# COMMUNICATION PATHWAYS

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## second edition

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FOUNTAINHEAD
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# DEDICATIONS

*For my son, Connor, whose smile and laughter remind me that every day is a joyful blessing.*

Joseph M. Valenzano III

*For my nieces, nephews, and others yet to come: may you learn to communicate in ways that help to make the world a kinder and gentler place.*

Melissa A. Broeckelman-Post

*For my husband Drew and daughter Lucy, who support me in my work and bring so much happiness to my life.*

Erin Sahlstein Parcell

# CONTENTS

# PREFACE

Communication is woven into our daily lives, and often we do not stop to think how complicated and challenging effectively communicating with others can be. Nevertheless, it is through communication that we add color, interest, and energy to our lived experiences. Without communication we could not share ideas, solve problems, build relationships, establish and maintain families, or express our emotions. Put simply, communication makes us human.

The basic communication course is too often the only exposure students have to training in communication, and even that class often focuses exclusively on public speaking. This course and this book do not focus on public speaking alone, but rather several different contexts and situations in which you will need to effectively communicate with others. To do this, the book is divided into several parts.

In the first part you will encounter the basic principles of communication and how it functions. You will learn about models of communication, how different cultural experiences result in different styles of communication, and the role of perception in the communication process. In addition to discussions of the models and principles that serve as the foundation for understanding communication, this book uniquely includes a chapter devoted to illustrating the concept of dialogic communication. We view dialogic communication as so important that we revisit how to engage in it in every subsequent chapter.

The first part also includes chapters that discuss the role of language in communication, how our nonverbal communication can influence the meaning in any message, and the complex purpose listening serves in the process of understanding and interpreting meaning.

The second significant part of this book considers communication in interpersonal contexts. This is, by far, the most common situation in which we communicate with others. The relationships we form, no matter how short- or long-lived they may be, serve as our tethers to other people and help us form communities. We discuss how we use communication to create and develop these bonds with others, how we maintain relationships (and how we don't), and pay special attention to the intimate relationships in our lives and the role communication plays in them.

Yet another chapter that sets this book apart is the chapter in which we cover mediated relationships. Today we use various media to develop and maintain relationships with people in ways we never could before. From Facebook and Pinterest to Skype and Facetime, we now have tools to communicate with people that allow us to overcome historical challenges to maintaining relationships, like distance and time.

The third part of the book turns the focus to public speaking. These chapters focus on introducing some basic elements of delivering a formal presentation, with a focus on how to do so to facilitate understanding and encourage dialogue. We cover things like delivery, organization, the basics of explaining information, and the persuasive process.

The fourth part of the book addresses communication in a third and final context: small groups. Often in your academic and professional lives you will be asked to work in groups with others, and the success of those groups depends upon effective communication. We also spend a chapter discussing leadership and the role communication plays for leaders in organizations and groups. Finally, we discuss interviewing, with a focus on job interviews and how to successfully present yourself in these very important moments.

Throughout the book you will also notice some short stories in boxes set apart from the main text. In these "Mediated Moments" we use contemporary examples from television, literature, and movies to illustrate key components of a given chapter. We believe these will help make content easier to understand and identify in our daily lives. The other consistent sidebars in the text are called "Dialing Diversity," and these short vignettes illustrate how communication concepts and principles play out differently within diverse groups.

New to this second edition are vignettes we have termed "Ethics Point" in each chapter. These boxes provide tough pragmatic questions to very real ethical dilemmas and events that have either occurred or could feasibly happen to you. Additionally, we have streamlined content on certain theories and approaches throughout the book, and we updated several of the boxes in each chapter. We feel these meaningful adjustments retain the style, purpose, and content of the book while enhancing the reader's ability to take away important key points from each chapter.

We believe this book addresses a gap in the current offerings for "survey" communication courses by tying communication in different contexts together through a focus on dialogue. Examples of poor communication abound in society today, with people talking over each other, arguing vociferously, and not respecting or even trying to understand the positions taken by others. We hope our focus on dialogic communication in multiple contexts provides the tools necessary for students to become more dialogic communicators.

Sincerely,


Joseph M. Valenzano, III
Melissa A. Broeckelman-Post
Erin Sahlstein Parcell

# 1

# THE
# BASICS OF
# COMMUNICATION

As the world around us becomes increasingly accessible, communication skills become more important than ever. Whether we are speaking with family over dinner, going out on a first date, working with a sales team to market a product, delivering a graduation address, or using technology to interact with friends across long distances, the one constant in all our days is communication. It is important to develop good communication skills so that we maximize our ability to be successful in all our endeavors with other people.

People often believe they know how to communicate well and that the same style or mode of communication works in every scenario. With our increasingly complex and digital world, this is simply not the case. Communication skills, like any other skill, require practice and continual development. In this chapter, we introduce you to the basic principles of communicating in any context so that as we progress through the book you begin to see how these principles work to inform how we adapt our communication in a variety of situations. We will begin with briefly describing the various reasons why and how we communicate in today's global world. We will then discuss some common myths about communication and what people erroneously believe it can do. Finally, we will explain models for when communication works and discuss what makes a person a competent communicator.

## WHY WE COMMUNICATE

A quick answer to why we communicate could very well be "to get something done"; however, as we will see in this section of the chapter, there are more reasons that drive us to interact with others than simply accomplishing tasks. In fact, there are five fundamental motives that drive our need to communicate with others. These needs all feed into some level of noted psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (see Figure 1.1).[1] His model shows that people first need to fill physiological needs, such as food and sleep, before then seeking safety for themselves and their family. Once these two needs are met, they move on to filling their needs to love and to belong to a group, which in turn allow them to seek out a way to fill their needs for self-esteem and confidence. Finally, they seek to fill their moral needs through what Maslow calls self-actualization. Maslow's hierarchy demonstrates that for communication to be successful and fulfilling, it needs to be driven by a purpose.
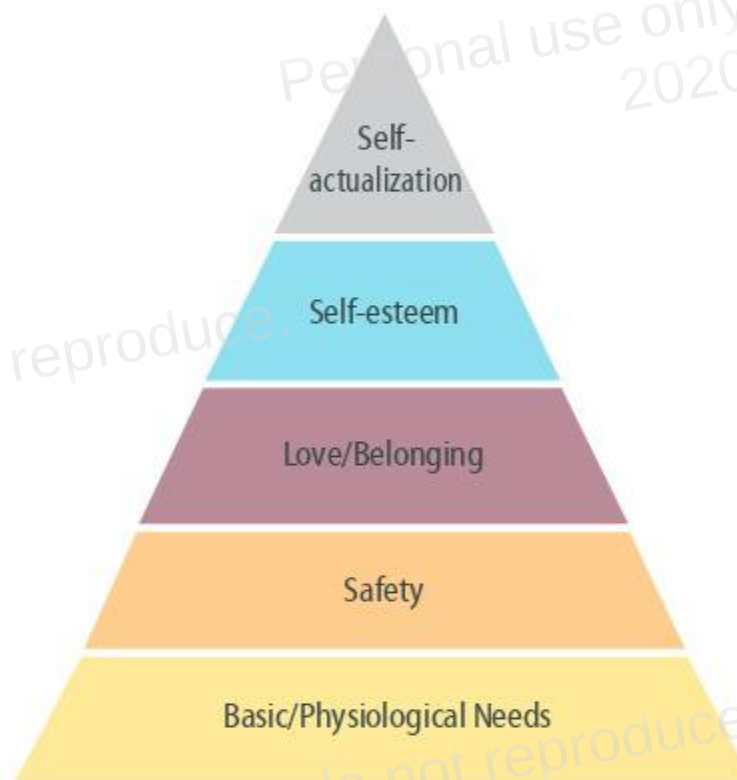


FIGURE 1.1    Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

## Physical Needs

Communication enhances our physical and mental health. This fact is what undergirds such programs as cancer support groups, Alcoholics Anonymous, and even suicide help lines. People can feel better when they talk to other people, because in doing so they feel connected to the world around them. For example, according to the American Cancer Society, research indicates that participation in support groups can help reduce stress, tension, and fatigue, while also potentially helping patients achieve greater tolerance for the grueling treatment they are undergoing.[2]

The benefits of communication on a person's health are rooted in the fact that we are social beings. Sometimes it is as if we cannot survive without social contact, something German Emperor Frederick II proved in a grossly unethical experiment in the thirteenth century. In an effort to determine what language children would speak without being exposed to any language, he took 50 newborns and had nurses feed and clean them, but

not speak or otherwise hold them. All of the infants eventually died.[3] In more current and less dangerous research, scholars have shown how important human contact, especially touch, is to newborns. In fact, more recent work has demonstrated that talking to babies, even at very early ages, helps them develop language skills.[4] Contact and communication are clearly directly related to health for children and adults, and help people fill their physiological and safety needs.

## Instrumental and Task Needs

Despite the health benefits provided by interacting with others, communication also often results in the fulfillment of practical needs. For example, without communication we could not exchange phone numbers, relay sales figures, share a diagnosis with a patient, or even build a bridge.

From ordering dinner, to calling emergency services, we use communication to complete important tasks that allow us to remain safe and even find food. The role communication plays in completing everyday tasks is as important as the benefits it accords our health and well-being. Without communication, we most assuredly would not be able to survive, but since we have survived, we can look to the other needs communication fills in our lives.

## Relational Needs

In addition to personal health and safety, we need companionship with others. This companionship helps us receive and give affection to others, as well as find ways to relax and escape from the stresses of life. These are things made possible through connection to other people, which would not be possible without communication. Communication is how we establish and maintain relationships with other people.

In today's global, digital world, there are myriad ways in which we can create relationships with others. There are the traditional avenues, such as face-to-face communication with our neighbors, classmates, and colleagues, and we can also maintain relationships at a distance, thanks to the telephone, video chat programs like Skype and FaceTime, and social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, just to name a few. Furthermore, we can create relationships with people we have never met in person using these same digital media.

Despite the abundance of communication tools, sometimes the more connected we are, the less connected to other people we feel. This is precisely the worry that has been raised by several scholars and cultural experts. For example, MIT professor Sherry Turkle delivered a *TED* Talk titled, "The Innovation of Loneliness," where she argued our increased use and reliance on social media and electronic communication has created an atmosphere where we feel more isolated from each other.[5] The medium of the computer has created a barrier preventing us from truly learning how to relate with other people. Nevertheless, communication helps us fulfill our need to develop and maintain relationships with others, despite the challenges some forms of communication may present in doing so.

## Identity Needs

Our conversations with others help shape how we see ourselves. The resulting communication thus provides us with how others understand us, and also provides us the language to define how we present ourselves to other people. Our identities are always in a state of flux, changing based on how new people see us, and how we choose to interact with them. This constant feedback allows us to adapt our self-images based on the different contexts in which we find ourselves.

## MEDIATED MOMENTS

### The Artist Formerly Known As Prince

One of the more popular and successful musicians in recent years, the late artist Prince changed his name to a symbol in 1993 during a dispute with his record label, Warner Bros. Appearing before the press with the word "slave" written on his face, Prince declared his new "name" and explained its meaning:

> The first step I have taken toward the ultimate goal of emancipation from the chains that bind me to Warner Bros. was to change my name from Prince to the Love Symbol [⚥]. Prince is the name that my mother gave me at birth. Warner Bros. took the name, trademarked it, and used it as the main marketing tool to promote all of the music that I wrote. The company owns the name Prince and all related music marketed under Prince. I became merely a pawn used to produce more money for Warner Bros...

> I was born Prince and did not want to adopt another conventional name. The only acceptable replacement for my name, and my identity, was the Love Symbol, a symbol with no pronunciation, that is a representation of me and what my music is about. This symbol is present in my work over the years; it is a concept that has evolved from my frustration; it is who I am. It is my name.

In this statement, Prince publicly announced the symbol he would be referred to as from that point on. He tied it to his sense of self and what he believed he represented. Since people could not verbalize the symbol, they referred to him as "The artist formerly known as Prince." This action by the famous artist shows how close the tie is between communication and our identity, and it depicts how communication can work to fulfill those needs.

For example, you define yourself differently and communicate differently with your parents than you do with your friends from school. In turn, you define yourself differently and speak differently with your college friends than you do with your friends from high school. Our identities shift based on what we let people see in us, what we choose to hide, and even what we do not know we are sharing or presenting to others. Later, in the chapter on perception and the self, we will explore self-esteem in greater detail, but for now it is enough to say we use communication to construct our self-image.

## Spiritual Needs

In the 2014 Religious Landscape study conducted by the Pew Research Center, 70.6 percent of Americans still claimed a Christian label,[6] and even those who did not adhere to a faith system still grappled with questions like "what is the *meaning* of life?" and "why are we here?" Spirituality does not mean religion; rather it refers to deep feelings and beliefs about the values, purposes, and meaning of human existence. Spirituality is not synonymous with religion, but rather religion is one form of expression of spirituality. As individuals, regardless of our faiths, we use communication to satisfy our longing for answers regarding these profound questions that cannot be directly answered. Some use prayer, while others employ meditation or read philosophy.

For those who use prayer, there is an even deeper question related to the spiritual needs fulfilled by communication. Communication scholar Quentin Schultz refers to this question as the "God Problem,"[7] wherein some people may use prayer to communicate to God, but how do we know we are being answered? How does God actually speak? These are profound questions about communication rooted in its ability to help us seek answers to and fulfill our spiritual needs. Intrapersonal communication, or communication with oneself, is also a vital part of other forms of spiritual communication that employ meditation and self-reflective practices.

## UNDERSTANDING HOW WE COMMUNICATE

Communication takes many different forms. In this section of the chapter, we will dissect communication to better understand how messages are constructed and how they are delivered. We will first discuss the nature of symbols and their relationship to our thoughts, and then we will discuss three models of communication that explain how messages travel (and sometimes don't) between people in virtually any situation. As we will explain, communication does not function in one way, as there are several paths through which messages can travel.

## The Building Blocks of Communication

Many disciplines break down their subject matter into things called **units of analysis**—what the researcher is trying to understand or study. Biologists use cells, chemists use molecules,

**UNIT OF ANALYSIS**

the item that the researcher is trying to understand or study

mathematicians use numbers, and communication scholars use symbols. Symbols are not just words; they can take many forms. One of the simplest ways to understand the study of symbols in all their forms is provided by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards in their book, *The Meaning of Meaning.*[8]

Ogden and Richards proposed that meaning is in people, not words. This proposal can also be extended to the use of other symbols. People give words and other symbols meaning through interpretation, because words and symbols mean nothing until we give them their essence. Ogden and Richards illustrated how the process of interpretation works. There are three parts of a semantic triangle: the referent, the symbol, and the thought. The symbol is a representation, such as a word or image. A referent is an actual object that you are trying to communicate to another person. We use thought to connect the symbol to the referent. It is in our minds, through thought, that we connect the symbol and the referent. Once this relationship has been established, we can use the symbol (such as the word "table") to represent the thing (an actual table) when we are communicating with others who share our same symbol system (our language: English, Latin, Spanish, Arabic, etc.). This allows us to share meaning with other people, even if the things that we are communicating about are not actually present. See Figure 1.2 for an illustration.
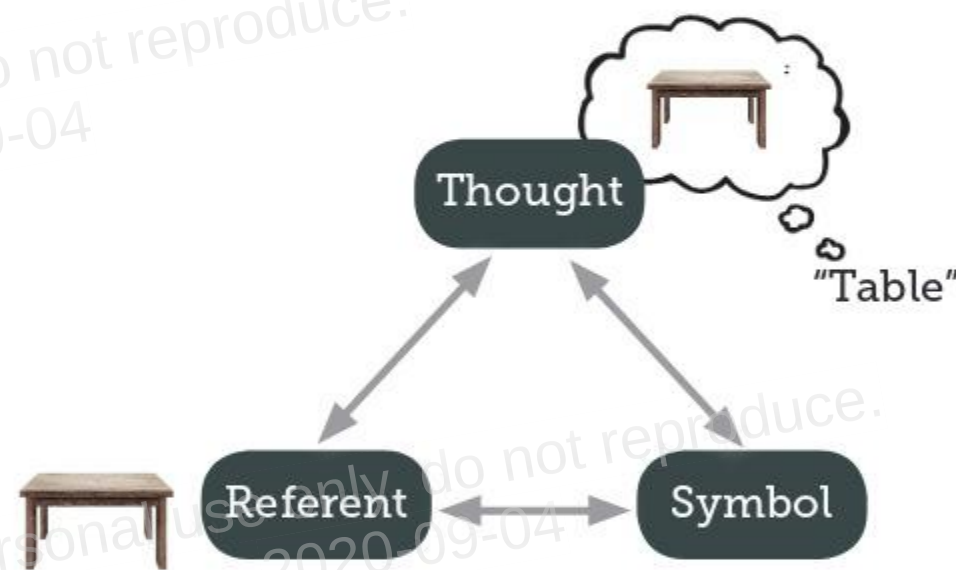


**FIGURE 1.2   Semantic Triangle**

As you can see, Ogden and Richards provided a clear way to analyze communication by treating symbols as the units of analysis. We do not, however, communicate using just a symbol, but rather by using symbol systems. Language is a type of symbol system, as are traffic signs, and even the Periodic Table of Elements. These systems allow people to communicate with each other, but the processes by which we send messages using symbol systems is more complex than this.

**ENCODING**

the process of creating a message using symbols

## Models of the Communication Process

There are three primary models used to explain the communication process, and each contains the same basic elements. The process begins with a sender **encoding**, or creating, a message. The sender then sends the message through a **channel**, or pathway through which the symbols travel to a receiver or receivers. Some examples of channels are text

**CHANNEL**

pathway through which the symbols travel

messages, television, radio, phone, email, and even your own voice. When travelling through the channel, the message invariably encounters **noise**, or anything that interferes with the receiver's ability to properly receive the message. For some examples of types of noise our messages typically encounter, see Table 1.1. On the other end of the channel is the receiver, who **decodes**, or interprets, the symbols within the message, thus giving them meaning.

**NOISE**

anything that interferes with the receiver's ability to properly receive the message

**DECODING**

the process of interpreting the symbols within a message

| Physical Noise | Psychological Noise |
|---|---|
| • Other sounds (people talking, air conditioner, shuffling papers, etc.)<br>• Visual barriers<br>• Poor volume and projection<br>• Distractions in the room<br>• Hunger, tiredness, and other bodily limitations | • Preoccupation with other thoughts<br>• Emotional reaction to the topic<br>• Prejudice or ill will toward the speaker<br>• Unwillingness to listen<br>• Resistance to the message |

**TABLE 1.1  Types of Noise**

These basic components serve as the foundation for each of the three models of the communication process we will now explore in further detail.

***Action model of communication.*** The action model of communication goes by two other names: the Shannon-Weaver model, and the linear model. The first of these alternate names represents the scholars responsible for the model's development, and the latter name reflects how the model works, as you will see. In the action model, communication is understood as a one-way process, in which the sender sends a message to a receiver, who decodes it. According to this model, the process stops there, as represented in Figure 1.3, but over time communication scholars recognized the process of creating and communicating meaning is not so linear.
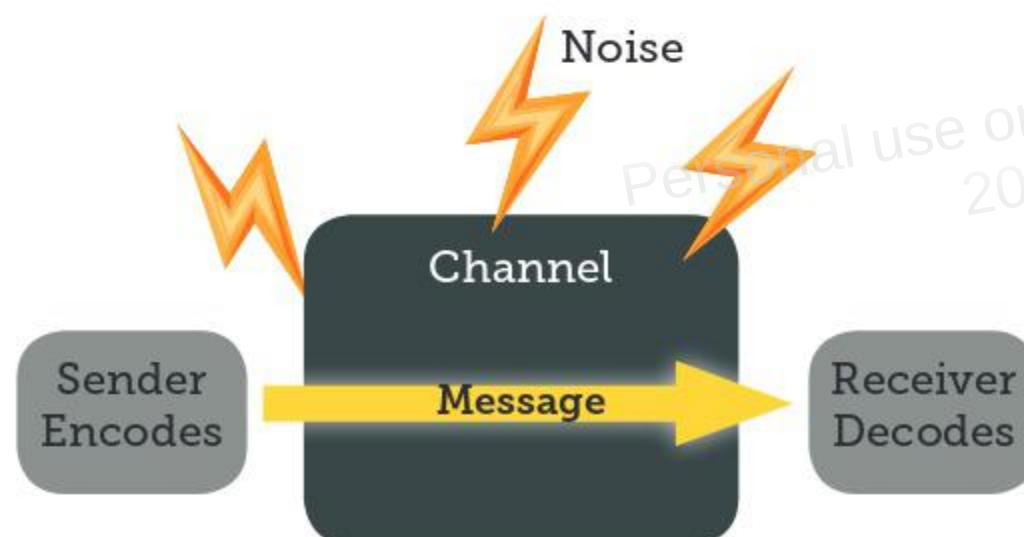


**FIGURE 1.3   Action Model of Communication**

**FEEDBACK**

the various verbal and nonverbal responses to the message by the receiver

**CONTEXT**

the physical, emotional, and psychological environment in which the communication event takes place

*Interaction model of communication.* The interaction model expands the action model, using all the same elements, but adding two more in order to show communication as a two-way process instead of a linear one-way process as shown in Figure 1.3. The first of the added elements to the model is **feedback**, or the various verbal and nonverbal responses to the message by the receiver. In the interaction model, feedback takes place after the receiver decodes the sender's message. The second added component is **context**, or the physical, emotional, and psychological environment in which the communication event takes place. When we communicate, we take the context into consideration when it comes to the words we use, the way we act, dress, and respond, and so the interaction model, Figure 1.4 on the following page, acknowledges this aspect of the communication process. Despite these additions, the two-way nature of the interaction model still does not completely capture the nature of the communication process, and so scholars developed a third, more complete model.
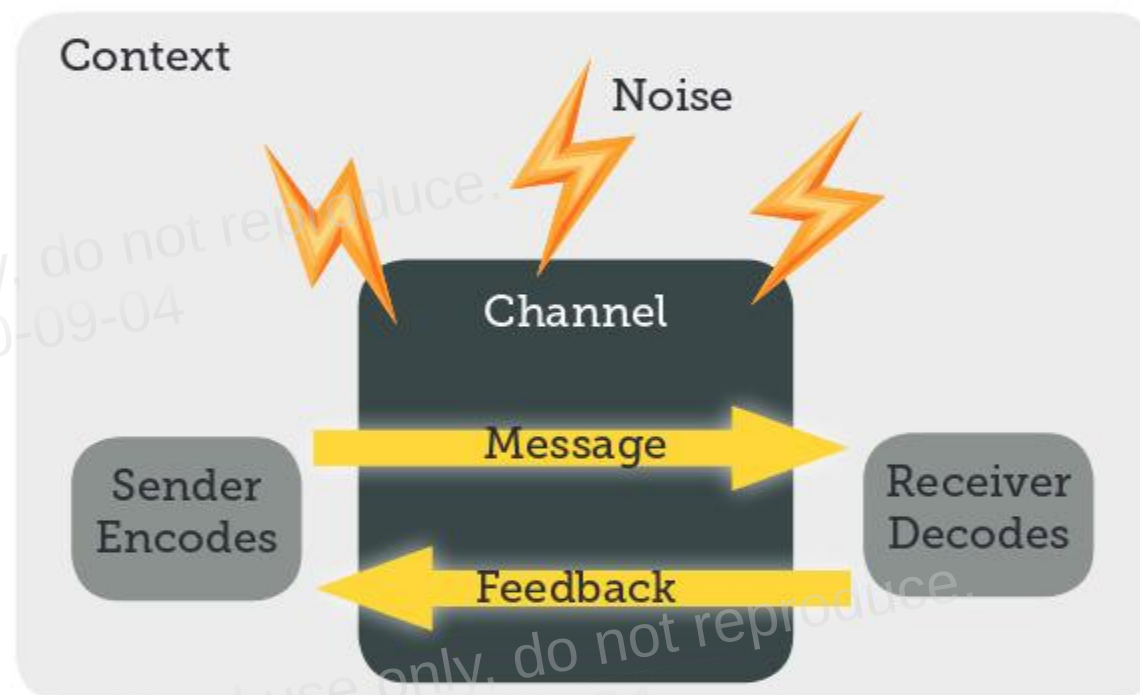


**FIGURE 1.4   Interaction Model of Communication**

*Transactional model of communication.* The transactional model updates both the action and interaction models of communication in one key way. The model does not differentiate between the sender and the receiver, seeing both parties as sender and receiver, as illustrated in Figure 1.5. This feature of the model shows the simultaneous nature of communication, where we are sending messages to the other person even while we are decoding the message the other person is sending. In this model, communication flows both ways at the same time, which is a much more realistic characterization of the communication process.

Now that we have explored both what communication can do for us, and how it works, we need to dispel some misconceptions about communication that many people hold.
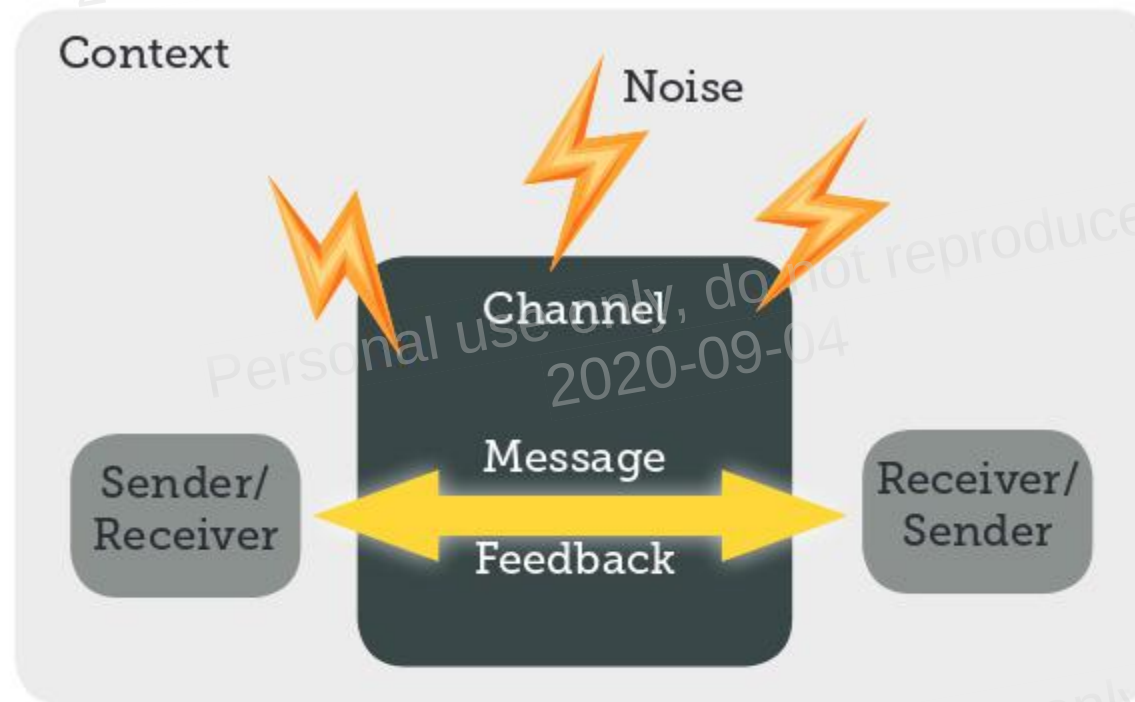
FIGURE 1.5 Transactional Model of Communication

## Communication Myths

Starting from birth, when we cried to let our caregivers know we needed food or a new diaper and continuing on through our acquisition of language, we have always communicated with others. This may explain why many people believe they understand communication so well, even though they likely do not. In this section, we will explore five common misconceptions many people have about communication.

*Myth #1: Everyone is an adept communicator.* As noted in the previous section, we all have extensive experience with communicating, but just because we do something often does not make us experts in it. For example, a person may keep track of her personal finances, but this does not make her an expert at finance. Many people also cook, but that does not

## Protests and Controversial Speakers

ENGAGING ETHICS

Recently college and university campuses have rescinded or cancelled invitations to controversial speakers to deliver remarks at their campus. In some instances, the decision to cancel occurred after protests or threats of violent protest if the speaker was allowed to speak. Former President Obama has remarked that colleges should not do this sort of thing, and allow the free exchange of ideas—especially those with which you disagree. Consider whether the protests, themselves a form of communication, are ethical points of entrance for people into a debate about a controversial figure. When else might they express their disagreement? What makes a protest "right" or "wrong"?

make them all chefs. What does make someone an expert in something is extensive training in his or her field, and most people do not have extensive training in communication. This is not to say that your experiences are bad or that you are impolite or even a bad communicator, but rather that there is a host of information on communication with which you are unfamiliar. This book will provide you with some of that information in a practical way so you can improve your communication skills.

**Myth #2: Communication can solve any problem.** Although communication can help to repair relationships and solve problems in many different circumstances, there are times when communication can actually make things worse. As social as people are, they also need their space, and it can be frustrating when we fill that space with constant communication. Additionally, not everything needs to be discussed or even addressed, and so leaving some topics alone is better than confronting them. More communication in these cases is not better; it can make things worse. In certain cases, communication can also let people know it may be

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# DIALING DIVERSITY

## The Culture of Business Cards

When two professionals meet, it is common practice to exchange business cards. The business cards often contain a company name, the individual's name and job title, contact information, and sometimes even a picture. In the United States, it is common to see people take a business card, not look at it, and simply place it in a pocket or even fold it up. They also may take the card and write some notes on it during the meeting. Americans do not find this practice offensive; however, other cultures do. For instance, in Japan professionals expect a person to whom they give their business card to read it and then put it in a place that will keep it from being crinkled. They see this as a sign of respect, because the business card for them is a shorthand for who they are and what they have accomplished, a resume of sorts. To write on it, fold it, or ignore it tells them that not just the card, but who the card represents, is not of any value to the receiver. In the Middle East, when presenting your card do so with your right hand and not your left. In India that protocol is the same, but also make sure you include academic achievements, degrees and certifications on your card as that is expected. When interacting with people from different backgrounds, it is important to take their expectations into account. If you do not, you risk damaging or even destroying the relationship. Ignore business cards at your own risk!

time to move on, even when the intent is to bring two people back together. We will return to this myth in more detail when we cover interpersonal conflict in a later chapter.

***Myth #3: There is only one type of communication.*** Communication is a very broad field, and it covers a lot of activities, but there is no one way to communicate properly. The type of communication we choose to engage in is dependent on the situation in which we find ourselves. Debate and argumentation work in some cases, but dialogue can be more effective in others. Sometimes, listening is the best thing we can do. Our choice depends on the purpose of the interaction and with whom we are speaking. If a person does not adjust the way in which they communicate based on the context in which they find themselves, they increase the probability of misunderstandings and potential problems.

***Myth #4: Any communication is good communication.*** Not all communication is positive, and sometimes we need to exercise restraint and not share certain comments or thoughts with others. Just because you want to say something, or even have the right to say something, does not mean it is good to say it. Just like any tool, communication can be used in a negative way, and, therefore, it is not always good. As an example, think about interruptions. Just because you feel the need to contribute at that moment does not mean it is a good idea to do so. Interrupting others, though communication, is not going to create a positive experience.

***Myth #5: More communication will ultimately make people agree with you.*** Many people believe that the reason others disagree with them is that they have not been clearly understood. As a result, they continue pushing their ideas in an effort to help the other person understand, and thus agree. It can often be the case, however, that the other person does understand what is being said, and yet still does not agree with it. More communication does not produce agreement in these instances, but may instead invite the opposite. It is important to recognize when a point is made and the other person just does not agree, because the more you talk in these cases, the more entrenched the other person is likely to become in the disagreement.

So far we have illustrated the complex nature of communication, how it works, and some common misunderstandings about the process people hold. In the final section of this chapter, we will define what it means to be a competent communicator.

## THE COMPETENT COMMUNICATOR

Just as there are several misconceptions regarding communication, there are things communication scholars know make up good communication between people. When we think of good communicators we have encountered, we often think of those people as being able to effectively and appropriately interact in any situation. This is also how scholars define **communication competence**. The effectiveness of communication refers to how well it achieves its purpose, and embedded within this definition is the idea that the strategic

**COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE**

the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in any given situation

choices we make about how we communicate with others in a given situation directly influence the degree to which our message can be successful. The appropriateness of communication refers to our ability to pay attention to the rules and expectations of a given situation, something made very difficult when it comes to interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. In this section of the chapter, we will detail five characteristics exhibited by competent communicators.

## Self-awareness

**SELF-MONITORING**

the process of being attuned to how your actions and messages impact others

A competent communicator pays attention to his or her behaviors and comments, and how those influence or affect other people. The process of being attuned to how our actions and messages impact others is called **self-monitoring**. People who are high self-monitors pay close attention to how they look, sound, and react, as well as what they say when in situations with other people. By contrast, low self-monitors pay minimal attention to these things, and are thus not aware that they may be making a negative impression on others. Being a high self-monitor allows people to adjust to different responses and situations.

## Responsiveness and Adaptability

Good communicators must not only be cognizant of their own actions and reactions, but also must be able to act upon those observations in a way that is appropriate to the situation. Responding to others and adapting your messages and behaviors in different social situations is an important skill exhibited by competent communicators. Remember that communication is not a one-size-fits-all tool, and thus competent communicators know how to adapt their communication to the responses of others and the various situations in which they find themselves.

**GENERALIZED OTHER**

a composite mental image we use to practice our potential statements or behaviors before we actually enact them

## Person-centered Messages

Too often we get lost in ourselves and forget to consider other people. Good communicators consistently take other people's thoughts, ideas, and feelings into account and create what researcher Jesse Delia calls "person-centered messages."[9] Noted scholar, George Herbert Mead, proposed a concept called the **generalized other**, which is a composite

The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point. Frequently the messages have meaning; that is they refer to or are correlated according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities.[10]

—C. E. Shannon

mental image upon which we practice our potential statements or behaviors before we actually enact them.[11] This allows us to anticipate how we think other people might react, and thus adapt accordingly. It also helps us experience **empathy**, or the ability to understand and feel the emotions that another person is experiencing. People who are other-oriented have strong generalized others, while those who are more focused on themselves skip the step of anticipating reactions through the generalized other altogether.

**EMPATHY**

the ability to understand and feel the same way as another person

## Cognitive Complexity

In most cases, there is more than one potential explanation for a behavior or message, and **cognitive complexity** is the ability to recognize multiple ways in which a situation or message could be understood or interpreted. This skill involves being attuned to the dimensions of the context in which people find themselves, and their ability to appreciate the different variables that could influence what, why, and how another person acts and speaks the way they do in a given circumstance. Increasing cognitive complexity involves patience and a willingness to have an open mind.

**COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY**

the ability to recognize multiple potential ways in which a situation or message could be understood or interpreted

## Ethics and Civility

Competent communicators understand and act upon what they believe is the right way to interact in a given situation. They communicate honestly, use good manners, are polite, and also are assertive. All but the last of these qualities may be something you readily understand, but it is important to note that assertiveness does not mean aggressiveness. Competent communicators know how to respectfully state a position in a way that does not offend others or make them defensive, and that is what we mean by being assertive. Competent communicators also know when to exercise self-restraint and to not share something with another party. Communicating in a civil and ethical fashion involves knowing the right and wrong way to communicate, acting on the former, and doing so in a manner that respects both yourself and those around you.

Being a competent communicator is much more involved than many people realize. In this book, we use the best research by experts in the field to provide you with a detailed understanding of how to improve your communication skills.

### SUMMARY

In this chapter, we defined communication and provided insight into the benefits good communication produces for people. We also explained the various components of the communication process, and dispelled some widely held myths regarding communication. Finally, we introduced some qualities and characteristics of competent communicators that will be further explored throughout the remainder of this book. Communication is a complex process that works differently in different situations, and as we go further, we will delve into different communication contexts and share the tools that will help you improve your interactional skills in those situations.

## CHAPTER 1 KEY IDEAS

- We communicate because communication fulfills physical, instrumental, relational, identity, and spiritual needs.

- We communicate using symbol systems that include referents (actual things), thoughts (mental constructs or ideas about those things), and symbols (words or images that represent both the referent and thought).

- There are three models of communication: the action model, the interaction model, and the transactional model.

- There are five common misconceptions or myths about communication: (1) everyone is an adept communicator, (2) communication can solve any problem, (3) there is only one type of communication, (4) any communication is good communication, and (5) more communication will ultimately make people agree with you.

- The five characteristics exhibited by competent communicators include (1) self-awareness, (2) responsiveness and adaptability, (3) person-centered messages, (4) cognitive complexity, and (5) ethics and civility.

## CHAPTER 1 KEY TERMS

| | |
|---|---|
| Unit of analysis | Context |
| Encoding | Communication competence |
| Channel | Self-monitoring |
| Noise | Generalized other |
| Decoding | Empathy |
| Feedback | Cognitive complexity |

## ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Watch the TEDEd video, "How Miscommunication Happens (and How to Avoid It)" created by Katherine Hampsten, which is available online at https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-to-avoid-miscommunication-katherine-hampsten. How does this video help to clarify the models of communication? Which part of the communication model is represented by the lump of clay?

2. Consider the three models of communication. For each model, draw an image or think about a metaphor that will help you remember the key features of each model. What is a situation that exemplifies communication happening in each of these models?

3. Think about a recent conversation that you had with another person. What types of noise distracted you and your conversation partner during that conversation? How might you reduce or overcome some of those types of noise during your next conversation?

4. Are you a competent communicator? Create a list of each of the characteristics of a competent communicator. Reflect back on your communication for the past month and add notes about evidence about how well you did or didn't exhibit each characteristic of competent communication. Rate yourself (or ask several people who know you well to rate you) on a scale of 1-10 for each characteristic to begin to identify your strengths and weaknesses.

5. Which of the five aspects of the competent communicator do you think that you need to work to improve the most this semester? How will this aspect of competent communication help you in your relationships and later career?

# 2

# COMMUNICATION, CULTURE, AND DIVERSITY

*Our ability to instantaneously communicate with people over great distances has had numerous effects on our lives, not the least of which is exposure to myriad different people, cultures, languages, and beliefs. We encounter these diverse audiences in classrooms, on social media, as business clients, medical patients, and even as family members. Such richness and diversity is both exciting and challenging. It makes appreciating the backgrounds and the experiences of others an essential part of becoming an effective communicator. More than ever, we must ensure that we are sensitive and respectful toward others when we speak, which makes it more likely they will listen to what we have to say.*

*In this chapter, we explain how culture and diversity impact our communication with others. First, we will define culture and investigate its different dimensions. We will then provide some detail on specific categories that constitute and influence the diverse audiences we encounter when we communicate in any context. Finally, we will offer some concrete suggestions for enhancing your ability to interact successfully with diverse groups of people in a variety of situations.*

# UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

**CULTURE**

the distinctive ideas, customs, social behavior, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, **culture** is defined as "the distinctive ideas, customs, social behavior, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period."[1] Geert Hofstede, one of the first social psychologists to study culture, offers another take, defining culture as "the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from another. The 'category' can refer to nations, regions within or across nations, ethnicities, religions, occupations, organizations, or the genders."[2] No matter which definition you prefer, culture is a complicated, powerful component of human development and life. It influences self-images, priorities, personalities, and how we communicate with one another.

**CO-CULTURES**

smaller specific cultures that intersect in our lives

We are not part of only one overarching culture. Instead, we belong to, and are impacted by, a variety of smaller, more specific cultures. These smaller groups, called **co-cultures**, exist within and alongside larger cultural groups, allowing individuals to simultaneously belong to several cultures and co-cultures. Sometimes we even feel conflicted between the different cultures to which we belong.

Let's look at an example to illustrate how cultures work and collide in our lives. Darius grew up in a Russian American family and is a practicing Roman Catholic. Darius happens to be quite proud of his ethnic heritage, and also makes sure he attends mass every Sunday. He does not speak Russian, however, nor does he agree with all the church's teachings. Nevertheless, many of the customs and beliefs of both groups inform Darius's perspective on the world around him. Many of his friends in his neighborhood are Russian, and he belongs to the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic charity dedicated to helping the sick, disabled and needy in their communities, but none of his Russian neighborhood friends are affiliated with that organization. Darius belongs to both cultures, which constitute co-cultures within the larger American or Western culture, and this causes a degree of conflict for him when the cultures collide.

One type of culture that is particularly influential is national culture. The specific traditions of a national culture vary greatly among countries, but according to Hofstede, national cultures can all be understood through six consistent dimensions.

For effectively cooperating with people who are from other nations, there are two basic conditions that have to be fulfilled. The first is speaking or having learned a shared language, and the second is acting according to shared rules and standards.

—**Geert Hofstede**

## High vs. Low Power Distance Culture

Cultures with high power distance have high levels of inequality in power distribution in organizations, families, and other institutions, whereas cultures with low power distance have less inequality. Democratic countries typically have low power distance, for instance, because everyone has an equal share in decisions, while high power distance is more likely in monarchies and dictatorships where only a few have access to power and others are removed from decision making. In terms of families, those with high power distance tend to adhere to parents' decisions and seek the permission of elders for certain actions. Those families with low power distance embrace a more inclusive approach, where major decisions, like moving or choice of school for children, is arrived at through a group discussion and decision, not the edict of a parent or elder. Power distance, or more aptly put, distance from power, plays a large role in how individuals and groups behave and helps identify things they value. For instance, low power distance cultures seem to value freedom of expression and dissent more, while high power distance cultures value stability, tradition, and experience.

## High vs. Low Uncertainty Avoidance Culture

Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance have a low tolerance for ambiguity and minimize the possibility of uncomfortable, unstructured situations by enforcing strict rules, safety measures, and a belief in absolute truth. Cultures with low uncertainty avoidance have fewer rules, take risks, and are tolerant of change. This cultural characteristic can also be seen in interpersonal relationships, as we will discuss later. For example, individuals who hail from cultures with high uncertainty avoidance will ask questions to reduce their uncertainty over the status of a relationship, while those who are more comfortable with uncertainty will allow things to move along naturally and not inquire about the status of a relationship to reduce their own stress. Again, this characteristic of cultures provides a view as to what a particular group may value. High uncertainty avoidance cultures may value things like planning and stability, while low uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to be more flexible and open to spontaneity and change.

## Individualist vs. Collectivist Culture

Individualistic societies have loose ties between individuals and expect each person to look out for himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivist cultures have strong ties between individuals, strong communal bonds, and often live in extended families that are deeply loyal to the group. Individualistic cultures value things like personal achievement and personal opinions, while collectivistic cultures tend to value things like group harmony over any one person in the group. This cultural characteristic manifests in some unique ways. For example, in individualistic cultures, such as the United States, people tend to pride themselves on speaking their minds and saying what they mean, regardless of the impact it might have on another person. Conversely, in collectivistic cultures, people will tend to "talk around" an issue until the other side realizes what is being said. This maintains group

harmony while still getting a point across, but it takes much more time and effort than the direct nature embraced by individualistic cultures.

## Masculine vs. Feminine Culture

Masculinity and femininity refer to the distribution of emotional roles between the genders and the difference in the values of men and women. In masculine cultures, men are typically highly assertive and competitive, and women are somewhat assertive and competitive. In feminine cultures, men and women are both much more modest and caring. Masculine cultures tend to emphasize competition, whereas feminine cultures emphasize cooperation and consensus. These masculine and feminine cultural behaviors have been identified through extensive research on gender and communication. Linguistics scholar Deborah Tannen coined the term "genderlect" to more clearly illustrate that gender is a cultural difference and that men and women simply communicate differently, thus creating their own cultures through their different styles of interaction. One fundamental difference she found was in the purpose of communication, as a masculine style of communication is one seeking to establish or defend status and express competition, while a feminine style of communication is one where the purpose is establishing connections and creating cooperation.[3]

## Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation Culture

Cultures with long-term orientation are pragmatic and focus on future rewards, with an emphasis on saving, persistence, and adaptation. Cultures with short-term orientation focus on the present and past and emphasize national pride, tradition, social obligations, and saving "face" in the here and now. What is interesting about this cultural characteristic is that "long" and "short" mean different things in different places and to different people. To some, a long-term orientation means thinking about next week, next month, or perhaps next year. It might even pertain to thinking about long-term career goals and where one wants to be in five years. To others, that type of thinking is still short-term. Keep in mind some cultures have existed for thousands of years, and as such they have a very different conception of long-term. They may plan in terms of decades or even generations—a very different way of thinking about time than looking at the next few days, months, or even years. Like other cultural characteristics, long-term versus short-term orientation should be viewed on a linear scale, and not as a "one or the other" form of existence. Some cultures are more long-term in their thinking than others.

## Indulgent vs. Restrained Culture

Indulgent cultures freely allow gratification of desires that allow individuals to enjoy life and have fun. Additionally, indulgent cultures value things like individual happiness, vacation, and leisure time, and the expression of emotions and thoughts. Restrained cultures have strict social norms and discourage acting simply out of want. In fact, in restrained cultures, many of the indulgent behaviors are curbed and governed through strict social and familial norms and rules, because they are seen as potentially rude. Leisure and vacation are not seen as that important in more

restrained cultures. Although this is the newest of the cultural dimensions to be identified and studied, there have been some thoughts on its impact in a globalized workplace. For instance, those who come from more restrained cultures may not freely express dissent or unhappiness, and this could be detrimental to a working environment; conversely, those from more indulgent cultures may be more likely to speak out of turn or to say something inappropriate that can also have a detrimental impact on work productivity and group cohesion.[4]

It is easy to see how different nations and countries can differ along these spectrums. It is important to note, though, that Hofstede believed these dimensions fall along a continuum, and do not exist as simply "either-or." For example, a culture is not either collectivistic or individualistic, but falls somewhere in between each on a line.

In addition to the six dimensions of culture identified by Hofstede, Edward T. Hall[5] explains that most national cultures can also be identified by how much importance is placed on nonverbal cues. In **low-context cultures**, such as the United States and Germany, meaning is derived mostly from the language used in an interaction, and less emphasis is placed on the nonverbal communication, environment, and situation. In **high-context cultures**, such as Korea and Saudi Arabia, a great deal of meaning is derived from the nonverbal expressions, environment, and situation in which the communication is taking place, and less emphasis is placed on the words.

# EXPLORING CULTURAL DEMOGRAPHICS

Hofstede's original six dimensions of culture, along with the one proposed by Hall, allow us to begin to understand the complexity of different cultures. This understanding can enhance our ability to interact with people by helping us see how they might differ from us in terms of values along these continuums. Next, we will explore some different cultural categories in addition to nationality, beginning with race and ethnicity.

## Race and Ethnicity in Culture

Race is a common cultural marker as well as a demographic category we find on college and job applications, census data, and other types of reports. **Race** refers to a set of physical characteristics shared by a group of people, such as skin color, body type, facial structure, and hair color. These physical characteristics are genetically inherited and reflect adaptations to the geographic region in which someone's ancestors previously lived. However, there is no biological difference between races in other characteristics, such as intelligence, athleticism, or other abilities. The common physical characteristics help individuals identify with each other and eventually form communities.

Another cultural marker that developed due to the close proximity of people is ethnicity, but ethnicity should not be confused with race. **Ethnicity** refers to a group of people who identify with each other based on a common experience, which might include geographic or national origin, ancestry, history, cultural and social norms, religion, race, language, ideology, food, dress,

**LOW-CONTEXT CULTURES**

meaning is derived mostly from the language used in an interaction, and less emphasis is placed on the nonverbal communication, environment, and situation

**HIGH-CONTEXT CULTURES**

a great deal of meaning is derived from the nonverbal expressions, environment, and situation in which the communication is taking place, and less emphasis is placed on the words

**RACE**

a set of physical characteristics shared by a group of people, such as skin color, body type, facial structure, and hair color

**ETHNICITY**

a group of people who identify with each other based on a common experience, which might include geographic or national origin, ancestry, history, cultural and social norms, religion, race, language, ideology, food, dress, or other factors

or other factors. Ethnicity is sometimes (but not always) related to national heritage. At times, violent conflicts and disputes evolve out of differences in ethnic heritage and values between two or more groups. At other times, several ethnic groups might coexist peacefully in the same nation. In fact, Tufts Professor Colin Woodard argues that the United States is really made up of eleven nations, each of which has a different history, ancestry, and set of deep-seated attitudes.[6]

A recent example of ethnic tension can be seen in the Crimea region of the Ukraine. In 2014, Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine sought support from the Russian Federation when the political situation in the country became unstable, and ultimately voted to secede from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. Ukrainian nationals in Crimea disagreed with this approach, and an international crisis ensued that still dominates much of the eastern border of the Ukraine shared with Russia.

Ethnic heritage can also be a source of reinforcement for individual identity through cultural celebrations. In major American cities, Italian Americans celebrate the Feast of San Gennaro, a food festival central to their culture. A number of cities also have areas designated Little Italy, Little China, and so on, where people who share that ethnic heritage settled. These areas offer a great opportunity to explore some of the ethnic differences between people in fun, interesting, and, if you like food, tasty ways.

## Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

Another set of significant cultural categories refers to a person's physical, psychological, and romantic definitions of their identity. To properly appreciate how these aspects of a person's self-concept relate to culture, we must first differentiate between the various ways we define ourselves. According to the American Psychological Society[7], **sex** refers to a person's biological classification as male, female, or intersex (a general term that stands for a range of situations that do not fit the typical binary groups of male or female) based on their reproductive organs and chromosomes. Sex is a relatively objective way of identifying the group to which a person belongs based on biology. Often, job applications and college applications ask for this information but are prohibited from using it to make decisions. Males, females, and intersex individuals are also often depicted with symbols as shown in Figure 2.1 on the following page.

Sex is also often incorrectly used as a synonym for gender, which is quite different. **Gender** is a social construction that includes all of the beliefs, attitudes, actions, and roles associated with being masculine, feminine, androgynous, and so on. A person's biological sex informs their gender identity, but gender is more than simply the expression of self through physical characteristics. **Gender identity** includes a person's sense of self as being along a range of possibilities that include identifying as a woman, non-binary, genderqueer, agender, or a man. **Gender roles** include the societal expectations for individuals who identify with a particular gender. It is important to note that these expectations vary across cultures and that **gender expression** (i.e., the ways people communicate their gender identity though their clothing, hairstyle, etc.) can be quite different across as well as within them.

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**SEX**

one's biological classification based on reproductive function

**GENDER**

a social construction that includes all of the beliefs, attitudes, actions, and roles associated with being masculine, feminine, androgynous, etc.

**GENDER IDENTITY**

a person's sense of self as being along a range of possibilities that include identifying as a woman, non-binary, genderqueer, agender, or a man

**GENDER ROLES**

societal expectations for individuals who identify with a particular gender

**GENDER EXPRESSION**

ways people communicate their gender identity

Male    Female    Intersex

**FIGURE 2.1** Male, Female, and Intersex Images and Corresponding Symbols

In addition to sex and gender, there is an emotional and romantic dimension. A person's **sexual orientation** refers to the sex and gender identities to which a person is romantically and sexually attracted. Sexual orientation includes many categories, but the three most common categories include whether a person is attracted to those of a different sex (heterosexual), of the same sex (gay or lesbian), or both men and women (bisexual). A person's sexual orientation is both intensely personal and, for some people, a public declaration of belonging to a group (i.e., coming out).

**SEXUAL ORIENTATION**

the sex and gender to whom a person is romantically and sexually attracted

## Gender: Law vs. Lived Experience

DIALING DIVERSITY

In many cases, laws are written using categories of sex-assigned at birth, and not the more fluid concept of gender. In June 2014, this conflict of terminology and practice resulted in a controversy in the state of South Carolina. Chase Culpepper, a 16-year-old who previously identified as male but now identifies as female, went to the Department of Motor Vehicles to have her driver's license photo wearing makeup. When she arrived at the DMV, they required her to take off her makeup, stating she did not look like a boy and that the makeup constituted a disguise (their reasoning being that it is illegal to wear a disguise for a driver's license photo). Although she ultimately wiped off the makeup for the photo and received her license, she, along with her family and the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund, complained that this requirement violated her right to gender expression protected by the First Amendment. Chase's story serves as a clear example of the difference between sex and gender, and how the definitions of gender and sex under the law may differ from the lived experience of an individual. Furthermore, the episode shows how certain labels carry certain expectations for society and cultural groups.
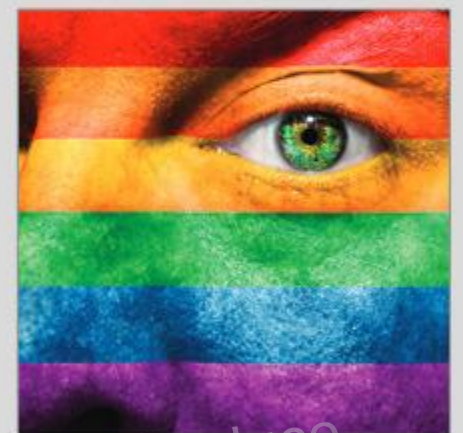
In 2018 professional golfer Tadd Fujikawa revealed himself as gay on his Instagram account, and his coming out as a part of the gay community stands as a recent example of how sexual orientation is not only personal, but can also be considered cultural. Many cities across the globe hold Pride Fests and Parades that are public celebrations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) culture and history. These events serve to create and reinforce ties between individuals who identify in similar ways and to help educate the public as well as promote understanding and acceptance in local communities of sex, gender, and sexual orientation diversity.

## Age

We do not often think of age as a cultural marker, but it definitely operates as one in any society. While none of us will be the same age for the rest of our lives, a person's age tells others something about his or her life experiences as well as some possible attitudes, and beliefs they might hold. Let's look at a few examples of different generational cultures in the United States.[8]

- The GI Generation is sometimes referred to as the Greatest Generation. This is the generation that fought during World War II.

- The Silent Generation is too young to fight in World War II but came into adulthood during the rise of the middle class and relatively prosperous time that followed.

- The Baby Boomers are the children of the GI generation, grew up with Woodstock and the Vietnam War, and tended to focus on careers and set high expectations for their children.

- Generation X graduated from high school in the '80s and '90s and tend to be independent, resilient, and adaptable.

- The Millennials graduated from high school after 2000, and they tended to be very protected by their parents and had high expectations set for them.

The generation that each person lives in shapes his or her experiences, expectations, and attitudes toward others. Not everyone from a specific generation acts and believes the same way, but people always identify with the times in which they grew up. As these different generational groupings illustrate, age as a cultural group is not as simple as "old" and "young" or "elderly" and "middle-aged." Those labels are defined purely by a number and fail to recognize the importance of each person's experiences and how those inform a person's generational culture. In fact, we will all be labeled "old" or "middle-aged" at some point, but the generation to which we belong will not change.

# PHYSICAL AND COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

Age, ethnicity, race, sex, gender, and sexuality are not the only ways in which we are different. In fact, unless you have an identical twin, you are probably the only person who looks exactly like you, acts like you, and thinks like you. Considering there are now more than seven billion people on Earth, there is a great deal of physical diversity among humans. However, our differences go beyond appearances and also include abilities. Some people have especially high levels of specific physical abilities (for instance, Usain Bolt holds world records in both the 100- and 200-meter dashes due to his ability as a sprinter), while others have lower levels of specific physical abilities (for example, Helen Keller could not see or hear). These differences make us no better or worse than someone else, but rather add to the richness of human experience.

At some point, most, if not all, of us will experience some type of physical or cognitive impairment. Some of these are permanent, while others are temporary; some are due to genetics, others the result of an illness or accident. Some people are born blind, for example, while others may develop blindness due to macular degeneration later in life. Some others may lose their sight temporarily, such as after surgery. This variety of causes is important to note because not all people with the same impairment are the same; instead, they may share a similar limitation or level of ability. These differences also do not define the person, but rather are a part of us, just as age, ethnicity, and race are a part of us.

Likewise, there is great diversity in our cognitive abilities and preferences. There is a broad range in IQ, learning styles and preferences, interests, memory, and experience among people. Many cognitive challenges are not immediately apparent when we meet someone, such as dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Alzheimer's disease, or memory loss. Like physical impairments, some people live with these challenges for their entire lives, while others might experience them for a shorter period of time. Medication, for example, can impact a person's short-term memory, as can a concussion.

Additionally, there is a wide degree of variability in how people cognitively process information and learn about the world around them. Some people understand concepts by reading about them, while others prefer to see a picture, and others still may prefer to examine a model. The idea of different modalities for human learning has been explored extensively by psychologist Howard Gardner, and formalized under his theory of multiple intelligences as shown in Figure 2.2 on the following page. **Multiple intelligence theory** proposes that although all individuals can access and learn about the world through each of the nine intelligences he identified, people differ in the strength of their aptitude or preference for those various intelligences. Although controversial, Gardner's theory illustrates how all people develop differently and experience the world in different ways.[9]

**MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCE THEORY**
although all individuals can access and learn about the world through each of the nine intelligences, people differ in the strength of their aptitude or preference for those various intelligences
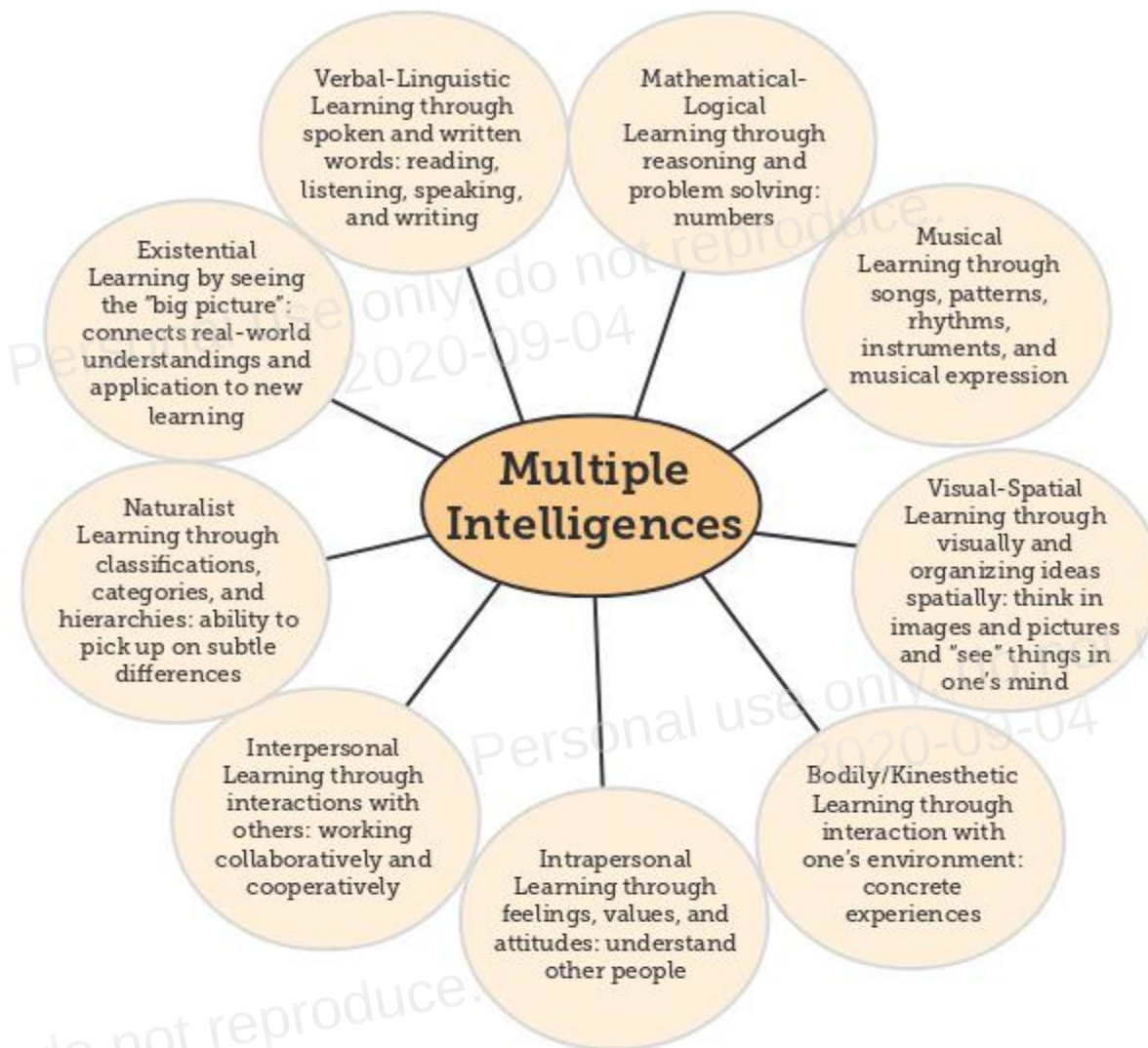
FIGURE 2.2  Multiple Intelligence Theory

## Ideological Diversity

We have thus far focused on largely physical differences between people, but diversity of thought is just as important. This type of diversity often emerges in politics, where people hold different ideas on policy and effective governance. These views are the result of a commitment to an **ideology**, or set of ideas, beliefs, and ideals that form one's worldview and provide a basis for action. Ideology is the basis for political beliefs and is heavily influenced by the family and society in which we grow up. As Colin Woodard showed when defining the Eleven Nations in the U.S.[10], there is a great deal of ideological diversity even within the United States, and that ideological diversity expands even more when we consider the entire globe. Not every country has, or even wants, a democracy. Let's focus a bit on ideological diversity in the United States specifically.

We often think of the United States as practicing a two-party system, and for all practical purposes this is true, but to believe the two parties contain individuals that completely agree or share worldviews would be foolish. The Democratic Party, for example, consists of people who place different priorities on various issues, and this sometimes manifests in intraparty squabbles. Some Democrats care about limiting government spending (they are called Blue Dog Democrats), while others are more concerned with civil rights and social issues. They do not agree on every issue. The same can be said for Republicans, who contain some Libertarians who believe in very small government, others who care about advancing social issues from a religious perspective, and others still who want to lower taxes and promote

business. The fact of the matter is the two parties merely cloud the vast political and ideological diversity that exists in the United States. To use "liberal vs. conservative" dichotomies to describe people and groups does not come close to acknowledging the variety of thought on public issues that exists in the United States.

## Religious Diversity

One final area of difference that both creates its own cultural norms and enhances diversity is religion. There are numerous different faiths practiced in the United States, and despite the prevalence of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) each contributes to the fabric of our culture in its own way. In 2009, the U.S. Census Bureau issued a statistical breakdown of the religious affiliations of people in the United States. In it they found a tremendous amount of diversity, including within Christian faiths, where they identified 30 different denominations. Each of these faiths has different religious perspectives, practices, and beliefs. The report also included a note regarding the growing number of Muslim, Wiccan, Buddhist, and non-religious people in the US.[11] In fact, the more recent 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study reported a sharp decline in the number of people who identify as Christians in the United States between 2007 and 2014 from 78.4 to 70.6 percent. There was also a 6.7 percent spike in unaffiliated individuals during the same period, also called "nones," who do not identify with any particular faith tradition.

The growth of non-religious, "unaffiliated but spiritual," and "nones" requires some discussion. It is a mistake to assume knowledge of someone's beliefs based on his or her specific affiliation, just as it is unwise to assume someone has no faith or belief in morality/spirituality because they are unaffiliated with a religious group. Many people still hold beliefs privately, and should not be discounted or counted simply based on the religious groups with whom they identify. Understanding and appreciating these differences, while not necessarily agreeing with them, is essential for developing a respectful community.

Religious groups also play important roles in local, state, and national communities. They often do good work on behalf of the community in which their members live and help to promote charitable endeavors across the world. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples

## Political Parties and Voting

ENGAGING ETHICS

During elections people tend to believe you must vote for either a Democrat or Republican. In fact, some go so far as to tell those who would vote for someone else that they are "throwing away" or "wasting" their vote because that person cannot possibly win. Consider both the accuracy and the ethical nature of such an argument. What are its implications?

all also practice their own culture by providing members opportunities to connect with each other and share stories and experiences. These efforts build their religious culture, but also contribute to the larger community's culture.

## COMMUNICATING IN A CULTURALLY DIVERSE WORLD

To be a competent communicator in any situation you need to understand, acknowledge, and appreciate the diversity that cultural differences provide our society. The differences in language, experiences, values, beliefs, and perspectives can enrich our lives in many ways, but require communication grounded in the purpose of understanding others rather than trying to convince them of anything. It requires us to be perceptive of the context in which we find ourselves, as well as the ways that context might be different for someone else. In this final section, we provide three tips to help enhance your ability to use communication to understand and respect differences between people.

## MEDIATED MOMENTS



### Dreamer, *Supergirl*, and Representations of Sexuality

Every year the non-profit advocacy organization called the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) issues their media awards to honor and acknowledge various platforms and networks for their accurate, fair, and inclusive representations of various forms of sexual orientation. One network that has received significant praise in recent years is the CW, as they have numerous main characters on primetime shows who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. The network is also famous for their adaptations of superheroes from the DC Comics label. In the fourth season of *Supergirl* the show introduced the character Dreamer, drawn from the pages of DC Comics, but did so by casting transgender actress Nicole Maines. Not only was the character portrayed by a transgender actress, it also was written as a transgender superhero, the first on television. Increased fair and inclusive representations of individuals from the LGBTQ community on television is an important way of communicating acceptance for the vast amount of diversity in society. It is yet another example of how communication through media can help perpetuate positive perceptions of diverse populations.

## Make the Message Accessible

As a speaker, it is important to consider the range of abilities in your audience and to adapt your presentation where possible to help the entire audience understand what you are saying. For instance, you might need to add captions to film clips, avoid combining red and green on slides so that those with colorblindness can read your text, and include signposts and transitions that make it easy for your audience to follow along if their attention wavers for a few moments. Using microphones, handouts, and other assistive methods may help people better follow your message, regardless of any limitations or challenges they may have. Another way to make information more accessible is to create stories that use references with which the audience might be familiar so they can understand how the concepts relate to their lives.

## Focus on Similarities, Not Differences

Though you might think that acknowledging the different abilities or backgrounds of others may make you seem like you understand them or are trying to help them, they may take issue with this. It calls them out in front of others and specifically heightens the differences they may not want others to know. So, act no differently, and whenever possible if you need to make an accommodation of sorts, do so in a way that everyone shares in it so as not to segregate your audience. If at all possible, it is far better to focus on the ties that bind an audience together than the things that make people feel different.

## Avoid "ist" Language

This is the type of language that demeans, ignores, inappropriately calls attention to, or disrespects members of a separate culture or group. This includes ageist, racist, and sexist language that does not respect the humanity of other people. This type of language depicts the other group as a passive object and not an active subject, thus making them seem less than the group of the person making the statement. Remember, the more ways you can emphasize commonalities between people, the more positively received your appeal will be.

Following these three simple tips will enable you to become more effective when developing, sending, and receiving messages in a variety of contexts. They ask that you be a respectful, observant, and thoughtful communicator.

### SUMMARY

In this chapter, we discussed the relationship between culture, communication, and diversity. We first explained the theoretical underpinnings of culture and explored the various dimensions all national cultures share to some extent. We then discussed several different categories of difference that both are their own cultural groups and contribute to a diverse society. We also offered some suggestions for how to effectively appreciate differences through communication.

## CHAPTER 2 KEY IDEAS

- Each of us belongs to and is influenced by several cultures and co-cultures.

- Hofstede identified six dimensions of national cultures: (1) high vs. low power distance, (2) high vs. low uncertainty avoidance, (3) individualism vs. collectivism, (4) masculinity vs. femininity, (5) long-term vs. short-term orientation, and (6) indulgence vs. restraint.

- Low-context cultures derive meaning primarily from language, while high-context cultures derive a great deal of meaning from nonverbal expressions, the environment, and the situation in which the interaction is taking place.

- Race refers to a set of physical characteristics shared by a group of people, whereas ethnicity refers to a group of people who identify with each other based on a common experience.

- Sex is one's biological classification as male, female, or intersex, whereas gender is the social construction associated with being, for example, masculine, feminine, or androgynous. Sexual orientation refers to the sex and gender to whom a person is romantically attracted.

- Humans have diverse experiences related to their generational differences, physical and cognitive ability, ideology, and religion.

## CHAPTER 2 KEY TERMS

| | |
|---|---|
| Culture | Gender |
| Co-cultures | Gender identity |
| Low-context cultures | Gender roles |
| High-context cultures | Gender expression |
| Race | Sexual orientation |
| Ethnicity | Multiple intelligence theory |
| Sex | Ideology |

## ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Watch Yassmin Abdel-Magied's TEDx talk, "What Does My Headscarf Mean to You," available online at https://www.ted.com/talks/yassmin_abdel_magied_what_does_my_headscarf_mean_to_you. Which cultures and co-cultures does she identify as ones to which she belongs? How can we be more aware of the assumptions that we make about others and work to seek to eliminate these unconscious biases?

2. Watch Julien's Bourrelle's TED talk, "How Culture Drives Behavior," available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-Yy6poJ2zs. How does he help us understand the impact of culture on the way that we see the world?

3. What are some of the cultures and co-cultures to which you belong? Make a list of as many cultures and co-cultures you can think of that you identify with. (This response can be a simple list instead of a paragraph.) How has your experience as part of these cultures and co-cultures shaped your experience?

4. Sex, gender, and sexual orientation are concepts that are often misunderstood, and there are often new terms introduced to help describe nuances that are not fully conveyed by terminology that is officially recognized by the American Psychological Association and other organizations that help to establish formal terminology. How should you respond when you are not sure what someone uses or if you encounter terminology with which you are not familiar? What is communicated when you do or do not use someone's preferred terminology and pronouns?

5. Watch this video on privilege: https://youtu.be/hD5f8GuNuGQ. How would you define privilege? In what ways have you experienced privilege (or the lack thereof) in your life? How does this help us understand visible and invisible types of diversity? Why is it important to be aware of the diverse backgrounds and experiences of others?

# 3

# PERCEPTION
# AND THE
# SELF

Even though we all live in the same world, we do not experience, define, or describe it the same way. A group of people can watch a movie or listen to a song and walk away with different ideas about its worth, quality, and value. How is it we can all experience the same thing, yet walk away with different ideas regarding what happened? How can people have two different ways of describing the same emotions, attitudes, events, and actions? The fact is we each pick and choose the things we pay attention to, and then we give them meaning through communication. So, when you watch a movie with a friend, you may focus on the outstanding performance by the lead actress and walk away with a positive impression of the film, while your friend might form a more negative view because they focused on the poorly constructed special effects. Neither person is objectively wrong; each emphasizes different aspects of the same thing and reaches a different conclusion. This phenomenon is human perception at work.

In this chapter, we explore the concept of perception, specifically how it relates to the way we understand and present ourselves to others. We will first identify the stages of the perception process, and then discuss how we attribute meaning to our surroundings and ourselves. We will then explore the idea of the self-concept, or self-image, and from there explain how we manage our public image. Although it may not seem so at first, perception is a key component to understanding how communication influences our identity and the world around us.

# HOW PERCEPTION WORKS

**PERCEPTION**

the process of giving meaning to the things we notice in the world around us

We don't often think about how we choose what to pay attention to in our surroundings; we just do it. To fully understand the unconscious and conscious choices we make about such things, it is important to define and discuss how perception works. **Perception** is how we establish meaning for our experience of the world around us and the people in it. The process unfolds in three distinct stages, each of which we will examine in this section. We will also discuss the various things that can influence our perceptual abilities, including cultural variables and personal biases.

## Three Stages of the Perception Process

There are three stages of the perception process, and they follow a specific order that should make intuitive sense. In many ways, the perception process is a lot like constructing a speech in that you first pick a topic and collect information about that topic, then create a structure so the information makes sense, and finally you offer your assessment of what the information means. As you will see, this is what we do all day as we pay attention to the things that occur around us.

**SELECTION**

the act of choosing to attend to, consciously or subconsciously, specific stimuli in the environment

*Stage #1: selection.* We learn at a very early age that our five senses enable us to know the world around us. We feel, smell, hear, taste, and see things and then make determinations about those experiences by evaluating our sense experience. Either consciously or subconsciously selecting what to experience is the first stage of perception. When you choose certain stimuli in your environment to experience, you are involved in **selection**. We typically choose things out of the vastness of the world around us for a few different reasons. First, we tend to pay attention to things that are unusual, unexpected, or unique, like a loud sound in a place you normally would not expect to hear it, such as in a library. Second, we pay attention to mundane things that we see repeatedly, like a person who wears the same tie three or four days in a row, or an announcer who uses the same opening line every broadcast. Finally, intense experiences also heighten our attention, such as when we smell something really intense or see something shocking in a picture or video. We select different things because the uniqueness, commonality, and even intensity of things differ for each of us. What is unique for one person might be common for another.

**ORGANIZATION**

the categorization of stimuli we select to pay attention to

*Stage #2: organization.* Once we choose an experience to attend to, we classify it by determining which things we already know that are and are not similar to it. This categorization of stimuli is called **organization**. Just like the selection part of the process, when we organize stimuli we use our unique frames for understanding. When doing this, we employ mental frameworks, called **schemas**, and use them to connect the new stimuli or ideas to others that are already stored in our brain. As a metaphor, you might think about your brain as being like a computer with numerous folders. Each folder is filled with files about related concepts, memories, experiences, individuals, and thoughts. When you encounter a new concept, experience, or thought, you compare it to the files in each folder and store it in a folder with related concepts. For example, if you were to eat a starfruit for the first time, you

**SCHEMAS**

mental frameworks for organizing information about experiences

would access your mental folder with memories of other types of fruit to compare the taste and texture, and then store a memory of eating the starfruit with the memories of other fruits.

Researcher Peter Andersen suggests that our schemas about other people typically take four forms (Table 3.1): physical constructs that emphasize things like appearance, role constructs that focus on a person's position or job, interactive constructs that hone in on the way people behave, and psychological constructs that stress a person's mood, emotions, and feelings.[1] Schemas apply to certain situations and environments, as well as people, so that we have a general construct for what our rooms look like and how stores, such as grocery stores, are laid out. This allows us to take new information and determine what it is like to better appreciate what the experience or person may share with someone else and thus develop appropriate responses.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Physical** | Is the person a man or woman? Is the person tall, short, or medium height? Is the person old, middle-aged, or young? |
| **Role constructs** | Is the person my friend? A coworker? A family member? A neighbor? A police officer? A doctor? |
| **Interactive constructs** | Is this person acting appropriately? Is this person acting insensitively? Do I think the person is friendly? |
| **Psychological constructs** | Is the person in a good mood? Is this person happy? Sad? Does this person seem to care about what we are discussing? Are they bored with our conversation? |

**TABLE 3.1   Four Schemas about Other People**

***Stage #3: interpretation.*** Noticing something and even categorizing the experience does not complete the perception process; you still must provide it with its meaning. Interpretation, the final step of the perception process, occurs when we assign meaning to an experience or person. It is here, where we interpret stimuli, that we likely see the most differences across people, as they assign different significance and even meaning than another person to the same experience.

During this stage, we make an important determination that affects how we will respond to stimuli, which is we decide if a stimulus, such as a person's communicative behavior, is in line with what we expect and/or desire. According to **expectancy violations theory**,[2] we hold expectancies for what is appropriate and/or typical for a type of person (a grocery store clerk) or a specific relationship partner (our brother).[3] More often than not our expectancies are upheld during conversations, but when our expectancies are violated, a process of evaluation is activated that determines how we will respond to the violation. In this process, we assess the **valence of the violation**. Sometimes a violation is negative (e.g., someone talks too loudly when you don't expect or want them to, such as in a library) and other times positive (e.g., a romantic interest texts you out of the blue). We also assess the **communicator reward value**, which is how positive or negative we feel about a person who

**EXPECTANCY VIOLATIONS THEORY**

theory that we hold expectancies for what is appropriate and/ or typical for a type of person

**VALENCE OF THE VIOLATION**

process of evaluation that determines how we will respond to the violation

**COMMUNICATOR REWARD VALUE**

how positive or negative we feel about a person who commits a violation

commits a violation. This assessment kicks in especially when a violation is not clearly negative or positive or can have multiple interpretations, so then our feelings about the person figure more into our interpretation of their behavior. When a person we perceive as positive violates an expectancy, we are more likely to forgive the violation or even see it as a good thing. When a person who we don't view favorably violates an expectancy, we are more likely to view the behaviors as negative. As we will discuss in the chapters on relationship development and relationship maintenance, we have expectations and desires for certain behaviors and benchmarks in our relationships. When these are violated it is important to consider the valence of the violation and the reward value of the person before reacting to the violation.

Overall, our interpretations are always influenced by many different variables. For instance, our interpretations can be affected by what we know about the other person or the experience. We can read an email from a close friend and know when she is joking, but if the same thing is written by someone we don't know very well, we may not see the joke—and it may not even be intended as a joke at all! Our own personal experiences also color how we interpret different events. Someone who has had to go without food at some point in his or her life may see donating money to a food pantry as the most important act of charity a person could do, while someone else who went homeless for a time may see the most important charity as one providing shelter, such as Habitat for Humanity. Our own experiences affect how we interpret different situations, experiences, or even the actions of others. Finally, our level of agreement or degree to which we identify with a person may influence how we see that person's positions, statements, or behaviors. Ultimately, each of us brings different sets of internal lenses to the same occurrences, and therefore interpret them differently despite seemingly experiencing the same exact thing.

## Perception and Attribution

When we observe others engaging in various activities, we often make assumptions about why the other person is engaging in that particular activity. These assumptions about motive, or attributions, generally fall into one of two categories: situational and internal.[4] When we make a **situational**, or external, attribution, we assume that another person is doing something because of factors in his or her environment or the situation. For example, if someone is late to a meeting with us, we could assume they had trouble finding parking or would otherwise be on time for our scheduled conversation. When we make an **interpersonal**, or internal, attribution, however, we assume that the person did something because of their character or disposition. For example, we might assume that the person who was late for our meeting is bad at time management, and that if they cared about our conversation, they would not be late. It's important to note that when we are trying to explain others' behavior, we have a tendency to overestimate the influence of internal characteristics and underestimate the influence of situational factors. This is known as the **Fundamental Attribution Error**.[5] For example, when someone does not call us back, we are more likely to think the person forgot or doesn't care about the relationship, both internal attributions for the behavior,

**SITUATIONAL ATTRIBUTION**

the assumption that another person is doing something because of factors in the environment or the situation they are in

**INTERPERSONAL ATTRIBUTION**

the assumption that another person is doing something because of her or his character or disposition

**FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR**

the tendency to overestimate the influence of internal characteristics and underestimate the influence of situational factors when evaluating someone else's behavior

rather than thinking their professor kept the class late or that someone else called them before they could call us.

## Influencing the Perception Process

Just as many different forms of noise can interfere with the communication process, there are a multitude of different things that can interrupt, influence, and affect our perceptions of the world around us. It is important to remember that how we perceive things and people is constantly impacted by who we are and what experiences we have had.

*Physical influences.* Our own bodies affect what we choose to attend to in our environments, as well as how we interpret them. In any given moment we experience a **physiological state** of being, or temporary condition of the body. All of us know what it feels like to be tired, hungry, or sick, and each condition results in a different response. We might be quick to anger when we are tired, focused only on food when we are hungry, or unable to focus on anything when we are sick. Even for adults, these conditions impede our ability to interact successfully with other people, because they change our perceptions of the actions and statements of others, as well as the environments in which we find ourselves.

We also have more permanent conditions that affect us throughout or lives. These **physiological traits** rely on our senses and manifest in a variety of different ways. For example, different people are more productive at different times of day. Researcher John Medina breaks down this trait into three types, aptly named after different birds. **Larks** are people who are most productive in the morning, and their attention and abilities trail off

**PHYSIOLOGICAL STATE**

temporary condition of the body

**PHYSIOLOGICAL TRAITS**

permanent enduring physical conditions that impact us throughout our lives

**LARKS**

ten percent of the population who function best early in the day

## Symbols: Perception Becomes Reality

MEDIATED MOMENTS



Symbols are all around us, and we each can interpret different things from them. For a case in point, simply look at the critically acclaimed book and television series *Game of Thrones*, created by George R. R. Martin. At the beginning of the second book and second season of the television series, a red comet streaks across the sky. Some characters perceive this as an omen for war and blood and others as a symbol of the family's rise to power. Others still see it simply as a red comet. The same experience was observed by several different characters, who organized it according to their knowledge and beliefs, and then interpreted it to mean something very different. In each case, the interpretations led to choices the characters would make in subsequent chapters and episodes. Our perception becomes our reality, and we all experience different realities in the same world, a fact that George R. R. Martin used to set the stage for a part of his award-winning stories.

**OWLS**

twenty percent of the population who function best at later times of the day

**HUMMINGBIRDS**

seventy percent of the population who function well throughout the day

in the afternoon and evening. Larks constitute 10 percent of the population. **Owls** are 20 percent of the population, and they fittingly operate best at later times in the day and often are found working well past midnight. The remaining 70 percent of us are **hummingbirds**, who are ready for action at any time—though some of us will be a little more larkish or owlish than others.[6] The point here is that this trait is both physical, as it has to do with your body's rhythms, and enduring, meaning it is a characteristic that you exhibit throughout your life. You can easily see how, depending on which category you are in, your perception of events and people can be influenced by time of day.

*Cultural influences.* Culture plays a significant role in how we perceive things, more so than what we recognize. In the previous chapter, we discussed different dimensions of culture, and to illustrate how those dimensions influence perception, let's look at a few examples. Recall that collectivist cultures place more of an emphasis on the family or community than individual achievement. Certain Asian cultures tend to be more collectivistic than Western cultures, so it may come as no surprise that it is sometimes much more acceptable to copy someone else's work in those cultures than it is in Western societies.[7] This is because copying is perceived as sharing to help the larger community and not as stealing from another individual.

As an example of gender differences, women in the United States have been socialized to speak more to express emotions and seek emotional support, whereas men have been brought up to talk for more functional problem-solving purposes. So, when a wife comes home from work and starts to share some of the difficulties she had that day with her colleagues, her husband might immediately launch into a list of suggestions for how she can do something different to fix those problems. The wife gets upset and an argument ensues. Why? Because the wife just wanted to express her feelings without receiving advice in return, and the husband thought he was helping with her workplace relationships. The potential communicative differences between the genders are evident here.

The power distance dimension of culture also influences perception. Recall that high power distance cultures exist where the population is far removed from authority, and low power distance cultures share power among individuals. With that in mind, think about someone who works for a company with very clear lines of authority, where individual creativity is not necessary or encouraged. Now think of this person leaving that job after years of experiencing that culture and going to work for Google, where there is almost the complete opposite corporate structure. At Google, people are encouraged to explore ideas, and the company's headquarters looks like a combination of a playground and a corporate office building. This person may have certain challenges adjusting to the different corporate culture.

*Occupational influences.* What we do for a living also influences what we see and how we see it. Professions come with particular sets of training that allow people to be attuned to specific things in certain situations. Physicians see more than most people about how the body functions, and even within that profession, there are subspecialties where doctors are

more adept at seeing things in particular areas of the body. Attorneys notice nuances in the law, farmers pay attention to different nutrients in soil, and mechanics are attuned to various cars' sounds and what they might mean. Content knowledge and specific training allow people to pay attention to certain things others may not notice.

Additionally, individuals might have a different view of how things fit together, depending on their level of responsibility within an organization. For example, in higher education, individual instructors know very well what is going on in their classrooms and what resources they need. The chairs of departments know the needs of the entire unit as a whole, and are best able to make decisions about where to allocate resources within the department. The same is the case for deans when it comes to overseeing resource requests and needs for all the different departments in a college. The higher up the administrative ladder, the broader the view and understanding of how the needs of different departments can and need to be addressed. Higher-level administrators are aware of more issues across the university, so they notice more things that individual faculty and staff may not see.

*Psychological influences and biases.* There are a variety of other psychological influences that play a role in our perceptions. The first, and perhaps most familiar, of these is **stereotyping**. Stereotyping occurs when we create generalizations about groups of people and apply them to individuals that we believe are members of that group. Stereotyping itself is not a bad thing; in fact, it allows us to function when we initially meet someone. The problem occurs when we hold tight to these rigid expectations and act as if they are true, and not just conceptual schemas that need to adapt once we understand individuals and how they might differ from their group. We also need to understand stereotypes as malleable, knowing we must adjust our assumptions when we encounter someone who is a part of the group for which we have a stereotype but who does not conform to all parts of the stereotype. Stereotypes can lead us to perceive what we expect but also to notice things we don't necessarily expect.

**STEREOTYPING**

generalizations about groups of people that are applied to individuals we believe are members of that group

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## Downsizing in the University Setting

**ENGAGING ETHICS**

In Spring 2018, the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point became the latest university to announce the elimination of academic departments and layoffs due to budget challenges. However, there has been some controversy over how the university selected which departments would be impacted, with some faculty claiming they were never consulted. What are the ethical expectations for decisions like this by management? Does it differ between industries? What does it say about the culture of an organization?

***Primacy and recency effects.*** Two other factors that influence perception relate to the order in which we experience things. One of the most critical moments is the first, whether it is in a speech, an interview, a date, or a sales meeting. The principle known as the **primacy effect** explains that people are prone to emphasizing the first impression of something over any subsequent impressions when forming their perception of an event or person. Psychologist Solomon Asch, one of the early pioneers in exploring the primacy effect in interpersonal interactions, found that when people are evaluated favorably at first, they are more likely to be seen in a good light going forward, with the impact of later negative information about that person diminishing.[8] The same can be said for things like actors and authors, whose initial work we tend to emphasize more than their later ones, even if the follow-ups are disappointing. On the other hand, if someone sets a negative first impression, positive information that is shared later is likely to be weighed less heavily or discounted altogether.

In addition to what occurs first, the **recency effect** also helps explain our perceptual abilities. It refers to when we allow our most recent impressions to hold more sway than earlier ones. This is important when we consider how we leave interactions. Consider job interviews, where your first impression is no doubt very important, but so is how you end the interview. A firm handshake, leaving a business card or resume, and following up with a quick thank-you note are all ways to leave a lasting recent impression on your prospective employer. Just getting up and leaving when the questions are concluded is not likely to leave a good recent impression.

***Positivity and negativity biases.*** Timing of impressions is one thing, but so is the type of information we choose to focus on when creating impressions of people and events. In some cases, such as during the initial stages of a romantic relationship, people tend to highlight and overemphasize positive information and characteristics when creating an impression. This is called **positivity bias**. In other cases, we can be overly critical and focus our efforts on picking out negative information or qualities in a person or situation, and this is called **negativity bias**. People who are unhappy or otherwise disinterested in a situation are more likely to use the negativity bias when evaluating information about experiences than people who are either happy or even ambivalent.

***Egocentrism.*** The final influence on perception we will cover is our own capacity to focus on how things affect ourselves. For most of us, we are our favorite topic to talk about, but we are not everyone else's favorite topic. This creates a need for us to manage our own desire to talk about ourselves with the desires of other people to tell stories of their own. People who are not able to do this are considered **egocentric**, or completely focused on themselves and ignorant of the needs of others. This focus on the self is something everyone experiences as a child, but most grow out of by adolescence and young adulthood. When we allow our own egocentrism to impact our perceptions, two things happen. First, we tend to believe the people around us do, see, and experience things in the same manner we do. Second, we tend to see things happening as directly related to ourselves, thus we see people acting in particular ways toward us because we think they either really like us, or perhaps they are out to get us.

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**PRIMACY EFFECT**

people are prone to emphasizing the first impression of something over any subsequent impressions when forming their perception of an event or person

**RECENCY EFFECT**

people are prone to using their most recent experience with someone as their overriding impression of the person

**POSITIVITY BIAS**

the tendency to highlight and overemphasize positive information and characteristics when creating an impression

**NEGATIVITY BIAS**

the tendency to focus our efforts on picking out negative information or qualities in a person or situation

**EGOCENTRIC**

people who are completely focused on themselves and ignorant of the needs of others

# PERCEPTION AND THE SELF

It should come as no surprise that perception affects how we define ourselves, and also influences how we define our environment and the people in it. Communicating about what we perceive begins with how we see ourselves. In this section of the chapter, we turn our attention to the idea of the self-concept, or the set of perceptions you have about yourself that define who you are, also known as your identity. We will first examine the four characteristics shared by all self-concepts before moving to a discussion of how we manage our self-concepts. In doing so, we will discuss the notion of "faces" and the process of negotiating our understanding of our various faces in different situations.

## Defining the Self-Concept

Our **self-concept** is the image that we have about who we believe we are. Our identities are quite complex. We may think we are simple people, and that we might be an "open book" to others, but our self-concept involves more than we realize. We cannot keep track of or remember everything that has happened to us, but those experiences all influence the way we see ourselves. So, in short, despite being unable to remember everything, it all leaves its mark on how we understand ourselves. Additionally, even though we all have different self-concepts, our identities all share four characteristics.

**SELF-CONCEPT**
the image we have of who we believe we are

***Self-concepts are shaped by others.*** How each of us perceives our self is due in large part to how others respond to us and what others say about us. George Herbert Mead explains that we experience the "self" indirectly from the standpoint of others, so we could think of other people as being the mirror that shows us who we are.[9] Part of this influence is through direct communication; when others repeatedly tell us that we are smart, funny, athletic, kind, or outgoing, we begin to believe those things about ourselves and behave in ways that reflect those beliefs. Part of this influence is through indirect communication or reactions that we see from others; your self-concept will be impacted in different ways if others listen to you with respect when you speak, versus whether others ignore you or look at you with disdain. We are also influenced by what we *think* other people are thinking about us. We imagine how we appear to others and consider how others might be evaluating or judging us based on that appearance, and that imagined perception influences our self-concept. As is shown on the next page in Figure 3.1, John Kinch summarized this process by explaining that our self-concept influences our behavior, and others respond to our behavior.[10] How we perceive the responses of others then influences our self-concept, which in turn influences our behavior, making this an ongoing cycle.

***Self-concepts are multifaceted.*** People often think they are the same person no matter what situation they are in, but that is just not true. In fact, we define ourselves differently depending on the situation and the people we are with. Sometimes we focus on our religion, at other times our gender, still other times our age or profession, or even our own estimation of our values and behaviors. We do not have one self, but rather we are the sum of many different smaller selves, each representing a part of our overall self-concept. To assume that

one part is the sum total of who you are is to essentialize yourself by one demographic or characteristic and to deny the other parts that make you, you.
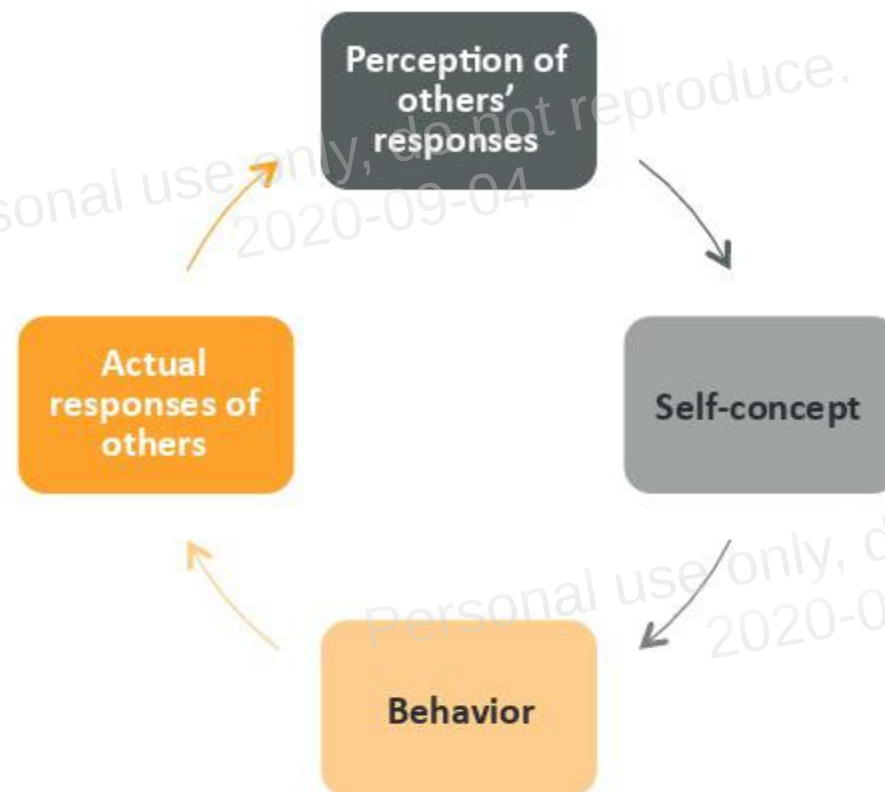


FIGURE 3.1   Process of Self-Concept

## DIALING DIVERSITY



© Getty Images.

# The Evolving Self-Concept: Bob Ross

The idea that a person's self-concept is both enduring and changeable can best be seen through any of the hundreds of success stories in America.[11] For instance, take a look at surprise Internet sensation Bob Ross. Ross, who passed away in 1995 is arguably more famous now as a YouTube celebrity, than he was when he hosted *The Joy of Painting* on PBS from 1983-1994.[12] Interestingly, Ross was not always a painter, and in fact his love of the craft and his calm demeanor are a direct result of his 20-year career in the Air Force. Ross, a high school dropout, enlisted in the military at age 18 and rose to the rank of master sergeant. During his time in the military he saw snow and mountains for the first time, having grown up in Florida; scenes that he would love to paint later in his life. The military role also required him to be "tough" and "mean" as he put it, but when he finally finished his military service he vowed never to yell or raise his voice again—resulting in the dulcet tone he is now famous for from his show. Ross's self-concept evolved over the years as he incorporated both new experiences and reflected on his own behaviors and attitudes. Truly, he represents how one's self-concept can and does evolve over time.

Perhaps the best way to understand the multifaceted nature of our self-concept is to differ-entiate between the parts we know with the parts others know about us. Psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham proposed a simple image that represents the various dimensions of the self. Creatively called the **Johari Window**, after grafting their two names together, the model—Figure 3.2—breaks down what we and others know about ourselves into four distinct areas.[13] The first of these is the open area, which contains those things that both we and others know about ourselves. The second area, the hidden area, contains things you know about yourself but do not share with others. The blind area includes the reverse of the hidden area; it includes things we do not know about ourselves that others know about us. The final quadrant, the unknown area, involves parts of ourselves that nei-ther we nor others know about, such as how we might respond to certain situations in the future. In the Johari Window, not all quadrants are of equal emphasis or importance for each person, and the importance of each area can increase or decrease in different circum-stances, but they all influence how we see ourselves and how others see us, as well.

**JOHARI WINDOW**
a four-quadrant model describing the different aspects of our self-concept based on what we and others know about ourselves

|  | Known to self | Not known to self |
|---|---|---|
| **Known to others** | Open | Blind |
| **Not known to others** | Hidden | Unknown |

FIGURE 3.2  Johari Window

***Self-concepts are somewhat subjective.*** What we know about ourselves can be broken down into two types of information: subjective and objective. Objective facts include things like height, weight, age, hair color, or even shoe size. When we interpret a fact such as a person weighing 115 lbs, we do so by examining the objective fact through the lens of the person's age, sex, or even occupation. For example, we come to different conclusions about a teenage boy who weighs 115 lbs (underweight) than we would about a twenty-something young woman (more appropriate weight). Most of our self-concept is driven by subjective interpretations and opinions. What this means is that people cannot be counted on to evalu-ate themselves objectively or accurately.

Sometimes, people overestimate their positive attributes. For example, many recent gradu-ates of college rate themselves as better than average or excellent communicators, and yet employers have repeatedly told colleges that graduates need to improve their communica-tion skills. Clearly there is a disconnect between these two groups; perhaps the individuals