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### NEW TO THIS EDITION

- **A new chapter on Mediated Interpersonal Communication (Chapter 2)** offers an evenhanded, research-based exploration of the pros and cons of communicating via social media and other communication technologies
- **A new section called "Conversation: From Monologue to Dialogue" (Chapter 13)** provides an in-depth look at enhancing face-to-face communication skills, ranging from making casual conversation to holding civil dialogues
- **Watch and Discuss features** point to YouTube videos for viewing in or out of the classroom. New video titles include "Struggles of Having a Friend with No Filter"; "I Forgot My Phone"; "Girl vs. Woman: Why Language Matters"; and "What Do You Do When Someone Just Doesn't Like You?"
- **Focus on Research, Dark Side of Communication, and At Work boxes** cover current topics and issues in more than two dozen new sidebars in this edition
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Interplay

FIFTEENTH EDITION

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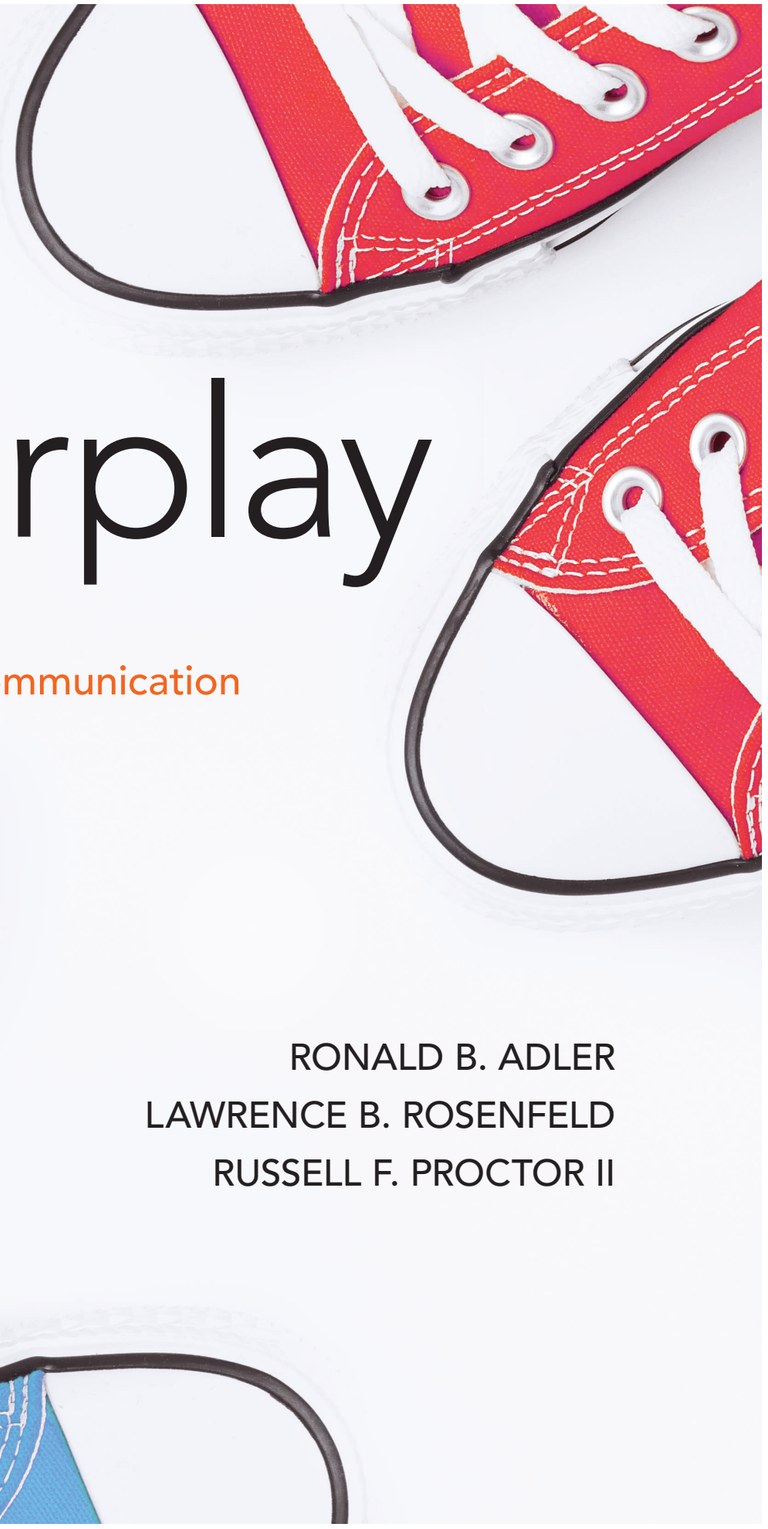
# Interplay

FIFTEENTH EDITION

## The Process of Interpersonal Communication



RONALD B. ADLER
LAWRENCE B. ROSENFELD
RUSSELL F. PROCTOR II

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# Interplay

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FIFTEENTH EDITION

## The Process of Interpersonal Communication

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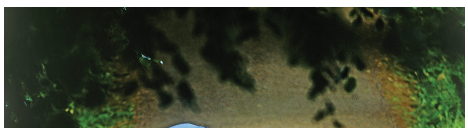
# Brief Contents



# Contents





FEATURES

# Preface

In the field of interpersonal communication, much has changed in recent years. Cultural dimensions and gender identity have become increasingly important to communication scholars. Digital communication, in all its various forms, has had profound impacts on how we relate to one another. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we learned new ways to communicate interpersonally in every context.

This new edition of *Interplay* reflects communication as it operates in today's world. At the same time, it emphasizes enduring principles and skills that are as important now as ever. It builds on the approach that has continually evolved to best serve students and professors over four decades. The accessible writing style presents ideas in a straightforward way while thought-provoking features highlight relevance for students, showing them how to improve their own interpersonal skills. *Interplay* cites more than 1,500 sources, nearly a third of which are new to this edition. These citations have a strong *communication* focus, as we continue to spotlight scholarship from our field. Research and theory aren't presented for their own sakes, but rather to explain how the process of interpersonal communication operates in everyday life.

## New in This Edition

For long-time users, a quick scan of this edition will reveal some significant changes:

- **A new chapter on Mediated Interpersonal Communication** (Chapter 2) is devoted to the most important communication innovation in the last half-century. It offers an evenhanded, research-based exploration of the pros and cons of communicating via social media and other communication technologies. There's also an updated comparison of interpersonal and masspersonal communication. The chapter concludes with tips on communicating competently through mediated channels. Nearly two-thirds of the chapter's content is new to this edition.
- **A new section, "Conversation: From Monologue to Dialogue"** (in Chapter 13), provides an in-depth look at enhancing face-to-face communication skills, ranging from making casual conversation to holding civil dialogues.
- **Updated Focus on Research sidebars** show how scholarship informs our view of effective (and ineffective) communication. This edition includes 17 new profiles on timely subjects including the lessons of doing a social media detox, co-cultural communication strategies among Latinx students, the value of "you" language when offering

interpersonal support, softening advice with empathy (something even chatbots do), using metacommunication to restore online civility, and what it takes to create and develop new friendships.
- **Dark Side of Communication** boxes address problems including the epidemic of loneliness, negative effects of smartphones on teens, why cultural appropriation is inappropriate, implicit bias and its effects, and pornography's impact on relational quality.
- **At Work** boxes help readers apply scholarship to their careers. New topics include using LinkedIn for social networking, the importance of listening empathically to customers, managing conflict via email, and telling stories in job interviews.
- **Watch and Discuss** features point to YouTube videos for viewing in or out of the classroom. Each is followed by discussion prompts. New video titles include "Struggles of Having a Friend with No Filter"; "I Forgot My Phone"; "Girl vs. Woman: Why Language Matters"; "Who Sounds Gay?"; "How to Turn Anxiety into Excitement"; "The Power of Forgiveness"; and "What Do You Do When Someone Just Doesn't Like You?"

Along with these features and major updates, this edition contains a multitude of new and updated material that addresses the latest communication research and changing communication practices. These include the following:

- Chapter 1 has updated and reworked sections on "What Makes Communication Interpersonal?" and "Meanings Exist in and Among People."
- Chapter 3 offers new discussions on co-cultural theory and microaggressions.
- Chapter 4 has enhanced coverage of the multifaceted nature of a healthy self-concept.
- Chapter 5's new captioned photos (which replace Media Clip sidebars in this edition) show how the movies *I, Tonya* and *Tall Girl* illustrate principles of perception. (There are many other new captioned photos throughout the book.)
- Chapter 6 now hosts "The Language of Choice" (which had been in the Communication Climate chapter in the 14th edition).
- Chapter 7 includes coverage of "the still face experiment" and the key term "nonverbal immediacy."
- Chapter 8 takes a closer look at the value of silent listening.
- Chapter 9 identifies attributes of emotional intelligence and has new material on communicating emotions through mediated channels.
- Chapter 11 updates and extends the discussion of boundary management and introduces new research on family boundary patterns.

## Digital Resources

Whether you have taught with *Interplay* for many years or are encountering it for the first time, you'll discover a toolkit of material that makes teaching and learning more efficient and effective.

## OXFORD INSIGHT COURSEWARE

**Oxford Insight Courseware**, new for *Interplay*, 15th edition, delivers content directly into your LMS to optimize student success. Developed in accordance with proven learning-design principles, **Oxford Insight empowers students by engaging them with personalized practice**. This adaptivity, paired with real-time, actionable data about student performance, helps you support each student along a unique learning path.

For more information on how *Interplay* powered by Oxford Insight can enrich your course, please contact your Oxford University Press representative.

## OXFORD LEARNING LINK

Oxford Learning Link is your central hub for a wealth of engaging digital learning tools and resources. Material hosted there includes the instructor's manual, test bank, PowerPoints, videos, interactive self-assessments, flashcards, and self-quizzes.

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*Interplay* continues to benefit from the contributions of these colleagues who helped shape previous editions:

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# Interplay

1

# Interpersonal Process

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

**1.1** Outline the needs that communication satisfies.

**1.2** Explain the interpersonal communication process, from its transactional nature to governing principles.

**1.3** Describe the characteristics of interpersonal versus impersonal communication.

**1.4** Identify characteristics of effective communication and competent communicators.

## FEATURES



## CHAPTER OUTLINE

EVERYONE COMMUNICATES. Students and professors, parents and children, employers and employees, friends, strangers, and enemies—all communicate. We have been communicating with others from earliest childhood and will almost certainly keep doing so until we die.

Why study an activity you've done your entire life? First, studying interpersonal communication will give you a new look at a familiar topic. For instance, you may not have realized that you can't *not* communicate or that more communication doesn't always improve relationships—topics you'll read about in a few pages. In this sense, exploring human communication is like studying anatomy or botany—everyday objects and processes take on new meaning.

A second, more compelling reason is that we all could stand to be more effective communicators. Surveys show that communication problems are at the root of most relational breakups, ahead of factors such as money, sex, or other conflict issues (Billow, 2013; Gravningen et al., 2017). Ineffective communication is also a major problem in the workplace, as 62 percent of surveyed executives indicated in another study (American Management Association, 2012). Perhaps that's why parents identify communication as the most important skill set their children need to succeed in life (Goo, 2015).

Pause now to make a mental list of communication problems you have encountered. You'll probably see that no matter how successful your relationships are at home, with friends, at school, and at work, there's plenty of room for improvement in your everyday life. The information that follows will help you communicate better with some of the people who matter most to you.

## 1.1 Why We Communicate

Research demonstrating the importance of communication has been around longer than you might think. Frederick II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 1220 to 1250, reportedly carried out experiments on language deprivation. A medieval historian described a dramatically inhumane one, in which Frederick forbade foster mothers and nurses from talking to babies and children:

> He bade foster mothers and nurses to suckle the children, to bathe and wash them, but in no way to prattle with them, for he wanted to learn whether they would speak the Hebrew language, which was the oldest, or Greek, or Latin, or Arabic, or perhaps the language of their parents, of whom they had been born. But he labored in vain because all the children died. For they could not live without the petting and joyful faces and loving words of their foster mothers. (Ross & McLaughlin, 1949)

Social scientists have found less barbaric ways to investigate the importance of communication. In one classic study of isolation, five volunteers were paid to remain alone in a locked room. One lasted for 8 days.

Three held out for 2 days, one commenting, "Never again." The fifth participant lasted only 2 hours (Schachter, 1959). Based on findings like this, psychologists have since concluded that solitary confinement is a form of torture (Muller, 2018).

The costs of social isolation became prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of people around the world were forced to isolate—some for months—without physical contact with anyone outside their household. Experts warned that the loneliness resulting from extended seclusion could in itself be a tremendous health hazard (Wright, 2020).

It's true that everybody needs alone time, often more than we get (more on that later in this chapter). On the other hand, there's a point beyond which solitude becomes loneliness. In other words, we all need people. We all need to communicate.

### 1.1.1 PHYSICAL NEEDS

Communication is so important that its presence or absence affects health. People who process a negative experience by putting their feelings into words report improved life satisfaction, as well as enhanced mental and physical health, compared with those who only think privately about it (Torre & Lieberman, 2018). Research conducted with police officers found that being able to talk easily with colleagues and supervisors about work-related trauma was linked to greater physical and mental health (Stephens & Long, 2000). And a broader study of over 3,500 adults revealed that as little as 10 minutes of talking a day, face to face or by phone, improves memory and boosts intellectual function (Ybarra et al., 2008).

In extreme cases, communication can even become a matter of life or death. As a navy pilot, the late U.S. Senator John McCain was shot down over North Vietnam and held as a prisoner of war (POW) for more than 5 years, often in solitary confinement. POWs in his camp set up codes to send messages by tapping on walls, laboriously spelling out words. McCain described the importance of maintaining contact with one another despite serious risks:

> The punishment for communicating could be severe, and a few POWs, having been caught and beaten for their efforts, had their spirits broken as their bodies were battered. Terrified of a return trip to the

#### *Watch and Discuss 1.1*


CBS Sunday Morning (YouTube channel): "Going It Alone"

1) How long do you think you could last without interpersonal communication? What effects would this loss have on you?
2) Discuss the relationship between *loneliness* and *communication*.

Note: This video previews topics covered extensively in later chapters, including social media (Chapter 2), social comparison (Chapter 4), listening (Chapter 8), and interpersonal relationships (Chapters 10 and 11).

> punishment room, they would lie still in their cells when their comrades tried to tap them up on the wall. Very few would remain uncommunicative for long. To suffer all this alone was less tolerable than torture. Withdrawing in silence from the fellowship of other Americans . . . was to us the approach of death. (McCain, 1999)

Communication isn't a necessity just for POWs. Evidence gathered by a host of researchers (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Parker-Pope, 2010; Yang et al., 2016) has shown that interpersonal relationships are vital among civilians as well. For example:

- A meta-analysis of nearly 150 studies involving a total of over 300,000 participants found that socially connected people—those with strong networks of family and friends—live an average of 3.7 years longer than those who are socially isolated.
- People with strong relationships have significantly lower risks of coronary disease, hypertension, and obesity than do people with less social integration.
- Divorced, separated, or widowed people are 5 to 10 times more likely to need hospitalization for mental illnesses than their married counterparts. Happily married people also have lower incidences of pneumonia, surgery, and cancer than single people. (It's important to note that the *quality* of the relationship is more important than the institution of marriage in these studies.)

After spending a year alone in space, astronaut Scott Kelly described his biggest challenge: "I think the hardest part is being isolated in a physical sense from people on the ground that are important to you." ***How satisfied are you with the amount and quality of personal contact in your life? What would be the ideal amount of contact?***

## 1.1.2 IDENTITY NEEDS

Communication does more than enable us to survive. It's the primary way we learn who we are (Harwood, 2005). As you'll read in Chapter 4, our sense of identity comes from the ways we interact with other people. Are you smart or stupid, attractive or ugly, skillful or inept? The answers to these questions don't come from looking in the mirror. The reactions of others shape identity.

Consider the case of the famous "Wild Boy of Aveyron," who appeared to have spent his early childhood without human contact. The boy was discovered in January 1800 while digging for vegetables in a French village garden. He could not speak, and he showed no behaviors one would expect in a social human. More significant was his lack of any identity as a human being. As author Roger Shattuck (1980) put it, "The boy had no human sense of being in the world. He had no sense of himself as a person related to other persons." Only after the influence of a loving foster mother did the boy begin to behave as a human.

Contemporary accounts support the essential role communication plays in shaping identity. In some cases, feral children—those raised with limited or no human contact—have demonstrated communication patterns similar to those of animals they grew up around (Newton, 2002). They do not appear to have developed a sense of themselves as humans before interacting with other people. Similarly, *Dani's Story* (Lierow, 2011) tells of an abandoned child who was rescued by a loving family and taught to communicate. After considerable time and investment, she was ultimately able to say of herself, "I pretty."

Each of us enters the world with little or no sense of identity. You gain an idea of who you are from the way others define you. As Chapter 4 explains, the messages each of us receives in early childhood are the strongest identity shapers, although the influence of others continues throughout life.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

### The Epidemic of Loneliness

"Ah, look at all the lonely people," sang the Beatles in the 1960s. Little did they know that in the following decades, loneliness would become an even greater social issue. One study revealed that roughly 20 percent of Americans always or often feel lonely or socially isolated (DiJulio et al., 2018). Another survey more than tripled those estimates (Coombs, 2020). Both studies show that loneliness takes a toll on one's physical, mental, and relational health.

For years, loneliness research focused on older people, who were likely to have experienced retirement, relocation, or the death of loved ones. But recent studies show that loneliness is also rampant among younger people (Richardson, 2019). Many have blamed technology, as you'll read in Chapter 2. Ironically, the same digital devices that can enable communication might bear some responsibility for new levels of loneliness (Davis et al., 2019).

Experts believe one solution is to engage in the cognitive reappraisal process described in Chapter 9 (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). Changing your self-talk ("I want to be with others; others want to be with me") is the starting point for changing your feelings and consequent behavior. Another recommendation is volunteer service, where you're likely to communicate with likeminded people and feel positive about contributing to a larger cause (Lustbader, 2018).

All of this research points to the fact that communicating with and relating to others are basic to human health.

## 1.1.3 SOCIAL NEEDS

Because interpersonal relationships are vital, some theorists argue that communicating with others is the primary goal of human existence, foundational to life satisfaction (Rohrer et al, 2018). One anthropologist

(Goldschmidt, 1990) calls the drive for meeting social needs through communication "the human career."

There's a strong link between the quality of communication and the success of relationships. For example, children who grow up in strong conversation-oriented families report having more satisfying friendships and romantic relationships when they become adults (Koesten, 2004). Women in one study reported that "socializing" contributed more to a satisfying life than virtually any other activity (Kahneman et al., 2004).

Despite knowing that communication is crucial to social satisfaction, evidence suggests that many people aren't very successful at managing their interpersonal relationships. For example, one-third of Americans say they've never interacted with their neighbors, up from one-fifth who said the same just a few decades ago (Poon, 2015). Ongoing relationships aren't the only way to meet social needs. Making small talk with strangers—a friendly cashier, a fellow dog owner at the park, a person standing with you in a line—generally raises happiness levels for all parties involved (Nicolaus, 2019). This doesn't mean you need to chat with every person you meet or share personal information with strangers. What it suggests is that human beings are social creatures who benefit from making interpersonal connections—even small ones.

## @work Communication and Career Advancement

No matter the field, research supports what experienced workers already know—that communication skills are crucial in finding and succeeding in a job. That's true even in today's high-tech workplace. According to 502 hiring managers and 150 HR decision makers (Schaffhauser, 2019), employers are looking foremost for these "uniquely human skills" in new hires:

- The ability to listen
- Attentiveness and attention to detail
- Effective communication
- Critical thinking
- Strong interpersonal abilities
- The drive to keep learning

These findings echo those of previous studies. Business leaders rated abilities in spoken and written communication as the most important skills for college graduates to possess (Supiano, 2013). Employers told college students that oral communication skills, and particularly interpersonal communication, are essential for workplace success (Coffelt et al., 2016). It's no wonder that job ads ask for competence in "oral and written communication" more than any other skill set—by a wide margin (Anderson & Gantz, 2013).

Some companies offer courses to teach basics such as a good handshake and making small talk (King, 2018). But it's clearly better to bring those abilities to the table when you are seeking employment. The skills discussed in this book are vital in helping you land a job—and succeed once you're hired.

### 1.1.4 PRACTICAL NEEDS

Along with satisfying physical, identity, and social needs, communication is essential in dealing with more practical matters. It's how we tell the hairstylist to take just a little off the sides, ask for directions, or inform the plumber the broken pipe needs attention *now*!

Beyond these simple types of needs, a wealth of research demonstrates that communication is an essential ingredient for success in virtually every career. (See the At Work box.) On-the-job communication skills can even make the difference between life and death for doctors, nurses, and other medical practitioners. Researchers discovered that "communication failures" in hospitals and doctors' offices were linked to more than 1,700 U.S. deaths in a recent 5-year period (Bailey, 2016). Studies also show a significant difference between the communication skills of physicians who had no malpractice claims against them and doctors with previous claims (Carroll, 2015).

Communication is just as important outside of work. For example, married couples who are effective communicators report happier relationships than those who are less skillful (Ridley et al., 2001)—a finding that has been supported across cultures (Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2007). And the effects of work–family conflict—a common occurrence that negatively affects marital satisfaction—can be mitigated with constructive communication (Carroll et al., 2013). In school, communication competence is a strong predictor of academic success (Mahmud, 2014). In addition, school adjustment, dropout rate, and overall school achievement are highly related to students' having strong, supportive relationships (Heard, 2007).

Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1968) suggested that human needs fall into five categories, which must be satisfied in order. As you read about each need, think about the role of communication. The most basic needs are *physical*: sufficient air, water, food, and rest and the ability to reproduce as a species. The second category of Maslow's needs involves *safety*: protection from threats to our well-being. Beyond physical and safety concerns are the *social* needs described earlier. Next, Maslow suggests that each of us has the need for *self-esteem*: the desire to believe we are worthwhile, valuable people. The final category of needs involves *self-actualization*: the desire to develop our potential to the maximum, to become the best person we can be.

## 1.2 The Communication Process

So far, we have talked about communication as if its meaning were perfectly clear. In fact, scholars have debated the definition of communication for years (Littlejohn et al., 2016). Despite their many disagreements, most would concur that at its essence, **communication** is about using messages to generate meanings (Korn et al., 2000). Notice

how this basic definition holds true across a variety of contexts—public speaking, small groups, mass media, and so forth. The goal of this section is to explain how messages and meanings are created in interpersonal communication and to describe the many factors involved in this complex process.

## 1.2.1 EARLY MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

As the old saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." With that principle in mind, social scientists of the 1950s created models of the communication process. These early, simplistic models characterized communication as a one-way, linear event—something a sender "does" by encoding a message and delivering it to a passive receiver who decodes it. This one-way process resembles an archer (the sender) shooting an arrow (the message) at a target (the receiver). For some examples of communication, a linear model can be fitting. If you labor over a thank-you note to get the tone just right before sending it, your message is primarily a one-way effort.

Later models represented communication as more of a tennis game, in which players hit balls (send messages) to receivers who then respond. This **feedback**, or response to a previous message, can be verbal or nonverbal. A back-and-forth chain of text messages seems to fit this description pretty well.

Yet those models fail to capture the complexity of the human beings involved in the process. Over time, communication theorists developed increasingly sophisticated versions in an attempt to depict all the factors that affect human interaction.

## 1.2.2 INSIGHTS FROM THE TRANSACTIONAL COMMUNICATION MODEL

No model can completely represent the process of communication any more than a map can capture everything about the neighborhood where you live. Still, Figure 1.1 reflects a number of important characteristics of **transactional communication**, the dynamic process in which communicators create meaning together through interaction.

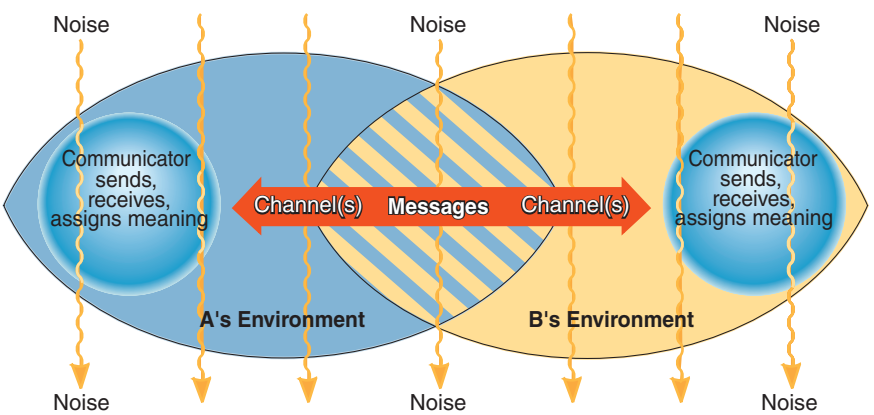



**FIGURE 1.1** Transactional Communication Model

## Sending and Receiving Are Usually Simultaneous

Some forms of communication, such as email, social media posts, voice messages, or "snail mail" letters, are asynchronous: There's a delay between when they are sent and received. But in face-to-face interaction, it's hard to distinguish sender and receiver. Consider a few examples:

- A teacher explaining a difficult concept to a student after class
- A parent lecturing a teenager about the family's curfew rules
- A salesperson giving a customer information about a product

The impulse is to identify the teacher, parent, and salesperson as senders, whereas the student, teenager, and customer are receivers. Now imagine a confused look on the student's face; the teenager interrupting defensively; the customer blankly staring into the distance. It's easy to see that these verbal and nonverbal responses are messages being sent, even while the other person is talking. Because it's often impossible to distinguish sender from receiver, our communication model replaces these roles with the more accurate term *communicator*. This term reflects the fact that—at least in face-to-face situations—people are simultaneously senders and receivers who exchange multiple messages.

## Meanings Exist in and Among People

A time-honored axiom among communication scholars is that "meanings are in people." A word, phrase, or gesture doesn't have meaning until you give it meaning. Perhaps you can think of a comment someone meant as an insult but you took positively. (See the #LikeAGirl photo for an example.) Likewise, you may interpret someone's compliment ("You're pretty smart") as a backhanded jab (think of ways you could construe that phrase negatively). The same is true with nonverbal cues. You might see a furrowed brow as a signal to stop talking, when the person was trying to communicate genuine interest. It's important to realize that you assign meaning to words and gestures in unique ways—and that your interpretations might not match others' intentions.

But meanings aren't assigned in a vacuum. Each of us is shaped by the environment in which we live (more on this in the following section). You learn and create meanings with others, which is why meaning is also *among* people. In the United States, a raised middle finger is a gesture of contempt, while "thumbs up" is positive. You'll read in Chapter 7 that nonverbal signals like these have different meanings in other cultures. As long as you're in the U.S., however, you need to follow societal rules for using these gestures (don't "flip the bird" to a judge and then explain that it means "Have a nice day" to you). Similarly, we decide with others which words are "good" and "bad"—and those meanings can shift over time and within co-cultures. Consider how "wicked" and "sick" are high compliments in some settings.

## Environment and Noise Affect Communication

Problems often arise because communicators occupy different **environments** (sometimes called *contexts*): fields of experience that help them make sense of others' behavior. In communication terminology, *environment*


The #likeagirl campaign promoted changing the meaning of "like a girl." The phrase has often been meant as an insult, but girls were encouraged to view it as a compliment and rallying cry. (Look up "Always #LikeAGirl" for an illustrative video.)

refers not only to a physical location but also to the personal experiences and cultural background that participants bring to a conversation. You can appreciate the influence of environments by considering your beliefs about an important topic such as work, marriage, or government policies. How might your beliefs be different if your personal history were different?

Notice how the model in Figure 1.1 shows that the environments of **A** and **B** overlap. This intersecting area represents the background the communicators have in common. If this overlap didn't exist, communication would be difficult, if not impossible.

Whereas similar environments often facilitate communication, different backgrounds can make effective communication more challenging. Consider just some of the factors that might contribute to different environments, and to communication challenges as a result:

- **A** might belong to one ethnic group and **B** to another.
- **A** might be rich and **B** poor.
- **A** might be rushed and **B** have nowhere to go.
- **A** might have lived a long, eventful life, and **B** could be young and inexperienced.
- **A** might be passionately concerned with the subject and **B** indifferent to it.

Another factor in the environment that makes communication difficult is what communication scholars call **noise**: anything that interferes with the transmission and reception of a message. Three types of noise can disrupt communication. *External noise* includes factors outside the receiver that make it difficult to hear, as well as many other kinds of distractions. For instance, loud

music in a bar or a jackhammer grinding in the street might make it hard for you to pay attention to another person. *Physiological noise* involves biological factors in the receiver that interfere with accurate reception: hearing loss, illness, and so on. *Psychological noise* refers to cognitive factors that make communication less effective. For instance, a woman who is called "girl" may become so irritated that she has trouble listening to the rest of a speaker's message.

## Channels Make a Difference

Communication scholars use the term **channel** to describe the medium through which messages are exchanged (Berger & Iyengar, 2013; Ledbetter, 2014). Along with face-to-face interaction, you have the option of using mediated channels such as texting, email, phone calls, and social media. The communication channel can affect the way you respond to a message. For example, a string of texted emojis probably won't have the same effect as a handwritten expression of affection, and being fired from a job in person would likely feel different from getting the bad news in an email.

The selection of a channel should depend in part on the kind of message you're sending. One survey asked students to identify which channel they would find best for delivering a variety of messages (O'Sullivan, 2000). Most respondents said they would have little trouble sending positive messages face to face, but that mediated channels had more appeal for sending negative messages (see also Feaster, 2010). In the next chapter, you'll read much more about choosing the best channel for the situation.

### FOCUS ON RESEARCH

## Tweeting: The Channel Affects the Message

In the years since media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously declared that "the medium is the message," scholars have studied the impact of communication channels on messages. Obviously it makes a difference whether you send a message in person, by phone, or through social media. A research team investigated an even more specific issue: Do Twitter messages created on mobile devices differ from those created on computers?

The short answer to that question is yes. In analyzing some 235 million tweets over a 6-week period, the researchers were generally able to determine whether the posts originated from mobile devices or from desktop computers. They found that mobile tweets were more egocentric than tweets from computers—that is, they included more first-person pronouns such as *I*, *me*, *my*, and *mine*. Tweets sent from mobile devices were also more negative in their wording and content. A tweet with the phrase "I'm mad" was more likely to be posted from a phone than a desktop. The researchers speculated that mobile devices encourage more spontaneous communication—for better or for worse.

As you'll read in Chapter 4, wise communicators consider pros and cons before making self-disclosures. This research suggests that the medium you choose for sending a message may play an important role in that process.

Murthy, D., Bowman, S., Gross, A. J., & McGarry, M. (2015). Do we tweet differently from our mobile devices? A study of language differences on mobile and web-based Twitter platforms. *Journal of Communication, 65*, 816–837.

## 1.2.3 COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

Beyond communication models, several principles explain the nature of communication. Communication is transactional—created through interaction; it can be intentional or unintentional; it is irreversible; it is unrepeatable; and it involves both content and relationships.

### Communication Is Transactional

The transactional model suggests that communicators create meaning through their interaction with one another. Perhaps the most important consequence of communication's transactional nature is mutual influence. To put it simply, communication isn't something we do *to* others; rather, it is an activity we do *with* them.

In this sense, communication is like dancing with a partner: No matter how skilled you are, success depends on the other person's behavior as well as your own. In communication and in dancing, the partners must adapt to and coordinate with each other. Further, relational communication—like dancing—is a unique creation that arises from how the partners interact. The way you dance probably varies from one partner to another because of its cooperative, transactional nature. Likewise, the way you communicate almost certainly varies with different partners. That's why competent communicators score high in adaptability, as you'll read later in this chapter.

Like dancing, communication is a transactional process that you do *with* others, not *to* them. Good dancers—and communicators—adapt to one another, creating a unique relationship. ***How would you describe the nature of the communication transactions in your close relationships?***

Psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991) expresses the transactional nature of communication well when he points out how our success depends on interaction with others. As he says, "one cannot be 'attractive' without others who are attracted, a 'leader' without others willing to follow, or a 'loving person' without others to affirm with appreciation."

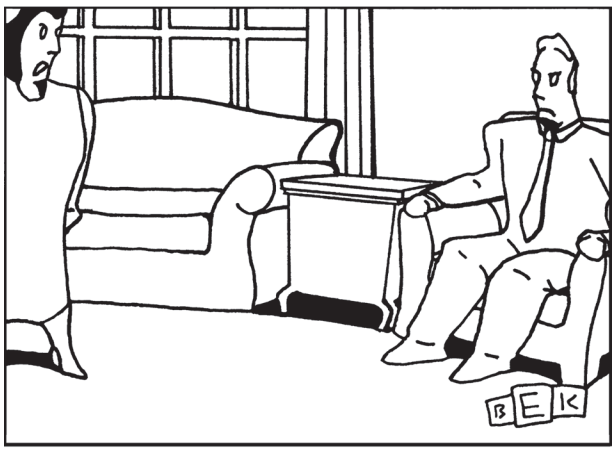
### Communication Can Be Intentional or Unintentional

Some communication is clearly deliberate: You probably plan your words carefully before asking the boss for a raise or offering constructive criticism. A minority of scholars (e.g., Motley, 1990) argue that only intentional messages like these qualify as communication. However, others (e.g., Buck & VanLear, 2002) suggest that even unintentional behavior is communicative. Suppose, for instance, that a friend overhears you muttering complaints to yourself. Even though you didn't intend for her to hear your remarks, they certainly did carry a message. In addition to these slips of the tongue, we unintentionally send many nonverbal messages. You might not be aware of your sour expression, impatient shifting, or sighs of boredom, but others read into them nonetheless.

Even the seeming absence of a behavior has communicative value. Recall times when you sent a text or left a voice message and received no reply. You probably assigned some meaning to the nonresponse. Was the other person angry? Indifferent? Too

busy to reply? Whether your hunch was correct, the point remains: All behavior has communicative value. "Nothing" never happens.

In *Interplay* we look at the communicative value of both intentional and unintentional behavior. This book takes the position that whatever you do—whether you speak or remain silent, confront or avoid, show emotion or keep a poker face—you provide information to others about your thoughts and feelings. In this sense, we are like transmitters that can't be shut off. We cannot *not* communicate (Watzlawick et al., 1967).



*"Let's stop this before we both say a lot of things we mean."*

## Communication Is Irreversible

At times, you probably wish you could erase your words or actions. Unfortunately, you can't undo communication. Sometimes, further explanation can clear up confusion, or an apology can mollify hurt feelings, but other times nothing can change the impression you have created. It is no more possible to "unsend" a message—including most digital messages—than to "unsqueeze" a tube of toothpaste. Words said, messages sent, and deeds done are irretrievable.

## Communication Is Unrepeatable

Because communication is an ongoing process, an event cannot be repeated. The friendly smile you gave a stranger last week may not succeed with the person you encounter tomorrow. Even with the same person, it's impossible to recreate an event. Why? Because both you and the other person have changed. You've both lived longer, and your feelings about each other may have changed. What may seem like the same words and behavior are different each time they are spoken or performed.

## Communication Has a Content Dimension and a Relational Dimension

Virtually all exchanges have content and relational dimensions. The **content dimension** involves the information being explicitly discussed: "Please pass the salt"; "Not now, I'm tired"; "You forgot to check your messages." All messages also have a **relational dimension** (Watzlawick et al., 1967), which expresses how you feel about the other person. For instance, something in your tone might reflect whether you like or dislike the other person, feel in control or subordinate, or feel comfortable or anxious. Consider saying "Thanks a lot" in different ways depending on the relational dimension.

Sometimes the content dimension of a message is all that matters. For example, you may not care how the barista feels about you as long as you get your coffee. In a qualitative sense, however, the relational dimension of a message is often more important than the content under discussion. This point explains why disputes over apparently trivial subjects become so important. In such cases, we're not really arguing over whose turn it is to take out the trash or whether to stay home or go out. Instead, we're

disputing the nature of the relationship: who's in control, and how important we are to each other. Chapter 10 explores several key relational issues in detail.

## 1.2.4 COMMUNICATION MISCONCEPTIONS

Now that you've learned what communication *is*, it's time to identify some things it *isn't*. Avoiding these common misconceptions (adapted from McCroskey & Richmond, 1996) can save you a great deal of trouble in your personal life.

### Not All Communication Seeks Understanding

You might assume that the goal of all communication is to maximize understanding between communicators. But although some understanding is necessary to coordinate our interactions, there are some types of communication in which understanding, as we usually conceive it, isn't the primary goal (Smith et al., 2010). Consider, for example, the following:

- *Social rituals we enact every day.* "How's it going?" you ask. "Great," the other person replies, even if it isn't actually going great. The primary goal in exchanges like these is mutual acknowledgment. The unstated message is "I consider you important enough to notice." There's obviously no serious attempt to exchange information (Burnard, 2003). An analysis of examples from Twitter shows how this social ritual to "keep in touch" can take place digitally as well as in person (Schandorf, 2013).
- *Attempts to influence others.* Most television commercials are aimed at persuading viewers to buy products, not helping viewers understand the content of the ad. In the same way, many of our attempts at persuading others don't involve a desire for understanding, just for compliance with our wishes.
- *Deliberate ambiguity and deception.* When you decline an unwanted invitation by saying, "I can't make it," you probably want to create the impression that the decision is really beyond your control. (If your goal were to be perfectly clear, you might say, "I don't want to get together. In fact, I'd rather do almost anything than accept your invitation.") As we explain in detail in Chapter 4, people often lie or hedge their remarks precisely because they want to obscure their true thoughts and feelings.

### More Communication Isn't Always Better

Whereas failure to communicate effectively and often enough can certainly cause problems, excessive communication also can be a mistake. Sometimes it is simply unproductive, as when people go over the same ground again and again.

There are times when talking too much actually aggravates a problem (Pinola, 2014). As two communication pioneers put it, "More and more negative communication merely leads to more and more negative results" (McCroskey and Wheeless, 1976). Even when relationships aren't troubled, less communication may be better than more. One study found that coworkers who aren't highly dependent on one another perform better

when they don't spend a great deal of time talking together (Barrick et al., 2007). There are even times when no interaction is the best course. When two people are angry, they may say hurtful things they will later regret. In such cases it's probably best to spend time cooling off, thinking about what to say and how to say it. Chapter 9 will help you decide when and how to share feelings. And Chapter 10 describes how constant connection via mediated communication isn't always a good thing.

### Communication Will Not Solve All Problems

Sometimes even the best planned, best timed communication won't solve a problem. For example, imagine that you ask an instructor to explain why you received a poor grade on a project you believe deserved top marks. The professor clearly outlines the reasons why you received the low grade and sticks to that position after listening thoughtfully to your protests. Has communication solved the problem? Hardly.

Sometimes clear communication is even the cause of problems. Suppose, for example, that a friend asks you for an honest opinion of an expensive outfit he just bought. Your clear and sincere answer, "I think it makes you look fat," might do more harm than good. Deciding when and how to self-disclose isn't always easy. See Chapter 4 for suggestions.

### Effective Communication Is Not a Natural Ability

Most people assume that communication is like breathing—that it's something people can do without training. Although nearly everyone does manage to function passably without much formal communication training, most people operate at a level of effectiveness far below their potential. In fact, communication skills are closer to an athletic ability. Even the most inept of us can learn to be more effective with training and practice, and even the most talented need to keep in shape.

## 1.3 What Makes Communication Interpersonal?

So far you've read about characteristics of communication in general. Now it's time to look at what makes some types of communication interpersonal versus impersonal.

### 1.3.1 DEFINING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Which of the following are examples of interpersonal communication?

A. A customer asking a salesclerk for information about a product.
B. A physician encouraging a patient to adopt a healthier lifestyle.
C. A group of old friends reminiscing about good times.

If you suspect there's no simple answer here, you're correct. A good response would be, "It depends on what you mean by *interpersonal*." There are two ways to think about what makes some communication interpersonal: (1) the *number* of people interacting and (2) the *quality* of the interaction.

A *quantitative approach* defines interpersonal communication by the number of communicators. By this yardstick, any two-person exchange fits the definition: ordering a double espresso at the coffee bar, asking a stranger for directions, or applying for a driver's license in person. Social scientists call two persons interacting a *dyad* and use the adjective *dyadic* to describe this type of communication (Guntzviller et al., 2017). In this sense, Situations A and B in the preceding list would count as interpersonal since they involve dyads; Situation C would not.

But asking questions of a salesclerk hardly seems the same as catching up with an old friend. Some scholars argue that the quality of interaction, not the quantity of people interacting, distinguishes interpersonal communication (Jian & Dalisay, 2018). From a *qualitative approach*, interpersonal communication means treating one another as unique individuals. In this sense, Situation C in the preceding list would certainly count as interpersonal. Situation B might also fit if the physician and patient had a longstanding relationship or even a single conversation that was personal and heartfelt. Situation A is more impersonal than interpersonal, qualitatively speaking. A qualitative approach defines the opposite of interpersonal as *impersonal* interaction. You can picture a continuum between these two extremes (see Figure 1.2).

Four features distinguish highly interpersonal versus impersonal communication:

- *Uniqueness*. No two high-quality interpersonal relationships are the same. With one friend you might exchange good-natured insults, whereas with another you are careful never to offend. In one, you might express your affection freely; in another it might be an unspoken foundation of the relationship. Each relationship is defined by its own specific language, customs, and rituals—what communication scholars call a *relational culture* (Farrell et al., 2014).
- *Interdependence*. In highly interpersonal communication exchanges, the fate of the partners is connected. You might be able to brush off a stranger's anger, sadness, or excitement. But in a qualitatively interpersonal relationship, the other's life affects you. Your life would be significantly different without each other.
- *Self-disclosure*. In impersonal exchanges, you probably reveal little about yourself. By contrast, in interpersonal exchanges you're more likely to share important thoughts and feelings, reflecting your comfort with the other person. This doesn't mean that all highly interpersonal relationships are warm and caring or that all self-disclosure is positive. It's possible to reveal negative personal information: "I really


**FIGURE 1.2** Impersonal–Interpersonal Communication Continuum

hate when you do that!" But note you'd probably say that only to someone with whom you have an interpersonal relationship.

- *Intrinsic rewards*. In impersonal exchanges you probably seek extrinsic rewards—payoffs that have little to do with the people involved. You listen to professors in class or talk to potential buyers of your used car in order to reach goals other than developing personal relationships. By contrast, in close relationships the best payoff is likely being with the other person. It doesn't matter what you talk about—developing the relationship is what's important.

With these characteristics in mind, this book adopts a qualitative approach and defines **interpersonal communication** as interaction distinguished by the qualities of uniqueness, interdependence, self-disclosure, and intrinsic rewards.

## ASSESSING YOUR COMMUNICATION

### How Interpersonal Are Your Relationships?

Select three important relationships to assess. These might include your relationships with people at work or school, with friends, or with family. For each relationship, respond to the following items:

_____ 1. To what extent is the relationship characterized by *uniqueness*? How much is this relationship one of a kind? Do you have your own unique language and rituals?

NOT UNIQUE **1 2 3 4 5 6 7** HIGHLY UNIQUE

_____ 2. To what extent are you and your relationship partner *interdependent*? To what extent does one person's actions affect the other?

NOT INTERDEPENDENT **1 2 3 4 5 6 7** HIGHLY INTERDEPENDENT

_____ 3. To what extent is communication in the relationship marked by *disclosure* of personal information?

LOW DISCLOSURE **1 2 3 4 5 6 7** HIGH DISCLOSURE

_____ 4. To what extent does the relationship create its own *intrinsic rewards*? How much do you like being together just for the sake of sharing each other's company?

REWARDS ARE EXTRINSIC **1 2 3 4 5 6 7** REWARDS ARE INTRINSIC

Based on your answers, decide how qualitatively interpersonal (or how impersonal) each of the relationships is. (If you have more 5s, 6s, and 7s in your answers, then your relationship is more qualitatively interpersonal. If you have more 1s, 2s, and 3s, then the relationship is more impersonal.) How satisfied are you with your findings? What can you do to improve your level of satisfaction with these relationships?

## 1.3.2 INTERPERSONAL AND IMPERSONAL COMMUNICATION: A MATTER OF BALANCE

Life without interpersonal relationships would be lonesome at best, and more likely bleak. That doesn't mean *all* communication should be interpersonal, or that constant communication is the ideal. Like a nutritious diet, the healthiest communication is a mixture—in this case between time together and time apart, and between deeper and more superficial interaction (Hall & Merolla, 2020).

### Alone Time

High-quality interpersonal communication is important, but it takes a lot of energy. Even good times in a close relationship can leave you tired, and the drain is greater when you're discussing difficult issues (Hall, 2018). Time away from others—even the people who matter most—can be a way of recharging your emotional batteries and gaining perspective on the relationship. Whether it's practicing meditation, taking a solo road trip, or spending an evening with just you and the TV, it's good to carve out time for yourself.

### Personal and Impersonal Communication

Most relationships are neither highly interpersonal nor entirely impersonal. Rather, they are likely to fall somewhere between these two extremes. There's often a personal element in even the most impersonal situations. You might appreciate the unique sense of humor of a store clerk or spend

### FOCUS ON RESEARCH

#### Online Chat in Customer Service: When Impersonal Fails

You're on an online travel site, considering a trip to England. Up pops a box that says, "Would you like to chat?" You type, "What hotel is included in the London package?" Seconds later, a customer service agent sends you this reply:

> Our package to London costs $1000 and lasts for 5 days and 4 nights. We will put you up in a gorgeous five-star hotel right on the river Thames and near all the attractions.

Would you be pleased with the speedy response or put off that it didn't answer your question? A team of communication researchers investigated reactions to online chat assistance.

Speed is the name of the game in most online service. Participants in the study confirmed this: They liked fast responses to chat inquiries much more than slow ones. That's why online service reps (the humans behind the scenes) often have shortcuts and scripts handy—so they can respond quickly and efficiently.

But there's a downside. Respondents didn't like fast feedback that failed to address the question they asked. Speed in such cases wasn't viewed positively; instead, it was seen as robotic and impersonal.

Even in a culture that values quickness and efficiency, there can be value in slowing down and treating customers—or anybody—as personally and uniquely as time allows.

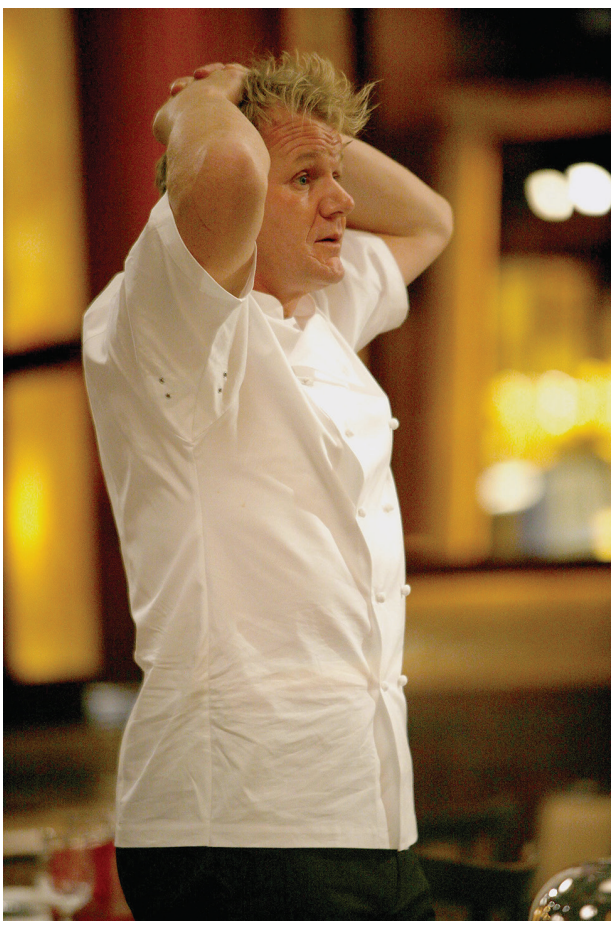
Lew, Z., Walther, J. B., Pang, A., & Shin, W. (2018). Interactivity in online chat: Conversational contingency and response latency in computer-medicated communication. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 23*, 201–221.

a few moments sharing private thoughts with the person cutting your hair. And even the most tyrannical, demanding, by-the-book boss might show an occasional flash of humanity.

Just as there's a personal element in many impersonal settings, there's also an impersonal side to even the most important relationships. In fact, most communication in close relationships is comfortably mundane (Alberts et al., 2005; Laliker & Lannutti, 2014). There are occasions when you almost certainly don't want to be personal: when you're distracted, tired, busy, or just not interested. Interpersonal communication is like rich food in that too much can make you uncomfortable. In fact, the scarcity of interpersonal communication contributes to its value (Mehl et al., 2010). Like precious and one-of-a-kind artwork, qualitatively interpersonal communication is special because it's rare.

## 1.4 Communication Competence

"What does it take to communicate better?" is probably the most important question to ask as you read this book. Answering it has been one of the leading challenges for communication scholars. Although we don't have all the answers, research has identified a great deal of important and useful information about communication competence.



On the TV show *Hell's Kitchen*, chef Gordon Ramsay gets the job done—but often treats his staff poorly in the process. On *MasterChef Junior*, he is much more appropriate as a cooking coach while remaining effective. ***Is your communication generally both appropriate and effective? Why or why not?***

### 1.4.1 PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Most scholars agree that **communication competence** is the ability to achieve goals in a manner that is both *effective* and *appropriate* (Wang et al., 2019). To understand these two dimensions, consider how you might handle everyday communication challenges such as declining an unwanted invitation or asking a friend to stop an annoying behavior. In cases such as these, *effective* communication would get the results you want. *Appropriate* communication would do so in a way that, in most cases, avoids damaging the relationship in which it occurs.

You can appreciate the importance of both appropriateness and effectiveness by imagining approaches that would satisfy one of these criteria but not the other. Yelling at your restaurant server may get your meal to come quickly, but you probably wouldn't be welcome back (and you might want to check your food before eating it). Likewise, saying "That's fine" to your roommate when things *aren't* fine might maintain the relationship on the surface but leave you frustrated. With the goal of encouraging a balance between effectiveness and appropriateness, the following paragraphs outline several important principles of communication competence.

## There's No Single "Ideal" or "Effective" Way to Communicate

Your own experience shows that a variety of communication styles can be effective. Some very successful communicators are serious, whereas others use humor; some are gregarious, others are quieter; and some are more straightforward while others hint diplomatically. Furthermore, a type of communication that is competent in one setting might be a colossal blunder in another, and what one person thinks is competent may seem incompetent to another (Dunleavy & Martin, 2010). The joking insults you routinely trade with a friend might offend a sensitive family member, and Saturday night's romantic approach would be out of place at work on Monday morning. No list of rules or tips will guarantee your success as a communicator.

Flexibility is especially important when members of different cultures meet. For instance, the definition of appropriate communication in a given situation varies considerably from one culture to another (Arasaratnam, 2007). Customs such as belching after a meal or appearing nude in public might be appropriate in some parts of the world but outrageous in others. There are also subtler differences in competent communication. For example, qualities such as self-disclosure and straight talk may be valued in the United States but considered overly aggressive and insensitive in many Asian cultures (Zhang, 2015). You'll read more about the many dimensions of intercultural competence in Chapter 3.

## Competence Is Situational

Because competent communication varies so much from one situation and person to another, it's a mistake to think of it as a trait that a person either possesses or lacks. It's more accurate to talk about degrees or areas of competence.

You and the people you know are probably quite competent in some areas and less so in others. For example, you might deal quite skillfully with peers while feeling clumsy interacting with people much older or younger, wealthier or poorer, or more or less accomplished than you. In fact, your competence may vary from situation to situation. It's an overgeneralization to say, in a moment of distress, "I'm a terrible communicator!" It's more accurate to say, "I didn't handle this situation very well, but I'm better in others."

## Competence Can Be Learned

To some degree, biology is destiny when it comes to communication competence (Teven et al., 2010). Research suggests that certain personality traits predispose people toward particular competence skills (Hullman et al., 2010). For instance, those who are agreeable and conscientious by nature find it easier to be appropriate and harder to be (and become) assertive and effective.

Fortunately, biology isn't the only factor that shapes how we communicate. Communication competence is, to a great degree, a set of skills that anyone can learn (Fortney et al., 2001). For instance, people with communication anxiety often benefit from courses and training (Hunter et al., 2014). Skills instruction has also been shown to help communicators

in a variety of professional fields (Brown et al., 2010; Hynes, 2012). Even without systematic training, it's possible to develop communication skills through the processes of observation and trial and error. We learn from our own successes and failures, as well as from observing other models—both positive and negative. And, of course, it's our hope you will become a more competent communicator by putting the information in this book to work.

## 1.4.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF COMPETENT COMMUNICATION

Although competent communication varies from one situation to another, scholars have identified several common denominators that characterize it in most contexts. These include a large repertoire of skills, adaptability, the ability to perform, empathy, cognitive complexity, and self-monitoring.

### A Large Repertoire of Skills

As you've already seen, good communicators don't use the same approach in every situation. They know that sometimes it's best to be blunt and sometimes tactful; that there is a time to speak up and a time to be quiet.

The chances of reaching your personal and relational goals increase with the number of options you have about how to communicate (Pillet-Shore, 2011). For example, if you want to start a conversation with a stranger, you might get the ball rolling simply by introducing yourself. In other cases, seeking assistance might work well: "I've just moved here. What kind of neighborhood is the Eastside?" A third strategy is to ask a question about the situation: "I've never heard this band before. Do you know anything about them?" You could also offer a sincere compliment and follow it up with a question: "Great shoes! Where did you get them?" Just as a chef draws from a wide range of herbs and spices, a competent communicator can draw from a large array of potential behaviors.

### Adaptability

To extend this metaphor, a chef must know when to use garlic, chili, or sugar. Likewise, a competent communicator needs *adaptability*, selecting appropriate responses for each situation—and for each recipient. Adaptability is so important that competence researchers call it "the hallmark of interpersonal communication skills" (Hullman, 2015). Your language, tone, and style in a job interview, for example, should be different from what you'd use with your pals.

One study found that professors negatively appraised students who sent emails that included casual text language (such as "4" instead of "for" or "RU" instead of "are you") (Stephens et al., 2009). These students didn't adapt their message to an appropriate level of professional communication. Linguists note that competent communicators are careful to "code-switch" when moving between casual and formal modes of texting (Collister, 2018). (You'll find more on the skill of *code-switching* in Chapter 3.)

Adaptability becomes especially challenging when communicating online. When you post on social media, for instance, it's likely you have

multiple audiences in mind as you craft your message (Marder et al., 2016). If you've edited an update before posting because you knew how some followers would react, you've practiced adaptability—along with impression management, as described in Chapter 4.

## Ability to Perform Skillfully

Once you have chosen the appropriate way to communicate, you have to perform that behavior effectively (Barge & Little, 2008). In communication, as in other activities, practice is the key to skillful performance. Much of the information in *Interplay* will introduce you to new tools for communicating, and the activities at the end of each chapter will help you practice them.

## Empathy/Perspective Taking

We develop the most effective messages when we understand and empathize with the other person's point of view (Nelson et al., 2017). Empathy, or perspective taking (explained in Chapter 4), is an essential skill partly because others may not express their thoughts and feelings clearly. And of course, it's not enough just to imagine another's perspective; it's vital to *communicate* that understanding through verbal and nonverbal responses (Kellas et al., 2013).

### *Watch and Discuss 1.2*


BuzzFeedVideo (YouTube channel): "Struggles of Having a Friend with No Filter"

1) Identify a friend who seems to have "no filter" when it comes to *self-monitoring*. How would you evaluate that person's communication competence?
2) Are there times when having a filter hurts interpersonal communication? Discuss the pros and cons of self-monitoring.

## Cognitive Complexity

**Cognitive complexity** is the ability to construct a variety of different frameworks for viewing an issue. Imagine that a longtime friend never responded to a message from you, but you expected a response. It's possible your friend is offended by something you've done. Another possibility is that something upsetting has happened in another part of your friend's life. Or perhaps nothing at all is wrong, and you're just being overly sensitive.

Researchers have found that a large number of constructs for interpreting the behavior of others leads to greater "conversational sensitivity," increasing the chances of acting in ways that will produce satisfying results (Burleson, 2011; MacGeorge & Wilkum, 2012). Not surprisingly, research also shows a connection between cognitive complexity and empathy (Youngvorst & Jones, 2017). The relationship makes sense: The more ways you have to understand others and interpret their behaviors, the more likely you are to see and communicate about the world from their perspective.

### Self-Monitoring

Psychologists use the term **self-monitoring** to describe the process of paying close attention to one's own behavior and using these observations to shape it. Self-monitors can consider their behavior from a detached viewpoint, allowing for observations such as:

"I'm making a fool out of myself."
"I'd better speak up now."
"This approach is working well. I'll keep it up."

It's no surprise that self-monitoring generally increases one's effectiveness as a communicator (Day et al., 2002). The ability to ask, "How am I doing?"—and to change your behavior if the answer isn't positive—is a tremendous asset for communicators (Wang et al., 2015). And you probably know what it looks like *not* to self-monitor. The Watch and Discuss feature in this section takes a humorous look at communicators who have "no filter."

## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**Objective 1.1** Outline the needs that communication satisfies.

Communication is important for a variety of reasons. Besides satisfying practical needs, meaningful communication contributes to physical health, plays a major role in defining our identity, and forms the basis for our social relationships.

**Q:** Considering a representative 2-day period, identify some of the physical, identity, social, and practical needs you try to satisfy by communicating. How could you better meet those needs by improving your communication skills?

**Objective 1.2** Explain the interpersonal communication process, from its transactional nature to governing principles.

Interpersonal communication is a complex process. The transactional model presented in this chapter shows that meanings are determined by the people who exchange messages, not in the messages themselves. Interpersonal communicators usually send and receive messages simultaneously, particularly in face-to-face exchanges. Environment and noise affect the nature of interaction, as do the channels used to exchange messages.

Communication follows several principles. For instance, it is transactional, irreversible, and unrepeatable, and it can be intentional or unintentional. Messages also have both content and relational dimensions.

To understand the communication process, it is important to recognize and avoid several common misconceptions. More communication is not always better. Sometimes total understanding isn't as important as we might think. Even at its best, communication is not a panacea that will solve every problem. Effective communication is not a natural ability. Although some people have greater aptitude at communicating, everyone can learn to interact with others more competently.

**Q:** Apply the transactional model to a situation that illustrates the principles described in Section 1.2.3.

**Objective 1.3** Describe the characteristics of interpersonal versus impersonal communication.

Interpersonal communication can be defined by the number of people interacting, or by the quality of interaction. In terms of quality, communication in interpersonal relationships is distinguished by uniqueness, interdependence, disclosure, and intrinsic rewards. Interpersonal communication is best understood in contrast to impersonal communication. Even close interpersonal relationships have a mixture of deep, personal communication and mundane, impersonal interaction.

**Q:** In what ways are some of your interpersonal relationships impersonal, and vice versa?

**Objective 1.4** Identify characteristics of effective communication and competent communicators.

Communication competency is the ability to be both effective and appropriate. There is no single ideal way to communicate. Flexibility and adaptability are characteristics of competent communicators, as are skill at performing behaviors, empathy and perspective taking, cognitive complexity, and self-monitoring. The good news is that communication competency can be learned.

**Q:** Identify interpersonal situations in which you communicate competently and those in which your competence is less than satisfactory. Based on these observations, identify goals for improving your interpersonal communication skills.

## KEY TERMS

Channel (13)
Cognitive complexity (24)
Communication (9)
Communication competence (21)
Content dimension (of a message) (15)
Environment (11)
Feedback (10)
Interpersonal communication (19)
Noise (external, physiological, and psychological) (12)
Relational dimension (of a message) (15)
Self-monitoring (25)
Transactional communication (10)

## ACTIVITIES

**1.** As you read in this chapter, communication satisfies a variety of physical, identity, and social needs. With a group of classmates, evaluate how well you meet those needs in your everyday interpersonal interactions. (In the next chapter, you can discuss how well social media help you meet those needs.)

**2.** Select three important relationships in your life. These might include your relationships with people at work or school, or with friends and family. For each relationship, rate on a scale ranging from 1 to 10 (with 1 = low and 10 = high) the degree to which the relationship is characterized by each of these four factors: *uniqueness*, *interdependence*, *self-disclosure*, and *intrinsic rewards*. Share your analysis with a classmate and discuss what these factors say about the interpersonal nature of your relationships.

**3.** How competent are you as a communicator? You can begin to answer this question by interviewing people who know you well: a family member, friend, or fellow worker, for example. Interview different people to determine if you are more competent in some relationships than others, or in some situations than others.

a. Describe the characteristics of competent communicators outlined in this chapter. Be sure your interviewee understands each of them.

b. Ask your interviewee to rate you on each of the observable qualities. (It won't be possible for others

to evaluate internal characteristics, such as cognitive complexity and self-monitoring.) Be sure this evaluation reflects your communication in a variety of situations: It's likely you aren't uniformly competent—or incompetent—in all of them.

c. If your rating is not high in one or more areas, discuss with your partner how you could raise it.

**4.** Knowing how you want to communicate isn't the same as being able to perform competently. The technique of behavior rehearsal provides a way to improve a particular communication skill before you use it in real life. Behavior rehearsal consists of four steps:

a. Define your goal. Begin by identifying the way you want to behave.

b. On your own or with the help of classmates, break the goal into the behaviors it involves. Most goals are made up of several verbal and nonverbal parts. You may be able to identify these parts by thinking about them yourself, by observing others, by reading about them, or by asking others for advice.

c. Practice each behavior before using it in real life. First, imagine yourself behaving more competently. Next, practice a new behavior by rehearsing it with others.

d. Try out the behavior in real life. You can increase the odds of success if you follow two pieces of advice when trying out new communication behaviors: Work on only one subskill at a time, and start with easy situations. Don't expect yourself suddenly to behave flawlessly in the most challenging situations. Begin by practicing your new skills in situations in which you have a chance of success.

2

# Mediated Interpersonal Communication

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

**2.1** Identify the benefits and drawbacks of mediated communication.

**2.2** Distinguish between mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication, and use each appropriately.

**2.3** Apply the principles of competence to your mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication.

## FEATURES



## CHAPTER OUTLINE

FOR MOST OF HISTORY, face-to-face communication was the foundation of interpersonal relationships. A medieval peasant knew only the small number of people who lived within a day's walk (Manchester, 1992). Centuries later, proximity still defined most relationships. As one historian noted, "You could not get too picky when you might meet only a handful of potential marriage partners in your entire life" (Coontz, 2005).

Proximity is still a powerful predictor of relationship formation and maintenance (Habinek et al., 2015). But technology can overcome spatial limitations in ways that earlier generations could have barely imagined. On your laptop or phone, you can chat across continents. At work, geographically distributed teams tackle jobs that would have been impossible to coordinate in earlier times. Romantic relationships often begin online, and partners keep them going even when separated by long distances.

Think of how many times you've texted, posted, messaged, blogged, emailed, tweeted, or video chatted during the past few days. These are all forms of **mediated communication**—any type of communication occurring via a technological channel (Sherblom, 2020). **Social media** are a subset within this category: websites and applications that enable individual users to network and share content. Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn are examples of social media platforms. Email and texting are mediated communication channels, but not social media because they don't involve networking and content sharing.

This chapter will give you a clear notion of how mediated communication operates in your relationships. In addition, it will discuss ways to use mediated channels to best accomplish your personal and relational goals.


*"Goodnight Twitter.*
*Goodnight Instagram.*
*Goodnight Snapchat.*
*Goodnight Reddit.*
*Goodnight Tinder.*
*Goodnight Pinterest.*
*Goodnight Facebook..."*

## 2.1 Mediated Communication: Pros and Cons

Dire predictions related to communication technologies have arisen throughout history. Almost 2,500 years ago, the philosopher Socrates declared that writing was inferior to speech. He warned that a written record "will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories" (Konnikova, 2012). Warnings were also sounded in the 19th century, soon after the invention of the telegraph. One critic's prediction resembles criticisms you might hear today about Twitter: "The constant diffusion of statements in

snippets, the constant excitements of feeling unjustified by fact, the constant formation of hasty or erroneous opinions must . . . deteriorate the intelligence of all" (Phalen, 2015). Other worries emerged when telephones were a new technology. Would they replace in-person conversations? Wasn't it rude and intrusive to call and interrupt someone without warning? Holding a strange device to your head also seemed physically risky (LaFrance, 2015): Could it hurt your brain, or even explode during use?

Today those worries about commonplace technologies sound comical. But similar concerns arise with every innovation. Fortunately, scholarship sheds light on both the true costs and benefits of using various forms of communication technology.

## 2.1.1 ALIENATING OR CONNECTING?

One of the most important debates regarding mediated communication is whether it's a source of alienation or connection. Does it create social distance or bring people together? There's evidence for both arguments.

### Alienating Factors

As you read in Chapter 1, loneliness is one of today's greatest health threats. A comprehensive review showed that people lacking social connections are at a 29 percent higher risk for premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2015). Excessive media use and loneliness often go hand in hand (Hunt et al., 2018).

Technology is most alienating when it's used as a substitute for face-to-face communication. There's a correlation between loneliness and what social scientists call a *preference for online social interaction* (Chen, 2019). Some people rely on online interaction because they don't have to respond in real time or manage the complexities of sending and interpreting nonverbal cues (Lundy & Drouin, 2016).

Frequent users of social media may become caught in a vicious cycle of alienation. Their preference for online interaction can lead to withdrawal from meaningful offline interaction, which leaves them feeling even more isolated (Phu & Gow, 2019). This negative spiral can create problems in offline relationships at school and work, as unhappy communicators withdraw further from in-person relationships (Caplan, 2018). It's hard to say whether loneliness leads to a preference for online social interaction or vice versa (Tokunaga, 2016). Either way, the problem is potentially serious.

### *Watch and Discuss 2.1*


Charstarlene TV (YouTube channel): "I Forgot My Phone"

1) How do the smartphone intrusions in this video resemble those in your life?
2) How do these intrusions affect the quality of your relationships?

Mediated communication helps families stay in touch, even when geographically separated. ***How does technology help you stay connected?***

## Connecting Factors

Steve Jobs, the late cofounder of Apple Inc., suggested that personal computers be renamed "*interpersonal* computers." He had a point: Research shows that mediated communication can enhance relationships.

This claim doesn't necessarily contradict the alienating factors described in the preceding section. In most cases, mediated communication isn't so much a *replacement* for face-to-face as a *supplement*. Consider how mediated communication helps you stay in touch with friends and family members—many of whom would be outside your social orbit if it weren't for social media (Carvalho et al., 2015). Participants in one study said texting had given them an increased sense of connection with family members (Crosswhite et al., 2014). Social networking sites also make it possible to reconnect with old contacts (Ramirez et al., 2017). Trying to get back in touch with a former neighbor, a high school classmate, or a long-lost relative? With a little research, you can potentially track them down in ways that wouldn't have been possible for previous generations.

The value of digital communication became dramatically clear during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, when millions of people were physically isolated for months on end (Pinsker, 2020). One college student described how technology kept her connected while sheltering at home:

> . . . being on social media has made me feel like the world isn't so small. When I tweet about being sad or depressed, people send messages telling me that they're available to talk and that I'm not alone. I told a friend I know only through Twitter that I wanted to try planting. A week later, several packets of seeds and a card with instructions arrived in the mail. (Garrett, 2020)

Connecting digitally was transformed during the pandemic from a tool of convenience to a virtual lifeline. Many younger people taught their elders how to use social media and video chatting services, bridging the digital divide that had separated generations (Conger & Griffith, 2020). In so doing, those who were tech-savvy helped stave off feelings of loneliness and isolation for those who were quarantined.

Besides helping maintain existing relationships, mediated communication can make it easier to create new ones. Nearly two-thirds of teens say they have made new friends online (Lenhart, 2016). Many people who engage with online groups or gaming systems find themselves making friends with other users. Communicating online can be especially helpful for people who are introverts (Orr et al., 2009). Social networking services provide

"a comfortable environment within which shy individuals can interact with others" (Baker & Oswald, 2010). Social media can be equally useful for those who face difficulty getting out and about (Cotten et al., 2013).

Mediated communication has also revolutionized the world of courtship and dating. Finding a compatible partner can be challenging, and online dating has many advantages (Smith & Duggan, 2013). Online dating services expand your dating pool beyond your offline network and help identify prospective partners with similar backgrounds and interests. Skeptics initially questioned whether relationships that started online could be successful in person. Research has largely put these concerns to rest (Rosenfeld, 2017). In one survey, more than one-third of the 19,000 married respondents said they had met their partners online (Cacioppo et al., 2013). Couples who meet online stay together about as much as those who meet in person, and those who stay together transition to marriage more quickly, and on average, report happier marriages.

Mediated channels are also vital for sustaining connection in long-distance romantic relationships. Some 3 million Americans live apart from their spouses for reasons other than divorce or discord (Bergen et al., 2007), and between 25 percent and 50 percent of college students are in long-distance relationships (Stafford, 2005). One study demonstrated the value of video chat in maintaining such relationships (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). For partners who used technologies such as Skype and FaceTime, the number of daily interactions was lower than for those who lived together, but their exchanges were longer and included more personal disclosures. One researcher explained why: "If you're sitting down for a video chat, then you're really focused on each other" (Pearson, 2013).

## 2.1.2 SUPERFICIAL OR MEANINGFUL?

Are relationships that are created or sustained only via social media necessarily superficial? Some users would dispute this view, claiming that mediated communication can contribute to meaningful relationships. Which is true?

### Mediated Communication as Superficial

Social scientists have argued that it's possible to sustain only about 150 relationships at a time (Dunbar, 2018). That figure has been termed "Dunbar's number" in recognition of the Oxford University anthropologist who established it. If you're lucky, you have an inner circle of about five "core" people and an additional layer of 10 to 15 close friends and family members (Bryant & Marmo, 2012). Beyond that lies a circle of roughly 35 reasonably strong contacts. That leaves about 100 more people to round out your


*"It says no one really knows who he is, but that he's got 400,000 followers on Twitter."*

group of meaningful connections. You almost certainly don't have the time or energy to actively sustain relationships with many more people than that.

Dunbar's number is much smaller than the number of "friends" many people claim on social networking sites. One study compared the online exchanges of people with thousands of social media friends to those who identified smaller numbers of online relationships (Dunbar, 2012). The conclusion: regardless of how many online friends users claimed, they only actively maintained relationships with the same number of people—roughly 15. You may have a large number of acquaintances online, but it's probably a stretch to consider them close friends. Some scholars have suggested that seeking an unrealistically large number of social media friends might be compensation for low self-esteem (Lee et al., 2012).

Over-reliance on brief mediated messages can lead to superficial connections, even among true friends. MIT professor Sherry Turkle (2015) put it this way:

> I was taken aback when Stephen Colbert asked me a profound question during an appearance on his show. He said, "Don't all those little tweets, these little sips of online communication, add up to one big gulp of real conversation?" My answer was no. Many sips of connection don't add up to a gulp of conversation.

Face-to-face conversations provide forms of connection that can't be achieved online. As two observers put it, "Email is a way to stay in touch, but you can't share a coffee or a beer with somebody on email or give them a hug" (Nie & Erbring, 2000). One study of college students who frequently used text-based messaging concluded that "nothing appears to compare to face-to-face communication in terms of satisfying individuals' communication, information, and social needs" (Flanagin, 2005).

## Mediated Communication as Meaningful

Nobody would dispute that mediated communication can sometimes feel superficial. But that doesn't mean *all* of it is. In fact, online connections can have immense value.

Communication technologies can provide a meaningful way to connect with likeminded people. Discussion boards, blogs, and online forums may create a sense of virtual community among strangers (Schwammlein & Wodzicki, 2012). Whether you're a follower of Premier League soccer, an avid environmentalist, or a devotee of punk rock, you can find kindred spirits online. What begins as a series of brief online exchanges with strangers can sometimes lead to valuable friendships. One sports fan offered this description:

> I've participated in a variety of blog sites for my favorite major league baseball team. One particular forum was small and welcoming, and over time we began to talk about our other hobbies and interests. Soon we were exchanging quips about our jobs and families (between innings, of course), and several of us decided to meet up at a game. I'm now connected to a dozen of these people on social networking sites and consider them good friends.