, May 22, 2012, accessed June 28, 2012, [http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2012/05/new\\_airport\\_service\\_rep\\_is\\_sti.html](http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2012/05/new_airport_service_rep_is_sti.html); Tecca, “New York City Airports Install New, Expensive Holograms to Help You Find Your Way,” *Y! Tech: A Yahoo! News Blog*, May 22, 2012, accessed June 28, 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/technology-blog/york-city-airports-install-expensive-holograms-help-way-024937526.html>. Research has shown, though, that humanlike avatars influence people even when they are not sophisticated in terms of functionality and adaptability. Amy L. Baylor, “The Design of Motivational Agents and Avatars,” *Educational Technology Research and Development* 59, no. 2 (2011): 291–300. Avatars are especially motivating and influential when they are similar to the observer or user but more closely represent the person’s ideal self.

Appearance has been noted as one of the most important

attributes of an avatar designed to influence or motivate. Attractiveness, coolness (in terms of clothing and hairstyle), and age were shown to be factors that increase or decrease the influence an avatar has over users. Amy L. Baylor, “The Design of Motivational Agents and Avatars,” *Educational Technology Research and Development* 59, no. 2 (2011): 291–300.

People also create their own avatars as self-representations in a variety of online environments ranging from online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* to some online learning management systems used by colleges and universities. Research shows that the line between reality and virtual reality can become blurry when it comes to avatar design and identification. This can become even more pronounced when we consider that some users, especially of online role-playing games, spend about twenty hours a week as their avatar.

Avatars do more than represent people in online worlds; they also affect their behaviors offline. For example, one study found that people who watched an avatar that looked like them exercising and losing weight in an online environment exercised more and ate healthier in the real world. Jesse Fox and Jeremy M. Bailenson, “Virtual Self-Modeling: The Effects of Vicarious Reinforcement and Identification on Exercise Behaviors,” *Media Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2009): 1–25. Seeing an older version of them online led participants to form a more concrete social and psychological connection with their future selves, which led them to invest more money in a retirement account. People’s actions online also mirror the expectations for certain physical characteristics, even when the user doesn’t exhibit those characteristics and didn’t get to choose them for his or her avatar. For example, experimental research showed that people using more attractive avatars were more extroverted and friendly than those with less attractive avatars, which is also a nonverbal communication pattern that exists among real people. In summary, people have the ability to self-select physical characteristics and personal presentation for their avatars in a

way that they can't in their real life. People come to see their avatars as part of themselves, which opens the possibility for avatars to affect users' online and offline communication. Changsoo Kim, Sang-Gun Lee, and Minchoel Kang, "I Became an Attractive Person in the Virtual World: Users' Identification with Virtual Communities and Avatars," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, no. 5 (2012): 1663–69

- Describe an avatar that you have created for yourself. What led you to construct the avatar the way you did, and how do you think your choices reflect your typical nonverbal self-presentation? If you haven't ever constructed an avatar, what would you make your avatar look like and why?
- In 2009, a man in Japan became the first human to marry an avatar (that we know of). Although he claims that his avatar is better than any human girlfriend, he has been criticized as being out of touch with reality. You can read more about this human-avatar union through the following link: [http://articles.cnn.com/2009-12-16/world/japan.virtual.wedding\\_1\\_virtual-world-sal-marry?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2009-12-16/world/japan.virtual.wedding_1_virtual-world-sal-marry?_s=PM:WORLD). Do you think the boundaries between human reality and avatar fantasy will continue to fade as we become a more technologically fused world? How do you feel about interacting more with avatars in customer service situations like the airport avatar mentioned above? What do you think about having avatars as mentors, role models, or teachers?

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Kinesics refers to body movements and posture and includes the following components:
- Gestures are arm and hand movements and include adaptors

like clicking a pen or scratching your face, emblems like a thumbs-up to say “OK,” and illustrators like bouncing your hand along with the rhythm of your speaking.

- Head movements and posture include the orientation of movements of our head and the orientation and positioning of our body and the various meanings they send. Head movements such as nodding can indicate agreement, disagreement, and interest, among other things. Posture can indicate assertiveness, defensiveness, interest, readiness, or intimidation, among other things.
- Eye contact is studied under the category of oculosics and specifically refers to eye contact with another person’s face, head, and eyes and the patterns of looking away and back at the other person during interaction. Eye contact provides turn-taking signals, signals when we are engaged in cognitive activity, and helps establish rapport and connection, among other things.
- Facial expressions refer to the use of the forehead, brow, and facial muscles around the nose and mouth to convey meaning. Facial expressions can convey happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and other emotions.
- *Haptics* refers to touch behaviors that convey meaning during interactions. Touch operates at many levels, including functional-professional, social-polite, friendship-warmth, and love- intimacy.
- *Vocalics* refers to the vocalized but not verbal aspects of nonverbal communication, including our speaking rate, pitch, volume, tone of voice, and vocal quality. These qualities, also known as paralinguage, reinforce the meaning of verbal communication, allow us to emphasize particular parts of a message, or can contradict verbal messages.
- *Proxemics* refers to the use of space and distance within communication. US Americans, in general, have four zones that constitute our personal space: the public zone (12 or more feet from our body), social zone (4–12 feet from our body), the

personal zone (1.5–4 feet from our body), and the intimate zone (from body contact to 1.5 feet away). Proxemics also studies territoriality, or how people take up and defend personal space.

- *Chronemics* refers the study of how time affects communication and includes how different time cycles affect our communication, including the differences between people who are past or future oriented and cultural perspectives on time as fixed and measured (monochronic) or fluid and adaptable (polychronic).
- *Personal presentation and environment* refers to how the objects we adorn ourselves and our surroundings with, referred to as *artifacts*, provide nonverbal cues that others make meaning from and how our physical environment—for example, the layout of a room and seating positions and arrangements—influences communication.

## EXERCISES

- Provide some examples of how eye contact plays a role in your communication throughout the day.
- One of the key functions of vocalics is to add emphasis to our verbal messages to influence the meaning. Provide a meaning for each of the following statements based on which word is emphasized: “*She* is my friend.” “*She is my* friend.” “*She is my friend.*”
- Getting integrated: Many people do not think of time as an important part of our nonverbal communication. Provide an example of how chronemics sends nonverbal messages in academic settings, professional settings, and personal settings.

# 3. Nonverbal Communication Competence

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify and employ strategies for improving competence with sending nonverbal messages.
- Identify and employ strategies for improving competence with interpreting nonverbal messages.

As we age, we internalize social and cultural norms related to sending (encoding) and interpreting (decoding) nonverbal communication. In terms of sending, the tendency of children to send unmonitored nonverbal signals reduces as we get older and begin to monitor and perhaps censor or mask them. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 125. Likewise, as we become more experienced communicators we tend to think that we become better at interpreting nonverbal messages. In this section we will discuss some strategies for effectively encoding and decoding nonverbal messages. As we've already learned, we receive little, if any, official instruction in nonverbal communication, but you can think of this chapter as a training manual to help improve your own nonverbal communication competence. As with all aspects of communication, improving your nonverbal communication takes commitment and continued effort.

However, research shows that education and training in nonverbal communication can lead to quick gains in knowledge and skill. Ronald E. Riggio, "Social Interaction Skills and Nonverbal Behavior," in *Applications of Nonverbal Behavior*

*Theories and Research*, ed. Robert S. Feldman (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 23. Additionally, once the initial effort is put into improving your nonverbal encoding and decoding skills and those new skills are put into practice, people are encouraged by the positive reactions from others. Remember that people enjoy interacting with others who are skilled at nonverbal encoding and decoding, which will be evident in their reactions, providing further motivation and encouragement to hone your skills.

## Guidelines for Sending Nonverbal Messages

First impressions matter. Nonverbal cues account for much of the content from which we form initial impressions, so it's important to know that people make judgments about our identities and skills after only brief exposure. Our competence regarding and awareness of nonverbal communication can help determine how an interaction will proceed and, in fact, whether it will take place at all. People who are skilled at encoding nonverbal messages are more favorably evaluated after initial encounters. This is likely due to the fact that people who are more nonverbally expressive are also more attention getting and engaging and make people feel more welcome and warm due to increased immediacy behaviors, all of which enhance perceptions of charisma.

### *Understand That Nonverbal Communication Is Multichannel*

Be aware of the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication. We rarely send a nonverbal message in isolation. For example, a posture may be combined with a touch or eye behavior to create what is called a nonverbal cluster. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language*

(New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 21. **Nonverbal congruence** refers to consistency among different nonverbal expressions within a cluster. Congruent nonverbal communication is more credible and effective than ambiguous or conflicting nonverbal cues. Even though you may intend for your nonverbal messages to be congruent, they could still be decoded in a way that doesn't match up with your intent, especially since nonverbal expressions vary in terms of their degree of conscious encoding. In this sense, the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication creates the potential of both increased credibility and increased ambiguity.



*Figure 9.8 People who are more nonverbally expressive typically form more positive initial impressions, because expressivity in the form of immediacy behaviors is attention getting and welcoming.* © Thinkstock

When we become more aware of the messages we are sending, we can monitor for nonverbal signals that are incongruent with other messages or may be perceived as such. If a student is talking to his professor about his performance in the class and concerns about his grade, the professor may lean forward and nod, encoding a combination of a body orientation and a head movement that conveys attention. If the professor, however, regularly breaks off eye contact and looks anxiously at her office door, then she is sending a message that could be perceived as disinterest, which is incongruent with the overall message of care and concern she probably wants to encode. Increasing our awareness of the multiple channels through which we send nonverbal cues can help us make our signals more congruent in the moment.

### *Understand That Nonverbal Communication Affects Our Interactions*

Nonverbal communication affects our own and others' behaviors and communication. Changing our nonverbal signals can affect our thoughts and emotions. Knowing this allows us to have more control over the trajectory of our communication, possibly allowing us to intervene in a negative cycle. For example, if you are waiting in line to get your driver's license renewed and the agents in front of you are moving slower than you'd like and the man in front of you doesn't have his materials organized and is asking unnecessary questions, you might start to exhibit nonverbal clusters that signal frustration. You might cross your arms, a closing-off gesture, and combine that with wrapping your fingers tightly around one bicep and occasionally squeezing,

which is a self-touch adaptor that results from anxiety and stress. The longer you stand like that, the more frustrated and defensive you will become, because that nonverbal cluster reinforces and heightens your feelings. Increased awareness about these cycles can help you make conscious moves to change your nonverbal communication and, subsequently, your cognitive and emotional states. Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 54.

As your nonverbal encoding competence increases, you can strategically manipulate your behaviors. During my years as a restaurant server I got pretty good at knowing what tables to engage with and “schmooze” a little more to get a better tip. Restaurant servers, bartenders, car salespeople, realtors, exotic dancers, and many others who work in a service or sales capacity know that part of “sealing the deal” is making people feel liked, valued, and important. The strategic use of nonverbal communication to convey these messages is largely accepted and expected in our society, and as customers or patrons, we often play along because it feels good in the moment to think that the other person actually cares about us. Using nonverbals that are intentionally deceptive and misleading can have negative consequences and cross the line into unethical communication.

As you get better at monitoring and controlling your nonverbal behaviors and understanding how nonverbal cues affect our interaction, you may show more competence in multiple types of communication. For example, people who are more skilled at monitoring and controlling nonverbal displays of emotion report that they are more comfortable public speakers. Ronald E. Riggio, “Social Interaction Skills and Nonverbal Behavior,” in *Applications of Nonverbal Behavior Theories and Research*, ed. Robert S. Feldman (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 12. Since speakers become more nervous when they think that audience members are able to detect their nervousness based

on outwardly visible, mostly nonverbal cues, it is logical that confidence in one's ability to control those outwardly visible cues would result in a lessening of that common fear.

### *Understand How Nonverbal Communication Creates Rapport*

Humans have evolved an innate urge to mirror each other's nonverbal behavior, and although we aren't often aware of it, this urge influences our behavior daily. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 251. Think, for example, about how people “fall into formation” when waiting in a line. Our nonverbal communication works to create an unspoken and subconscious cooperation, as people move and behave in similar ways. When one person leans to the left the next person in line may also lean to the left, and this shift in posture may continue all the way down the line to the end, until someone else makes another movement and the whole line shifts again. This phenomenon is known as **mirroring**, which refers to the often subconscious practice of using nonverbal cues in a way that match those of others around us. Mirroring sends implicit messages to others that say, “Look! I'm just like you.” Mirroring evolved as an important social function in that it allowed early humans to more easily fit in with larger groups. Logically, early humans who were more successful at mirroring were more likely to secure food, shelter, and security and therefore passed that genetic disposition on down the line to us.

Last summer, during a backyard game of “corn hole” with my family, my mom and sister were standing at the other board and kept whispering to each other and laughing at my dad and me. Corn hole, which is also called “bags,” involves throwing a cloth sack filled with corn toward another team's board with the goal of getting it in the hole or on the board to score points. They later told us that they were amazed at how we stood, threw our

bags, and shifted position between rounds in unison. Although my dad and I didn't realize we were doing it, our subconscious mirroring was obviously noticeable to others. Mirroring is largely innate and subconscious, but we can more consciously use it and a variety of other nonverbal signals, like the immediacy behaviors we discussed earlier, to help create social bonds and mutual liking.

### *Understand How Nonverbal Communication Regulates Conversations*

The ability to encode appropriate turn-taking signals can help ensure that we can hold the floor when needed in a conversation or work our way into a conversation smoothly, without inappropriately interrupting someone or otherwise being seen as rude. People with nonverbal encoding competence are typically more “in control” of conversations. This regulating function can be useful in initial encounters when we are trying to learn more about another person and in situations where status differentials are present or compliance gaining or dominance are goals. Although close friends, family, and relational partners can sometimes be an exception, interrupting is generally considered rude and should be avoided. Even though verbal communication is most often used to interrupt another person, interruptions are still studied as a part of chronemics because it interferes with another person's talk time. Instead of interrupting, you can use nonverbal signals like leaning in, increasing your eye contact, or using a brief gesture like subtly raising one hand or the index finger to signal to another person that you'd like to soon take the floor.

### *Understand How Nonverbal Communication Relates to*

## *Listening*

Part of being a good listener involves nonverbal-encoding competence, as nonverbal feedback in the form of head nods, eye contact, and posture can signal that a listener is paying attention and the speaker's message is received and understood. Active listening, for example, combines good cognitive listening practices with outwardly visible cues that signal to others that we are listening. We all know from experience which nonverbal signals convey attentiveness and which convey a lack of attentiveness. Listeners are expected to make more eye contact with the speaker than the speaker makes with them, so it's important to "listen with your eyes" by maintaining eye contact, which signals attentiveness.

Listeners should also avoid distracting movements in the form of self, other, and object adaptors. Being a higher self-monitor can help you catch nonverbal signals that might signal that you aren't listening, at which point you could consciously switch to more active listening signals.

## *Understand How Nonverbal Communication Relates to Impression Management*

The nonverbal messages we encode also help us express our identities and play into impression management, is a key part of communicating to achieve identity goals. Being able to control nonverbal expressions and competently encode them allows us to better manage our persona and project a desired self to others—for example, a self that is perceived as competent, socially attractive, and engaging. Being nonverbally expressive during initial interactions usually leads to more favorable impressions. So smiling, keeping an attentive posture, and offering a solid handshake help communicate confidence and

enthusiasm that can be useful on a first date, during a job interview, when visiting family for the holidays, or when running into an acquaintance at the grocery store. Nonverbal communication can also impact the impressions you make as a student. Research has also found that students who are more nonverbally expressive are liked more by their teachers and are more likely to have their requests met by their teachers. Timothy P. Mottet, Steven A. Beebe, Paul C. Raffeld, and Michelle L. Paulsel, “The Effects of Student Verbal and Nonverbal Responsiveness on Teachers’ Liking of Students and Willingness to Comply with Student Requests,” *Communication Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2004): 27–38.

### *Increase Competence in Specific Channels of Nonverbal Communication*

While it is important to recognize that we send nonverbal signals through multiple channels simultaneously, we can also increase our nonverbal communication competence by becoming more aware of how it operates in specific channels. Although no one can truly offer you a rulebook on how to effectively send every type of nonverbal signal, there are several nonverbal guidebooks that are written from more anecdotal and less academic perspectives. While these books vary tremendously in terms of their credibility and quality, some, like Allan Pease and Barbara Pease’s *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, are informative and interesting to read.

### *Kinesics*

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal messages sent using your hands, arms, body, and face.

## *Gestures*

- Illustrators make our verbal communication more engaging. I recommend that people doing phone interviews or speaking on the radio make an effort to gesture as they speak, even though people can't see the gestures, because it will make their words sound more engaging.
- Remember that adaptors can hurt your credibility in more formal or serious interactions. Figure out what your common adaptors are and monitor them so you can avoid creating unfavorable impressions.
- Gestures send messages about your emotional state. Since many gestures are spontaneous or subconscious, it is important to raise your awareness of them and monitor them. Be aware that clenched hands may signal aggression or anger, nail biting or fidgeting may signal nervousness, and finger tapping may signal boredom.

## *Eye Contact*

- Eye contact is useful for initiating and regulating conversations. To make sure someone is available for interaction and to avoid being perceived as rude, it is usually a good idea to “catch their eye” before you start talking to them.
- Avoiding eye contact or shifting your eye contact from place to place can lead others to think you are being deceptive or inattentive. Minimize distractions by moving a clock, closing a door, or closing window blinds to help minimize distractions that may lure your eye contact away.
- Although avoiding eye contact can be perceived as sign of disinterest, low confidence, or negative emotionality, eye contact avoidance can be used positively as a face-saving strategy. The notion of **civil inattention** refers to a social norm that leads us to avoid making eye contact with people in

situations that deviate from expected social norms, such as witnessing someone fall or being in close proximity to a stranger expressing negative emotions (like crying). We also use civil inattention when we avoid making eye contact with others in crowded spaces. Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 322–31.

### *Facial Expressions*

- You can use facial expressions to manage your expressions of emotions to intensify what you're feeling, to diminish what you're feeling, to cover up what you're feeling, to express a different emotion than you're feeling, or to simulate an emotion that you're not feeling. Sandra Metts and Sally Planlap, "Emotional Communication," in *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, 3rd ed., eds. Mark L. Knapp and Kerry J. Daly (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002): 339–73.
- Be aware of the power of emotional contagion, or the spread of emotion from one person to another. Since facial expressions are key for emotional communication, you may be able to strategically use your facial expressions to cheer someone up, lighten a mood, or create a more serious and somber tone.
- Smiles are especially powerful as an immediacy behavior and a rapport-building tool. Smiles can also help to disarm a potentially hostile person or deescalate conflict. When I have a problem or complain in a customer service situation, I always make sure to smile at the clerk, manager, or other person before I begin talking to help minimize my own annoyance and set a more positive tone for the interaction.

## *Haptics*

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals using touch:

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

These are types of touch to avoid: Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 49.

- Avoid touching strangers unless being introduced or offering assistance.
- Avoid hurtful touches and apologize if they occur, even if accidentally.
- Avoid startling/surprising another person with your touch.
- Avoid interrupting touches such as hugging someone while they are talking to someone else.
- Avoid moving people out of the way with only touch—pair your touch with a verbal message like “excuse me.”
- Avoid overly aggressive touch, especially when disguised as playful touch (e.g., horseplay taken too far).
- Avoid combining touch with negative criticism; a hand on the shoulder during a critical statement can increase a person's defensiveness and seem condescending or aggressive.

## Vocalics

- Verbal fillers are often used subconsciously and can negatively affect your credibility and reduce the clarity of your message when speaking in more formal situations. In fact, verbal fluency is one of the strongest predictors of persuasiveness. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 81. Becoming a higher self-monitor can help you notice your use of verbal fillers and begin to eliminate them. Beginner speakers can often reduce their use of verbal fillers noticeably over just a short period of time.
- Vocal variety increases listener and speaker engagement, understanding, information recall, and motivation. So having a more expressive voice that varies appropriately in terms of rate, pitch, and volume can help you achieve communication goals related to maintaining attention, effectively conveying information, and getting others to act in a particular way.

## Proxemics

The following may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to interpersonal distances.

- When breaches of personal space occur, it is a social norm to make nonverbal adjustments such as lowering our level of immediacy, changing our body orientations, and using objects to separate ourselves from others. To reduce immediacy, we engage in civil inattention and reduce the amount of eye contact we make with others. We also shift the front of our body away from others since it has most of our sensory inputs and also allows access to body parts that are considered vulnerable, such as the stomach, face, and genitals. Peter A.

Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 45. When we can't shift our bodies, we often use coats, bags, books, or our hands to physically separate or block off the front of our bodies from others.

- Although pets and children are often granted more leeway to breach other people's space, since they are still learning social norms and rules, as a pet owner, parent, or temporary caretaker, be aware of this possibility and try to prevent such breaches or correct them when they occur.

## *Chronemics*

The following guideline may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to time.

- In terms of talk time and turn taking, research shows that people who take a little longer with their turn, holding the floor slightly longer than normal, are actually seen as more credible than people who talk too much or too little. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 64.
- Our lateness or promptness can send messages about our professionalism, dependability, or other personality traits. **Formal time** usually applies to professional situations in which we are expected to be on time or even a few minutes early. You generally wouldn't want to be late for work, a job interview, a medical appointment, and so on. **Informal time** applies to casual and interpersonal situations in which there is much more variation in terms of expectations for promptness. For example, when I lived in a large city, people often arrived to dinner parties or other social gatherings about thirty minutes after the announced time, given the possibility of interference by heavy traffic or people's hectic schedules. Now that I live in

a smaller town in the Midwest, I've learned that people are expected to arrive at or close to the announced time. For most social meetings with one other person or a small group, you can be five minutes late without having to offer much of an apology or explanation. For larger social gatherings you can usually be fifteen minutes late as long as your late arrival doesn't interfere with the host's plans or preparations.

- Quality time is an important part of interpersonal relationships, and sometimes time has to be budgeted so that it can be saved and spent with certain people or on certain occasions—like date nights for couples or family time for parents and children or other relatives.

### *Personal Presentation and Environment*

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to personal presentation and environment:

- Recognize that personal presentation carries much weight in terms of initial impressions, so meeting the expectations and social norms for dress, grooming, and other artifactual communication is especially important for impression management.
- Recognize that some environments facilitate communication and some do not. A traditional front-facing business or educational setup is designed for one person to communicate with a larger audience. People in the audience cannot as easily interact with each other because they can't see each other face-to-face without turning. A horseshoe or circular arrangement allows everyone to make eye contact and facilitates interaction. Even close proximity doesn't necessarily facilitate interaction. For example, a comfortable sofa may

bring four people together, but eye contact among all four is nearly impossible if they're all facing the same direction.

- Where you choose to sit can also impact perceived characteristics and leadership decisions. People who sit at the head or center of a table are often chosen to be leaders by others because of their nonverbal accessibility—a decision which may have more to do with where the person chose to sit than the person's perceived or actual leadership abilities. Research has found that juries often select their foreperson based on where he or she happens to sit. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 57–58. Keep this in mind the next time you take your seat at a meeting.

## Guidelines for Interpreting Nonverbal Messages

We learn to decode or interpret nonverbal messages through practice and by internalizing social norms. Following the suggestions to become a better encoder of nonverbal communication will lead to better decoding competence through increased awareness. Since nonverbal communication is more ambiguous than verbal communication, we have to learn to interpret these cues as clusters within contexts. My favorite way to increase my knowledge about nonverbal communication is to engage in people watching. Just by consciously taking in the variety of nonverbal signals around us, we can build our awareness and occasionally be entertained. Skilled decoders of nonverbal messages are said to have nonverbal sensitivity, which, very similarly to skilled encoders, leads them to have larger social networks, be more popular, and exhibit less social anxiety. Ronald E. Riggio, “Social Interaction Skills and Nonverbal Behavior,” in *Applications of Nonverbal Behavior Theories and*

Research, ed. Robert S. Feldman (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 15.

### *There Is No Nonverbal Dictionary*

The first guideline for decoding nonverbal communication is to realize that there is no nonverbal dictionary. Some nonverbal scholars and many nonverbal skill trainers have tried to catalog nonverbal communication like we do verbal communication to create dictionary-like guides that people can use to interpret nonverbal signals. Although those guides may contain many valid “rules” of nonverbal communication, those rules are always relative to the individual, social, and cultural contexts in which an interaction takes place. In short, you can’t read people’s nonverbal communication like a book, and there are no A-to-Z guides that capture the complexity of nonverbal communication. Peter J. DePaulo, “Applications of Nonverbal Behavior Research in Marketing and Management,” *Applications of Nonverbal Behavior Theories and Research*, ed. Robert S. Feldman (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 64. Rather than using a list of specific rules, I suggest people develop more general tools that will be useful in and adaptable to a variety of contexts.

### *Recognize That Certain Nonverbal Signals Are Related*

The second guideline for decoding nonverbal signals is to recognize that certain nonverbal signals are related. Nonverbal rulebooks aren’t effective because they typically view a nonverbal signal in isolation, similar to how dictionaries separately list denotative definitions of words. To get a more nuanced understanding of the meaning behind nonverbal cues, we can look at them as progressive or layered. For example, people

engaging in negative critical evaluation of a speaker may cross their legs, cross one arm over their stomach, and put the other arm up so the index finger is resting close to the eye while the chin rests on the thumb. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 22. A person wouldn't likely perform all those signals simultaneously. Instead, he or she would likely start with one and then layer more cues on as the feelings intensified. If we notice that a person is starting to build related signals like the ones above onto one another, we might be able to intervene in the negative reaction that is building. Of course, as nonverbal cues are layered on, they may contradict other signals, in which case we can turn to context clues to aid our interpretation.

### *Read Nonverbal Cues in Context*

We can gain insight into how to interpret nonverbal cues through personal contexts. People have idiosyncratic nonverbal behaviors, which create an individual context that varies with each person. Even though we generally fit into certain social and cultural patterns, some people deviate from those norms. For example, some cultures tend toward less touching and greater interpersonal distances during interactions. The United States falls into this general category, but there are people who were socialized into these norms who as individuals deviate from them and touch more and stand closer to others while conversing. As the idiosyncratic communicator inches toward his or her conversational partner, the partner may inch back to reestablish the interpersonal distance norm. Such deviations may lead people to misinterpret sexual or romantic interest or feel uncomfortable. While these actions could indicate such interest, they could also be idiosyncratic. As this example shows, these individual differences can increase the ambiguity of nonverbal communication, but when observed over a period of

time, they can actually help us generate meaning. Try to compare observed nonverbal cues to a person's typical or baseline nonverbal behavior to help avoid misinterpretation. In some instances it is impossible to know what sorts of individual nonverbal behaviors or idiosyncrasies people have because there isn't a relational history. In such cases, we have to turn to our knowledge about specific types of nonverbal communication or draw from more general contextual knowledge.

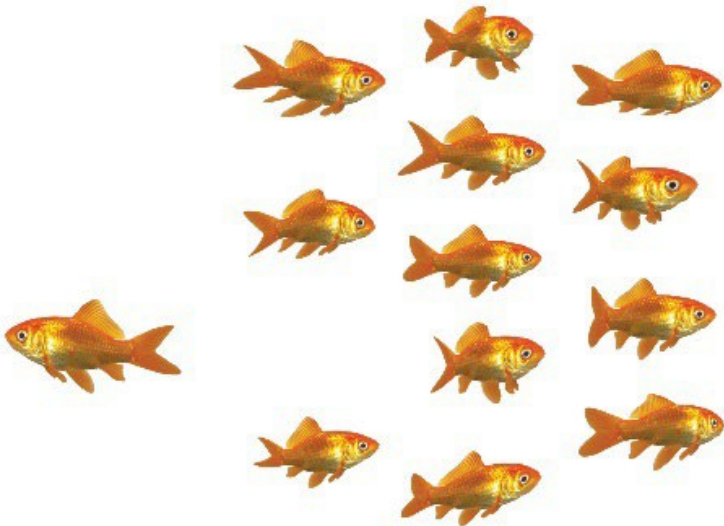


Figure 9.9 Although cultural patterns exist, people also exhibit idiosyncratic nonverbal behavior, meaning they don't always follow the norms of the group © Thinkstock

### *Interpreting Cues within Specific Channels Kinesics*

**Gestures** Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004).

- While it doesn't always mean a person is being honest, displaying palms is largely unconsciously encoded and

decoded as a sign of openness and truthfulness. Conversely, crossing your arms in front of your chest is decoded almost everywhere as a negative gesture that conveys defensiveness.

- We typically decode people putting their hands in their pocket as a gesture that indicates shyness or discomfort. Men often subconsciously put their hands in their pockets when they don't want to participate in a conversation. But displaying the thumb or thumbs while the rest of the hand is in the pocket is a signal of a dominant or authoritative attitude.
- Nervous communicators may have distracting mannerisms in the form of adaptors that you will likely need to tune out in order to focus more on other verbal and nonverbal cues.

### *Head Movements and Posture*

- The head leaning over and being supported by a hand can typically be decoded as a sign of boredom, the thumb supporting the chin and the index finger touching the head close to the temple or eye as a sign of negative evaluative thoughts, and the chin stroke as a sign that a person is going through a decision-making process. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 155–59.
- In terms of seated posture, leaning back is usually decoded as a sign of informality and indifference, straddling a chair as a sign of dominance (but also some insecurity because the person is protecting the vulnerable front part of his or her body), and leaning forward as a signal of interest and attentiveness.

### *Eye Contact*

- When someone is avoiding eye contact, don't immediately

assume they are not listening or are hiding something, especially if you are conveying complex or surprising information. Since looking away also signals cognitive activity, they may be processing information, and you may need to pause and ask if they need a second to think or if they need you to repeat or explain anything more.

- A “sideways glance,” which entails keeping the head and face pointed straight ahead while focusing the eyes to the left or right, has multiple contradictory meanings ranging from interest, to uncertainty, to hostility. When the sideways glance is paired with a slightly raised eyebrow or smile, it is sign of interest. When combined with a furrowed brow it generally conveys uncertainty. But add a frown to that mix and it can signal hostility. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 179.

### *Facial Expressions*

- Be aware of discrepancies between facial expressions and other nonverbal gestures and verbal communication. Since facial expressions are often subconscious, they may be an indicator of incongruency within a speaker’s message, and you may need to follow up with questions or consider contextual clues to increase your understanding.

### *Haptics*

- Consider the status and power dynamics involved in a touch. In general, people who have or feel they have more social power in a situation typically engage in more touching behaviors with those with less social power. So you may decode a touch from a supervisor differently from the touch of an acquaintance.

## *Vocalics*

- People often decode personality traits from a person's vocal quality. In general, a person's vocal signature is a result of the physiology of his or her neck, head, and mouth. Therefore a nasal voice or a deep voice may not have any relevant meaning within an interaction. Try not to focus on something you find unpleasant or pleasant about someone's voice; focus on the content rather than the vocal quality.

## *Proxemics*

- The size of a person's "territory" often speaks to that person's status. At universities, deans may have suites, department chairs may have large offices with multiple sitting areas, lower-ranked professors may have "cozier" offices stuffed with books and file cabinets, and adjunct instructors may have a shared office or desk or no office space at all.
- Since infringements on others' territory can arouse angry reactions and even lead to violence (think of the countless stories of neighbors fighting over a fence or tree), be sensitive to territorial markers. In secondary and public territories, look for informal markers such as drinks, books, or jackets and be respectful of them when possible.

## *Personal Presentation and Environment*

- Be aware of the physical attractiveness bias, which leads people to sometimes mistakenly equate attractiveness with goodness. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 75. A person's attractive or unattractive physical presentation can lead to irrelevant decoding that is distracting

from other more meaningful nonverbal cues.

## *Detecting Deception*

Although people rely on nonverbal communication more than verbal to determine whether or not a person is being deceptive, there is no set profile of deceptive behaviors that you can use to create your own nonverbally based lie detector. Research finds that people generally perceive themselves as good detectors of deception, but when tested people only accurately detect deception at levels a little higher than what we would by random chance. Given that deception is so widespread and common, it is estimated that we actually only detect about half the lies that we are told, meaning we all operate on false information without even being aware of it. Although this may be disappointing to those of you reading who like to think of yourselves as human lie detectors, there are some forces working against our deception detecting abilities. One such force is the **truth bias**, which leads us to believe that a person is telling the truth, especially if we know and like that person. Conversely, people who have interpersonal trust issues and people in occupations like law enforcement may also have a lie bias, meaning they assume people are lying to them more often than not. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 293.

It is believed that deceptive nonverbal behaviors result from **nonverbal leakage**, which refers to nonverbal behaviors that occur as we try to control the cognitive and physical changes that happen during states of cognitive and physical arousal. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 52. Anxiety is a form of arousal that leads to bodily reactions like those we experience when we perceive danger or become excited for some other reason. Some of these reactions are visible, such as increased movements, and some are audible, such as changes in

voice pitch, volume, or rate. Other reactions, such as changes in the electrical conductivity of the skin, increased breathing, and increased heart rate, are not always detectable. Polygraph machines, or lie detectors, work on the principle that the presence of signs of arousal is a reliable indicator of deception in situations where other factors that would also evoke such signals are absent.

So the nonverbal behaviors that we associate with deception don't actually stem from the deception but the attempts to control the leakage that results from the cognitive and physiological changes.

These signals appear and increase because we are conflicted about the act of deception, since we are conditioned to believe that being honest is better than lying, we are afraid of getting caught and punished, and we are motivated to succeed with the act of deception—in essence, to get away with it. Leakage also occurs because of the increased cognitive demands associated with deception. Our cognitive activity increases when we have to decide whether to engage in deception or not, which often involves some internal debate. If we decide to engage in deception, we then have to compose a fabrication or execute some other manipulation strategy that we think is believable. To make things more complicated, we usually tailor our manipulation strategy to the person to whom we are speaking. In short, lying isn't easy, as it requires us to go against social norms and deviate from our comfortable and familiar communication scripts that we rely on for so much of our interaction. Of course, skilled and experienced deceivers develop new scripts that can also become familiar and comfortable and allow them to engage in deception without arousing as much anxiety or triggering the physical reactions to it. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 288.

There are certain nonverbal cues that have been associated with deception, but the problem is that these cues are also associated with other behaviors, which could lead you to assume

someone is being deceptive when they are actually nervous, guilty, or excited. In general, people who are more expressive are better deceivers and people who are typically anxious are not good liars. Also, people who are better self-monitors are better deceivers, because they are aware of verbal and nonverbal signals that may “give them away” and may be better able to control or account for them. Research also shows that people get better at lying as they get older, because they learn more about the intricacies of communication signals and they also get more time to practice. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 281. Studies have found that actors, politicians, lawyers, and salespeople are also better liars, because they are generally higher self-monitors and have learned how to suppress internal feelings and monitor their external behaviors.



Figure 9.10 There is no one “tell” that gives away when someone is lying. © Thinkstock

## “Getting Competent”

### *Deception and Communication Competence*

The research on deception and nonverbal communication indicates that heightened arousal and increased cognitive demands contribute to the presence of nonverbal behaviors that can be associated with deception. Remember, however, that these nonverbal behaviors are not solely related to deception and also manifest as a result of other emotional or cognitive states.

Additionally, when people are falsely accused of deception, the signs that they exhibit as a result of the stress of being falsely accused are very similar to the signals exhibited by people who are actually engaging in deception.

There are common misconceptions about what behaviors are associated with deception. Behaviors mistakenly linked to deception include longer response times, slower speech rates, decreased eye contact, increased body movements, excessive swallowing, and less smiling. None of these have consistently been associated with deception. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 296. As we've learned, people also tend to give more weight to nonverbal than verbal cues when evaluating the truthfulness of a person or her or his message. This predisposition can lead us to focus on nonverbal cues while overlooking verbal signals of deception. A large study found that people were better able to detect deception by sound alone than they were when exposed to both auditory and visual cues. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 297. Aside from nonverbal cues, also listen for inconsistencies in or contradictions between statements, which can also be used to tell when others are

being deceptive. The following are some nonverbal signals that have been associated with deception in research studies, but be cautious about viewing these as absolutes since individual and contextual differences should also be considered.

**Gestures.** One of the most powerful associations between nonverbal behaviors and deception is the presence of adaptors. Self-touches like wringing hands and object-adaptors like playing with a pencil or messing with clothing have been shown to correlate to deception. Some highly experienced deceivers, however, can control the presence of adaptors. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 284.

**Eye contact.** Deceivers tend to use more eye contact when lying to friends, perhaps to try to increase feelings of immediacy or warmth, and less eye contact when lying to strangers. A review of many studies of deception indicates that increased eye blinking is associated with deception, probably because of heightened arousal and cognitive activity. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 282–83.

**Facial expressions.** People can intentionally use facial expressions to try to deceive, and there are five primary ways that this may occur. People may show feelings that they do not actually have, show a higher intensity of feelings than they actually have, try to show no feelings, try to show less feeling than they actually have, or mask one feeling with another.

**Vocalics.** One of the most common nonverbal signs of deception is speech errors. As you'll recall, verbal fillers and other speech disfluencies are studied as part of vocalics; examples include false starts, stutters, and fillers. Studies also show that an increase in verbal pitch is associated with

deception and is likely caused by heightened arousal and tension.

**Chronemics.** Speech turns are often thought to correspond to deception, but there is no consensus among researchers as to the exact relationship. Most studies reveal that deceivers talk less, especially in response to direct questions. Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1999), 283.

- Studies show that people engage in deception much more than they care to admit. Do you consider yourself a good deceiver? Why or why not? Which, if any, of the nonverbal cues discussed do you think help you deceive others or give you away?
- For each of the following scenarios, note (1) what behaviors may indicate deception, (2) alternative explanations for the behaviors (aside from deception), and (3) questions you could ask to get more information before making a judgment.

**Scenario 1.** A politician is questioned by a reporter about allegations that she used taxpayer money to fund personal vacations. She looks straight at the reporter, crosses one leg over the other, and says, “I’ve worked for the people of this community for ten years and no one has ever questioned my ethics until now.” As she speaks, she points her index finger at the politician and uses a stern and clear tone of voice.

**Scenario 2.** You ask your roommate if you can borrow his car to go pick up a friend from the train station about ten miles away. He says, “Um, well...I had already made plans to go to dinner with Cal and he drove last time so it’s kind of my turn to drive this time. I mean, is there someone else you could ask or someone else who could get her? You know I don’t mind sharing things with you, and I would totally let you, you know, if I didn’t have this thing to do. Sorry.” As he says, “Sorry,” he

raises both of his hands, with his palms facing toward you, and shrugs.

**Scenario 3.** A professor asks a student to explain why he didn't cite sources for several passages in his paper that came from various websites. The student scratches his head and says, "What do you mean? Those were my ideas. I did look at several websites, but I didn't directly quote anything so I didn't think I needed to put the citations in parentheses." As he says this, he rubs the back of his neck and then scratches his face and only makes minimal eye contact with the professor.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- To improve your competence encoding nonverbal messages, increase your awareness of the messages you are sending and receiving and the contexts in which your communication is taking place. Since nonverbal communication is multichannel, it is important to be aware that nonverbal cues can complement, enhance, or contradict each other. Also realize that the norms and expectations for sending nonverbal messages, especially touch and personal space, vary widely between relational and professional contexts.
- To improve your competence decoding nonverbal messages, look for multiple nonverbal cues, avoid putting too much weight on any one cue, and evaluate nonverbal messages in relation to the context and your previous experiences with the other person. Although we put more weight on nonverbal communication than verbal when trying to detect deception, there is no set guide that can allow us to tell whether or not another person is being deceptive.

## EXERCISES

- Getting integrated: As was indicated earlier, research shows that instruction in nonverbal communication can lead people to make gains in their nonverbal communication competence. List some nonverbal skills that you think are important in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic.
- Using concepts from this section, analyze your own nonverbal encoding competence. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Do the same for your nonverbal decoding competence
- To understand how chronemics relates to nonverbal communication norms, answer the following questions: In what situations is it important to be early? In what situations can you arrive late? How long would you wait on someone you were meeting for a group project for a class? A date? A job interview?

PART IX  
CHAPTER NINE



# 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.

# I. 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** 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.<sup>134</sup>

## Language and Conflict

At the interpersonal level, **unsupportive messages** can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and actual separation or dissolution of a relationship. It's impossible to be supportive in our communication all the time, but consistently unsupportive messages can hurt others' self-esteem, escalate conflict, and lead to defensiveness. People who regularly use unsupportive messages may create a toxic win/lose climate in a relationship. Six verbal tactics that can lead to feelings of defensiveness and separation are global labels, sarcasm, dragging up the past, negative comparisons, judgmental "you" messages, and threats.<sup>135</sup>

## 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.

## 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.<sup>136</sup>

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.<sup>137</sup>

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 10.1 “Five Styles of Interpersonal Conflict Management”).



Figure 10.1 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.<sup>138</sup> 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.<sup>139</sup> 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.<sup>140</sup> And although we may think that competitiveness is gendered, research has often shown that women are just as competitive as men.<sup>141</sup>

## 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.<sup>142</sup> 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.<sup>143</sup> 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.<sup>144</sup> 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.<sup>145</sup> 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:<sup>146</sup>

- 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:

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

### 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.<sup>147</sup> 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.<sup>148</sup> 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.<sup>149</sup> 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.<sup>150</sup> 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).<sup>151</sup>

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.<sup>152</sup> 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 styles:

- 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.

## 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.**<sup>153</sup>

#### *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.<sup>154</sup> 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.<sup>155</sup>

Two common conflict pitfalls are **one-upping and mindreading**.<sup>156</sup> **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.<sup>157</sup> 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.

# 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.<sup>158</sup>

## 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

- 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?
- 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?

- 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?

# End Notes

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PART X  
CHAPTER TEN



# Learning Objectives

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

# I. 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.<sup>160</sup> **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 11.1 “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.

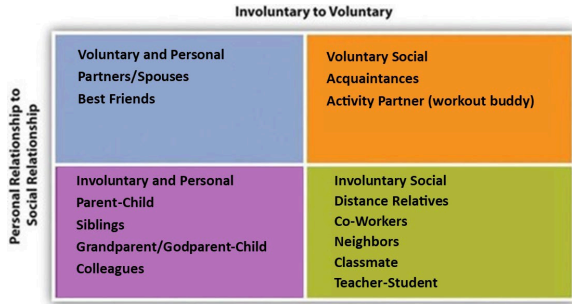


Figure 11.1 Types of Relationships. Adapted from C. Arthur VanLear, Ascan Koerner, and Donna M. Allen, "Relationship Typologies," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, eds. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 95.

## 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.<sup>161</sup>

There are ten established stages of interaction that can help us understand how relationships come together and come apart.<sup>162</sup> We will discuss each stage in more detail, but in Table 11.1 "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.

### *Coming Together Process*

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Representative Communication</b>
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 Process**

Stage	Representative Communication
Differentiating	"I'd really like to be able to hang out with my friendssometimes."
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 behome as much."
Terminating	"It's important for us both to have some time apart. I know you'll be fine."

Table 11.1 Relationship Stages<sup>163</sup>

## 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.<sup>164</sup> 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.<sup>165</sup>

## *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.<sup>166</sup> 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.”).<sup>167</sup> 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.<sup>168</sup> 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.<sup>169</sup>

We can be cautioned, though, to not view social exchange theory as a tit-for-tat accounting of costs and rewards.<sup>170</sup> 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.<sup>171</sup> 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.<sup>172</sup> 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

- Review the types of relationships in Figure 11.1 “Types of Relationships.” Name at least one person from your relationships that fits into each quadrant. How does your communication differ between each of these people?
- 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?
- 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?

# 2. Communication and Friends

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Compare and contrast different types of friendships.
- Describe the cycle of friendship from formation to maintenance to dissolution/deterioration.
- Discuss how friendships change across the life span, from adolescence to later life.
- Explain how culture and gender influence friendships.

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.<sup>211</sup> Just as the makeup of families changes, so do the definitions.

## Defining and Classifying Friends

**Friendships** are voluntary interpersonal relationships between two people who are usually equals and who mutually influence one another.<sup>173</sup> 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.<sup>174</sup> 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.<sup>175</sup>

## Types of Friendships

Although friendships vary across the life span, three types of friendships are common in adulthood: **reciprocal, associative, and receptive**.<sup>176</sup> **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.<sup>177</sup> 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.<sup>178</sup> 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.<sup>179</sup> 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.<sup>180</sup> 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.<sup>181</sup>

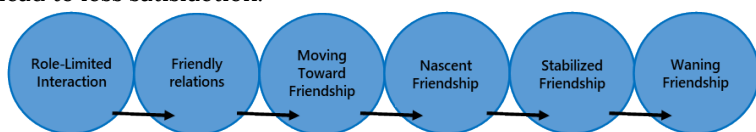


Figure 11.2 Lifespan of Friendship

The formation process of friendship development involves two people moving from strangers toward acquaintances and potentially friends.<sup>182</sup> Several factors influence the formation of friendships, including environmental, situational, individual, and interactional factors.<sup>183</sup> 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.<sup>184</sup> 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.<sup>185</sup> 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).<sup>186</sup> 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.<sup>187</sup> 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.<sup>188</sup> 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.<sup>189</sup> 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.<sup>190</sup>



*Figure 11.3 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.<sup>191</sup> 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.<sup>192</sup> 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.<sup>193</sup> 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.<sup>194</sup>



Figure 11.4 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.<sup>195</sup> 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.<sup>196</sup>

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.<sup>197</sup> 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).<sup>198</sup>



*Figure 11.5 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.<sup>199</sup>

### *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 11.6 *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.<sup>200</sup> 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.<sup>201</sup> 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.<sup>202</sup>

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.<sup>203</sup> 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.<sup>204</sup> 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.<sup>205</sup> 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.<sup>206</sup>

**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.<sup>207</sup> 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.<sup>208</sup> 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.<sup>209</sup> Similarly, women reported that they enjoyed the activity-oriented friendships they had with men.<sup>210</sup>

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

- 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?
- 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.
- 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?

# 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.<sup>211</sup> 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.<sup>212</sup> 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.<sup>213</sup> 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.

### **Pin It! Different Types of Families**

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

There are several subdefinitions of families of orientation.<sup>214</sup> 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.<sup>215</sup> 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.<sup>216</sup> 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.<sup>217</sup>

**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.<sup>218</sup> 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**<sup>26</sup> 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**<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>219</sup> 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.

- 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?
- 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?
- 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 11.2 "Family Types Based on Conflict and Conformity Orientations" ).<sup>220</sup>

A **consensual family** 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** 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** 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** 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.<sup>221</sup>

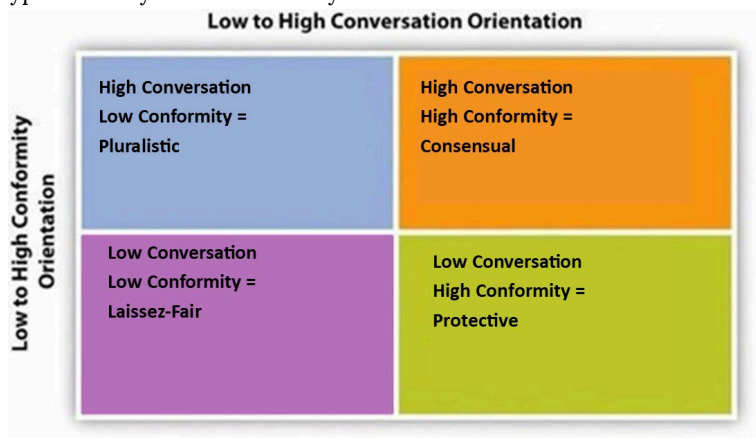


Figure 11.7 Family Types Based on Conflict and Conformity Orientations

## 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

- Of the three types of definitions for families (structural, task-orientation, or transactional), which is most important to you and why?
- 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?

- 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.

# 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.<sup>222</sup> 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.<sup>223</sup> 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.<sup>224</sup> 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.<sup>225</sup>

## “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**

Listen to Ashvini Mashru arranged marriage story.

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.

- Do you think arranged marriages are ethical? Why or why not?

- 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?
- 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.<sup>226</sup> **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.<sup>227</sup> 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.<sup>228</sup> 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.<sup>229</sup> For

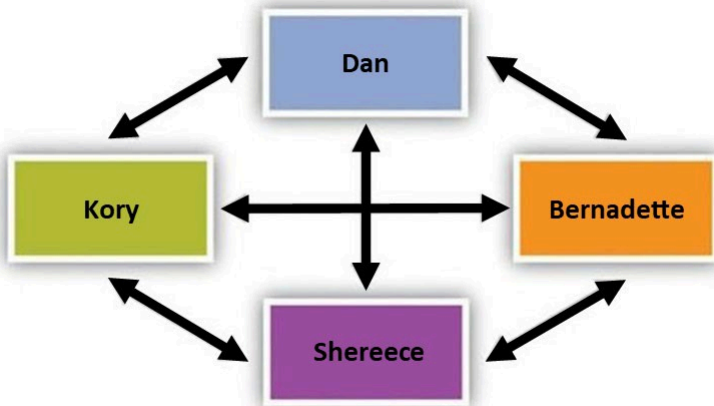
example, a sexual communication could involve a couple discussing a decision to abstain from sexual activity until a certain level of closeness or relational milestone (like marriage) has been reached. Sexual communication could also involve talking about sexual likes and dislikes. **Sexual conflict** 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.<sup>230</sup> 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 11.8 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.<sup>231</sup>

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.<sup>232</sup> 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//Files/Reports/2006/PIP\\_Online\\_Dating.pdf.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/~media//Files/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?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of online dating?
- 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** 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).<sup>233</sup>

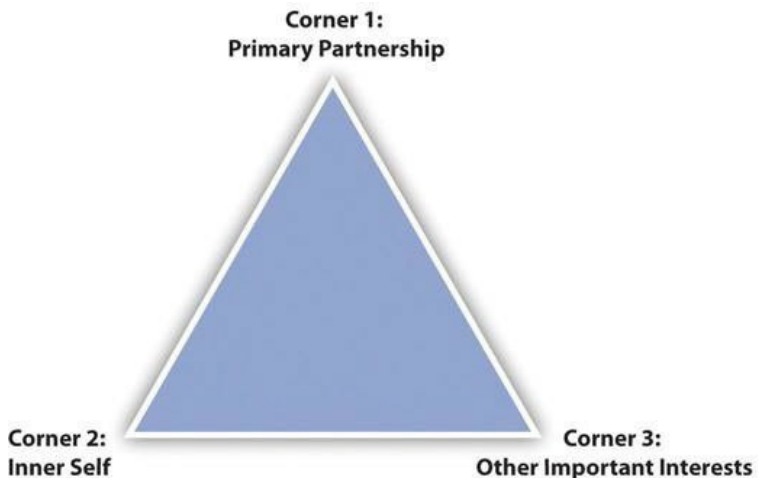


Figure 11.9 Theory of Triangles

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

- In terms of romantic attraction, which adage do you think is more true and why? “Birds of a feather flock together” or “Opposites attract.”
- 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?
- Social network overlap affects a romantic relationship in many ways.
- What are some positives and negatives of network overlap?

# 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.<sup>234</sup>

## Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships

Given that most workplaces are based on hierarchy, it is not surprising that relationships between supervisors and their subordinates develop.<sup>235</sup> 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.<sup>236</sup> 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.<sup>237</sup> 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.<sup>238</sup> 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.<sup>239</sup> 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.<sup>240</sup>



Figure 11.10 Coworkers by Ali Yahya on Unsplash

Peer coworkers can be broken down into three categories: information, collegial, and special peers.<sup>241</sup> **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.<sup>242</sup> 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.<sup>243</sup> 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.<sup>244</sup> 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.<sup>245</sup> 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.<sup>246</sup> 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.<sup>247</sup> 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.<sup>248</sup> 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.<sup>249</sup> 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.<sup>250</sup> **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.<sup>251</sup> One trend that seeks to find middle ground is the “love contract” or “dating waiver.”<sup>252</sup> 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.<sup>253</sup>

## 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

- 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?
- 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?
- If you were a business owner, what would your policy on workplace romances be and why?

## 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.<sup>254</sup>

### **Think About It . . . Marriage Equality**

Watch this GetUp! Australia Commercial. 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.<sup>255</sup> 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.<sup>256</sup>

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.<sup>257</sup> 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.<sup>258</sup> 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.<sup>259</sup> It wasn't until 1998 and 2000, however, that South Carolina and Alabama removed such language from their state constitutions.<sup>260</sup>

The organization and website [lovingday.org](http://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.<sup>261</sup> 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.<sup>262</sup>

## 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.

# 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.<sup>263</sup> 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.<sup>264</sup> 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.<sup>265</sup> 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.<sup>266</sup> 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.<sup>267</sup> 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.<sup>268</sup>

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.<sup>269</sup> 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.<sup>270</sup> 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.<sup>271</sup>

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.<sup>272</sup>

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.<sup>273</sup>

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.<sup>274</sup> 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.<sup>275</sup> 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.<sup>276</sup> 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.<sup>277</sup> 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.<sup>278</sup> 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.<sup>279</sup> 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.<sup>280</sup> 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.<sup>281</sup> 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.<sup>282</sup> 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:<sup>283</sup>

- 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.<sup>284</sup> 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. 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.

- How can you distinguish between a boss who is demanding or a perfectionist and a boss who is a bully?

- 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.
- Extradynamic 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

- 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?
- How do you think technology has affected extradyadic romantic activity?
- 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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# Appendix

This is where you can add appendices or other back matter.