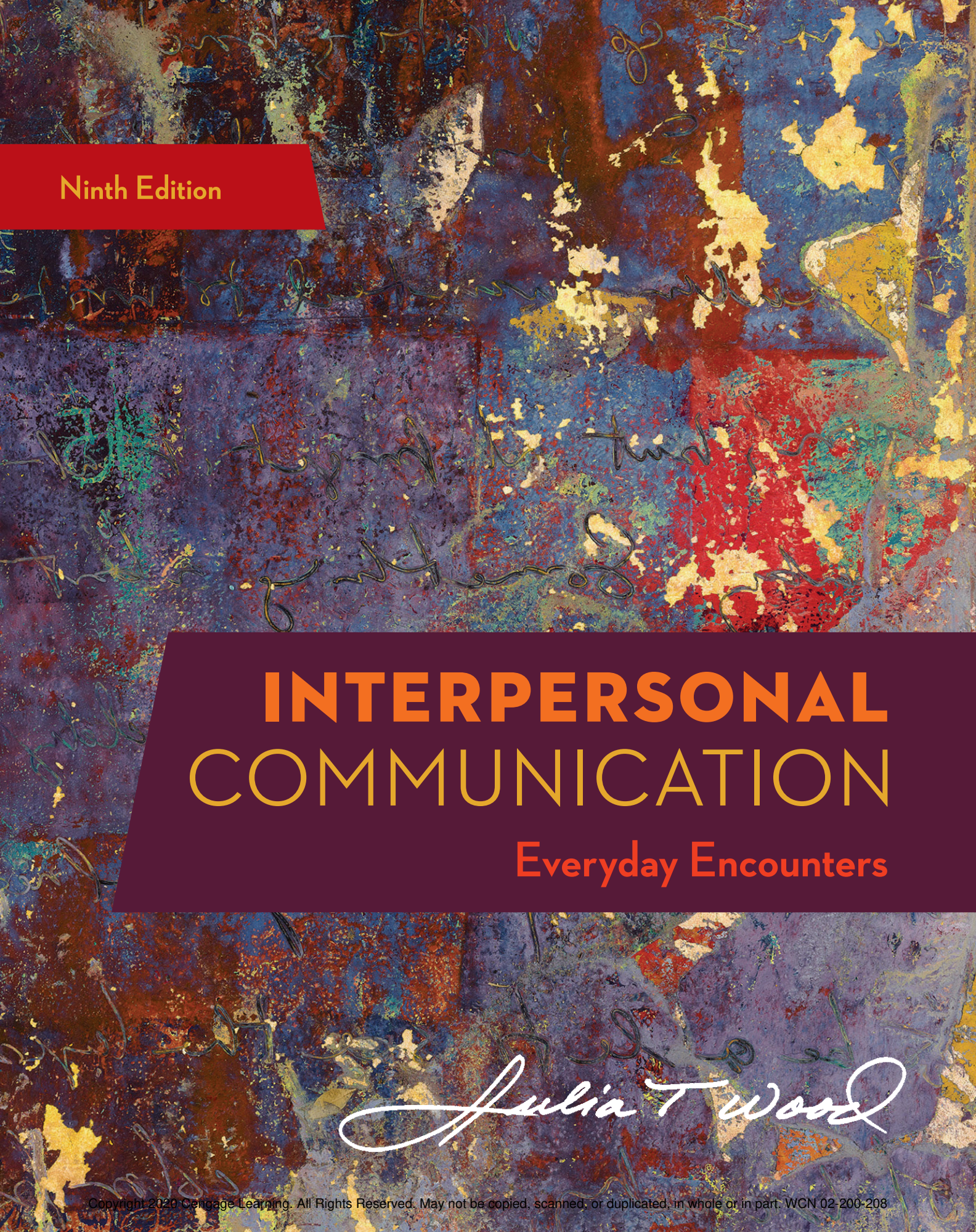


MINDTAP
From Cengage

Fit your coursework into your hectic life.

Make the most of your time by learning your way. Access the resources you need to succeed wherever, whenever.

- Get more from your time online with an easy-to-follow five-step learning path.
- Stay focused with an all-in-one-place, integrated presentation of course content.
- Get the free MindTap Mobile App and learn wherever you are.

Break limitations. Create your own potential, and be unstoppable with MindTap.

MINDTAP. POWERED BY YOU.

cengage.com/mindtap

Interpersonal Communication

edition 9

Everyday Encounters

Julia T. Wood

Lineberger Distinguished Professor of Humanities Emerita
Caroline H. and Thomas S. Royster Distinguished Professor of Graduate Education Emerita

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

CENGAGE

Australia • Brazil • Japan • Korea • Mexico • Singapore • Spain • United Kingdom • United States

***Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters,* Ninth Edition**
Julia T. Wood

Product Manager: Carolyn Lewis

Project Manager: Julie Dierig

Content Developer: Katy Gabel

Product Assistant: Camille Beckman

Marketing Manager: Andrea Shaw

Content Manager: Kathy Sands-Boehmer

Production Service: Lumina Datamatics, Inc.

Art Director: Marissa Falco

Text and Cover Designer: Chrissy Kurpeski

Cover Image: weathered by Rebecca Woodhouse 2013

Intellectual Property

Analyst: Ann Hoffman

Project Manager: Kathryn Kucharek

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018946351

Student Edition ISBN: 978-0-357-03294-7
Loose-leaf Edition ISBN: 978-1-337-91425-3

Cengage
20 Channel Center Street
Boston, MA 02210
USA

Cengage is a leading provider of customized learning solutions with employees residing in nearly 40 different countries and sales in more than 125 countries around the world. Find your local representative at **www.cengage.com**.

Cengage products are represented in Canada by Nelson Education, Ltd.

To learn more about Cengage platforms and services, visit **www.cengage.com**

To register or access your online learning solution or purchase materials for your course, visit **www.cengage.com/student**

Printed in the United States of America
Print Number: 01 Print Year: 2018

For Michelle, whose vision, values, and daring inspire me.

BRIEF CONTENTS

CONTENTS

COMMUNICATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

DIVERSITY

INSIGHT

SOCIAL MEDIA

WORKPLACE

PREFACE

I wrote this book to introduce students to knowledge and skills that will allow them to live fuller, more satisfying lives than they could without competence in interpersonal communication. To achieve that goal, *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* is distinct in three ways. First, it gives prominence to theories, research, and practical skills from the field of communication and supplements these with scholarship from other fields. Second, this book gives strong attention to three issues that are vital for students in the 21st century: social diversity, social media, and workplace contexts. Finally, this book offers unique pedagogical features that encourage personal learning. Throughout the book, I encourage students to engage theory and concepts personally and to apply theoretical information and skills to their everyday lives.

In this book, I focus on communication research and theory and complement them with work from other fields. Interpersonal communication is a well-established intellectual area, complete with a base of knowledge, theories, and research developed by communication scholars. The maturation of interpersonal communication as an intellectual discipline is evident in the substantial original research published in academic journals and scholarly books. Consistent with this scholarly growth, *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* features current research on communication. For example, Chapter 2 discusses communication strategies that we use to present our face and, if it's threatened, to protect it. Chapter 6, which focuses on listening, invites students to consider research showing that social media increasingly interfere with mindful, attentive listening. Chapter 11 discusses ways that social media facilitate and sometimes constrain communication in intimate relationships and offers information on long-distance romantic relationships, which are increasingly common. And Chapter 12 highlights family communication patterns that influence how parents and children interact.

Scholarship in other fields can enhance understanding of communication. For this reason, *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* incorporates research from other fields. Ongoing work in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, and other disciplines enriches insight into differences in communication that are influenced by gender, economic class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and race.

Attention to Significant Social Trends

Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters speaks to the context of students' lives today. I give attention to the social trends, issues, and concerns that characterize the 21st century in Western culture.

Social Diversity The United States, like many other countries, is enriched by a cornucopia of people, heritages, customs, and ways of interacting. *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* reflects and addresses social diversity by weaving it into the basic fabric of interpersonal communication.

Truly incorporating diversity into this book entails more than adding an isolated chapter on the topic or tacking paragraphs about gender or race onto conventional coverage of topics. To achieve a more organic approach to diversity, I weave discussion of race, ethnicity, economic class, gender, age, religion, and sexual orientation into the book as a whole. This approach allows students to appreciate the relevance of diversity to all aspects of interpersonal communication. For example, in exploring personal identity, I examine race, gender, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation as the core facets of identity. You'll also find numerous examples of ways in which diversity affects communication in the contemporary workplace, which is populated by people from different cultures and social communities. Chapters 4 and 5, which cover verbal and nonverbal communication, respectively, feature examples of communication in non-Western cultures. Chapter 11, on romantic relationships, discusses research on interracial, gay, and lesbian romance. And Chapter 12, on family communication, includes research on a range of families, including ones that are not white, middle-class, and heterosexual.

To discourage stereotyped thinking about groups of people, I use qualified language. For instance, when citing research about differences between Hispanic and European American communication patterns, I refer to "most Hispanics" and what is "typical of European Americans." My intent is to remind students that generalizations are limited and may not apply to every member of a group.

To further weave diversity into this book, I include "Communication in Everyday Life" features that emphasize connections between communication and diversity.

Social Media Another defining feature of our era is the pervasive presence of social media in our lives. We email, tweet, and text to stay in touch with friends and family. We join online support groups. We blog, check Facebook, Skype, and send instant messages (IMs). We participate in online religious and political discussions. We meet people, make friends, network, flirt, and date—all online. As with social diversity, this topic is better covered by integrating it organically into all chapters rather than by relegating it to a separate chapter.

Every chapter in this edition includes a main section in which I discuss how social media pertain to the chapter's content. In addition, this edition includes "Communication in Everyday Life" features that highlight social media. Finally, I have integrated technology into the text itself. I suggest a number of websites and online sources for students who want to learn more about particular topics in "Communication in Everyday Life."

Ethics Ethical issues infuse interpersonal interaction. We are frequently confronted with ethical choices: Do we tell a "white lie" when a friend asks us how we like a very expensive new coat or do we say honestly that we don't think it's flattering? Do we exaggerate our attractiveness when creating our profile for an online dating site? Do we pretend to be listening when we are really not? Do we judge people from other cultures by the norms and standards of our own culture? These are just a few of the ethical choices that arise in our everyday encounters. To underline the ethical character of interpersonal communication, I call attention to such issues both in the chapter content and in the "Thinking Critically" exercises at the end of each chapter.

Coverage of Timely Topics

Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters provides coverage of topics and issues that have increased importance in this era. There is a **full chapter on friendships**, because so many of my students tell me that friendships are essential to them in the face of the growing number of broken marriages and geographically dispersed families. Social media make it possible for friends to stay in touch with each other across distances that separate them. The chapter on romantic relationships addresses some of the **"dark side" issues** in personal relationships such as stalking, abuse, and violence between intimates. This chapter also discusses using communication to negotiate safer sex.

Students are also increasingly career-focused. They want to know how what they are studying pertains to the world of work and how it will help them succeed in that world. This edition of *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* gives **prominence to connections between interpersonal communication concepts and skills and the workplace** in four ways. First, I include research about on-the-job communication within each chapter. Second, I call attention to particularly interesting connections between interpersonal communication and careers by highlighting them in "Communication in Everyday Life—Workplace" boxes. Third, at the end of each chapter, I feature a workplace application. Finally, for instructors who want fuller coverage of on-the-job communication, I have prepared a chapter on organizational communication that can be bundled with this text as a part of our customization program; contact your sales representative for details.

Changes in the Ninth Edition

Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters has evolved in response to feedback from instructors and students as well as new research in communication and kindred disciplines.

I have made several significant content changes in this edition:

- As noted earlier, this edition provides stronger and more integrated attention to social media. Every chapter includes a section that discusses

connections between chapter themes and social media. In addition, every chapter includes one or more "Communication in Everyday Life" features that highlight social media.

- This edition emphasizes connecting theories and concepts covered in the chapters with students' real lives. Each chapter includes a new feature, Reach Out, that invites students to communicate with someone about material presented in the chapter in order to discover the concrete implications of ideas they've read about.
- The text gives heightened attention to ethics. In addition to coverage of ethical choices woven throughout the text, a Thinking Critically question focused specifically on ethics appears at the end of each chapter.
- I have included findings from more than 150 new sources that reflect the latest research related to interpersonal communication. Attention to current research ensures that *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* remains grounded in strong scholarship while also being accessible to students.

Pedagogy for Personal Learning

In addition to this book's distinct conceptual emphases, I adopt a **conversational and personal tone** to encourage students to feel they are full participants in a dialogue. I use contractions, as people do in everyday conversations. Also, I include examples of everyday interactions so that abstract ideas are clarified in practical ways. In my writing, I share with students some of the communication challenges and encounters that have surfaced in my life. The conversational writing style aims to prompt students to think of their own examples and applications of material presented in the book. As students do this, they interact personally with the concepts, principles, and skills presented in this book.

My voice is not the only one that students will encounter in this book. All chapters are enhanced by a second personal learning feature—**student commentaries** that were written by students in interpersonal communication classes at my university and other colleges and universities around the nation. Their experiences, insights, and concerns broaden the conversation to include a wide range of perspectives. The student commentaries also encourage active learning through observation, comparison, and analysis. As students read the commentaries, they observe others and compare and contrast others' experiences and perspectives with their own. If students wish to write their own commentaries for future editions of this book, I invite them to send those to me at Cengage.

In particular, this edition's pedagogy is built on a strengthened learning architecture, based on skill building, application, and critical thinking, reflected and integrated carefully in **MindTap—**a personalized teaching experience with assignments that guide students to analyze, apply, and improve thinking, allowing instructors to measure skills and outcomes with ease. At MindTap students are able to use dynamic technological resources, including interactive videos and simulations; find high-value gradable activities; and practice in an engaging, personalized online environment.

Each chapter now previews the chapter content for students with an easily reviewed set of **Learning Objectives** paired with a list of chapter topics. Each Learning Objective has been carefully matched with one or more activities that will demonstrate its mastery.

The **photo program** now includes more stills from popular media, with thought-provoking captions.

"Everyday Skills" now cover most Learning Objectives and emphasize that they are all about skill building. They may be answered in the book or online, in MindTap.

"Communication in Everyday Life" features—with the subcategories "Diversity," "Insight, "Social Media," and "Workplace"—highlight interesting research and examples of interpersonal communication in real life. These items encourage students to observe how principles and concepts actually work in concrete situations, to witness the application of theory and concepts to particular cases, and to compare their own experiences and values with those presented in the "Communication in Everyday Life" features. I often suggest ways to apply the boxed material via reflection, action, or written responses in MindTap.

An unparalleled collection of skill-building, application, and critical thinking activities appears at chapter's end and online in MindTap, beginning with the highly engaging "Continuing the Conversation"

video situations. Chapter-end features provide a logical learning sequence for all activities, building up to progressively more challenging levels of practice and application. The levels move from the simplest review ("Chapter Summary" and "Key Concepts") to the most challenging application ("Thinking Critically").

High-value, gradable versions of all activities are incorporated in MindTap, and MindTap is cued in the text wherever appropriate, to remind students that they may take activities there interactively. End-of-chapter highlights:

"Continuing the Conversation" case studies continue the conversation of the chapter by allowing students to see how the theories and principles that they just read about show up in everyday life. Video is available for students in MindTap.

"Assessing Yourself" self-assessment quizzes in most chapters allow students to apply chapter concepts at the most basic level: themselves.

"Everyday Skills" emphasize the next level of application: skill building with author support. "Everyday Skills" icons in the book's margins point students to these skill-building application exercises at the end of the chapter. In MindTap these exercises may be taken exactly where they are referenced in the text.

"Engaging with Ideas" reflections and **"Thinking Critically"** activities allow students to reflect and write in more depth—in MindTap—by considering questions about personal, on-the-job, and ethical applications.

Additional Resources for Instructors

Accompanying *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* is an Instructor Companion Website where you will find an Instructor's Resource Manual, Cengage Learning Testing Powered by Cognero, and PowerPoint presentations.

The extensive **Instructor's Resource Manual**, co-authored by Narissra Punyanunt-Carter of Texas Tech University and me, supplements the textbook. The manual discusses philosophical and pragmatic considerations involved in teaching the introductory course in interpersonal communication. It also includes suggestions for course emphases, sample syllabi, exercises, and films appropriate for each chapter, journal items, and panel ideas.

Cengage Learning Testing Powered by Cognero is a flexible, online system that allows you to

- Author, edit, and manage test bank content from multiple Cengage Learning solutions.
- Create multiple test versions in an instant.
- Deliver tests from your LMS, your classroom, or wherever you want.

The **Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentations** are predesigned for use with the book and fully customizable.

Acknowledgments

Although I am the only listed author of this book, many people have contributed to it. I am especially indebted to members of the publishing team who transformed my manuscript into the final book you are holding. Specifically, I thank Julie Dierig, the product manager; Katy Gabel, my content developer; Kathy Sands-Boehmer, content project manager; Ann Hoffman, IP analyst; and the copy-editing and project management staff at Lumina Datamatics.

In addition to the editorial and production teams at Cengage, I am grateful to the survey respondents and reviewers who gave me valuable feedback that I used in preparing this edition:

Finally, I am indebted to family and friends who enrich my life. At the top of that list is Robbie (Robert) Cox, my partner in love, life, adventure, and dreams for 40 years. He cheers with me when writing is going well and bolsters my confidence when it isn't. He provides a critical ear when I want a sounding board and privacy when I am immersed in a project. And he is an ongoing source of experience in interpersonal communication. Along with Robbie, I am fortunate to have the love and support of my sister Carolyn and my close friends. And, of course, always, I appreciate the love and patience of the four-footed members of my family: our dog, Sydney, and our cats, Rigby and Always Rowdy. Unlike my two-footed friends, these three keep me company when I am writing at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning.

Julia T Wood

December 2018

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Wood joined the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill when she was 24. During her 37 years on the faculty, she taught classes and conducted research on personal relationships and on gender, communication, and culture. She was named the Lineberger Distinguished Professor of Humanities and the Caroline H. and Thomas S. Royster Distinguished Professor of Graduate Education.

She has published 25 books and 100 articles and book chapters. In addition, she has presented more than 100 papers at professional conferences and campuses around the United States. She has received 14 awards honoring her teaching and 16 awards recognizing her scholarship.

Professor Wood lives with her partner, Robert Cox, who is a Professor Emeritus of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Sharing their home are their dog, Sydney, and two cats, Rigby and Always Rowdy.

Professor Wood continues to write and conduct research. In addition, she volunteers and serves on the board of Carolina Tiger Rescue and chairs the communication committee for her community.

wavebreakmedia/Shutterstock.com

INTRODUCTION

MindTap®

Read, highlight, and take notes online.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

When I was 20 years old, something happened that changed the rest of my life: I took an interpersonal communication class. A new world of meaning opened up for me as I learned about the power of communication to enhance or harm our relationships. The more courses I took, the more fascinated I became, so I decided to make a career of studying and teaching interpersonal communication. I wrote *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* because I wanted to awaken you, as my first course awakened me, to the power of interpersonal communication to enrich us and the relationships in our lives.

In the opening pages of this book, I'll introduce you to the field of interpersonal communication, to myself, to the features of this book, and to some of the special concerns and issues that surround interpersonal communication in this era.

THE FIELD OF COMMUNICATION

The field of communication has a long and distinguished intellectual history. It dates back to ancient Greece, where great philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato taught rhetoric, or public speaking, as a necessary skill for participation in civic life. In the 2,000 years since the communication field originated, it has expanded to encompass many kinds of interaction, including interpersonal communication, group discussion, family communication, health communication, oral traditions, organizational communication, and nonverbal communication.

Interpersonal communication is one of the most popular and vibrant areas in the discipline. Student demand for courses in interpersonal communication is consistently strong. Faculty respond by offering more classes, including advanced ones, that help students learn to interact effectively in their everyday interpersonal encounters.

Reflecting the intellectual maturity of the field, communication theory and research offer rich insight into the impact of interpersonal communication on individual identity and on personal, social, and professional relationships. Because interpersonal communication is central to our lives, it naturally intersects with other disciplines that are concerned with human behavior. Thus, research in communication contributes to and draws from work in such fields as psychology, business, sociology, anthropology, and counseling. The interdisciplinary mingling of ideas enriches the overall perspective on human interaction that you will find in *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters*.

A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

When I was an undergraduate, most of the books I read seemed distant and impersonal. I never had the feeling a real human being had written them, and authors never introduced themselves except by stating their titles. Certainly, that's no way to begin a book about interpersonal communication! I want to introduce myself personally to you and explain my reasons for writing this book.

As I've already mentioned, I became fascinated by interpersonal communication when I was an undergraduate student. Today, I'm more excited than ever about the study and practice of interpersonal communication. It has been exciting to watch and participate in the growth of research on interpersonal communication and to observe how strong scholarship has facilitated applications to people's everyday lives.

Although research and writing occupy a great deal of my time, I have other interests as well. For instance, I work with wild cats at the Carolina Tiger Rescue and I volunteer at a library. I also cherish my relationships with my partner, Robbie, and close friends and family. Interacting with these people continuously enlarges my appreciation of the vital role of interpersonal communication in our everyday lives.

In describing myself to you, I can also tell you that I am European American, southern, middle class, middle aged, and heterosexual and that I strive to live in ways that are consistent with my spiritual values. Each facet of my identity shapes how I communicate, just as your age, race, class, gender, spirituality, and sexual orientation shape your communication. For instance, I don't know what it is like to be a man, to be in a same-sex romantic relationship, or to live in poverty. However, that doesn't mean that I, or you, can't learn to understand and respect the experiences of people who differ—sometimes radically—from us.

All of us are limited by our own identities and the experiences and understandings they have—and have not—given us. Yet this doesn't mean we have to be completely uninformed about those who differ from us. In fact, the more we interact with a range of people, the more we discover important similarities as well as interesting differences. Learning about both is essential for ethical, effective participation in our pluralistic world.

Communication in Everyday Life

DIVERSITY

A Kaleidoscopic Culture

The United States has always been a country of many races and ethnicities, and it's only going to become more so in years ahead. Today, minorities represent more than one-third of the U.S. population. By 2060, minorities are predicted to represent 57% of the U.S. population (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2015).

	2005	2050
African American	13%	13%
Asian	5%	9%
Caucasian	67%	47%
Hispanic	14%	29%

The Census also predicts that there will be more older Americans in the years to come. Currently one in seven Americans is 65 or older; by 2050, that should grow to one in five (Cooper, 2012; Gross, 2016).

To learn more about changing demographics in the United States, go to http://www.census.gov. Read information in the "People" category under "Estimates and Projections."

Living and Learning in a Diverse World

In our era, it is essential to learn about and respect perspectives that differ from our own and from those of the communities in which we were raised. It's very likely that you will have friends and neighbors whose ethnic backgrounds differ from your own. It's even more likely—almost guaranteed—that you will work with people of diverse ages, races, sexual orientations, gender identities, and spiritual commitments. You may date people of many races and religious backgrounds, and if you have children, it's very likely they will do the same. Personal effectiveness in our era requires skill in communicating well with a range of people.

Interacting with people who differ from us not only teaches us about them but also prompts insights into ourselves. Westerners can see their competitive attitude toward athletics in a new light if they consider the Japanese preference for tied or very close scores in sporting events so that neither side loses face. It is difficult to understand what whiteness is if you interact only with whites; it's hard to recognize the character of heterosexuality if you know only straight people. Thus, learning about people in other cultures and people who are outside of what the culture defines as mainstream inevitably teaches us about the mainstream as well. This explains why students who encounter diversity score higher on critical thinking than students who do not, and white students reap the most benefit from engaging diversity (Berrett, 2012).

The diversity of our society offers both opportunities and challenges. Exploring variations in gender, race, class, cultural heritage, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical and mental ability, and spiritual belief can enhance our appreciation of the range of human behavior and the options open to us as people and as communicators. At the same time, diversity can complicate interaction because people may communicate in dissimilar ways and misunderstand one another, as Yih-Tang Lin notes in her commentary.

Communication in Everyday Life

DIVERSITY

About Vocabulary in This Book

Because social diversity is woven into this book, it's important to think carefully about the language used to refer to social groups. Whenever possible, I cite research done by members of the groups we are discussing so we understand groups from the perspectives of insiders. Drawing on research, I present generalizations about various groups. But the generalizations are only that: generalizations. They are not universal truths that apply to all members of a group. There are always exceptions to generalizations. As you read, you may discover that you are a living exception to some of the generalizations about groups to which you belong. If so, you may want to reflect on the reasons you depart from group tendencies.

Generalizations should not be used to stereotype members of particular groups. For instance, in Chapter 4 you will read about gendered speech communities. You will learn how women and men typically—but not always, not in every case—differ in their communication styles. You will also learn about communication patterns in some traditional African American communities. The general patterns you read about don't describe every woman, man, or African American. Any of us may depart from the usual patterns of our groups, because of individual differences and because we belong to multiple groups.

The key point to keep in mind as you read is this: Generalizations are both important and limited. They are important because they inform us of broad patterns that can be useful starting points in our efforts to understand and interact with others. At the same time, generalizations are limited because they do not necessarily tell us about any single individual who belongs to a group. Thus, it's important to qualify generalizations. You'll notice that I use words such as *usually*, *typically*, and *in general*. These are to remind us that there are exceptions to generalizations, so we can never assume that a generalization applies to a specific person.

Dougal Waters/Digital Vision/Getty Images

YIH-TANG LIN

When I first came here to school, I was amazed at how big the rooms in dormitories are, so I remarked on this. All of the Americans had a laugh at that and thought I was joking. In my country, individuals have very little space, and houses are tight together. The first time an American disagreed with me, I felt angry that he would make me lose face. We don't ever contradict another person directly. I have had many miscommunications in this country.

In this book, we will consider many ways in which diversity intersects with communication. For instance, we'll see how the same gestures mean very different things in different cultures, and we'll discover that women and men, in general, rely on both similar and distinct types of communication to create closeness. We'll also learn that race and ethnicity influence how people interact. And, as the Communication in Everyday Life: Social Media feature on page 6 shows, we will learn how age differences affect interpersonal communication. Weaving diversity into how we think about interpersonal communication enlarges understandings of communication and the range of people and perspectives it involves. Cherrie, a student in one of my courses, makes this point effectively in her commentary.

CHERRIE

I am Hispanic, and I am tired of classes and books that ignore my people. Last year, I took a course in family life, and all we talked about was Western, middle-class white families. Their ways are not my ways. A course on family should be about many kinds of families. I took a course in great literature, and there was only one author who was not Western and only three who were women. It's not true that only white men write great literature.

Blend Images/Shutterstock.com

Cherrie and others who were not born and raised in the United States also have much to teach students who are native citizens of the United States, as Carl's commentary reveals.

Communication in Everyday Life

SOCIAL MEDIA

What's Digitally Polite?

Is it polite to leave a voice message when someone doesn't answer the phone? How about sending an email to tell someone you left a voice mail—is that polite? Should you open emails with "hello" and close with "bye"? It turns out that whether you think those are polite courtesies or not may depend on your age.

Younger people are rewriting the rules of etiquette to fit an era saturated by social media. When you are sending dozens or even hundreds of messages a day, "hello" and "goodbye" become superfluous. So do emails or texts that say "thank you"—no need for those. If you call someone who doesn't answer his or her cell phone, he or she will see that you called and should call or text you back to talk, so there's no need to leave a voice message (Bilton, 2013).

People who aren't digital natives, however, often operate by the rules that regulated communication as they were growing up. To them, it *is* polite to start messages with "hello" and end them with "goodbye"; in fact, it's impolite not to do so. And, to them, you should leave a message if the person you called doesn't answer—it's only polite to let him or her know why you called.

Communicating via social media, like communicating face to face, is most effective when we adapt our communication to the people with whom we are interacting. If you're calling a 60-year-old, it's probably fine to leave a voice message that you wouldn't leave when calling a 20-year-old.

This isn't the first time that new technologies have presented etiquette puzzles. When the telephone was invented in the 1870s, people weren't sure how to answer the phone. Many picked up the phone and said nothing, waiting for the caller to start the conversation. Alexander Graham Bell, who had invented the phone, proposed "Ahoy" as the proper greeting (Bilton, 2013).

CARL

At first, I was really put off by the two students in our class who were from China. Like when we talked about conflict and they just didn't get it—I mean, that's the way it seemed to me when they said they tried to avoid it. But the more I listened to them, the more I saw that they were really saying there are ways for people to work around differences without having to attack each other or make the other person look bad. It's really different than how I was brought up—you know, stand your ground, muster your arguments, win! I'm still not sure I really get their perspective, but it does make me think about whether I always need to be so fast to try to beat the next guy.

Like many of us, Carl's first inclination is to view ways other than his own as inferior. But Carl moved beyond that starting point. He worked to consider his Chinese classmates' perspectives on conflict on their terms, in the context of their culture. In turn, they enlarged Carl's perspective on ways to deal with conflict. Like Carl, most of us will not always find it easy to appreciate or respect ways that are different from our own. Yet the struggle is worthwhile because it can enrich us personally and enable us to participate more effectively in a world characterized by many perspectives on life and communication.

INTRODUCTION TO FEATURES OF THIS BOOK

Woven into this book are four features that I hope will make it more interesting to you and more helpful as a resource for understanding and improving your own interpersonal communication.

First, I've written this book in a **conversational tone** so that you can connect with the ideas in the pages that follow. Like you, I am interested in interpersonal communication, and I am continually trying to figure out how to be more effective in my everyday encounters with others. In this book, I share some of my experiences and some of the perspectives and skills that enhance my interactions.

Second, in each chapter I feature **comments from students** such as Cherrie, Carl, and Yih-Tang Lin. Because students teach me so much, I've included many of their comments in the chapters that follow. These are taken from journals they've kept in interpersonal communication classes taught by me and by instructors at other schools. In reading their commentaries, you'll discover that some of these students seem much like you and that others seem quite different. It's likely that you'll agree with some of the students' comments, disagree with others, and want to think still further about others. However you respond to their ideas, I suspect that, like me, you will find them interesting, insightful, and often challenging.

Third, each chapter includes several "Communication in Everyday Life" features that extend chapter coverage by **spotlighting interesting research and news items** about interpersonal communication. When this information is particularly relevant to cultural diversity, social media, or the workplace, I call that to your attention with special titles for each of those themes.

Fourth, this book emphasizes **personal learning**. Most of us, especially students, are familiar with impersonal learning, which occurs when someone else tells or shows us something. In other words, we receive knowledge passively.

Personal learning, in contrast, occurs when we interact with subject matter. Rather than just receiving information, we do something active—we reflect, observe, assess ourselves, discuss, debate, engage in action, or write about ideas; we experiment with principles and skills; we contrast, compare, and analyze. All of these activities involve us in generating and testing knowledge rather than just receiving it. The personal learning approach assumes that effective learning involves some kind of experience and some dialogue with the self (reflection, application) or others.

Several specific end-of-chapter and online features in this book foster personal learning. First is a feature titled "Interactive Video Activity: Continuing the Conversation." This is a case study that allows you to see, on the web, how concepts, theories, and principles discussed in the chapter show up in real-life interactions. Second, each chapter includes one "Reach Out" feature, which invites you to apply something covered in the chapter to your own life. Third, in most chapters, you will find an "Assessing Yourself" quiz whose answers will be revealed if you take it online. Fourth, you'll find several "Everyday Skills" activities that give you an opportunity to extend and apply material discussed in the text to your own life by doing something or engaging in dialogue with yourself or others. Some of the "Everyday Skills" show you how to develop a particular communication skill; others ask you to reflect on ideas we've discussed to observe communication principles and patterns in your everyday encounters. Fifth, there are "Engaging with Ideas" features that ask you to reflect on one question that requires personal learning, as well as two other questions that focus on the workplace and ethics. Finally, there are "Thinking Critically" questions for you to reflect on and write about in more depth.

I hope this book will enhance your appreciation of the power of interpersonal communication in our relationships. I also hope it will motivate you to apply the principles and skills presented here in your everyday life.

chapter

ONE

sirtravelalot/Shutterstock.com

A FIRST LOOK AT INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Interpersonal Imperative

Definition of Interpersonal Communication

Models of Interpersonal Communication

Principles of Interpersonal Communication

Social Media in Everyday Life

Guidelines for Interpersonal Communication Competence

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

List the range of needs that people try to meet through interpersonal communication.

Give examples of the three types of relationships in Buber's view of communication.

Identify the key features that define interpersonal communication.

Distinguish content and relationship levels of meaning.

Apply the transactional model of interpersonal communication to a specific interaction.

Recognize eight principles behind effective interpersonal communication.

Explain how the definition of interpersonal communication and its features apply to social media.

Apply the guidelines discussed in this chapter to assess communication competence in a particular interaction.

MindTap®

Read, highlight, and take notes online.

You've been interviewing for 2 months, and so far you haven't gotten a single job offer. After another interview that didn't go well, you text a friend. Instead of a terse response, your friend texts back to suggest getting together for lunch. Over pizza, you disclose that you're starting to worry that you won't ever get hired. Your friend listens closely and lets you know he understands how you feel and he isn't judging you. Then he tells you about other people he knows who also haven't yet gotten job offers. All of a sudden, you don't feel so alone. Your friend reminds you how worried you felt

last term when you were struggling with your physics course and then made a B on the final. As you listen to him, your sagging confidence begins to recover. Before leaving, he tells you about a virtual interview website that allows you to practice interviewing skills, and he works with you to communicate more effectively in interviews. By the time you leave, you feel hopeful again.

Interpersonal communication is central to our everyday lives. We count on others to care about what is happening in our lives and to help us celebrate good moments and deal with problems and disappointments (Galvin, Braithwaite, & Bylund, 2014). In addition, we need others to encourage our personal and professional growth. Friends and romantic partners who believe in us enable us to overcome self-defeating patterns and help us become the people we want to be. Coworkers who give us advice and feedback help us increase our effectiveness on the job. And sometimes we just want to hang out with people we like, trust, and have fun with.

In the workplace, interpersonal communication is critically important. A 2010 national survey of employers reported that 89% of employers consider that college students should focus on learning to communicate effectively orally and in writing in order to be successful professionally (Rhodes, 2010). Similarly, in 2012 employers said that key qualities for job applicants were interpersonal skill, oral communication skill, and adaptability (Selingo, 2012). The following year, another survey showed that 93% of employers think a job candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically and communicate clearly is more important than the focus of his or her undergraduate studies (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Finally, a 2016 survey reported that regardless of their chosen professions, there are certain skills every student needs to be a successful employee, and those include communication skills—specifically, oral and interpersonal communication (Coffelt, Baker, & Corey, 2016). These findings explain why people who major in communication outpace other college graduates in being hired within 6 months of graduation (Collins, 2016).

Leaders of organizations such as FedEx and GlaxoSmithKline list communication as a vital skill for their employees (O'Hair & Eadie, 2009). The pivotal role of communication in health care makes it unsurprising that an increasing number of medical schools base admissions, in part, on applicants' communication skills, especially their ability to communicate empathy to patients (Rosenbaum, 2011).

In this chapter, we take a first look at interpersonal communication. We start by identifying the ways in which interpersonal communication meets important human needs. Next, we define interpersonal communication and provide a model of how it works. Then we discuss the principles of effective interpersonal communication and consider how social media affect interpersonal communication. To close the chapter, we identify guidelines for achieving competence in interpersonal communication.

THE INTERPERSONAL IMPERATIVE

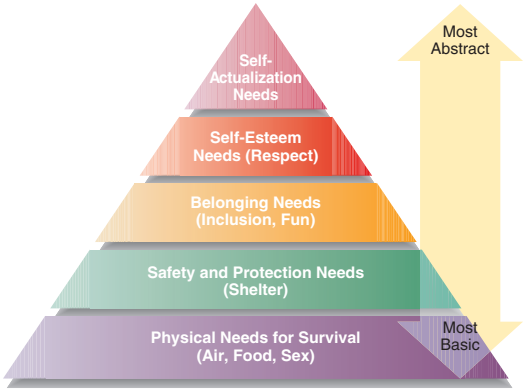


Figure **1.1**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Have you ever thought about why you communicate? Psychologist William Schutz (1966) developed interpersonal needs theory, which asserts that we create and sustain relationships to meet three basic needs. The first need is for affection, which is a desire to give and receive love and liking. The second need is for inclusion, which is a desire to be social and to be included in groups. The third need is for control, which is a desire to influence the people and events in our lives.

Expanding on Schutz's ideas, Abraham Maslow (1968) proposed that we communicate to meet a range of human needs. According to Maslow, basic needs must be satisfied before we can focus on those that are more abstract (see Figure 1.1).

Physical Needs

At the most basic level, humans need to survive, and communication helps us meet this need. Babies cry to alert others when they are hungry or in pain or danger. Beyond survival, children need interaction if they are to thrive. As we grow older, we continue to rely on communication to survive and to thrive. Good communication between doctors and patients is related to effective treatment and to patients' physical health (Fleishman, Sherbourne, & Crystal, 2000). Our effectiveness in communicating affects what jobs we get and how much we earn to pay for medical care, food, leisure activities, and housing.

Furthermore, researchers have amassed impressive evidence to document the close link between physical health and relationships with others (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009). College students who are in committed relationships have fewer mental health problems and are less likely to be obese (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010), cancer patients who are married live longer than cancer patients who are single ("A Lifesaving Side to Marriage," 2016; "Cancer," 2009), and people who lack close emotional connections with others are more likely to have heart attacks and strokes ("Loneliness Hurts the Heart," 2016) or develop dementia than are people who have strong relationships (Brody, 2013). So important is the connection between meaningful interpersonal relationships and health that doctors John Cacioppo and William Patrick (2009) assert that "social isolation has an impact on health comparable to the effect of high blood pressure, lack of exercise, obesity, or smoking" (p. 5). Given this information, it is unsurprising that people who have strong social connections live almost 4 years longer than people with weaker social ties (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010).

Safety Needs

We also use communication to meet safety needs. If your roof is leaking or if termites have invaded your apartment, you must talk with the property manager to get the problem solved so that you have safe shelter. If someone is threatening you, you need to talk with authorities to gain protection. If you take the car keys from a friend who has been drinking and say, "I'll drive you home," you may save a life. We go online to research health problems we have.

My mom is a worrier, and she was really concerned when I decided to come to this big school instead of the one near home. She calls me like five times a day just to ask what I'm doing and if I'm okay. I get on her case about that a lot, but I really like knowing she stays in touch and always has my back.

Communication also helps protect us from dangers and harm. When foods are determined to be unsafe, news media inform the public. When defects in cars and other products are discovered, recalls are issued. Residents in communities with toxic waste dumps rely on social networks to organize and then communicate with officials and media to call attention to environmental toxins that endanger their safety. After the tragic shootings at several schools, many campuses around the country developed plans for email alerts and sirens to warn students of any dangers.

Belonging Needs

The third level in Maslow's hierarchy is belonging, or social, needs. All of us want to feel that we fit in our work and social groups. We want others' company, acceptance, and affirmation, and we want to give companionship, acceptance, and affirmation to others. The painful feeling of being excluded or rejected is often described as being "frozen out" or getting the "cold shoulder." It turns out that the cold sensation is not just metaphorical but is real. Researchers Hans Ijzerman and Justin Saddlemyer (2012) found that our body temperature drops when we feel excluded.

The connection between belonging needs and health is well established. People who are deprived of human interaction over a long time may fail to develop a concept of themselves as humans. The "Communication in Everyday Life: Diversity" feature summarizes two dramatic cases of social isolation. The first case is that of Victor, a wild boy found in France in 1800; the second case is that of Ramu, or "*Ghadya ka Bacha*," the "wolf boy" (Gerstein, 1998; Shattuck, 1994). Doctors who examined Ramu concluded that he was a feral child, which means he was raised in the wild with little or no human contact. As a result, he did not have a sense of himself as a person or a human being. His self-concept and self-esteem were shaped by those with whom he interacted, presumably wolves.

Communication in Everyday Life

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Networking on the Job

For years, employers discouraged workers from social networking while on the job, but now many employers are encouraging it. Social text and Microsoft SharePoint 2010 are two of the leaders in online social tools for the workplace. Interactive online platforms allow employees to create and maintain their own profile pages with personal information, photos, and information such as birthday and college attended. Rather than having "friends," they have "colleagues." They can post real-time status updates on their profile page and participate on internal wikis that allow team collaboration (Swift, 2010).

Do you agree that social networking at work is good for workers and employers?

Two other cases are documented by sociologist Kingsley Davis (1940, 1947). Anna and Isabelle, two girls who were not related to one another, received minimal human contact and care during the first 6 years of their lives. Authorities who discovered the children reported that both girls lived in dark, dank attics. Anna and Isabelle were so undeveloped intellectually that they behaved like 6-month-olds. Anna was startlingly apathetic and unresponsive to others. She did not progress well despite care, contact, and nutrition. She died 4 years after she was discovered. Isabelle fared better. When she was found, she communicated by grunts and gestures and was responsive to human interaction. After 2 years in systematic therapy, Isabelle's intelligence approached normal levels for her age.

How do we explain the difference between these two isolated children and what happened to them? There was one major difference. Anna was left alone all the time and had no human contact. Food was periodically put in her room, but nobody talked to her or played with her. Isabelle, on the other hand, shared her space with her mother, who was deaf and mute. The family had renounced both of them and sequestered them in an attic.

Although Isabelle didn't have the advantage of normal family interaction, she did have contact with her mother. Because the mother was deaf and mute, she couldn't teach Isabelle to speak, but she did teach Isabelle to interact with gestures and sounds that both of them understood. Thus, Isabelle suffered less extreme deprivation than Anna.

Self-Esteem Needs

Moving up Maslow's hierarchy, we find self-esteem needs, which involve valuing and respecting ourselves and being valued and respected by others. As we will see in Chapter 2, communication is the primary way we figure out who we are and who we can be. We gain our first sense of self from others who communicate how they see us. Parents and other family members tell children they are pretty or plain, smart or slow, good or bad, helpful or difficult, and so forth. As family members communicate their perceptions, children begin to form images of themselves.

This process continues throughout life as we see ourselves reflected in others' eyes. In elementary school, our teachers and peers influence our perceptions of how

smart we are, how good we are at soccer, and how attractive we are. Later, friends and romantic partners reflect their views of us as loving or unloving, generous or selfish, open or closed, and trustworthy or untrustworthy. In professional life, our coworkers and supervisors communicate in ways that suggest how much they respect us and our abilities. Through all the stages of our lives, our self-esteem is shaped by how others communicate with us.

Self-Actualization Needs

According to Maslow, the most abstract human need is self-actualization. Maslow (1954/1970) defined *self-actualization* as fully developing and using our unique "talents, capacities, potentialities" (p. 150). To achieve this, we need to refine talents that we have and cultivate new potentials in ourselves. As humans, we seek more than survival, safety, belonging, and esteem. We also thrive on growth. Each of us wants to cultivate new dimensions of mind, heart, and spirit. We seek to enlarge our perspectives, engage in challenging and different experiences, learn new skills, and test ourselves in unfamiliar territories.

Communication fosters our personal growth. Therapists can be powerful resources in helping us identify our potentials. Friends, family, coworkers, and teachers can help us recognize promise in ourselves that we otherwise might not see. Adam recalls how such a person affected him in his first job.

Communication in Everyday Life

DIVERSITY

Missing Socialization

Most of us take socialization for granted. We are born into families, and they socialize us as members of the human world of meaning and action. But what if there were no humans around to socialize you? Would you still be human? The question of what it means to be human is at the heart of two extraordinary stories of "wild children" who appear to have grown up without human contact (Douthwaite, 2002; Gerstein, 1998; Shattuck, 1994).

The first case took place in 1800. One day, French hunters found a strange creature in the woods. They were unsure what the creature was—perhaps a wild pig or monkey, they thought. The hunters tied the creature to a pole and brought it out of the woods for villagers to see. Quickly, it was determined that the creature was a human boy—filthy, naked, mute, and wild, but human nonetheless. When scientists were consulted, they said the boy was severely mentally disabled and unteachable. However, Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard disagreed. He was a young doctor who devoted many years to trying to socialize the wild boy, whom he named Victor. Itard was not successful, perhaps because Victor had missed human socialization during a critical developmental period early in life. The story of Victor is portrayed in François Truffaut's film *The Wild Child*.

A second case occurred in India in the middle of the 20th century. A young, naked, starving boy found his way to the hospital at Balrampur, India. He showed no ability to interact with people and had heavy calluses as though he moved on all fours. In addition, there were scars on the boy's neck as though he had been dragged by animals. The boy, named Ramu by the hospital staff, spent most of his time playing with a stuffed animal, as a wild animal might in its lair. He showed no interest in communicating; indeed, he seemed to feel no connection with other people. Ramu howled when he smelled raw meat in the hospital kitchen more than 100 yards from his room—far too great a distance for the human sense of smell to detect a scent. Ramu also didn't eat like a human; he tore meat apart and lapped milk from a container. Most of the doctors and scientists who examined Ramu concluded that he was a "wolf boy"—"*Ghadya ka Bacha*" in the Hindi language—who had grown up in the wild and had been socialized by wolves.

Would you say Ramu was a wolf, a boy, or something else?

ADAM

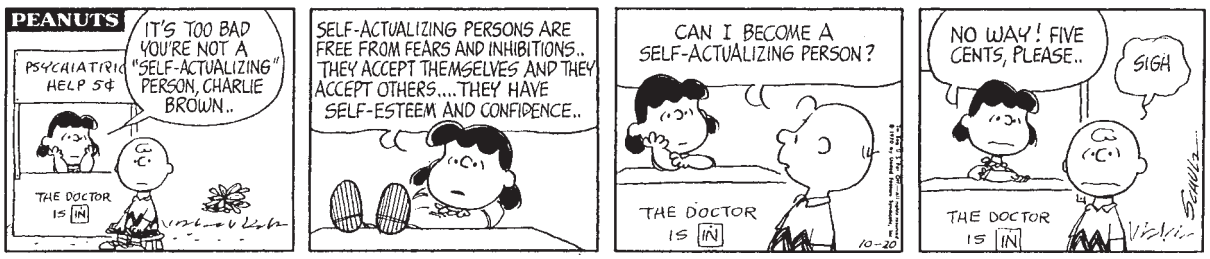
Mr. Bentley really helped me when I had my first job. It wasn't much—just serving at a sandwich shop—but he mentored me. He noticed I was awkward interacting with people, and he said I could learn social skills. He showed me how to be more effective—how to make customers feel comfortable, how to notice subtle cues that they needed something. Before that job, I'd thought of myself as kind of an introvert, somebody not very good with people. But Mr. Bentley saw a possibility in me that I hadn't seen in myself, and, as a result, I developed social skills and confidence that I never had before.

Another way in which we seek personal growth is by experimenting with new versions of ourselves. For this, too, we rely on communication. Sometimes we talk with friends about ways we want to grow or with coworkers about ways we want to advance professionally. At other times, we try out new styles of identity without telling anyone what we're doing. Some people experiment with their identities online where visual cues won't expose their real race, sex, age, or other characteristics. Lashelle's commentary stresses the importance of feedback from others in actualizing our potential.

LASHELLE

A person who changed my life was Mrs. Dickenson, my high school history teacher. She thought I was really smart, and she helped me see myself that way. I'd never considered myself all that intelligent, and I sure hadn't thought I would go to college, but Mrs. Dickenson helped me to see a whole new image of who I could be. She stayed after school a lot of days to talk to me about my future and to help me get ready for the SAT. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be in college now.

Others also help us self-actualize through inspiration and teaching. Mother Teresa was well known for inspiring others to be generous, compassionate, and giving. She had the ability to see the best in others and to help them see it in themselves. Mohandas Gandhi embodied the principle of nonviolent resistance so gracefully and effectively that he inspired thousands of Indians to define themselves as nonviolent resisters. Years later, in the United States, the Reverend Martin



Luther King Jr. followed Gandhi's example with his nonviolent resistance of racism. Spiritual leaders such as Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad also inspire people to grow personally. As we interact with teachers and leaders who inspire us, we may come to understand their visions of the world and of themselves, and we may weave them into our own self-concepts.


Purestock/Jupiter

Participating Effectively in a Diverse Society

In our era, the likelihood of meeting the needs Maslow discussed depends on our ability to participate effectively in a very diverse social world. Western culture includes people of different ethnicities, gender identities, social classes, sexual orientations, ages, spiritual commitments, and abilities. The United States is becoming increasingly diverse. In 2009, almost 49% of births in the United States were minorities, and 48.3% of children below 5 years were minorities (Nasser & Overberg, 2010). In 2010, Caucasians made up 64% of the population, but by 2050 there will be no majority race in the United States (Cooper, 2012; Yen, 2012). A total of 17% of marriages in the United States now involve people of different races or ethnicities (*Noted*, 2017).

Nearly half first-year students at colleges and universities say that learning about other cultures is essential or very important (Hoover, 2010). Research also shows that exposure to students from a range of backgrounds is one of the best predictors of whether first-year college students return for a second year (Berrett, 2011). Classrooms with students of different races and ethnicities increase cognitive and personal development and enhance critical thinking skills (St. John, 2016).

Most of us realize that we expand intellectually and personally when we engage people who differ in background, ethnicity, age, and so forth. Dante notes the importance of this type of communication.

DANTE

> My friend Bobby is about as different from me as a person could get. He's black; I'm white. He's from a big city; I grew up on a farm. He's liberal politically; I'm conservative. That's what I like about Bobby—he doesn't see a lot of things the way I do. When we talk, we often start out at different points, but we listen to each other and each of us learns other ways of looking at things.

Understanding and interacting with diverse people is also critical to success in professional life (St. John, 2016). Today's and tomorrow's employers think it is very important for employees to be able to interact effectively with different kinds of people. Job applicants who can do this have a keen advantage.

Communication in Everyday Life

DIVERSITY

Communicating in a Multicultural World

Communicating effectively with diverse people begins with learning how people in different cultures view communication and actually practice it. One excellent resource for learning more is the website of the Society for Cross-Cultural Research. In addition to presenting a wealth of good information, the site provides links to many other intercultural communication sites.

Go to the Society for Cross-Cultural Research's website: http://www.sccr.org/.

Communicating comfortably and effectively with diverse people is also essential to career success as organizations become increasingly global and diverse. The Cornell University library site, focused on workplace diversity, offers links to other sites: http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/library/research/subjectGuides/workplaceDiversity.html

Understanding and adapting to social diversity is critical to professional success and even to professional competence (Allen, 2016). Doctors, for instance, need to realize that some Hispanic patients are reassured by eye contact, whereas some patients from traditional Asian backgrounds are uneasy when looked at directly. Social workers need to understand that many people of Spanish and Asian heritage have extended families that are much larger than most Caucasian families. Former global media coordinator for the United Nations states that people involved in global businesses must be able to recognize and adapt to different communication styles or they will fail (Alaimo, 2016).

In summary, interpersonal communication meets human needs ranging from survival to self-actualization and interacting with a diversity of people. Of course, our ability to meet our needs depends on the effectiveness of our interpersonal communication. That is why the rest of this chapter elaborates what interpersonal communication is and identifies principles that enhance effectiveness.

DEFINING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

When asked to distinguish interpersonal communication from communication in general, many people say that interpersonal communication involves fewer people, often just two. According to this definition, an exchange between a homeowner and a plumber would be interpersonal, but a conversation involving parents and four children would not. Although interpersonal communication often involves only two or three people, this isn't a useful definition.

Perhaps you are thinking that intimate contexts define interpersonal communication. Using this standard, we would say that a couple on a first date in a romantic restaurant engages in more interpersonal communication than an established couple in a shopping mall. Again, this context is not the key.

The best way to define interpersonal communication is by focusing on what happens between people, not where they are or how many are present. For starters, then, we can say that interpersonal communication is a distinct type of interaction between people.

A Communication Continuum

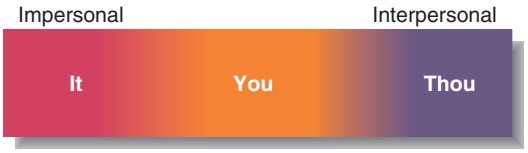


Figure **1.2**

The Communication Continuum

We can begin to understand the unique character of interpersonal communication by tracing the meaning of the word *interpersonal*. It is derived from the prefix *inter-*, meaning "between," and the word *person*; interpersonal communication literally occurs between people. In one sense, all communication happens between people, yet many interactions don't involve us personally. Communication exists on a continuum from impersonal to interpersonal (see Figure 1.2).

Much of our communication is not really personal. Sometimes we don't acknowledge others as people at all but treat them as objects; they bag our groceries, direct us around highway construction, and so forth. In other instances, we do acknowledge people, yet we interact with them on a surface level and often in terms of their social roles rather than personally. For instance, I often run into neighbors when I'm walking my dog, Cassie. We engage in small talk about weather and home projects. Through this kind of interaction, we acknowledge each other as people, but we don't get really personal. With a select few people, we communicate in deeply intimate ways. These distinctions are captured in poetic terms by the philosopher Martin Buber (1970), who distinguished between I–It and I–Thou levels of communication. Later scholars added a third level, I–You.

I–It Communication In an I–It relationship, we treat others very impersonally, almost as objects. In **I–It communication**, we do not acknowledge the humanity of other people; we may not even affirm their existence. Sometimes we do not treat salespeople, servers in restaurants, and clerical staff as people but only as instruments to take our orders and deliver what we want. In the extreme form of I–It relationships, others are not even acknowledged. When a homeless person asks for money for food, some people look away as if the person weren't there. In dysfunctional families, parents may ignore children and refuse to speak to them, thereby treating the

Communication in Everyday Life

WORKPLACE

Diagnosis: Cultural Miscommunication

If you plan a career in the field of health, learn all you can about different cultures. Patients' cultural beliefs and values affect how they perceive medical practitioners and how they can be most effectively treated. Consider a few examples of cultural misunderstandings (Fadiman, 1997; Galanti, 2014).

Some Asian cultures practice *coining*, in which a coin (often heated) is rubbed vigorously over a sick person's back to draw out the illness. The resulting red welts are perceived as evidence that the illness came out. However, on seeing red welts on children's backs, some American health professionals have had Asian parents investigated for child abuse.

American culture emphasizes autonomy and each person's right to information about herself or himself. As a result, physicians routinely share a poor prognosis directly with patients before discussing it with other family members. However in places such as Mexico, China, Iran, and the Philippines, it is considered extremely insensitive to burden a person, particularly a sick person, with bad news. Instead, family members should be told, and they, not the physician, decide when and how to tell the patient.

One hospital got a lesson in cultural values when it tried to assign a patient to Room 4. In the patient's home country, China, the character for *4* is pronounced almost identically to the character for the word *death*. The Chinese patient did not want to be in a room called "Death"!

Do you think training in intercultural communication should be required as part of medical school?

children as things—as "its"—not as unique individuals. Students on large campuses may also feel they are treated as "its," not as people. Jason, a sophomore in one of my classes, makes this point.

> At this school, I get treated like a number a lot of the time. When I go to see my adviser, he asks what my identification number is—not what my name is. Most of my professors don't know my name. In high school, all the teachers called on us by name. It felt more human there. Sometimes I feel like an "it" on this campus.

I-You Communication The second level of communication is **I–You communication**, which accounts for the majority of our interactions. People acknowledge one another as more than objects, but they don't fully engage each other as unique individuals. For example, suppose you go shopping, and a salesclerk asks, "May I help you?" It's unlikely you will have a deep conversation with the clerk, but you might treat him or her as more than an object (Wood, 2006a). Perhaps you say, "I'm just browsing today. You know how it is at the end of the month—no money." The clerk might laugh and commiserate about how money gets tight by the end of the month. In this interaction, the clerk doesn't treat you as a faceless shopper, and you don't treat the clerk as just an agent of the store.

I–You relationships may also be more personal than interactions with salesclerks. For instance, we talk with others in classes, on the job, and on sports teams in ways that are somewhat personal. The same is true of interaction in Internet forums, where people meet to share ideas and common interests. Interaction is still guided by our roles as peers, as members of a class or team, and as people who have common interests. Yet we do affirm the existence of others and recognize them as individuals within those roles. Teachers and students often have I–You relationships. In the workplace, most of us have many I–You relationships that are pleasant and functional.

I-Thou Communication The rarest kind of relationship involves **I–Thou communication**. Buber regarded this as the highest form of human dialogue because each person affirms the other as cherished and unique. When we interact on an I–Thou level, we meet others in their wholeness and individuality. Instead of dealing with them as occupants of social roles, we see them as unique human beings whom we know and accept in their totality. In I–Thou communication, we open ourselves fully, trusting others to accept us as we are, with our virtues and vices, hopes and fears, and strengths and weaknesses.

Buber believed that only in I–Thou relationships do we become fully human, which for him meant that we discard the guises and defenses we use most of the time and allow ourselves to be completely genuine (Stewart, 1986). Much of our communication involves what Buber called "seeming," in which we're preoccupied with our image and careful to manage how we present ourselves. In I–Thou relationships, however, we engage in "being," through which we reveal who we really are and how we really feel. I–Thou relationships are not common because we can't afford to reveal ourselves totally to everyone all the time. Thus, I–Thou relationships and the communication in them are rare and special.

Features of Interpersonal Communication

Building on Buber's poetic description, we can define **interpersonal communication** as a selective, systemic process that allows people to reflect and build personal knowledge of one another and create shared meanings. We'll discuss each key term in this definition.

Selective First, as we noted earlier, we don't communicate intimately with the majority of people we encounter. In some cases, we neither want nor need to communicate with others even at the I–You level. For instance, if we get a phone call from a pollster, we may only respond to the questions and not engage the caller in any personal way. We invest the effort and take the risks of opening ourselves fully with only a few people. As Buber realized, most of our communication occurs on I–It or I–You levels. This is fine because I–Thou relationships take more time, energy, and courage than we are willing to offer to everyone.

Systemic Interpersonal communication is also **systemic**, which means that it takes place within various systems, or contexts, that influence what happens and the meanings we attribute to interaction. The communication between you and me right now is embedded in multiple systems, including the interpersonal communication course you are taking, our academic institutions, and American society. Each of these systems influences what we expect of each other, what I write, and how you interpret what you read. Communication between me and Chinese students taking a class in interpersonal communication would reflect the context of Chinese culture.

Consider an example of the systemic character of communication. Suppose Ian gives Mia a solid gold pendant and says, "I wanted to show how much I care about you." What do his words mean? That depends in large part on the systems within which he and Mia interact. If Ian and Mia have just started dating, an expensive gift means one thing; if they have been married for 20 years, it means something different. On the other hand, if they don't have an established relationship, and Mia is engaged to Manuel, Ian's gift may have yet another meaning. What if Ian argued with Mia the previous day? Then, perhaps, the gift symbolizes an apology. If Ian is rich, a solid gold pendant may be less impressive than if he is short on cash. Systems that affect what this communication means include Mia's and Ian's relationship, their socioeconomic classes, cultural norms for gift giving, and Mia's and Ian's personal histories. All these contexts affect their interaction and its meaning.

Because interpersonal communication is systemic, situation, time, people, culture, personal histories, and so on interact to affect meanings. We can't just add up the various parts of a system to understand their impact on communication. Instead, we have to recognize that all parts of a system interact; each part affects all others. In other words, elements of communication systems are interdependent; each element is tied to all the other elements.

All systems include **noise**, which is anything that distorts communication or interferes with people's understandings of one another. Noise in communication systems is inevitable, but we can be aware that it exists and try to compensate for the difficulties it causes.

There are four kinds of noise. *Physiological noise* is distraction caused by hunger, fatigue, headaches, drugs, and other factors that affect how we feel and think. *Physical noise* is interference in our environments, such as sounds made by others, overly dim or bright lights, spam and pop-up ads, extreme temperatures, and crowded conditions. *Psychological noise* refers to thoughts and feelings that affect how we communicate and how we interpret others. For instance, if you are preoccupied with a problem, you may be inattentive at a team meeting. Likewise, prejudice and defensive feelings can interfere with communication. Our needs may also affect how we interpret others. For example, if we really need affirmation of our professional competence, we may be predisposed to perceive others as communicating more praise for our work than they really do. Finally, *semantic noise* exists when words themselves are not mutually understood. Authors sometimes create semantic noise by using jargon or unnecessarily technical language. For instance, to discuss noise, I could write, "Communication can be egregiously obstructed by phenomena extrinsic to an exchange that actuate misrepresentations and symbolic incongruities." Although that sentence may be accurate, it's filled with semantic noise. Similarly, the abbreviations typical in texts and tweets may not be understood by people who use social media infrequently.

I wish professors would learn about semantic noise. I really try to pay attention in class and to learn, but the way some faculty talk makes it impossible to understand what they mean, especially if English is a second language. I wish they would remember that we're not specialists like they are, so we don't know all the technical words.

Some noise is of more than one type. Listening to your favorite music on your iPod while walking across campus creates both physical noise and psychological noise. Social media can be so distracting that people have accidents. One survey found that 1,000 people visited emergency rooms in a single year because they tripped, fell, or walked into something while using a cell phone to talk or text (Richtel, 2010).

In summary, when we say that communication is systemic, we mean three things. First, all communication occurs within multiple systems that affect meanings. Second, all parts and all systems of communication are interdependent, so they affect one another. Third, all communication systems have noise, which can be physiological, physical, psychological, or semantic.

Process Interpersonal communication is an ongoing, continuous **process**. This means, first, that communication evolves over time, becoming more personal as people interact. Friendships and romantic relationships gain depth and significance over the course of time, and they may also decline in quality over time. Relationships on the job also evolve over time. Ellen may mentor Craig when he starts working at her firm, but over time they may become equal colleagues. Because relationships are dynamic, they don't stay the same but continually change.

JANA

My daughter is my best friend, but it wasn't always that way. As a child, she was very shy and dependent. She was a sullen teenager who resented everything I said and did. Now that she's 22, we've become really good friends. But even now, our relationship has all of the echoes of who we were with each other at different times in our lives.

An ongoing process also has no discrete beginnings and endings. Suppose a friend stops by and confides in you about a troubling personal problem. When did that communication begin? Although it may seem to have started when the friend came by, earlier interactions may have led the friend to feel that it was safe to talk to you and that you would care about the problem. We can't be sure, then, when this communication began. Similarly, we don't know where it will end. Perhaps it ends when the friend leaves, but perhaps it doesn't. Maybe your response to the problem helps your friend see new options. Maybe what you learn changes how you feel toward your friend. Because communication is ongoing, we can never be sure when it begins or ends.

Because interpersonal interaction is a process, what happens between people is linked to both past and future. In our earlier example, the meaning of Ian's gift reflects prior interactions between him and Mia, and their interaction about the gift will affect future interactions. All our communication occurs in three temporal dimensions: past, which affects what happens now; present, which reflects the past and sets the stage for the future; and future, which is molded by what occurs in this moment and past ones (Wood, 2006a). How couples handle early arguments affects how they deal with later ones. Yesterday's text from a friend influences what you text today and, in turn, what your friend texts back tomorrow. In communication, past, present, and future are always interwoven.

The ongoing quality of interpersonal communication also suggests that we can't stop the process, nor can we edit or unsay what has been said. In this sense, communication is irreversible: We can't take it back. This implies that we have an ethical responsibility to recognize the irreversibility of communication and to communicate carefully.

Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

Relationships between characters in "Big Little Lies" have evolved over the course of the series.

Personal Knowledge Interpersonal communication fosters personal knowledge and insights. To connect as unique individuals, we have to get to know others personally and understand their thoughts and feelings. With family members whom you have known all of your life, you understand some of their worries, concerns, and personal issues in ways that new acquaintances cannot. Longtime friends have a history of shared experiences and knowledge that allows them to interact more deeply than casual friends can.

Just as every person is unique, so is every interpersonal relationship. Each develops its own distinctive patterns and even special vocabulary that are not part of

other interpersonal relationships (Nicholson, 2006). In the process of becoming close, people work out personal roles and rules for interaction, and these may deviate from general social rules and roles (Dainton, 2006; Duck, 2006; Wood, 2006a). With one friend, you might play pickup basketball and get together for films. With a different, equally close friend, you might talk openly about feelings.

As our relationships with others deepen, we build trust and learn how to communicate in ways that make each other feel comfortable and safe. The personal knowledge we gain over time in relationships encourages us to know and be known: We share secrets, fears, and experiences that we don't tell to just anyone. This is part of what Buber meant by "being" with others. Personal knowledge is a process, one that grows and builds on itself over time as people communicate interpersonally. Sometimes, we may even feel that our closest friends know us better than we know ourselves, as Lizelle explains.

LIZELLE

> What I like best about long-term relationships is all the layers that develop. I know the friends I've had since high school in so many ways. I know what they did and felt and dreamed in high school, and I know them as they are now. They have the same kind of in-depth knowledge of me. We tell each other everything, so it sometimes seems that my deepest friends know me better than I know myself.

Sharing personal information and experiences means that interpersonal communication involves ethical choices. We can use our knowledge to protect people we care about. We can also use it to hurt those people, for example, by attacking vulnerabilities others have revealed to us. Ethical communicators choose not to exploit or treat casually personal information about others.

Meaning Creating The heart of interpersonal communication is shared meanings between people. We don't merely exchange words when we communicate. Instead, we create meanings as we figure out what each other's words and behaviors stand for, represent, or imply. Meanings grow out of histories of interaction between unique persons. For example, my partner, Robbie, and I are both continually overcommitted, and we each worry about the pace of the other's life. Often, one of us says to the other, "*bistari, bistari*." This phrase will mean nothing to you unless you know enough Nepalese to translate it as meaning, "Go slowly, go gradually." When one of us says, "*bistari, bistari*," we not only suggest slowing down but also remind each other of our special time living and trekking in Nepal.

Like Robbie and me, most close friends and romantic partners develop vocabularies that have meaning only to them. People who work together also develop meanings that grow out of their interactions over time and the shared field in which they work.

You may have noted that I refer to *meanings*, not just one meaning. This is because interpersonal communication involves two levels of meaning (Rogers, 2008; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The first level, called the **content meaning**, deals with literal, or denotative, meaning. If a parent says to a 5-year-old child, "Clean your room now," the content meaning is that the room is to be cleaned immediately.

The second level is the **relationship meaning**. This refers to what communication expresses about relationships between communicators. The relationship meaning of "Clean your room now" is that the parent has the right to order the child; the parent and child have unequal power in their relationship. If the parent says, "Would you mind cleaning your room?" the relationship meaning reflects a more equal relationship. Suppose a friend says, "You're the only person I can talk to about this," and then discloses something that is worrying him. The content level includes the actual issue itself and the information that you're the only one with whom he will discuss this issue. But what has he told you on the relationship level? He has communicated that he trusts you, he considers you special, and he probably expects you to care about his troubles.

My father needs to learn about relationship meanings. Whenever I call home, he asks me if anything's wrong. Then he asks what the news is. If I don't have news to report, he can't understand why I'm calling. Then Mom gets on the phone, and we talk for a while about stuff—nothing important, just stuff. I don't call to tell them big news. I just want to touch base and feel connected.

Cultures vary in how much they emphasize content- and relationship-level meanings. In high-context cultures, great emphasis is put on holistic understanding of meanings based on a collective understanding of context. Words themselves have little meaning until placed in the context of culture, relationships, and people. Some cultures are low-context, which means that communicators do not assume a great deal of shared, collective knowledge. Because a high level of collective knowledge is not assumed, the content level of meaning is given great priority. Words and literal meaning are emphasized and specifics are provided in conversation. The United States is a low-context culture, whereas many Asian cultures are high-context, which means that collective knowledge is assumed. In high-context cultures, less emphasis is given to content-level meaning and to providing specifics because communicators can assume that others share their collective knowledge. For example, in a low-context culture, a person might say to a coworker, "Let's get together to talk about our project. We can meet in my office at 2 P.M. today, and you can bring the draft. I'll order some coffee for us." In a high-context culture, the message might be "Let's meet at 2 P.M. to discuss our project." In the high-context culture, the communicator assumes that the coworker will share cultural understandings about where to meet, what to bring, and whether there will be a beverage (Lim, 2002).

Scholars have identified three general dimensions of relationship-level meanings. The first dimension is responsiveness, and it refers to how aware of others and involved with them we are. Perhaps you can remember a conversation you had with someone who shuffled papers and glanced at a clock or kept looking at a phone while you were talking. If so, you probably felt she wasn't interested in you or what you were saying. In Western culture, low responsiveness is communicated on the relationship level of meaning when people don't look at us, or when they are preoccupied with something other than talking with us. Higher responsiveness is communicated by eye contact, nodding, and feedback, all of which indicate involvement (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000).

Debby Wong/Shutterstock.com

A second dimension of relationship meaning is liking, or affection. This concerns the degree of positive or negative feeling that is communicated. Although liking may seem synonymous with responsiveness, the two are actually distinct. We may be responsive to people we don't like but to whom we must pay attention. We may also be responsive by glaring or scowling, which indicate we are attentive to the other person but we are not affectionate. We communicate that we like or dislike others by what we actually say as well as by tone of voice, facial expressions, how close we sit to them, and so forth.

Power, or control, is the third dimension of relationship meaning. This refers to the power balance between communicators. Friends and romantic partners sometimes engage in covert power struggles on the relationship level. One person suggests going to a particular movie and then to dinner at the pizza parlor. The other responds by saying he or she doesn't want to see that movie and isn't in the mood for pizza. They could be arguing on the content level about their different preferences for the evening. If arguments over what to do or eat are recurrent, however, chances are the couple is negotiating power—who gets to decide where to go and what to do. In many relationships, power is imbalanced: teacher–student, parent–child, coach–athlete, and so forth. Usually both people in relationships like these accept the power imbalance as appropriate, but sometimes the person who has less power challenges the person who has more. For instance, a student may question a teacher's authority, and a player may argue with a coach's instructions.

Thus far, we have seen that communication exists on a continuum, ranging from impersonal to interpersonal. We've also defined interpersonal communication as a selective, systemic process that allows people to build personal knowledge of one another and to create meanings. Meanings, we have seen, reflect histories of all interactions and involve both content and relationship levels. To further clarify the nature of interpersonal communication, we'll first discuss three efforts to model the communication process.

MODELS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

A **model** is a representation of a phenomenon such as an airplane, a house, or human communication. Models show how a phenomenon works. Early models of interpersonal communication were simplistic, so we will discuss them very briefly. We'll look more closely at a current model that offers sophisticated insight into the process of interpersonal communication.

Linear Models

The first model of interpersonal communication (Lasswell, 1948) depicted communication as a linear, or one-way, process in which one person acts on another person. This was a verbal model that consisted of five questions describing a sequence of acts that make up communication:

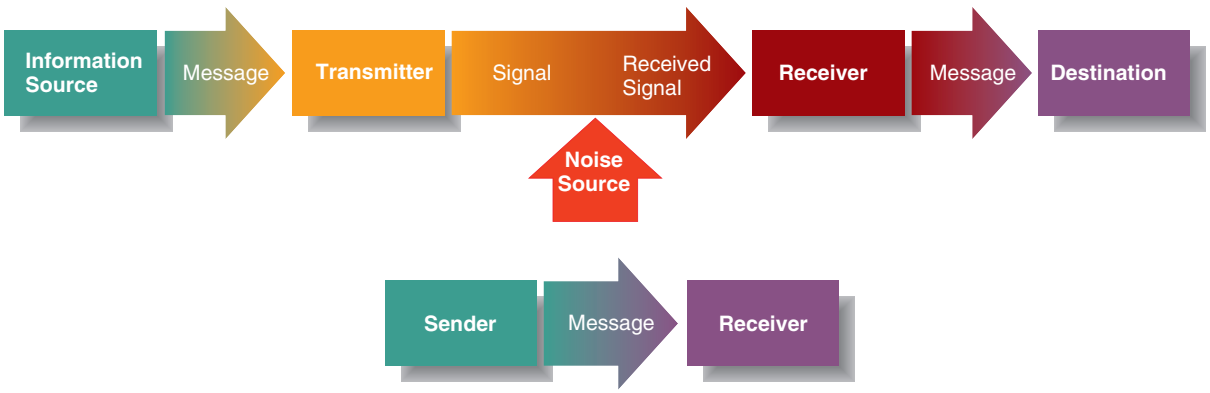
Who?
Says what?
In what channel?
To whom?
With what effect?

A year later, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949) offered a revised model that added the feature of noise. Earlier in this chapter, we noted that noise is anything that interferes with communication. Noise might be spam in online communication, regional accents, or background conversations in the workplace. (Figure 1.3 shows Shannon and Weaver's model.)

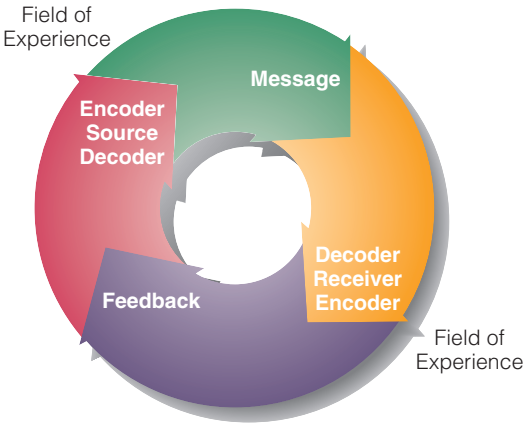
These early **linear models** had serious shortcomings. They portrayed communication as flowing in only one direction—from a sender to a passive receiver. This implies that listeners never send messages and that they absorb only passively what speakers say. But this isn't how communication really occurs. Listeners nod, frown, smile, look bored or interested, and so forth, and they actively work to make sense of others' messages. Further, different cultures place distinct emphases on speaking and listening. East Asians place greater emphasis on the receiver's responsibilities than Western cultures (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2015). Linear models also erred by representing communication as a sequence of actions in which one step (listening) follows an earlier step (talking). In actual interaction, however, speaking and listening often occur simultaneously or they overlap. On the job, coworkers exchange ideas, and each listens and responds as one person speaks; those who are speaking are also listening for cues from others. Online, as we compose our messages, instant messages (IMs) pop up on our screens. At any moment in

Figure 1.3

The Linear Model of Communication



Cengage Learning, Adapted from Shannon and Weaver, (1949).



Cengage Learning. Adapted from Schramm (1955).

Figure 1.4

The Interactive Model of Communication

the process of interpersonal communication, participants are simultaneously sending and receiving messages and adapting to one another.

Interactive Models

Interactive models portrayed communication as a process in which listeners give **feedback**, which is a response to a message. In addition, interactive models recognize that communicators create and interpret messages within personal fields of experience (see Figure 1.4). The more communicators' fields of experience overlap, the better they can understand each other. When fields of experience don't overlap enough, misunderstandings may occur. Madison's commentary gives an example of this type of misunderstanding.

MADISON

I studied abroad last year. For the first couple of weeks that I was in Germany, I thought Germans were the rudest people I'd ever met. They aren't friendly with small talk and saying hello; they push and bump into others and don't apologize. After I got to know some Germans, I realized they are very nice, but they have different social norms than Americans—especially Americans from the South!

Although the interactive model is an improvement over the linear model, it still portrays communication as a sequential process in which one person is a sender and another is a receiver. In reality, everyone who is involved in communication both sends and receives messages. Interactive models also fail to capture the dynamic nature of interpersonal communication and the ways it changes over time. For example, two people communicate more openly after months of exchanging email messages than they did the first time they met in a chat room. Two coworkers communicate more easily and effectively after months of working together on a project team.

Transactional Models

The **transactional model** of interpersonal communication is more accurate because it emphasizes the dynamism of interpersonal communication and the multiple roles people assume during the process. In addition, this model includes the feature of time to call our attention to the fact that messages, noise, and fields of experience vary over time (see Figure 1.5).

The transactional model recognizes that noise is present throughout interpersonal communication. In addition, this model includes the feature of time to remind us that people's communication varies over time. Each communicator's field of experience, and the shared field of experience between communicators, changes

over time. As we encounter new people and have new experiences that broaden our outlooks, we change how we interact with others. As we get to know others over time, relationships may become more informal and intimate. For example, people who meet online sometimes decide to get together face-to-face (f2f), and a serious friendship or romance may develop.

The transactional model also makes it clear that communication occurs within systems that affect what and how people communicate and what meanings are created. Those systems, or contexts, include the shared systems of both communicators (shared social networking sites, campus, town, workplace, religion, social groups, or culture) and the personal systems of each person (family, religious association, friends).

Finally, we should emphasize that the transactional model doesn't label one person a sender and the other a receiver. Instead, both people are defined as communicators who participate equally and often simultaneously in the communication process. This means that, at a given moment in communication, you may be sending a message (speaking or nodding your head), receiving a message, or doing both at the same time (interpreting what someone says while nodding to show you are interested).

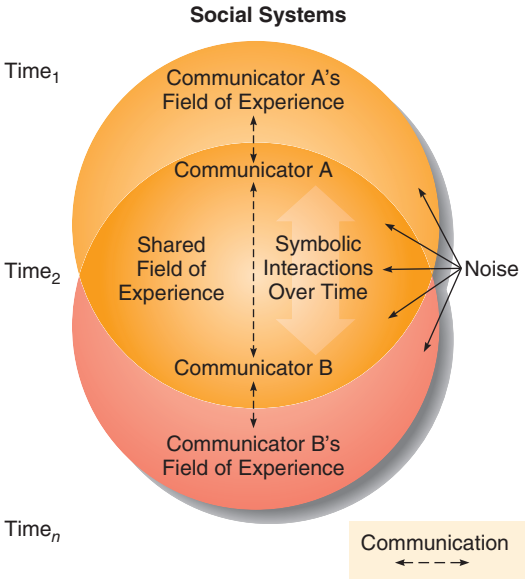


Figure 1.5

The Transactional Model of Communication

The transactional nature of interpersonal communication implies that communicators share responsibility for effectiveness. People often say, "You didn't express yourself clearly," or "You misunderstood me," as if understanding rested with a single person. In reality, responsibility for good communication is shared. One person cannot make communication successful, nor is one person totally responsible for problems. Misunderstandings often arise in email and online communication because feedback tends to be delayed, a problem that instant messaging can decrease. Another limitation of online communication is the inability to convey inflection and nonverbal behaviors, such as winks, that tell another person we are joking. Sometimes we add emoticons—such as :) or :(— to signal emotions online. Because interpersonal communication is an ongoing, transactional process, all participants share responsibility for its effectiveness.

We're now ready to consider the principles implied by how we have defined and modeled interpersonal communication.

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

There are eight basic principles for effectiveness in interpersonal communication.

Principle 1: We Cannot *Not* Communicate

A key principle to keep in mind is that we cannot avoid communicating when we are with others because they interpret what we do and say as well as what we don't do and don't say. Even if we choose to be silent, we're communicating. What we mean by silence and how others interpret it depend on the systems within which we interact.

Because Westerners typically are more verbal than many other cultural groups, they are likely to regard silence as a signal of anger, disinterest, or lack of knowledge. Some Native Americans and members of many Eastern cultures might interpret silence as thoughtfulness or respect. Either way, silence communicates.

Even when we don't intend to communicate, we do so. We may be unaware of a grimace that gives away our disapproval or an eye roll that shows we disrespect someone, but we are communicating nonetheless. Unconscious communication often occurs on the relationship level of meaning as we express feelings about others through subtle, often nonverbal communication. Regardless of whether we aim to communicate and whether others understand our intentions, we continuously, unavoidably communicate.

Principle 2: Interpersonal Communication Is Irreversible

Perhaps you have been in a heated argument in which you lost your temper and said something you later regretted. It could be that you hurt someone or revealed something about yourself that you meant to keep private. Later, you might have tried to repair the damage by apologizing, explaining what you said, or denying what you revealed. But you couldn't erase your communication; you couldn't unsay what you had said.

You may have had similar experiences when texting or posting online. Perhaps you read a message that made you angry, and you dashed off a barbed reply, sent it, and then wished you could unsend it. Perhaps you posted a picture of yourself when you were not sober, and your parents saw it. The fact that communication is irreversible reminds us that what we say and do matters. It has impact. Once we communicate with others, our words become part of the relationship. Remembering this principle keeps us aware of the importance of choosing when to communicate and what to say—or not to say!

Principle 3: Interpersonal Communication Involves Ethical Choices

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that focuses on moral principles and codes of conduct. Ethical issues concern right and wrong. Because interpersonal communication is irreversible and affects others, it always has ethical implications. What we say and do affects others: how they feel, how they perceive themselves, how they

think about themselves, and how they think about others. Thus, responsible people think carefully about ethical implications of their communication.

Our everyday lives are filled with ethical choices. Should you not tell someone something that might make him or her less willing to do what you want? If you read a message on your social network that makes you angry, do you fire off a nasty reply, assuming that you will never meet the person and so won't face any consequences? Do you judge another person's communication from your personal perspective and experience, or do you try to understand his or her communication on his or her terms and from his or her perspective? In work settings, should you avoid giving negative feedback because it could hurt others' feelings even if it might help them advance? In these and many other instances, we face ethical choices. Throughout this book, we note ethical issues that arise when we interact with others. As you read, consider what kinds of choices you make and what moral principles guide your choices.

Principle 4: People Construct Meanings in Interpersonal Communication

The significance of communication doesn't lie in words and nonverbal behaviors. Instead, meaning arises out of how we interpret communication. This calls our attention to the fact that humans use symbols, which sets us apart from other creatures.

As we will see in Chapter 4, **symbols**, such as words, have no inherent or true meanings. Instead, we must interpret them. What does it mean if someone says, "You're sick"? To interpret the comment, you must consider the context (a counseling session, a professional meeting, following a daredevil stunt), who said it (a psychiatrist, a supervisor, a subordinate, a friend, an enemy), and the words themselves, which may mean various things (a medical diagnosis, a challenge to your professional competence, a compliment on your zaniness, disapproval).

In close relationships, partners gradually coordinate meanings so that they share understandings of issues and feelings important to their connection. When a relationship begins, one person may regard confrontation as healthy, and the other may avoid arguments. Over time, partners come to share meanings for conflict—what it is, how to handle it, and whether it threatens the relationship or is a path to growth.

The meanings we attribute to conflict are shaped by cultural backgrounds. Because standing up for your own ideas is emphasized in the United States, many people who were born and raised in this country value confrontation more than do many Asians who were raised in traditional Asian families. Conflict means different things to each group.

Even one person's meanings vary over time and in response to experiences and moods. If you're in a good mood, a playful gibe might strike you as funny or as an invitation to banter. The same remark might hurt or anger you if you're feeling down. The meaning of the gibe, like all communication, is not preset or absolute. Meanings are created by people as they communicate in specific contexts.

ampyang/Shutterstock.com

Principle 5: Metacommunication Affects Meanings

The word *metacommunication* comes from the prefix *meta*, meaning "about," and the root word *communication*. Thus, **metacommunication** is communication about communication. For example, during a conversation with your friend Pat, you notice that Pat's body seems tense and her voice is sharp. You might say, "You seem really stressed in our conversation." Your statement is metacommunication because it communicates about Pat's nonverbal communication.

We can use words to talk about other words or nonverbal behaviors. If an argument between Joe and Marc gets out of hand, and Joe makes a nasty personal attack, Joe might later say, "I didn't really mean what I just said. I was just so angry it came out." This metacommunication may soften the hurt caused by the attack. If Joe and Marc then have a productive conversation about their differences, Marc might conclude by saying, "This has really been a good talk. I think we understand each other a lot better now." This comment verbally metacommunicates about the conversation that preceded it.

Metacommunication can increase understanding. For instance, teachers sometimes say, "The next point is really important." This comment signals students to pay special attention to what follows. A parent might tell a child, "What I said may sound harsh, but I'm only telling you because I care about you." The comment tells the child how to interpret a critical message. A manager tells a subordinate to take a comment seriously by saying, "I really mean what I said. I'm not kidding." On the other hand, if we're not really sure what we think about an issue, and we want to try out a stance, we might say, "I'm thinking this through as I go, and I'm not really wedded to this position, but what I tend to believe right now is . . . ." This preface to your statement tells listeners not to assume that what you say is set in stone.

We can also metacommunicate to check on understanding: "Was I clear?" "Do you see why I feel like I do?" "Can you see why I'm confused about the problem?" Questions such as these allow you to find out whether another person understands what you intend to communicate. You may also metacommunicate to find out whether you understand what another person expresses to you. "What I think you meant is that you are worried. Is that right?" "If I follow what you said, you feel trapped between what you want to do and what your parents want you to do. Is that what you were telling me?" You may even say, "I don't understand what you just told me. Can you say it another way?" This question metacommunicates by letting the other person know you did not grasp her message and that you want to understand.

Effective metacommunication also helps friends and romantic partners express how they feel about their interactions. Linda Acitelli (1988, 1993) has studied

what happens when partners in a relationship talk to each other about how they perceive and feel about their interaction. She reports that women and men alike find metacommunication helpful if there is a conflict or problem that must be addressed. Both sexes seem to appreciate knowing how the other feels about their differences; they are also eager to learn how to communicate to resolve those differences. During a conflict, one person might say, "I feel like we're both being really stubborn. Do you think we could each back off a little from our positions?" This expresses discontent with how communication is proceeding and offers an alternative. After conflict, one partner might say, "This really cleared the air between us. I feel a lot better now."

I never feel like an argument is really over and settled until Andy and I have said that we feel better for having thrashed out whatever was the problem. It's like I want closure, and the fight isn't really behind us until we both say, "I'm glad we talked," or something to say what we went through led us to a better place.

Acitelli also found that women are more likely than men to appreciate metacommunication when there is no conflict or immediate problem to be resolved. For example, while curled up on a sofa and watching TV, a woman might say to her male partner, "I really feel comfortable snuggling with you." This statement comments on the relationship and the nonverbal communication between the couple. According to Acitelli and others (Wood, 1997), men generally find talk about relationships unnecessary unless there is an immediate problem to be addressed. Understanding this gender difference in preferences for metacommunication may help you interpret members of the other sex more accurately.

Principle 6: Interpersonal Communication Develops and Sustains Relationships

Interpersonal communication is the primary way we build, refine, and transform relationships. Partners talk to work out

Communication in Everyday Life

INSIGHT

Poor Interpersonal Communication as the Number One Cause of Divorce

According to a nationwide poll, a majority of people perceive communication problems as the number one reason marriages fail (Roper poll, 1999). Poll results showed that, regardless of age, race, sex, or income level, Americans reported that communication problems are the most common cause of divorce; 53% of those who were polled said that ineffective communication was the principal reason for divorce. Compare this with the frequency with which people named other causes of divorce: money problems, 29%; interference from family members, 7%; sexual problems, 5%; previous relationships, 3%; and children, 3%.

Conversely, good communication is at the core of healthy marriages according to marital therapists (Scarf, 2008). When cancer is diagnosed, marriage carries a strong advantage: Unmarried men have a 27% higher risk of death than their married counterparts. Unmarried women are 19% more likely to die than their married peers ("A Lifesaving Side to Marriage," 2016).