Quick Reference Guide

Readings

On the Job

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Skill Builders

Spotlight on Experience

In Real Life

Ethical Challenges

16th Edition

Looking Out
Looking In

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To
Neil Towne
whose legacy continues in these pages.

Brief Contents

Contents

3

Communication and Identity: Creating and Presenting the Self   69

4

Perception: What You See Is What You Get   111

7

Nonverbal Communication: Messages beyond Words   219

8

Listening: More Than Meets the Ear   253

Part III   Looking At Relational Dynamics

9

Communication and Relational Dynamics   285

10

Interpersonal Communication in Close Relationships   323

11

Improving Communication Climates   359

12

Managing Interpersonal Conflicts   395

Preface

Goals of This Book

Listening is arguably the most important communication skill of them all. That's certainly been true as we developed this new edition of *Looking Out Looking In*. Listening to our users has helped us refine the book you're holding, so it will address the concerns of both professors and students.

Before we began work on this 16th edition, we asked current and prospective users what we could do to best meet their needs. They told us they want an introduction to interpersonal communication that reflects the way communication operates in rapidly changing today's world and one that continues to focus on fundamental principles. They shared that the text must prepare students for success in their personal, academic, and future professional lives, helping them connect what they're learning now to what they will use in their careers. Last, they shared that it must leverage recent scholarship in the field of Interpersonal Communication to better represent the many and varied ways we, as human beings, communicate, bridge barriers, and relate to one another in our diverse world.

You spoke, we listened, and you are now seeing the results. With the advent of this 16th edition of *Looking Out Looking In*, we present you with a text that equips students to communicate in a principled manner by connecting the best of the field's scholarship with everyday life.

New to This Edition

The entire text has been revised to update facts, examples, and references to technology—and to incorporate the bias-free and inclusive language recommendations in the *American Psychological Association (APA) 7th edition*.

Users of *Looking Out Looking In* will find that the new edition has been improved in several ways while remaining true to the approach that has served more than one million students over four decades.

- **More-Inclusive Language, Examples, Research, and Representation**
  This new edition has been carefully revised to recognize, incorporate, and respect the diversity of *Looking Out Looking In*'s wide readership. The result is a book that is inclusive in its language; engages examples and research that represent interpersonal communicators from across the world and who embody multiple identities; and that is built with the ethic that representation matters. To that end, more readers than ever will see themselves in *Looking Out Looking In*.

- **Extended Coverage of Computer-Mediated Communication**
  Chapter 2 remains one of the few interpersonal communication textbook chapters to place a direct focus on computer-mediated communication. In addition to Chapter 2, *Looking Out Looking In* incorporates social media and technology use throughout the book. This new edition adds extensive research that explores increased use of video chat to maintain relationships, including in the workplace; additional coverage focusing on emotions and social media; explorations of some of the negative aspects of social media interaction, including misinformation and online deception; and even more considerations of how social media in communication in families, friendships, and romantic relationships. From "Netflix and chill" to gamer interaction online, *Looking Out Looking In* is built to help students explore technology's role in modern relationships.

- **Research Updates**
  It isn't only technology that has been updated in the latest edition. The new *Looking Out Looking In* has been thoroughly updated to include the latest research while still recognizing the classic concepts and theories that are so relevant to interpersonal communication. The research in this edition has especially been updated to recognize a more-inclusive readership, with concepts such as intersectionality or harmful practices such as misgendering being incorporated into the text. The new edition also includes new research recognizing advances in relational social support, resolving conflict, communicating across cultures, and workplace communication.

- **New Examples from Popular Culture**
  This edition is loaded with illustrations of how communication operates in a variety of relationships. Students will enjoy illustrations and examples explained from their favorite popular culture sources including Netflix series, Marvel movies, Tik Tok stars, and their favorite music artists. *Looking Out Looking In* is careful to ensure that even if the reader doesn't follow the show or hasn't seen the movie that the concept can be understood, and the lessons can still be learned. Other captioned photos also highlight how communication principles operate in today's world.

- **New Narrative-Style Readings**
  Compelling, magazine-style readings have always distinguished *Looking Out Looking In*. This edition features some classic favorites as well as a new lineup that shows how principles in the text operate in a wide range of settings and relationships. These entertaining and insightful readings cover topics ranging from the benefits of cuddling to the annoyance of couples over-posting online to ways people with different political beliefs can overcome their differences. Each engaging reading is still followed by a series of "Reflect" questions that help readers connect the material to their everyday lives. In an era where more students are getting their news and other information from sites such as Buzzfeed, the readings in *Looking Out Looking In* offer quality information told in the narrative form students crave.

- **Interactive Learning Opportunities**
  MindTap for *Looking Out Looking In* is a fully online, highly personalized learning experience built upon *Looking Out Looking In*. MindTap combines student learning tools—readings, multimedia, activities, and assessments—into a singular Learning Path that guides students through the course. Instructors personalize the experience by easily customizing the existing content and learning tools with their own materials. The result: An easy-to-use learning system that is exactly right for your own unique situation.

Organization of the text

Looking Out, Looking In is organized so that students gain essential knowledge in five particular areas of interpersonal communication studies: key concepts and theories related to interpersonal relationships; the importance of considering diverse experiences and inclusive perspectives when learning interpersonal communication; how social media and digital technologies influence interpersonal relationships; the importance of strong interpersonal skills in developing close relationships; and the value of strong interpersonal skills in the workplace. By frontloading these concepts and theories, students can expand on learning about them throughout the text.

To that end, Chapter 1, "A First Look at Interpersonal Communication" introduces key concepts related to interpersonal communication studies; examines how diversity and inclusion are important to understanding interpersonal relationships, especially in consideration of identity; and lays the foundation for understanding different kinds of close relationships as well as workplace interactions.

Chapter 2, "Interpersonal Communication and Social Media," then offers an in-depth examination of social media concepts and theories. This unique chapter sets up the connections to new media and digital technologies that will appear throughout the text.

That is followed by Chapter 3, "Communication and Identity" that takes the concepts introduced in the first chapter to offer deeper considerations of how interpersonal interaction both relates to personal identity and influences how we see ourselves and others. This chapter strongly ties to Chapter 4, "Perception," where students are challenged to consider their beliefs about relationships and how they see others.

Next, Chapter 5, "Emotions," examines how feelings and affect come into interplay with both our interpersonal communication and the relationships we develop. The chapter also examines how we use interpersonal communication to express our emotions to others.

In Chapter 6, "Language," students are encouraged to think both generally about how words matter as well as how they can use language effectively in contexts including intimate conversations, online social interaction, and workplace settings, among others. Then Chapter 7, "Nonverbal Communication," provides details about why nonverbal cues and signals are often just as important, if not more so, than language. Together, Chapters 6 and 7 provide students with an accessible-but-thorough understanding of the building blocks of language and social interaction.

Chapter 8 then examines how listening is an essential skill, especially in relationships; and how listening itself is a form of communication. The chapter foregrounds the next two chapters. In Chapter 9, "Communication and Relational Dynamics," students learn how communication is an essential ingredient in relationships; and then in Chapter 10, "Communication in Close Relationships," specific relationship types are explored. Combined, these chapters often provide students important skill-building opportunities for interacting in their relationships as well as the concepts and theories that help to explain why and how such communication is beneficial and effective.

Chapters 11 and 12 then bring all of the previous chapters together to offer students big-picture considerations of how they can improve communication beyond their immediate close relationships. In Chapter 11, "Improving Communication Climates," students consider how their surroundings and particular situations impact interpersonal communication possibilities. Then, in Chapter 12, "Managing Interpersonal Conflicts," students are offered practical skills that will help them to resolve both their personal conflicts and their conflicts with others. These chapters provide essential concepts for helping students to understand the sometimes-tumultuous situations communicators face in contemporary culture.

Overall, *Looking Out Looking In* provides essential interpersonal communication concepts and theories in a way that allows students to consider how these ideas and skills apply to their own personal relationships as well as how interpersonal communication concepts can lead to inclusive communication practices, more satisfying and safe online experiences, and skillful workplace communication.

Embracing Technology

MindTap Communications for *Looking Out Looking In* combines tools like a robust self-assessment, readings, flashcards, journal entries, quizzes, and other digital activities designed intentionally to guide students through their course and transform them into master students. This MindTap is structured to include a "Knowledge Check" and "Apply It" activities in each chapter that guide students through book-aligned learning exercises and authentic application opportunities.

Knowledge Check

"Knowledge Checks" introduce students to some of the key concepts and skills they will learn about in the chapter through an interactive poll.

Apply It

"Apply It" activities are designed to bridge the understanding of chapter concepts with their real-world applications in both college and career.

For Instructors

Additional instructor resources for this product are available online. Instructor assets include an Instructor's Manual, Educator's Guide, PowerPoint slides, and a test bank powered by Cognero. Sign up or sign in at www.cengage.com to search for and access this product and its online resources.

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

Since this is a book about interpersonal communication, it seems appropriate for us to introduce ourselves to you, the reader. The "we" you'll be reading throughout this book isn't just an editorial device: It refers to three real people—Ron Adler, Russ Proctor, and Jimmie Manning.

Ron Adler lives in Santa Barbara, California, with his wife, Sherri, an artist and photo researcher who selected most of the images in this book. Their three adult children were infants when early editions of *Looking Out Looking In* were conceived, and they grew up as guinea pigs for the field testing of many concepts in this book. If you asked them, they would vouch for the value of the information between these covers.

Ron spends most of his professional time writing about communication. In addition to helping create *Looking Out Looking In*, he has contributed to six other books on topics including business communication, public speaking, small group communication, assertiveness, and social skills. Besides writing and teaching, Ron teaches college courses and helps professional and business people improve their communication on the job. Cycling and hiking help keep Ron physically and emotionally healthy.

Russ Proctor is a professor at Northern Kentucky University, where his sons RP and Randy both attended. Russ's wife, Pam, is an educator too, training teachers, students, and businesses to use energy more efficiently.

Russ met Ron at a communication conference in 1990, where they quickly discovered a shared interest in using feature films as a teaching tool. They have written and spoken extensively on this topic over the years, and they have also co-authored several textbooks and articles. When Russ isn't teaching, writing, or presenting, his hobbies include sports (especially baseball), classic rock music (especially Steely Dan), and cooking (especially for family and friends on his birthday each year).

Jimmie Manning lives in Reno, Nevada, with his husband, Adam, their son, Devvan, their goldendoodle, Stone, and two cats, Piz and Grayson. He earned the Ph.D. degree in Interpersonal Communication and Cultural Studies from the University of Kansas in 2006. He is currently Chair and Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Nevada. His teaching and research examine how people make meaning in and about their relationships, with an overall goal of doing research that will help others have the connections with friends, family, and loved ones that they crave. He has published over 120 essays, books, and encyclopedia entries and is also a renowned teacher. He was recently awarded the National Communication Association Ecroyd award for outstanding teaching in higher education.

When he is not doing his academic work, he spends time playing board games with his family, going to concerts, working with community advocacy groups, and enjoying brunch dates with friends and family. He dedicates this book to his son who, as a 16-year-old, is constantly asking for advice relating to one of the relationship types covered in Chapter 10.

xv

A First Look at Interpersonal Communication

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After studying the topics in this chapter, you should be able to:

LO1 Assess the needs (physical, identity, social, cultural, and practical) that communicators are attempting to satisfy in a given situation or relationship.

LO2 Explain how culture influences interpersonal communication practices and understandings.

LO3 Apply the transactional communication model to a particular interpersonal interaction.

LO4 Identify how the communication principles and misconceptions described in this chapter are evident in a specific situation.

LO5 Examine the level of communication competence in a specific interpersonal interaction or in a specific relationship.

3

This book is about connecting with other people. It is about the joy of companionship and not being alone. At the same time, the knowledge contained in this book recognizes and verifies that sometimes people do want to be alone; and that forms of interaction that are often labeled as negative—such as conflict—can be beneficial aspects of relating with others.

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At the same time, and sadly, most people know what it is like to receive unwanted attention or be involved with communication that is abusive or disrespectful. Take, for instance, bullying. Many people learn how communication can be used as a negative social tool early in their lives by watching, enacting, experiencing, or hearing about bullying at school or in their communities.[1] They learn that communication with others can build someone up or tear them down. Sometimes this is through harsh words or even physical violence; and other times, it is through *withholding* communication that the pain comes, such as silence and ignoring others.

We all know intuitively that communication—the company of others—is one of the most basic human needs and that lack of contact is among the cruelest punishments a person can suffer. In fact, as we become adults, we become even more tolerant of unkind communicative behaviors made toward us. For example, workplace studies show that employees would rather get negative attention from bosses and coworkers than receive no attention at all. It hurts to be picked on, but it's worse to be ostracized.[2]

Besides being emotionally painful, being deprived of companionship is so serious that it can affect life itself. Frederick II, emperor of Germany in the 13th century, may have been the first person to prove the point systematically. A medieval historian described one of his significant, if inhumane, experiments:

> He bade foster mothers and nurses to suckle the children, to bathe and wash them, but in no way to prattle with them, for he wanted to learn whether they would speak the Hebrew language, which was the oldest, or Greek, or Latin, or Arabic, or perhaps the language of their parents, of whom they had been born. But he labored in vain because all the children died. For they could not live without the petting and joyful faces and loving words of their foster mothers.[3]

Fortunately, contemporary researchers have found less barbaric ways to illustrate the importance of communication. In one study of isolation, subjects were paid to remain alone in a locked room. Of the five subjects, one lasted for eight days. Three held out for two days, one commenting, "Never again." The fifth subject lasted only two hours.[4]

The need for contact and companionship is just as strong outside the laboratory, as individuals who have led solitary lives by choice or necessity have discovered. W. Carl Jackson, an adventurer who sailed across the Atlantic Ocean alone in fifty-one days, summarized the feelings common to most loners:

> I found the loneliness of the second month almost excruciating. I always thought of myself as self-sufficient, but I found life without people had no meaning. I had a definite need for somebody to talk to, someone real, alive, and breathing.[5]

Why We Communicate

You might object to stories like this, claiming that solitude would be a welcome relief from the irritations of everyday life. It's true that all of us need solitude, often more than we get, but each of us has a point beyond which we do not want to be alone. Beyond this point, solitude changes from a pleasurable to a painful condition. In other words, we all need relationships. Everyone needs to communicate.

Physical Needs

Communication is so important that its presence or absence affects physical health. Medical researchers have identified a wide range of health threats that can result from a lack of close relationships. For instance:

- A meta-analysis of nearly 150 studies and over 300,000 participants found that socially connected people—those with strong networks of family and friends—live an average of 3.7 years longer than those who are socially isolated.[6]

- A lack of social relationships jeopardizes coronary health to a degree that rivals cigarette smoking, high blood pressure, and lack of physical activity.[7]

- Socially isolated people are much more susceptible to the common cold than are those who have active social networks;[8] and they take longer to recover from injuries or illness.[9]

- Divorced, separated, and widowed people are five to ten times more likely to need mental hospitalization than their married counterparts. Married people also have lower incidences of pneumonia, surgery, and cancer than do single people.[10] The health benefits were especially positive when participants reported that they were in a *happy* marriage.

By contrast, a life that includes positive relationships created through communication leads to better health. As little as ten minutes per day of socializing improves memory and boosts intellectual function.[11] Conversation with others reduces feelings of loneliness and its accompanying maladies.[12] Stress hormones decline when more often people hear expressions of affection from loved ones,[13] allowing benefits such as feeling calmer and experiencing fewer sleep disturbances.[14]

Research like this demonstrates the importance of having satisfying personal relationships. Not everyone needs the same amount of contact, and the quality of communication is almost certainly as significant as the quantity. The key point is that personal communication is essential for our well-being.

Identity Needs

Communication does more than enable us to survive. It is the way—indeed, the only way—we learn who we are. As this chapter reviews and as you will learn more about in Chapter 3, our sense of identity comes from the way we

interact with other people. Specifically, our cultures and our identities—as well as the messages we receive from friends, family members, mentors, or even strangers—help us to negotiate a sense of who we are.

Although we do have some control over who we are and how others see us, it is also true that, if deprived of communication with others, we would have no sense of ourselves. A dramatic example is the "Wild Boy of Aveyron," who spent his early childhood without any apparent human contact. The boy was discovered in January 1800 digging for vegetables in a French village garden. He showed no behaviors that one would expect in a social human. The boy could not speak but rather uttered only weird cries. More significant than this lack of social skills was his lack of any identity as a human being. As one author put it, "The boy had no human sense of being in the world. He had no sense of himself as a person related to other persons."[15] Only with the influence of a loving "mother" did the boy begin to behave—and, we can imagine, think of himself—as a human.

Like the boy of Aveyron, each of us enters the world with little or no sense of identity. We gain an idea of who we are from the messages we receive from the world. As Chapter 3 explains, the messages we receive in early childhood are the strongest, but the influence of others continues throughout life.

Social/Relational Needs

Besides helping to define who we are, communication provides a vital link with others. Researchers and theorists have identified a whole range of social needs that we satisfy by communicating. These include pleasure, affection, companionship, escape, relaxation, and control.[16]

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∧ A common motivation for communication is loneliness. How well does your communication fulfill your needs for connection? How can you use the information in this book to help you meet your social needs?

Research suggests a strong link between effective interpersonal communication and happiness. In one study of more than 200 college students, the happiest 10 percent described themselves as having a rich social life. (The very happy people were no different from their classmates in any other measurable way such as amount of sleep, exercise, TV watching, religious activity, or alcohol consumption.)[17] In another study, women reported that "socializing" contributed more to a satisfying life than virtually any other activity, including relaxing, shopping, eating, exercise, TV, or prayer.[18] Married couples who are effective communicators report happier relationships than less skillful partners—a finding that has been supported across cultures.[19]

Despite knowing that communication is vital to social satisfaction, a variety of evidence suggests that many people aren't very successful at managing their interpersonal relationships. For example, one study revealed that a quarter of the more than 4,000 adults surveyed knew more about their dogs than they did about their neighbors' backgrounds.[20] Research also suggests that the number of friendships is in decline. Recent research indicates

that an average adult in the U.S. has about two close friends—a drop from the average of almost three reported in a similar survey 20 years earlier.[21]

Because connections with others are so vital, some theorists maintain that positive relationships may be the single most important source of life satisfaction and emotional well-being in every culture.[22] If you pause now and make a mental list of your own relationships, you'll probably see that, no matter how successfully you interact with friends, at home, at school, and at work, there is plenty of room for improvement in your everyday life. The information that follows will help you improve the way you communicate with the people who matter most to you.

Practical Goals

Besides satisfying social needs and shaping our identity, communication is the most widely used approach to satisfying what communication scholars call **instrumental goals**: getting others to behave in ways we want. Some instrumental goals are quite basic: Communication is the tool that lets you tell the hair-stylist to take just a little off the sides, lets you negotiate household duties, and lets you convince the plumber that the broken pipe needs attention *now*!

Other instrumental goals are more important. Career success is a prime example. As the On the Job box in this section shows, communication skills are essential in virtually every career. For example, researchers discovered that "poor communication" was the root of more than 60 percent of reported medical errors—including death, serious physical injury, and psychological trauma.[23] Research published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and

On the Job

Communication and Career Success

No matter what the field, research confirms what experienced workers already know—that communication skills are crucial in finding and succeeding in a job. Communication skills often make the difference between being hired and being rejected. In one widely followed annual survey, employers list the skills and qualities for their ideal candidate. Communication skills always top the list, ahead of technical skills, initiative, analytical ability, and computer skills.[a]

In another survey, managers across the country rated the abilities to speak and listen effectively as the two most important factors in helping college graduates find jobs in a competitive workplace—more important than technical competence, work experience, and specific degree earned.[b] When 170 well-known business and industrial firms were asked to list the most common reasons for *not* offering jobs to applicants, the most frequent replies were "inability to communicate" and "poor communication skills."[c]

Once you have been hired, the need for communication skills is important in virtually every career.[d] Engineers spend the bulk of their working lives speaking and listening, mostly in one-to-one and small-group settings.[e] Accountants and the firms that hire them consistently cite effective communication as essential for career success.[f] One executive at computer giant Sun Microsystems made the point forcefully: "If there's one skill that's required for success in this industry, it's communication skills."[g] Writing in *The Scientist*, a commentator echoed this sentiment: "If I give any advice, it is that you can never do enough training around your overall communication skills."[h]

elsewhere revealed a significant difference between the communication skills of physicians who had no malpractice claims against them and those with previous claims.[24] Because communication is so important in the workplace, each chapter will continue to examine how the concepts covered fit into the interpersonal interaction that occurs in workplace settings.

Cultural Needs

Last, but certainly not least, we have a cultural need to communicate. Communication makes us feel as if we belong, as if we have a history, background, connection, and identity. These cultural aspects of communication are explored in the next section of this chapter.

Culture and Communication

As renowned intercultural communication scholar Brenda J. Allen notes, difference matters.[25] As we will explore in this chapter and throughout the book, understanding and respecting cross-cultural differences is an important part of building and enjoying relationships. Interpersonal communication and culture are inseparable.[26] Everyday interaction, such as making plans, talk over a meal, arguments, or even greetings to strangers involve interactions that are specific to cultural expectations. Despite these common occurrences being cultural, it is most likely that we do not consider them to be cultural and think of them as being part of the norm. That is because often when people are taught to think about "culture" they are taught to think about "others." But everyone belongs to a culture—in fact, people all belong to *multiple* cultures.

It is important that we consider the everyday norms and practices that make up our own cultures. We can do that by asking questions about what kinds of assumptions shape our conversations as cultural events. For example, if a family has a guest for dinner, what kinds of topics are allowed to be discussed? Who guides the conversation? What kinds of comments about the food served are allowed or disallowed? What are the rules about manners? What other expectations are present? The answers to these questions help to unpack notions of the family's culture—but they also likely examine other cultural aspects including the race and/or ethnicities of the family members and guests, the ages of those eating with the family, and the socioeconomic status of the family, among others.

As this example illustrates, culture informs the communication that is happening while, at the same time, communication is helping to make the culture of the dinner event. In other words, communication *makes* or *is constitutive of* culture; and, in turn, that same culture reflexively shapes communication practices and processes. In other words, and returning to the example of a dinner party, it is the interaction or communication that will make the dinner party what it is; and, at the same time, that communication

will be guided or even dictated by the culture or cultures involved. As this suggests, the connection between communication and culture is complex. That is why a lot of this book will explore communication and culture.

Cultures and Co-Cultures

Culture is the complex system of learned values, norms, traditions, languages, and symbols shared by a group of people. Belonging to a specific culture is both a matter of *perception* and *definition*. When identifying as a member of a culture, someone typically recognizes characteristics they share with others. These identified similarities help to form a cultural *in-group*, or people who are perceived the same. Others who do not possess these characteristics will be recognized, and they form the *out-group*, or people who are different from the specific culture. When these perceptions regarding an in-group and out-group are strong enough to create a socially defined identity, that is when they are often defined as being a culture. Actually, it is probably more correct to say that people do not have *a* culture, but instead belong to many *co-cultures* that help to shape their identities.

Within a society, **co-cultures** have different communication practices. Consider just a few co-cultures:

- age (e.g., teen, older adult)

- occupation (e.g., fashion model, long-distance trucker)

- sexual and/or romantic identity (e.g., lesbian, gay male, asexual)

- physical disability (e.g., wheelchair user, deaf person)

- religion (e.g., evangelical Christian, Muslim)

- activity (e.g., biker, gamer)

Unfortunately, members of different co-cultures are not all treated the same, with some co-cultures being marginalized, discriminated against, or even violently assaulted or killed. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, difference matters—and even when that difference is unintentional and only minimally hurtful, it can make a difference in how we relate with others. The challenges that nondominant co-cultures face from members of dominant cultures have been established in Mark Orbe's co-cultural theory.[27] According to this theory, marginalized members of a co-culture will use one of three strategies to manage their situations. First, they might *assimilate*, or blend with the dominant culture. For example, parents in a family who have immigrated from Mexico to the U.S. might intentionally only teach their children English, not Spanish, to better assimilate their children to the most commonly spoken language in their new country.

Second, co-cultural theory indicates co-cultures might *accommodate* to a co-culture. A Muslim woman working in a business setting who wears a hajib with her suit would fit this category of the theory. Finally, there is *separation*. A gay co-worker might choose to only invite other queer colleagues to a party he is hosting as a way of ensuring he feels comfortable or even safe in his home space—thus separating himself from members of the dominant culture.

Intercultural Communication as Interpersonal Communication

As co-cultural theory demonstrates, members of marginalized identity groups often feel as if they must adjust in order to navigate or survive dominant co-cultures. This labor can certainly take its toll, and it can hamper communication and prevent the formation of rewarding interpersonal relationships. Even when communicators from different co-cultures are more even in terms of the respect and power they are afforded, the ability for cultural members to communicate in respectful, caring, and/or beneficial ways is important. **Intercultural communication** happens when members from two or more cultures/co-cultures interact in a way that is influenced by their different symbol systems and cultural perceptions. Intercultural communication applies to both verbal and nonverbal communication symbols.

By harvesting strong intercultural communication skills, you will be able to better navigate your interpersonal communication interactions. That is because just about any set of two people who will interact are bound to have some sort of cultural differences between them. That does not, however, mean that all communication are intercultural. Even as the world continues to diversify, many people share similar values, norms, customs, and ideas. Even when those values, norms, customs, or ideas are different, that does not always come to the forefront in the communication that is happening in a particular conversation. Rather than thinking about differences as being inherent and ongoing across cultures, it might be more beneficial to think about the *salience* of intercultural differences as they pertain to a particular person, conversation, and/or context. That is, sometimes particular instances in a conversation will bring more weight or importance to intercultural differences.

For example, Jenny's orthodox Judaism rarely impacts her on-the-job communication. In fact, most of her colleagues aren't even aware of her religious beliefs. But cultural matters arise when Jenny and her work team start to socialize after office hours. Jenny might feel obliged to explain dietary rules that might make some dining choices problematic. In this case, culture becomes a *salient* issue—one that carries weight.

FatCamera/E+/Getty Images

The Process of Communication

We have been talking about *communication* as though the meaning of this word is perfectly clear. Communication scholars have argued for years about communication definitions. Despite their many disagreements, most would agree that, at its essence, communication is about using messages to generate meanings.[28] Notice how this basic definition holds true across a variety of contexts—public speaking, small groups, mass media, and so on. Before going further, we need to explain systematically what happens when people exchange messages and create meanings in interpersonal communication. Doing so will introduce you to a common working vocabulary and, at the same time, preview some of the topics that are covered in later chapters.

A Linear View

In the early days of studying communication as a social science, researchers created models to illustrate the communication process. Their first attempts resulted in a **linear communication model**, which depicts communication as something a sender "does to" a receiver. According to the linear model in Figure 1.1,

> A **sender** (the person creating the message)
> **encodes** (puts thoughts into symbols and gestures) a
> **message** (the information being transmitted), sending it through a
> **channel** (the medium through which the message passes) to a
> **receiver** (the person attending to the message) who
> **decodes** (makes sense of the message), while contending with
> **noise** (distractions that disrupt transmission).

Notice how the appearance of and vocabulary in Figure 1.1 are similar to how radio and television broadcasting operate. This isn't a coincidence: The scientists who created it were primarily interested in early electronic media. The widespread use of this model has affected the way we think and talk about communication. There is a linear, machine-like quality to familiar phrases, such as "We're having a communication breakdown" and "I don't think my message is getting through." While this is sometimes the case in mediated forms of communication, these familiar phrases (and the thinking they represent) obscure some important features of human communication.
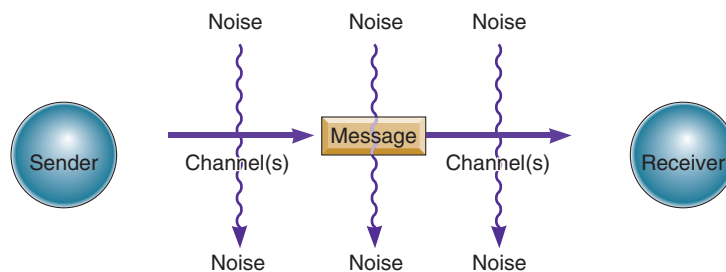
◄ **FIGURE 1.1**
Linear communication model

Does interpersonal communication really "break down," or are people still exchanging information even when they're not talking to each other? Is it possible to "get a message through" to someone loudly and clearly, but still not get the desired reaction? Here are some other questions to consider about the shortcomings of the linear model:

- When you're having a face-to-face conversation with a friend, is there only one sender and one receiver, or do both of you send and receive messages simultaneously?

- Do you purposely encode every message you send, or do you engage in some behaviors unconsciously that still communicate messages to others?

- Even when you send a message electronically (e.g., through texting or email), is the message's meaning affected by larger factors such as culture, environment, and relational history?

These and other questions have led scholars to create models that better represent interpersonal communication. We will look at one of these models now.

A Transactional View

A **transactional communication model** (Figure 1.2) updates and expands the linear model to better capture communication as a uniquely human process. Some concepts and terms from the linear model are retained in the transactional model, whereas others are enhanced, added, or eliminated.

The transactional model uses the word *communicator* instead of *sender* and *receiver*. This term reflects the fact that people typically send and receive messages simultaneously and not in a unidirectional or back-and-forth manner, as suggested by the linear model. Consider, for example, what might happen when you and a housemate negotiate how to handle household chores. As soon as you begin to hear (receive) the words sent by your housemate, "I want to talk about cleaning the kitchen…," you grimace and clench your jaw (sending a nonverbal message of your own while receiving the verbal one). This reaction leads your housemate to interrupt defensively, sending a new message: "Now wait a minute…."

FIGURE 1.2 >
Transactional communication model
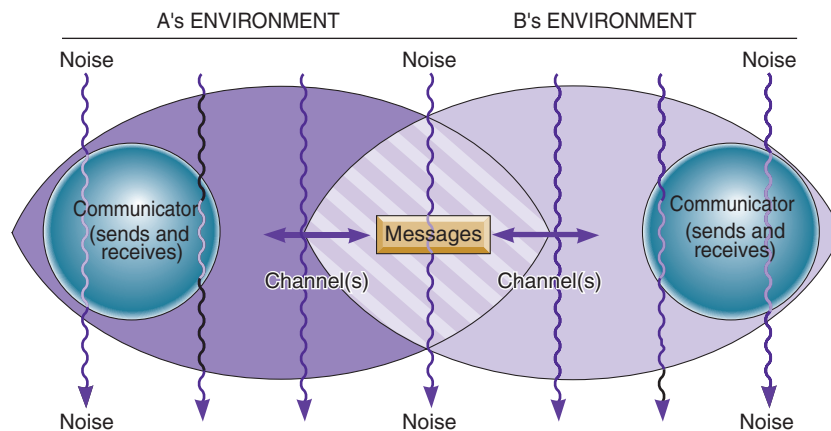
A transactional model also shows that communicators often occupy different **environments**—fields of experience that affect how they understand others' behavior. In communication terminology, *environment* refers not only to a physical location but also to the personal experiences and cultural background that participants bring to a conversation.

Consider just some of the factors that might contribute to different environments:

- Person A might belong to one ethnic group, and person B to another.

- Person A might be economically advantaged, and B a lower-income.

- Person A might be rushed and B have nowhere to go.

- Person A might an older adult and B might be an adolescent.

- Person A might be passionately concerned with the subject and B indifferent to it.

Notice how the model in Figure 1.2 shows that the environments of persons A and B overlap. This area represents the background that the communicators have in common. As the shared environment becomes smaller, communication usually becomes more challenging. Consider a few examples in which different perspectives can make understanding difficult:

- Bosses who have trouble in understanding the perspectives of their employees will be less effective managers, and workers who do not appreciate the challenges of being a boss are more likely to be uncooperative (and probably less suitable for advancement).

- Parents who have trouble recalling their youth are likely to clash with their children, who have never known and may not appreciate the responsibility that comes with parenting.

- Members of a dominant culture who have never experienced how it feels to be marginalized may not appreciate the concerns of people from underrepresented co-cultures, whose own perspectives make it hard to understand the cultural blindness of the majority.

Communication channels retain a significant role in the transactional model, as they did in the linear model. Although it's tempting to see channels simply as neutral conduits for delivering a message, a closer look reveals the important role they play.[29] For instance, should you say "I love you" in person? Over the phone? In a text message? By renting space on a billboard? By sending flowers and a card? Via email? In a voicemail? On social media? Mediated channels have become so important that Chapter 2 is devoted to explaining the role they play in interpersonal relationships.

The transactional model also retains the concept of noise but with a broader focus. In the linear model, the focus is on noise in the channel—what is known as *external noise*. For instance, loud music or too much cigarette smoke in a crowded room might make it difficult for you to pay attention to another person. The transactional model shows that noise also resides *within* communicators. This includes *physiological noise*, which involves biological factors that interfere with accurate reception: illness, fatigue, hearing loss, and so on. Communicators can also encounter *psychological noise:* forces

within that interfere with the ability to understand a message accurately. For instance, a student might become so upset upon learning that they failed a test that they would be unable (perhaps *unwilling* is a better word) to understand clearly where they went wrong. Psychological noise is such an important communication problem that we have devoted much of Chapter 11 to investigating its most common cause: defensiveness.

For all the insights they offer, models can't capture some important features of interpersonal communication. A model is a "snapshot," while communication more closely resembles a "motion picture." In real life, it's difficult to isolate a single discrete "act" of communication from the events that precede and follow it.[30] Consider the cartoon seen here. As it demonstrates, each of the characters considers themselves to be communicating effectively. As outsiders, we can see that they are both contributing to the communication problems that they are experiencing; and, furthermore, that the communication between the characters is what creates the relationship. In other words, the communication pattern that the characters have created together contributes to the quality of their relationship.

This leads to another important point: Transactional communication isn't something that we do *to* others; rather, it is an activity that we do *with* them. In this sense, interpersonal communication is rather like dancing—at least the kind of dancing we do with partners. Like dancing, communication depends on the involvement of a partner. And like good dancing, successful communication doesn't depend only on the person who takes the lead. A great dancer who forgets to consider and adapt to the skill level of his or her partner can make both people look bad. In communication and dancing, even having two talented partners doesn't guarantee success. When two skilled dancers perform without coordinating their movements, the results feel bad to the dancers and look foolish to an audience. Finally, relational communication—like dancing—is a unique creation that arises out of the way in which the partners interact. The way you dance probably varies from one partner to another. Likewise, the way you communicate almost certainly varies from one partner to another.

Now we can summarize the definition of interpersonal communication that we have been developing. **Interpersonal communication** is a transactional process involving participants who occupy different but overlapping environments and create meaning and relationships through the exchange of messages, many of which are affected by external, physiological, and psychological noise.

WOULD YOU SAY YOU LEAN MORE TO THE LEFT?

YOUR LEFT OR MY LEFT?

STAHLER. 9/1

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Whether or not you memorize this definition is a matter for you and your instructor to decide. In any case, notice how it reflects a more sophisticated view of the process than you might have had before reading this far. With this definition in mind, let's look at how interpersonal communication differs from less personal kinds of interaction.

Cinema Publishers Collection/Alamy Stock Photo

Interpersonal and Impersonal Communication

Scholars have characterized interpersonal communication in a number of ways.[31] The most obvious definition focuses on the number of people involved. A *quantitative* definition of interpersonal communication includes any inter-action between two people, usually face to face. Social scientists call two inter-acting people a **dyad**, and they often use the adjective *dyadic* to describe this type of communication. So, in a quantitative sense, the terms *dyadic commu-nication* and *interpersonal communication* can be used interchangeably. Using a quantitative definition, a salesclerk and customer or a police officer ticketing a speeding driver would be examples of interpersonal acts, whereas a teacher and class or a performer and audience would not.

You can probably see the problems with a quantitative definition of interpersonal communication. For example, consider a routine transaction between a salesclerk and customer, or the rushed exchange when you ask a stranger on the street for directions. Communication of this sort hardly seems interpersonal—or personal in any sense of the word. In fact, after transactions like this, we commonly remark, "I might as well have been talking to a machine."

The impersonal nature of some two-person exchanges and the personal nature of others have led some scholars to argue that *quality*, not quantity, is what distinguishes interpersonal communication.[32] Taking a *qualitative* approach, interpersonal communication occurs when people treat one another as unique individuals, regardless of the context in which the interaction occurs or the number of people involved. When quality of interaction is the criterion, the opposite of interpersonal communication is **impersonal communication**, not group, public, or mass communication.

Several features distinguish qualitatively interpersonal communication from less-personal communication.[33] The first feature is *uniqueness*. Communication in impersonal exchanges is determined by social *rules* (e.g., laugh politely at others' jokes, don't dominate a conversation) and by social *roles* (e.g., the customer is always right, be especially polite to older adults). Qualitatively interpersonal relationships are characterized by the development of unique rules and roles. For example, in one relationship you

> ∧ In the series *Wanda-Vision* the Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) uses her magic to bring her husband Vision back to life. She then transforms a small town to match the happy world seen in 1950s sitcoms so she can re-start her life with Vision. Unfortunately (spoiler alert!), she eventually realizes that, even with some of the greatest powers in the Marvel Universe, communication is still irreversible and unre-peatable as her plan does not work. What moments from your life do you wish you could reverse or repeat in a better way? How was communication involved with those moments? And how has it helped you to learn for the future?

might exchange good-natured insults, whereas in another you are careful never to offend your partner. Likewise, you might handle conflicts with one friend or family member by expressing disagreements as soon as they arise, whereas the unwritten rule in another relationship is to withhold resentments until they build up and then clear the air periodically. Communication scholars use the term *relational culture* to describe people in close relationships who create their own unique ways of interacting.[34]

A second feature of qualitatively interpersonal relationships is *irreplaceability*. Because interpersonal relationships are unique, they have no substitute. This explains why we usually feel so sad when a close friendship or love affair cools down. We know that no matter how many other relationships fill our lives, none of them will ever be quite like the one that just ended.

Ethical Challenge

Martin Buber's I and Thou

Martin Buber is arguably the most influential advocate of relational interpersonal communication, as defined in this section. His book *Ich und Du* (*I and Thou*) is a worldwide classic, selling millions of copies since its publication in 1922.[a]

Buber states that "I-It" and "I-Thou" represent two ways in which humans can relate to one another. "I-It" relationships are stable, predictable, and detached. In an "I-It" mode we deal with people because they can do things for us: pump gas, laugh at our jokes, buy products we are selling, and provide information or amusement. "I-It" is also the approach of science, which attempts to understand what makes people tick in order to explain, predict, and control their behavior. Buber would have regarded advertisers as operating in an "I-It" mode, crafting messages that lead people to buy their products or services. "I-It" relationships exist in personal relationships as well as impersonal ones: On an everyday basis, parents and children, bosses and employees, service providers and customers—even lovers—deal with one another as objects ("I wish they would leave me alone." "Can you pick me up after work?" "Why didn't they like my status update?").

In profound contrast to "I-It" relationships, Buber described an "I-Thou" way of interacting. "I-Thou" relationships are utterly unique. Because no two teachers or students, parents or children,

husbands or wives, bosses or employees are alike, we encounter each person as an individual and not as a member of some category. An "I-Thou" posture goes further: Not only are people different from one another, but they change from moment to moment. An "I-Thou" relationship arises out of how we are now, not how we might have been yesterday or even a moment ago. In an "I-Thou" relationship, persuasion and control are out of the question: We certainly may explain our point of view, but ultimately we respect the fact that others are free to act.

Buber acknowledges that it is impossible to create and sustain pure "I-Thou" relationships. But without this qualitatively interpersonal level of contact, our lives are impoverished. To paraphrase Buber, without "I-It" we cannot exist, but if we live only with "I-It," we are not fully human.

Think of your most important relationships:

1. To what degree can they be described as "I-Thou" or "I-It"?

2. How satisfied are you with this level of relating?

3. What obligation do you have to treat others in an "I-Thou" manner?

Based on your answers to these questions, how might you change your style of communication?

Interdependence is a third feature of qualitatively interpersonal relationships. At the most basic level, the fate of the partners is connected. You might be able to brush off the anger, affection, excitement, or depression of someone you're not involved with personally, but in an interpersonal relationship the other's life affects you. Sometimes interdependence is a pleasure, and at other times it is a burden. In either case, it is a fact of life in qualitatively interpersonal relationships. Interdependence goes beyond the level of joined fates. In interpersonal relationships, our very identity depends on the nature of our interaction with others. As psychologist Kenneth Gergen puts it: "One cannot be 'attractive' without others who are attracted, a 'leader' without others willing to follow, or a 'loving person' without others to affirm with appreciation."[35]

A fourth feature of interpersonal relationships is often (though not always) the amount of *disclosure* of personal information. In impersonal relationships we don't reveal much about ourselves, but in interpersonal relationships we feel more comfortable sharing our thoughts and feelings. This doesn't mean that all interpersonal relationships are warm and caring, or that all self-disclosure is positive. It's possible to reveal negative, personal information: "I'm really angry with you." The point is we tend to reserve these kinds of disclosures—both positive and negative—for our more personal relationships.

A fifth feature of interpersonal communication is *intrinsic rewards*. In impersonal communication, we seek payoffs that have little to do with the people involved. You listen to instructors in class or talk to potential buyers of your used car in order to reach goals that usually have little to do with developing personal relationships. By contrast, you spend time in qualitatively interpersonal relationships with friends, lovers, and others because you find the time personally rewarding. It often doesn't matter *what* you talk about: The relationship itself is what's important.

Because relationships that are unique, irreplaceable, interdependent, disclosing, and intrinsically rewarding are rare, qualitatively interpersonal communication is relatively scarce. We chat pleasantly with shopkeepers or fellow passengers on the bus or plane; we discuss the weather or current events with most classmates and neighbors; we enjoy bantering with online acquaintances on social networking websites. However, considering the number of people with whom we communicate, personal relationships are by far in the minority.

Most relationships aren't *either* interpersonal *or* impersonal. Rather, they fall somewhere on a continuum between these two extremes. Your own experience probably reveals that there's often a personal element in even the most impersonal situations. You might appreciate the unique sense of humor of a familiar blog poster or connect on a personal level with the person cutting your hair. And even the most tyrannical, demanding, by-the-book boss might show an occasional flash of humanity.

Just as there's a personal element in many impersonal settings, there is also an impersonal element in our relationships with the people we care most about. There are occasions when we don't want to be personal: when we're distracted, tired, busy, or just not interested. Sometimes all we want to know about certain friends is what they post on social media sites. In fact, interpersonal communication is rather like rich food—it is fine in moderation, but too much can make you uncomfortable.

Pause and Reflect

How Personal Are Your Facebook Relationships?

If you're a social media user, scroll through your list of friends, contacts, or followers on the site you use the most. Consider how personal (or impersonal) your relationships are with those people:

- How many would you regard to be "highly personal"? How many are "highly impersonal"? (Perhaps you can rate them on a scale of 1 to 10, with those rated 9 or 10 being highly personal and those rated 1 or 2 being highly impersonal.)

- Which factors noted in this section (unique, irreplaceable, interdependent, disclosing, and intrinsically rewarding) affect your appraisals?

- What percentage of your communication with these people occurs exclusively on that social media site? Through other mediated channels (phone, text, email, another social media platform)? Face to face? How does this ratio affect your friendships?

Most of us don't have the time or energy to create highly personal relationships with everyone we encounter, either in person or via social media. In fact, the scarcity of qualitatively interpersonal communication contributes to its value. Like precious jewels and one-of-a-kind artwork, interpersonal relationships are special because of their scarcity.

Communication Principles and Misconceptions

Now that we've looked at definitions and approaches to communication, it's important to identify some principles of interpersonal interaction—and what communication can and can't accomplish.

Communication Principles

It's possible to draw several important conclusions about communication from what you have already learned in this chapter.

Communication Can Be Intentional or Unintentional   Some communication is clearly intentional: You probably plan your words carefully before asking the boss for a raise or offering constructive criticism. Some scholars argue

that only intentional messages like these qualify as communication. Others contend that even unintentional behavior is communicative. Suppose, for instance, that a friend overhears you muttering complaints to yourself. Even though you didn't intend for them to hear your remarks, they certainly did carry a message. In addition to these slips of the tongue, we unintentionally send many nonverbal messages. You might not be aware of your sour expression, impatient shifting, or sigh of boredom, but others view them nonetheless. In *Looking Out Looking In*, we will look at the communicative value of both intentional and unintentional behavior.

It's Impossible Not to Communicate   Because both intentional and unintentional behaviors send a message, many theorists agree that it is impossible not to communicate. Whatever you do—whether you speak or remain silent, confront or avoid, act emotional or keep a poker face—you provide information to others about your thoughts and feelings. In this sense, we are like transmitters that can't be shut off.

Of course, the people who decode your message may not interpret it accurately. They might take your kidding seriously or underestimate your feelings, for example. The message that you intend to convey may not even resemble the one that others infer from your actions. Thus, when we talk about "a communication breakdown" or "miscommunication," we rarely mean that communication has ended. Instead, we mean that it is inaccurate, ineffective, or unsatisfying. We even use the word miscommunication to indicate that we made a mistake or were confused.[36]

This explains why the best way to boost understanding is to discuss your intentions and your interpretations of the other person's behavior until you have negotiated a shared meaning. The perception-checking skills described in Chapter 4, the tips on clear language offered in Chapter 6, and the listening skills introduced in Chapter 8 will give you tools to boost the odds that the meanings of messages you send and receive are understandable to both you and others.

Communication Is Unrepeatable   Because communication is an ongoing process, it is impossible to repeat the same event. The friendly smile that worked so well when meeting a stranger last week might not succeed with the person you meet tomorrow. It might feel stale and artificial to you the second time around, or it might be wrong for the new person or occasion. Even with the same person, it's impossible to re-create an event. Why? Because neither you nor the other person is the same person. You've both lived longer. Your feelings about each other may have changed. You need not constantly invent new ways to act around familiar people, but you should realize that the "same" words and behavior are different each time they are spoken or performed.

Communication Is Irreversible   We sometimes wish that we could back up in time, erasing words or acts and replacing them with better alternatives. As the cartoon here points out, such reversal is impossible. Sometimes, further explanation can clear up another's confusion, or an apology can mollify another's hurt feelings. Other times no amount of explanation can erase the impression you have created. It is no more possible to "unreceive" a message than to

"We can pause, Stu—we can even try fast-forwarding— but we can never rewind."

"unsqueeze" a tube of toothpaste. The same is true of most electronic messages: Once you hit "send," they can't be taken back. Words said, messages sent, and deeds done are irretrievable.

Communication Has a Content and a Relational Dimension   Practically all exchanges operate on two levels. The **content dimension** involves the information being explicitly discussed: "Turn left at the next corner." "You can buy that for less online." "You're standing on my foot." In addition to this sort of obvious content, messages also have a **relational dimension** that expresses how you feel about the other person: whether you like or dislike the other person, feel in control or subordinate, feel comfortable or anxious, and so on.[37] For instance, consider how many different relational messages you could communicate by simply saying, "I'm busy tonight, but maybe some other time" in different ways.

Sometimes the content dimension of a message is all that matters. For example, you may not care much about how the customer service representative feels about you as long as you get a technician scheduled to fix your car. At other times, though, the relational dimension of a message is more important than the content under discussion (consider times when a customer service representative has spoken to you in a tone that seemed dismissive or rude). This explains why arguments can develop over apparently trivial subjects such as whose turn it is to wash the dishes or how to spend the weekend. In cases like this, what's really being tested is the nature of the relationship. Who's in control? How important are we to each other? Chapter 9 will explore these key relational issues in detail.

Communication Misconceptions

It's just as important to know what characteristics of communication are *not* universally true as to understand what communication is.[38] Avoiding the following misconceptions can save you a great deal of personal trouble.

More Communication Is Not Always Better Whereas not communicating enough can cause problems, there are also situations when *too much* communication is a mistake. Sometimes excessive communication is simply unproductive, as when two people "talk a problem to death," going over

the same ground again and again without making progress. As one communication book puts it, "More and more negative communication merely leads to more and more negative results."[39] Even when you aren't being critical, too much communication can backfire. Pestering a prospective employer after your job interview or texting too many "call me" messages can generate the opposite reaction from what you're seeking.

Meanings Are Not in Words   The biggest mistake we can make is to assume that *saying* something is the same thing as *communicating* it. As Chapter 4 explains, the words that make perfect sense to you can be perceived and interpreted in entirely different ways by others. Chapter 6 describes the most common types of verbal misunderstandings and suggests ways to minimize them. Chapter 8 introduces listening skills that help ensure that the way you receive messages matches the ideas that a speaker is trying to convey. As the old saying goes, "Words don't mean—*people* mean."

Successful Communication Doesn't Always Involve Shared Understanding   George Bernard Shaw once remarked, "The problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished." This observation may sound cynical, but research (and most likely your personal experience) demonstrates that misunderstandings are common.[40] In fact, evidence suggests that people who are well acquainted may be more likely to misunderstand one another than relative strangers.[41]

Mutual understanding can be one measure of successful communication,[42] but there are times when success comes from *not* completely understanding one another. For example, we are often deliberately vague in order to spare another's feelings. Imagine how you might reply when a friend asks, "What do you think about my new tattoo?" You might tactfully say, "Wow—that's really unusual," instead of honestly and clearly answering, "I think it's grotesque." In cases like this, we sacrifice clarity for the sake of kindness and to maintain our relationships. Some research suggests that satisfying relationships depend in part on flawed understanding. Couples who *think* their partners understand them are more satisfied with each other than those who *actually* understand what the other says and means.[43] In other words, satisfying relationships can sometimes come from less-than-perfect understanding. Chapter 3 describes in detail the way we sometimes sacrifice clarity for the sake of maintaining relationships.

Communication Will Not Solve All Problems   Sometimes even the best-planned, best-timed communication won't solve a problem. Imagine, for example, that you ask an instructor to explain why you received a poor grade on a project that you believe deserved top marks. The instructor clearly outlines the reasons why you received the poor grade and sticks to that position after listening thoughtfully to your protests. Has communication solved the problem? Hardly.

Sometimes clear communication is even the *cause* of problems. Suppose, for example, that a friend asks you for an honest opinion of the outfit they have just bought. Your sincere response, "I think it looks great! You'll be the star of your costume party!" might do more harm than good. Deciding when and how to self-disclose isn't always easy. See Chapter 3 for suggestions.

Online Communication Principles and Misconceptions

While we are on the topic of communication principles and misconceptions, it is important to note that even for the most avid online communicators a lot of misunderstandings about the problems and advantages of social media and other forms of online communication persist. In Chapter 2, you will thoroughly examine both the benefits and drawbacks of computer-mediated communication and examine in-depth how it impacts interpersonal relationships. For now, however, consider just how widespread social media use is on a worldwide basis:[44]

Rawpixel.com/Shutterstock.com

- About 500 million tweets are sent daily.
- YouTube viewers watch about 3.25 billion hours of content each month.
- Snapchat is used by over 187 million people each day.
- Every fourth person has a Facebook account.

⌄ Whether you love it or hate it, computer-mediated technology is here to stay and has a considerable impact on interpersonal communication. What are some of your favorite aspects of computer-mediated communication? What do you dislike? And what would your life be like if computer-mediated communication were to suddenly cease to exist?

Following the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020, people expanded their social media repertoires using video chat platforms such as Zoom[45] as well as other new social media platforms to keep in touch with friends and families.

Although some detest social media and other forms of computer-mediated communication, as the numbers shared here indicate, it is becoming increasingly more apparent that part of being an effective and competent interpersonal communicator in the current era involves an understanding of online communication technologies. A lot of what you read in the next section about communication competence applies to communicating online; and in Chapter 2, you will consider even more how you can make the most of computer-mediated communication experiences.

What Makes an Effective Communicator?

It's easy to recognize good communicators and even easier to spot poor ones, but what characteristics distinguish effective communicators from their less successful counterparts?

Communication Competence Defined

Defining **communication competence** isn't as easy as it might seem. Although scholars struggle to agree on a precise definition, most would agree

that competent communication involves achieving one's goals in a manner that, in most cases, maintains or enhances the relationship in which it occurs. Put another way, competence seeks to be both *effective* and *appropriate*. You can probably think of people who achieve one of these goals at the expense of the other, such as the high-achieving businessperson who regularly ruffles feathers, or the kind and gracious person who doesn't stand up for herself or himself. Competence is a balancing act that requires looking out both for yourself and for others—sometimes a challenging task.[46]

The following characteristics typify a competent communicator.

There Is No Ideal Way to Communicate   Your own experience shows that a variety of communication styles can be effective. Some very successful communicators are serious, whereas others use humor; some are gregarious, whereas others are quieter; and some are more straightforward, whereas others hint diplomatically. Just as there are many kinds of beautiful music or art, there are many kinds of competent communication. It certainly is possible to learn new, effective ways of communicating from observing models, but it would be a mistake to try to copy others in a way that doesn't reflect your own style or values.

TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy Stock Photo

∧ In the TV series *Cobra Kai*, the communication of conniving dojo sensei John Kreese (Martin Kove) is high in *effectiveness* (he almost always achieves his goals and gets his way) but low on *appropriateness* (he routinely damages others and his relationships with them). How would an impartial observer evaluate the moral dimensions of *your* communication?

Competence Is Situational   Even within a culture or relationship, the specific communication that is competent in one setting might be a colossal blunder in another. The joking that insults you routinely trade with one friend might offend a sensitive family member, and last Saturday night's romantic approach would most likely be out of place at work on Monday morning.

Because competent behavior varies so much from one situation and person to another, it's a mistake to think that communication competence is a trait that a person either has or does not have. It's more accurate to talk about *degrees* or *areas* of competence.[47] You might deal quite skillfully with peers, for example, but feel clumsy interacting with people who are much different from you in their age, culture, or socioeconomic status. Sometimes people feel self-aware or nervous when they perceive the person they are talking to is more attractive or "put together" than they are. In fact, your competence will vary from situation to situation as you interact with one person to another. This means that it's an overgeneralization to say in a moment of distress, "I'm a terrible communicator!" when it's more accurate to say, "I didn't handle this situation very well, even though I'm better in others."

Competence Can Be Learned   To some degree, biology is destiny when it comes to communication style.[48] Studies of identical and fraternal twins suggest that traits including sociability, anger, and relaxation seem to be partially a function of our genetic makeup. Some research suggests that certain personality traits predispose people toward particular competence skills.[49] For instance, those who are agreeable and conscientious by nature find it easier to be appropriate, and harder to be (and become) assertive and

effective. Chapter 3 will have more to say about the role of neurobiology in communication traits.

Fortunately, biology isn't the only factor that shapes how we communicate. Communication competence is, to a great degree, a set of skills that anyone can learn. Skills training has been shown to help communicators in a variety of professional fields.[50] Research also shows that college students typically become more competent communicators over the course of their undergraduate studies.[51] In other words, your level of competence can improve through education and training, which means that reading this book and taking this course can help you become a more competent communicator.[52]

Characteristics of Competent Communicators

Although competent communication varies from one situation to another, scholars have identified several common denominators that characterize effective communication in most contexts.

A Wide Range of Behaviors   Effective communicators are able to choose their actions from a wide range of behaviors.[53] To understand the importance of having a large communication repertoire, imagine that someone you know repeatedly tells jokes—perhaps racist or sexist ones—that you find offensive. You could respond to these jokes in a number of ways:

- You could decide to say nothing, figuring that the risks of bringing the subject up would be greater than the benefits.

- You could ask a third party to say something to the joke teller about the offensiveness of the jokes.

- You could hint at your discomfort, hoping your friend would get the point.

- You could joke about your friend's insensitivity, counting on humor to soften the blow of your criticism.

- You could express your discomfort in a straightforward way, asking your friend to stop telling the offensive jokes, at least around you.

- You could even demand that your friend stop.

With this choice of responses at your disposal (and you can probably think of others as well), you could pick the one that has the best chance of success. But if you were able to use only one or two of these responses when raising a delicate issue—always keeping quiet or always hinting, for example—your chances of success would be much smaller. Indeed, many poor communicators are easy to spot by their limited range of responses. Some are chronic jokers. Others are always belligerent. Still others are quiet in almost every situation. Like a piano player who knows only one tune or a chef who can prepare only a few dishes, these people are forced to rely on a small range of responses again and again, whether or not they are successful.

Many people with disabilities have learned the value of having a repertoire of options available to manage unwanted offers of help.[54] Some of those options include performing a task quickly before anyone has the chance to intervene; pretending not to hear the offer; accepting a well-intentioned invitation

to avoid seeming rude or ungrateful; using humor to deflect a bid for help; declining a well-intentioned offer with thanks; and assertively refusing help from those who won't take no for an answer.

Ability to Choose the Most Appropriate Behavior   Simply possessing a large range of communication skills is no guarantee of success. It's also necessary to know which of these skills will work best in a particular situation. As the Artificial (un)Intelligence reading shows, a response that works well in one setting can flop miserably in another one.

Although it's impossible to say precisely how to act in every situation, you should consider at least three factors when choosing a response. The first factor is the communication *context*. The time and place will almost always influence how you act. Asking your boss for a raise or your lover for a kiss might produce good results if the time is right, but the identical request might backfire if your timing is poor. Likewise, the joke that would be ideal at a bachelor party would probably be inappropriate at a funeral.

Your *goal* will also shape the approach you take. Inviting a new neighbor over for a cup of coffee or dinner could be just the right approach if you want to encourage a friendship, but if you want to maintain your privacy, it might be wiser to be polite but cool. Likewise, your goal will determine your approach in situations in which you want to help another person. As you will learn in Chapter 8, sometimes offering advice is just what is needed. But when you want to help others develop the ability to solve problems on their own, it's better to withhold your own ideas and function as a sounding board to let them consider alternatives and choose their solutions.

Finally, your *knowledge of the other person* should shape the approach you take. If you're dealing with someone who is very sensitive or insecure, your response might be supportive and cautious. With an old and trusted friend, you might be blunt. The social niche of the other party can also influence how you communicate. For instance, you would probably act differently toward an older adult than you would toward a teenager. And one study shows that using casual text language (such as "4" instead of "for") will be less successful when emailing your professor than it might be with your friends.[55]

Skill at Performing Behaviors   After you have chosen the most appropriate way to communicate, it's still necessary to perform the required skills effectively.[56] There is a big difference between knowing *about* a skill and being able to put it into practice. Simply being aware of alternatives isn't much help unless you can skillfully put these alternatives to work.

Just reading about communication skills in the following chapters won't guarantee that you can start using them flawlessly. As with any other skills—playing a musical instrument or learning a sport, for example—the road to competence in communication is not a short one. As you learn and practice the communication skills in the following pages, you can expect to pass through several stages,[57] shown in Figure 1.3.

Cognitive Complexity   Social scientists use the term **cognitive complexity** to describe the ability to construct a variety of frameworks for viewing an issue.[58] To understand how cognitive complexity can increase competence, imagine that a longtime friend seems to be angry with you. One possible

Artificial (Un) Intelligence and Communication (In) Competence

Watson, the name for IBM's supercomputer best known for crushing *"Jeopardy!"* contestants at their own game, briefly went from "smart" to "smart ass" with the help of the Urban Dictionary.

According to Eric Brown, the "brains" behind Watson, he and his 35-person team wanted to get IBM's supercomputer to sound more like a real human. In Brown's mind, what better way to learn the intricacies of informal human communication and conversation than having Watson memorize the Urban Dictionary?

The Urban Dictionary, for those who don't know, is comprised of submissions from everyday people and regulated by volunteer editors, who are given an extremely small set of rules to maintain quality control. But for the most part, even with the help of human editors, the Urban Dictionary still turns out to be a rather profane place on the Web.

Watson may have learned the Urban Dictionary, but it never learned the all-important axiom, "There's a time and a place for everything." Watson simply couldn't distinguish polite discourse from profanity. Watson, unfortunately, learned all of the Urban Dictionary's bad habits, including throwing in overly-crass language at random points in its responses. Watson picked up similarly bad habits from reading Wikipedia.

In the end, Brown and his team were forced to remove the Urban Dictionary from Watson's vocabulary, and additionally developed a smart filter to keep Watson from swearing in the future.

For now, Watson will keep doing what it's great at: Helping hospitals diagnose sick patients based on their records and symptoms, and beating the snot out of game show participants. If Watson's brief stint with the Urban Dictionary teaches us anything, it's that artificial intelligence will take a long time to finally learn the complicated, ever-changing ins and outs of human communication.

Dave Smith

1. Can you think of times when people have used "Urban Dictionary language" in settings where it wasn't appropriate?

2. On the other hand, can you think of times when people have used overly formal language in a situation that called for something more casual?

3. What kinds of guidelines should you follow when it comes to appropriate language use?

explanation is that your friend is offended by something you've done. Another possibility is that something has happened in another part of your friend's life that is upsetting. Or perhaps nothing at all is wrong, and you're just being overly sensitive. Considering the issue from several angles might prevent you from overreacting or misunderstanding the situation, increasing the odds of finding a way to resolve the problem constructively. Chapter 4 discusses cognitive complexity—and ways to improve it—in greater detail.

Empathy   Seeing a situation from multiple points of view is important, but there's another step that goes beyond understanding different perspectives. *Empathy* involves feeling and experiencing another person's situation, almost as they do. This ability is so important that some researchers have labeled empathy the most important aspect of communication competence.[59] Chapters 4 and 8 introduce you to a set of skills that can boost your ability to empathize. For now, it's enough to note that getting a feel for how others view the world is a useful and important way to become a more effective communicator.

Emotional Intelligence   Empathy is part of a larger concept called *emotional intelligence* that refers to one's ability to feel, understand, and manage their emotions.[60] Emotional intelligence involves self-awareness, especially in terms of how one emotionally reacts to certain stimuli; self-management as it applies to controlling emotions and adapting to emotional situations; empathy, which you just learned about; and, most relevant to this book, interpersonal communication—especially in terms of conflict management, working with others, making meaningful connections, and advocating for yourself and others. You will have the opportunity to learn more about your emotions and emotional intelligence throughout the text, but you will especially do some reflection in Chapter 5. For now, consider how your emotions connect to how you see others and how you believe others see you.

Self-Monitoring   Whereas increased cognitive complexity and empathy help you understand others better, self-monitoring is one way to understand yourself and the emotions you feel better. Psychologists use the term **self-monitoring** to describe the process of paying close attention to one's behavior and using these observations to shape the way one behaves. Self-monitors are able to separate a part of their consciousness and observe their behavior from a detached viewpoint, making observations such as:

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

Although too much self-monitoring can be problematic (see Chapter 3), people who are aware of their behavior and the impression it makes are typically more skillful communicators than people who are low self-monitors.[61] For example, self-monitors are more accurate in judging others' emotional states, better at remembering information about others, less shy, and more assertive. By contrast, low self-monitors aren't able even to recognize their incompetence. One study revealed that poor communicators were blissfully ignorant of their shortcomings and more likely to overestimate their skill than were better

Skill Builder

Stages in Learning Communication Skills

Learning any new skill requires moving through several levels of competence:

1. **Beginning Awareness.** This is the point at which you first learn that there is a new and better way of behaving. If you play tennis, for example, awareness might grow when you learn about a new way of serving that can improve your power and accuracy. In the area of communication, *Looking Out Looking In* should bring this sort of awareness to you.

2. **Awkwardness.** Just as you were awkward when you first tried to ride a bicycle or drive a car, your initial attempts at communicating in new ways may also be awkward. As the saying goes, "You have to be willing to look bad in order to get good."

3. **Skillfulness.** If you keep working at overcoming the awkwardness of your initial attempts, you'll be able to handle yourself well, although you will still need to think about what you're doing. As an interpersonal communicator, you can expect the stage of skillfulness to be marked by a great deal of thinking and planning, and also by increasingly good results.

4. **Integration.** Integration occurs when you're able to perform well without thinking about it. The behavior becomes automatic, a part of your repertoire.
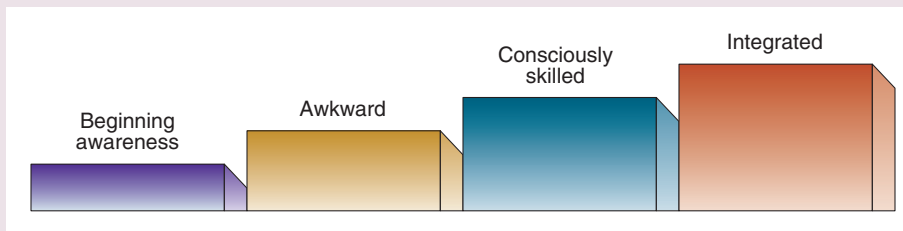
◄ **FIGURE 1.3**
Stages in learning communication skills

communicators.[62] For example, experimental subjects who scored in the lowest quartile on joke-telling skills were more likely than their funnier counterparts to grossly overestimate their sense of humor.

Whereas low self-monitors may blunder through life, succeeding or failing without understanding why, high self-monitors have the detachment to ask themselves the question "How am I doing?" and to change their behavior if the answer isn't positive. This ability can be useful in both personal and professional settings. At the same time, in a computer-mediated world high self-monitors have more data at their disposal than ever before in the form of social media. One study showed that those who were high self-monitors spent excessive time on Facebook trying to understand others' evaluations of themselves and reflect on how they were being viewed by others.[63] As this indicates, while self-monitoring can be healthy and helpful, too much self-monitoring can lead to excess worry and wasted time.

Commitment   One feature that distinguishes effective communication—at least in qualitatively interpersonal relationships—is commitment. In other words, people who seem to care about relationships communicate better than those who don't.[64] This care shows up in at least two ways. The first is

In Real Life

Self-Monitoring

MarketStream has recently called together a team of employees for their new product rollout. Today's meeting in the corporate office is the first time one of the remote members of the team will be required to attend. Nia, the Digital Media Manager, has interacted with Morgan, the Marketing Manager, via email, phone, and even a virtual meeting or two; but this will be their first meeting face-to-face. Morgan's sales consultants will also be there.

Nia is a bit nervous about meeting the team in person due to both the important nature of the project and the fact that her previous conversations with Morgan have been a bit cold. She remembers sharing a friendly comment or joke that went nowhere with Morgan. Nia is aware she needs to avoid any negative mental evaluations and should *self-monitor* while communicating to make sure she remains open and avoids being judgmental. The success of this meeting is vital.

Student Observation
As you read the dialogue below, carefully observe the self-monitoring (*in italics*) experienced by each communicator.

Morgan: Hello, Nia! I have been so excited about this meeting. I'm glad to finally meet you face-to-face, our encounters are always so productive and pleasant. Thank you for coming today! The rest of my team will be joining us in about 10 minutes, but I wanted to get your initial thoughts about the project. I really trust your judgment.

Nia: *(This is not what I expected! He actually seems quite nice!)* Hi Morgan, thank you for the warm welcome! I was not sure what to expect.

Morgan: What do you mean?

Nia: Oh! I just mean our discussions have always been so businesslike over the phone. I wasn't sure if our chemistry would fit. *(Okay Nia, watch your words!)*

Morgan: Really? I thought just the opposite! You always seemed so friendly, open, and incredibly helpful. Was it something I said? *(I wonder if I offended her in any way?)*

Nia: No, not at all. I guess I was a bit nervous about coming in today and you know how imagination gets in the way of reality. *(Boy, did I really misjudge him!)* I am really looking forward to working with you and your team on this new product!

Morgan: *(I am so relieved I stayed calm and didn't react defensively!)* Great! Let's go meet Aaliyah and Omar.

commitment to the other person. Concern for the other person is revealed in a variety of ways: a desire to spend time with the other person instead of rushing, a willingness to listen carefully instead of doing all the talking, the use of language that makes sense to the other person, and openness to change after hearing the other person's ideas. Effective communicators also *care about the message.* They appear sincere, seem to know what they are talking about, and demonstrate through words and deeds that they care about what they say.

How do you measure up as a competent communicator? Competence isn't a trait that people either have or do not have. Rather, it's a state that we achieve more or less frequently. A realistic goal, then, is not to become perfect, but rather to boost the percentage of time when you communicate in ways outlined in this section.

Competence in Intercultural Communication

Throughout history, most people lived and died within a few miles of where they were born. They rarely had much to do with people from different backgrounds. Today is a different story. To use a familiar metaphor, we live in a global village, our lives intertwined with people from very different personal histories and communication styles.

As our world becomes more multicultural, the likelihood of interacting with people from different parts of the world is greater than ever. Given this fact, it's important to realize that what qualifies as competent behavior in one culture might be completely inept, or even offensive, in another.[65] On an obvious level, customs like belching after a meal or appearing nude in public that might be appropriate in some parts of the world would be considered

Skill Builder

Check Your Competence

Other people are often the best judges of your competence as a communicator. They can also offer useful information about how to improve your communication. Find out for yourself by following these steps:

1. Choose a person with whom you have an important relationship.

2. In cooperation with this person, identify several contexts in which you communicate. For example, you might choose different situations such as "handling conflicts," "lending support to friends," or "expressing feelings."

3. For each situation, have your friend rate your competence by answering the following questions:

    a. Do you have a wide repertoire of response styles in this situation, or do you always respond in the same way?

    b. Are you able to choose the most effective way of behaving for the situation at hand?

    c. Are you skillful at performing behaviors? (Note that knowing how you want to behave isn't the same as being *able* to behave that way.)

    d. Do you communicate in a way that leaves others satisfied?

4. After reviewing your partner's answers, identify the situations in which your communication is most competent.

5. Choose a situation in which you would like to communicate more competently, and with the help of your partner:

    a. Determine whether your repertoire of behaviors needs to be expanded.

    b. Identify the ways in which you need to communicate more skillfully.

    c. Develop ways to monitor your behavior in the key situation to get feedback on your effectiveness.

Spotlight on Experience
▪ *Igor Ristic*

Courtesy of Igor Ristic

Competent Communication around the World

I was born in Bosnia and spent the first ten years of my life in Eastern Europe. I now live in the U.S. and have visited more than a dozen countries on five continents. The more of the world I experience, the more I'm inspired to learn how to communicate effectively within and between cultures.

Intercultural communication can be challenging. Take something as simple as customer service in restaurants. Waiters and waitresses in the U.S. make small talk with their customers, check in with them several times during a meal, and go to great lengths to be friendly and helpful. In contrast, most Eastern European servers quickly take an order, never interrupt diners during a meal, and drop off the bill as inconspicuously as possible. When I first came to the U.S., the friendliness of the wait staffs seemed unusual. Now when I return to Europe, I sometimes perceive their servers as impersonal and curt. Being an effective communicator requires

that I remain open-minded and understand the customs of each culture.

This isn't to suggest that Eastern Europeans aren't warm and friendly. In fact, when I talk with family members in Serbia, they often sit right next to me and drape an arm around my shoulder while we chat. After living in the U.S. for more than a decade, I've developed a strong sense of a "personal space bubble"—and I much prefer to sit facing others, at a distance, without touching, while holding a conversation. Those are things I never even thought about while growing up.

What I try to keep in mind is that cultural communication rules aren't "right" or "wrong"—they're simply different. Being a good communicator means I need to be aware of various cultural norms and adapt my communication style as much as possible.

"Competent Communication around the World" by Igor Ristic. Used with permission of author.

outrageous in others. But there are more subtle differences in competent communication. For example, qualities like self-disclosing and speaking assertively that are valued in the U.S. are more likely to be considered overly aggressive and insensitive in Korean culture, where subtlety and indirectness are considered more important.[66]

Even within a single society, members of various co-cultures may have different notions of appropriate behavior. One study revealed that ideas of how good friends should communicate varied from one ethnic group to another.[67] As a group, Latino/a/x people in the U.S. valued relational support most highly, whereas Black people valued respect and acceptance. Asian American people prized a caring, positive exchange of ideas, and white people prized friends who recognized their needs as individuals. Findings like these mean that there can be no surefire list of rules or tips that will guarantee your success as a communicator. They also mean that competent communicators are able to adapt their style to suit the individual and cultural preferences of others.[68]

Most obviously, it helps to know the rules of a specific culture. For example, the kind of self-deprecating humor people in the U.S. are likely to find amusing may fall flat among people from Egypt or Lebanon.[69] But beyond knowing the

specific rules of an individual culture, there are also attitudes and skills called "culture-general" that help communicators build relationships with people from other backgrounds.[70]

To illustrate the ingredients of culture-general communication competence, imagine you've just been hired to work in a Japanese-owned company in the U.S. that has manufacturing operations in Mexico and customers around the world. In your new job, you are surrounded by coworkers, supervisors, and clients who come from cultures and co-cultures that are different from your own. You are also required to make occasional trips abroad. How will you handle the communication demands of this position? Ideally, you'll possess the following attributes.

Motivation   The desire to communicate successfully with strangers is an important start. For example, people who are high in willingness to communicate with people from other cultures report a greater number of friends from different backgrounds than those who are less willing to reach out.[71] Having the proper motivation is important in all communication, but particularly so in intercultural interactions, because they can be quite challenging.

Tolerance for Ambiguity   Communicating with people from different backgrounds can be confusing. A tolerance for ambiguity makes it possible to accept and even embrace the often equivocal and sometimes downright incomprehensible messages that characterize intercultural communication.

If you happen to work with colleagues raised in traditional Native North American co-cultures, you may find them much quieter and less outgoing than you are used to. Your first reaction might be to chalk up this reticence to a lack of friendliness. However, it may just reflect a co-culture in which quietness is valued more than extraversion, and silence more than loquacity. In cross-cultural situations like this, ambiguity is a fact of life, and a challenge.

Open-Mindedness   It's one thing to tolerate ambiguity; it's another to become open-minded about cultural differences. There is a natural tendency to view others' communication choices as "wrong" when they don't match our cultural upbringing. In some parts of the world, you may find that women are not regarded with the same attitude of equality that is more common in the West. Likewise, in other cultures, you may be aghast at the casual tolerance of poverty or with practices of bribery that don't jibe with homegrown notions of what is ethical. In situations like these, principled communicators aren't likely to compromise deeply held beliefs about what is right. At the same time, competence requires an attitude that recognizes that people who behave differently are most likely following rules that have governed their whole lives. Chapter 4 offers more guidance on the challenges of viewing the world from others' perspectives.

Knowledge and Skill   The rules and customs that work with one group might be quite different from those that succeed with another. For example, when traveling in Latin America, you are likely to find that meetings there usually don't begin or end at their scheduled time, and that it takes the participants

quite a while to "get down to business." Rather than viewing your hosts as irresponsible and unproductive, you'll want to recognize that the meaning of time is not the same in all cultures. Likewise, the gestures others make, the distance they stand from you, and the eye contact they maintain have ambiguous meanings that you'll need to learn and follow.

Becoming interculturally competent requires *mindfulness*—awareness of your own behavior and that of others.[72] Communicators who lack this quality blunder through intercultural encounters *mindlessly*, oblivious of how their own behavior may confuse or offend others and how behavior that they consider weird may be simply different. When you're in a mindful state, you can use three strategies for moving toward a more competent style of intercultural communication:

1. *Passive observation* involves noticing the behaviors of members of a different culture and using these insights to communicate in ways that are most effective.[73]
2. *Active strategies* include reading, watching films, asking experts and members of the other culture how to behave, and taking academic courses related to intercultural communication and diversity.[74]
3. *Self-disclosure* involves volunteering personal information to people from the other culture with whom you want to communicate.

One type of self-disclosure is to confess your cultural ignorance: "This is very new to me and what's the right thing to do in this situation?" This approach is the riskiest of the three described here, because some cultures may not value candor and self-disclosure as much as others. It's also worth noting that historically oppressed people can become fatigued from the emotional labor of having to explain their point of view to members of the dominant culture. With that in mind, you might say, "This is new territory to me—I can see I need to do some learning." This provides the other person with the chance to explain themselves without imposing a burden that they must do so. If you don't learn in the immediate situation, you can always do some online research on your own.

Summary

Communication is essential on many levels. Besides satisfying practical needs, effective communication can enhance physical health and emotional well-being. Communication also creates our identities and satisfies social needs; and it is firmly rooted in culture. The process of communication is not a linear one that people *do* to one another. Rather, communication is a transactional process in which participants create a relationship by simultaneously sending and receiving messages, many of which are distorted by various types of noise.

Interpersonal communication can be viewed quantitatively by the number of people involved, or qualitatively by the nature of interaction between them. In a qualitative sense, interpersonal relationships are unique, irreplaceable, interdependent, and intrinsically rewarding. Both personal and impersonal communications are useful, and most relationships have both elements.

Several principles guide how communication operates. Messages can be intentional or unintentional. It is impossible not to communicate. Communication is irreversible and unrepeatable. Messages have both content and relational dimensions. Some common misconceptions should be avoided when thinking about communication: meanings are not in words, but rather in people; more communication does not always make matters better; communication will not solve all problems; communication—at least effective communication—is not a natural ability.

Communication competence is the ability to get what you are seeking from others in a manner that maintains the relationship. Competence varies from one situation to another. The most competent communicators have a wide repertoire of behaviors, and they are able to choose the best behavior for a given situation and perform it skillfully. They are able to understand others' points of view and respond with empathy. They also monitor their own behavior and are committed to communicating successfully. In intercultural communication, competence involves having the right motivation, a tolerance for ambiguity, open-mindedness, and the knowledge and skill to communicate effectively.

Key Terms

channel
co-culture
cognitive complexity
communication competence
content dimension
culture
decode
dyad
encode
environment
impersonal communication

instrumental goals
intercultural communication
interpersonal communication
linear communication model
message
noise
receiver
relational dimension
self-monitoring
sender
transactional communication model

Interpersonal Communication and Social Media

Rawpixel/Getty Images

After studying the topics in this chapter, you should be able to:

LO1 Identify the similarities and differences between mediated and face-to-face communication, especially in consideration of the relational consequences of choosing each possible channel in a given situation.

LO2 Analyze how the benefits and drawbacks of mediated communication affect a variety of your interpersonal relationships.

LO3 Examine how identity and context influence mediated communication experiences.

LO4 Evaluate your online communication competence in consideration of how you foster positive relationships, embrace new ways of relating, and protect your own interests.

37

Take a moment to think about the ways you've interacted using communication technology recently. Did you check out a social networking site such as Instagram or Facebook as a way to take a break from your homework? Share a video on TikTok or send a Snap using your smartphone as a fun way to spend time? Did you check out your Twitter feed to catch up on news and politics while also streaming a movie on Hulu? Or are you not even sure what some of these words mean?

These are all examples of interactive communication. Some are **social media**—forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities.[1] Along with social media, think about the less-public forms of electronic communication that play a role in your interpersonal relationships such as email, mobile phone conversations, and text messaging. All of these channels are forms of **mediated communication**—so named because they all involve connecting through some electronic medium rather than face-to-face interaction.

Imagine how your life would be different without mediated communication channels. How would your relationships suffer? How might they be better?

It wasn't long ago that interpersonal "communication technology" meant using land lines to place phone calls. As little as two decades ago, the most advanced form of technology in most homes was a personal computer. Mobile phones were bulky, expensive, and rare. As a popular tool, email was in its infancy. Social networking sites didn't exist. Today, by contrast, most of us are connected with friends, family, and even strangers in ways that seemed like science fiction a few generations ago.[2] It's not an exaggeration to say that technology developed over the past two decades has completely changed interpersonal communication.

This chapter explores the ways that mediated communication shapes interpersonal relationships. You'll learn how mediated communication is similar to and different from the face-to-face variety. You'll also consider how electronic communication can help create, sustain, enhance, or sometimes harm interpersonal relationships. After looking at how identity and other contexts shape the way people interact online, the chapter will conclude with tips on how to communicate more competently when using technology.

Mediated versus Face-to-Face Communication

In today's high-tech world, most people would agree that mediated communication is a valuable—even essential—tool for keeping in touch with coworkers, friends, families, and loved ones. Early theorists didn't share this assumption. In fact, many believed that technology was ill-suited for interpersonal relationships and that mediated communication would replace warm face-to-face interactions with cold electronic exchanges.

When the telephone was introduced in the late 1870s, some experts warned that it would become a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction, and that it would leave behind only a "semblance" of "real world" interaction.[3] Many were

afraid of a world where families would be isolated from each other, preferring to communicate electronically, and meeting only occasionally.

Similar fears arose almost a century later when personal computers became popular. Rather than enhancing interpersonal connections, theorists believed that computer-mediated communication would lead to impersonal, task-oriented relationships.[4] They concluded this in part because mediated channels "filter out" nonverbal cues that are available when people communicate in person—eye contact, vocal tone, touch, body posture, and a host of other behaviors described in Chapter 7. This loss of nonverbal and physical cues was expected to render mediated communication emotionless and impersonal—a poor tool for interpersonal relationships.

Several decades of research show that these concerns aren't fully merited—and in some cases, they were downright wrong. As you'll soon read, mediated communication has the potential to both diminish *and* enhance the quality of relationships.

Similarities between Mediated and Face-to-Face Communication

Despite the obvious difference between mediated communication and face-to-face interaction, there are many similarities between the two.

Same Goals   Whether using electronic media or speaking in person, we communicate for the same fundamental reasons described in Chapter 1: to satisfy physical, social, identity, and practical needs. You can appreciate this range of goals by considering the many functions a smartphone serves: calling for help in an emergency, chatting with friends, serving as a status symbol, and connecting you to the internet from wherever you may be. In many cases, mediated communication is faster and more efficient than face-to-face interaction—but it's still about meeting the same sorts of needs.

Similar Process   All of the components of the transactional model described in Chapter 1 are factors in mediated communication. The process still involves *communicators* sending *messages* through *channels*, and those messages are still affected by *noise* and the communicators' *environment*. And, just like traditional face-to-face communication, mediated channels are capable of supporting *interactivity* through the shared *feedback* between communicators. Of course, the noise in mediated communication might be static on a phone line or unwanted pop-up ads on websites—but these distractions have essentially the same effect on communication as those in face-to-face interactions.

Similar Principles   If you've ever mistakenly sent a message intended as private to a group chat, you know that mediated communication can be unintentional, just like the face-to-face variety. Once the send button is pushed, the irreversibility of communication comes into play. And if you've ever wondered why someone hasn't returned your direct message or isn't responding to your texts, then you know it's impossible not to communicate—because even the absence of a message sends a message. All of these principles outlined in Chapter 1 hold true for mediated communication.