

Introduction to Interpersonal Communication

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Learning Objectives

In this chapter, readers will explore the basics of interpersonal communication. By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to

- Understand the specific components of communication
- Describe the overarching models of the communication process
- Define interpersonal communication, including its functions, challenges, and benefits
- Understand how this text will help make you a more competent interpersonal communicator

Introduction

Humans are social beings. We depend on other people to meet our needs, and we form and interact in organized groups such as families, neighborhoods, teams, clubs, and societies to spend time with and assist one another. Communication with other people helps us understand ourselves, others, and our world. Our bonds with siblings, friends, romantic partners, neighbors, colleagues, and classmates give our lives meaning, even when such bonds challenge and frustrate us. For these reasons, how we communicate, connect with others, and build and maintain relationships is the subject of this text.

You probably know from your own experiences that communication can go astray, and misunderstandings can occur in any number of ways. Perhaps the receiver cannot hear or does not pay attention to the message being sent. Maybe equipment used to transmit the message fails, such as when a call from a mobile phone is dropped. You can also likely recall specific instances of successful communication when the interaction resulted in positive change or mutual understanding. Consider the following conversation:

Kim sends Pat an e-mail: Hey, hope you are having a good day. What are we doing for dinner tonight?

Pat replies via e-mail: You never told me that you were going to be home early enough to have dinner together, so I'm not sure.

Kim, via e-mail: I did. I told you this past weekend.

Pat, via e-mail: I don't remember you saying anything about being home for dinner. I'm leaving work now, so text my cell.

Kim replies via text message: Ugh, this is an annoying way to carry on this conversation. But I still have to say, you never listen when I tell you something.

Pat, who is driving home, does not reply because his phone is in his pocket.

Kim, via text message: Hello, are you ignoring me?

Pat, once he is home, checks his mobile phone and sees Kim's text message. He calls Kim, who is now on her way home from work: Hey, it's me. I just got your text because I was driving. I was not ignoring you.

Kim: Fine, whatever. I'm almost home myself. I'll talk to you then. Bye.

Once they are both home, Kim and Pat continue their conversation face-to-face.

Pat: You are making a big deal out of nothing. Can we just figure out what we are doing for dinner? I'm hungry.

Kim: Oh, I'm making a big deal out of nothing?

You likely have engaged in a similar conversation. The interaction contains multiple elements of interpersonal communication, and we will use it as an example throughout this chapter to illustrate the complexity of Kim and Pat's seemingly everyday encounter.

Chapter 1 examines the nature of communication and its importance in your life. This chapter introduces several important definitions, elements, and models of communication, as well as

providing a brief overview of the foundation of communication as an academic discipline. In addition, this chapter defines interpersonal communication, investigates its functions and challenges, and considers the benefits of studying this specific type of communication.

1.1 What Is Communication?

Communication, in its various forms, channels, and contexts, is a fundamental aspect of being human. In fact, as newborn babies, our first cry is a message to the world that we have arrived, and as infants we are often consoled by a gentle touch or the soothing voice of our caregivers. We soon learn to express our thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires through behavior and language, to listen and respond to others when they communicate with us, and to use communication to build, maintain, and even end a variety of relationships.

The word *communication* can be traced back to the Latin word *communicare*, which means “to join or unite,” “to connect,” “to participate in,” or “to share with all.” Other words that emerge from this root word include *common*, *commune*, *communion*, and *community*. Reflecting its roots, this text defines **communication** as a process where two or more individuals strive to create shared meaning using verbal and nonverbal messages in a variety of contexts. This definition highlights five primary characteristics of communication:

- Two or more people are involved.
- It is a process.
- There is an attempt to create shared meaning.
- Both verbal and nonverbal messages influence interactions.
- It occurs in a variety of contexts.

The intricacies of each element are discussed next.

1. Communication Involves Two or More People

Communication requires a minimum of two individuals. In other words, we cannot communicate unless there is at least one other person to interact with. Certainly, we can also communicate with more than two individuals, and mediated channels, such as television and the Internet, can even allow us to communicate with millions of people. Finally, it is important to note, according to the definition discussed here, that talking to ourselves or internally exploring who we are as individuals is not communication, even though doing so is called intrapersonal communication. This is a different type of communication, which we will evaluate in Chapter 2.

2. Communication Is a Process

In 1960, communication theorist David Berlo described communication as a constantly evolving interaction or activity that changes each of us and changes our relationships to one another over time. The word *process* might bring to mind an action that has some purpose or is directed to some end; an action that is dynamic, ongoing, and ever changing. When you meet someone for the first time, for example, you approach each other as strangers. The communication that occurs during this first meeting will then influence or shape the next meeting you have with one another. If the first meeting was a positive experience, you will generally expect the second interaction to be positive as well. On the other hand, if the first meeting did not go well, you may

approach the second meeting with some concern or trepidation because you expect to have a similar experience.

Communication is a continuous and complex process affected by past events, influenced by how the current interaction unfolds, and impacting interactions to come as well as the future of the relationship. Because communication is ongoing, we continually work to build, maintain, alter, and sometimes even terminate relationships. Over time, we change and others change, and thus our communication within our relationships changes.

3. Communication Is Shared Meaning

The fundamental purpose of human communication is to allow people to generate and share their thoughts, feelings, experiences, beliefs, opinions, or really anything they can think to express. People communicate in the hope that such ideas have meanings for others too and that they will understand. This understanding, or meaning, and the shared view of reality are best achieved through communication.

As an example of how people can share meaning through words, the symbols of language, picture the following event.

A small black bear cub, apparently abandoned by its mother, wandered into a rural neighborhood and lived in the undergrowth and trees in the neighborhood for more than five days. Because the animal showed no signs of leaving, state Fish and Wildlife Department authorities were called to capture the bear and remove it from the property. They shot the cub with a tranquilizer gun, but the cub scurried up a large tree and fell asleep. The tree was too tall for any ladder to reach and too wide to encircle with a safety harness, a requirement if an authority were to climb, but the bear cub was in danger of falling to an almost certain death at any moment. For approximately one hour, neighbors and wildlife officials anxiously waited for a resolution. Then the cub awakened and began to move. The small branch on which the cub rested broke, and the bear suddenly dropped a few feet to a second branch. The small cub dangled high above the ground, holding onto the branch with its two front paws. Slowly it lost its grip and dropped toward the ground, bouncing off two or three tree branches on the way down. As it fell, wildlife officers ran toward the tree, gripping a tarp tightly, and caught the cub safely using the open canvas.

Although you were not present at the exact moment to witness the event described above, you can easily visualize it because of a shared language and shared use of symbols. When we talk with other people about an experience, however, the communication is only an abstraction of that experience. For example, a reporter who is present at the event and then writes a story about the bear cub shares his perception of the situation as it unfolds. He might report as many facts as possible, but he also might make it sound like a more dramatic event than it was to keep readers interested in the story.

That story, however, is just one person's representation, which is a simplified and condensed version of the entire occurrence. Each witness noticed or focused upon different things during the experience. For example, the wildlife official who was standing directly under the tree was focusing her attention entirely on where to best place the tarp to catch the bear cub. Meanwhile, a neighbor, positioned at a greater distance from the tree with the stranded bear cub, might instead be better able to view the whole scene, including the potential damage to the tree, nearby structures, or cars if the cub did happen to fall. Each individual's story would be slightly different even though there is also a great deal of shared meaning about specific elements of the same event. We

will return to the importance of these different meanings when we discuss culture and perceptions later in this text.

One of the primary goals of human communication is to share meaning and connect with others, but this is not as easy as it might first seem. We can look up a word in a dictionary, but the definition does not necessarily account for the word's unique meaning for the person who uses it. Meaning is not in the message itself; meaning is in the communicator. We each respond to messages based on personal experiences, cultures, and interpretations. But this can make communication difficult because verbal and nonverbal messages can mean something different to each of us. It is

generally easier to create shared meaning when we have an established relationship with someone because that person has shared experiences with us. Communication is thus considered successful when meaning is generally shared with others, and all parties come to a mutual understanding about the content of the messages exchanged.



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▲ A primary goal of communication is to share meaning and connect with others.

4. Communication Is Verbal and Nonverbal Messages

Messages are the actual pieces of information exchanged between individuals in an interaction, and these messages take two broad forms: verbal and nonverbal. **Verbal communication** is, put simply, language or the use of words to communicate. **Language** provides us with the unique ability to create, use, and exchange common words or symbols that represent objects and events. **Symbols** are words, pictures, sounds, marks, or objects used to represent particular ideas, objects, or qualities.

We can also use language to describe past, present, and future events and to wish, dream, and imagine objects that do not exist or are not immediately present (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996). **Nonverbal communication** includes other visual and vocal means, other than language, used to communicate. There are eight distinct forms of nonverbal communication:

- Physical appearance and attractiveness
- Body movement (the study of kinesics), including posture, facial expressions, and eye contact
- Physical contact with another through touch (haptics)
- Personal space and distance from one another (proxemics)
- Voice and the way something is said, including tone, pitch, rate, and height, and even silence (vocalics)
- Time and the way it is used (chronemics)
- Scents or odors (olfactics)
- Use or display of objects (artifacts) used to create and shape messages (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Manusov, 2011)

Although the two types of communication are often studied separately, both verbal and nonverbal communication messages are present in an interaction. Verbal and nonverbal messages are intrinsically intertwined, and either complement or contradict one another. Their interplay can change the nature and interpretation of the interaction.

Think back to the example of Kim and Pat’s conversation at the beginning of the chapter. They were clearly using verbal communication via language in their e-mails and text messages to each other, but they also engaged in multiple forms of nonverbal communication, including the tones and volumes of their voices, use of eye contact, gestures, personal distance, and touch. At times, the verbal and nonverbal messages they were using may have communicated the same thing. For example, Kim’s voice might have sounded angry and been at a higher pitch than normal, and she might have crossed her arms in front of her chest when she said, “Fine, whatever. I’m almost home myself. I’ll talk to you then. Bye.” Maybe Pat’s messages offered different or conflicting meanings if he had smiled and spoken in a calm tone of voice when he said, “You are making a big deal out of nothing.”

Even e-mails and text messages, which are communications that contain primarily verbal messages, can use different forms of nonverbal communication such as capital letters to emphasize a point, exclamation marks to convey excitement, or emoticons to make a joke or depict sadness (for more about emoticons, see *Everyday Communication Challenges*). We will return to the importance of verbal and nonverbal messages in Chapter 4.

EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Emoticons as Nonverbal Communication Symbols

Today we frequently rely on written language in the form of text messages, e-mails, tweets, and social media posts to communicate with one another. This form of communication allows us to communicate with one or thousands of people far and wide but can also limit nonverbal communication. **Emoticons**, combinations of keyboard characters that indicate the emotional state of the person writing the message, were developed to enable us to add some additional nonverbal information to these verbal messages. For example, a colon and a parenthesis can represent a smile or a frown.

The emoticon was first used by Scott Fahlman and his colleagues in a 1982 Carnegie Mellon University computer science online bulletin board to clearly indicate board posts that were made in jest (see Fahlman’s discussion of the emoticon and a link to the post where it was first used: <https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~sef/sefSmiley.htm>). In the absence of visual or auditory cues like smiling and laughter, you can use these nonverbal written symbols to increase the likelihood of achieving shared meaning. When you tease someone, you can stick out your tongue **:-p** or wink **;-)** or even laugh out loud **LOL**.

Emoticons are now so ubiquitous in our **mediated communication**—communication in which someone or something intervenes between the sender and the receiver in the communication process—that many mobile phones include a button that provides a variety of emoticon options. Facebook, Google, and even Microsoft Word will automatically convert emoticons into stylized faces that are more illustrative than combinations of punctuation marks. A good rule of thumb is to use emoticons in moderation, as you would with strong emotions during face-to-face interactions,

(continued)

and be sure only to use them in informal situations where it is appropriate to bring your emotional state into the messages you are writing.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How do you feel about using emoticons in your mediated communication with others? In what types of situations can they be overused, inappropriate, or misinterpreted?
2. How else can we communicate our emotions when writing messages to one another, especially in formal or professional situations where emoticons might not be appropriate?
3. How can advances in mediated communication continue to allow us to express our emotions more easily and accurately?

5. Communication Occurs in a Variety of Contexts

The **context**, or the situation in which communication takes place, affects what we expect to hear and see, the meaning of what is said, and whether and how we communicate. When we speak of context, we must consider that people communicate differently in different settings. For example, you would not communicate and behave at a party the same way you would at work. You may talk and laugh loudly at a party, or yell to someone from across the room, but you would probably not exhibit these same behaviors in the workplace.

Any number of contextual cues can influence communication. For example, the time and place of the interaction are both important considerations. Does the interaction occur at night or during the day? Does the interaction take place face-to-face or via a mediated technology such as Skype? In addition, the cultures of each communicator, as well as the culture in which the interaction is taking place, are often consciously and subconsciously taken into account. Culture, which we will discuss in more depth in Chapter 3, involves the traditions, beliefs, and standards for behaviors that are passed down from one generation to the next.

Our psychological state also affects our communication. When we are unhappy, we perceive situations differently from how they seem to us if we are in a good mood. For example, you might have a better time at a birthday party right after receiving an excellent grade in a course than you might after receiving a poor grade. In addition, the social situation, the participants in the interaction, and their relational history influence communication and each person's interpretation of it.

As you have learned, communication occurs in a particular context, which includes the time, place, and people involved in the interaction. (We discuss context further later in this chapter.) All of these contextual aspects fit into the larger context of culture. Overall, it is important to recognize that the context often significantly shapes communication in a particular setting.



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▲ Culture is an overarching context that can influence an interaction.

1.2 Two Models of Communication

In the field of interpersonal communication, communication theories and models evolved from basic, preliminary foundations laid by early scholars. Communication as an academic discipline has both a long and a short history. The broad study of communication is rooted in the traditions of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the philosophy of ancient Greece. Specifically, the art of persuasion, known as rhetoric, emerged to promote citizen participation in democracy during this time. Rhetoric remains an important area of communication study today. In contrast, the modern study of communication, and the emergence of the subfield of interpersonal communication in particular, only began in the twentieth century. In the first four decades of that century, various aspects of communication were studied as speech and oratory at American universities but in different social science and humanities departments such as anthropology, English, political science, and sociology. From 1940 to the mid-1960s, the study of communication started to evolve into a distinct communication discipline. This consolidation was partially due to World War II, which generated an interest in the creation, understanding, and successful implementation of propaganda messages during wartime.

It was also in the 1960s that the study of interpersonal communication “came into its own as an identifiable academic discipline” (Bryant & Pribanic-Smith, 2010, p. 26). The early focus of this discipline was persuasion, influence, group communication, but there was also a growing interest during the 1970s in how cognition is related to interpersonal interaction. The study of interpersonal communication continued to advance in size and influence between the 1970s and 1980s, with substantial growth in university courses and the founding of professional associations and journals focused on interpersonal communication (Bryant & Pribanic-Smith, 2010). The field of interpersonal communication continues to grow and evolve with the ever-changing nature of social interactions thanks to the popularity of social networking and technological conduits developed for interpersonal communication, such as text messaging and video conferencing.

Since the 1940s, when the study of communication split from other academic disciplines, communication scholars proposed their own models and theories to explain communication interactions. **Theories** are claims and beliefs researchers develop and then test in controlled studies or in real-world situations. When communication scholars create and test theories, they provide useful information about the communication process that is based on research and evidence. Such practices also help advance communication as a unique academic discipline. Researchers also create physical models to illustrate communication concepts and theories. **Models** are simple representations, in an ideal form, of a process or an object. Although models provide a simplified view of something that is typically much more complex, they are useful because they clarify the nature of a phenomenon or a process. A model also highlights or emphasizes the elements a scholar believes are particularly important and allows us to examine how an element is related to other parts of the model. Theories and models are important tools to illustrate the researcher’s systematic thinking about that particular topic.

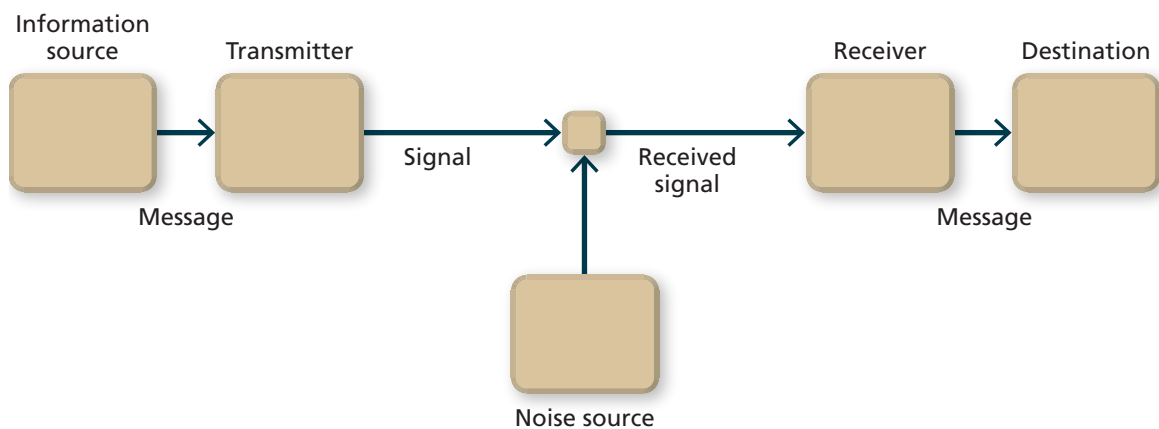
With new research findings in interpersonal communication, researchers expanded upon the discipline’s preliminary models and theories. To illustrate the evolution of these communication models, we will discuss two general types of communication models: (1) the linear model and (2) the transaction model. The transaction model builds on the linear model and, based on research findings, adds new insights to our knowledge of the communication process. Let’s examine these models and discuss how they differ.

The Linear Model of Communication

In 1948 Bell Telephone Company engineer and mathematician Claude Shannon was assigned the task of determining the most efficient way to transmit electrical signals from one location to another. As a result, Shannon developed one of the most influential early linear models of communication. He called his model the Mathematical Theory of Communication, and it was originally published in *The Bell System Technical Journal*. Shannon later worked with mathematician Warren Weaver to create a description of this communication model that was accessible to the general public, in what is known today as the Shannon and Weaver model of communication (see Figure 1.1). There are a number of linear models that were developed at this time, but the Shannon and Weaver model is the most significant.

Figure 1.1: The Shannon-Weaver model of communication

The linear model of communication, developed by Shannon and Weaver, was originally created to represent mechanical communication, but this model is still the first to visually depict the communication process.



Source: Shannon, C. E. (1948, July–October). A mathematical theory of communication. *Bell System Technical Journal*, 27, 379–423. © John Wiley & Sons.

Shannon postulated that all communication could be broken down into three components: an information source, a channel or path, and a destination (Weaver & Shannon, 1963). In this model, the **information source** is the sender, who has a message to transmit. This message is transformed into a **signal**, which travels along a channel, where it is delivered. The transmitter and receiver shown in the Shannon and Weaver model were devices such as telephone handsets that sent and received the information signal. The Shannon and Weaver model focused on the mechanism of transmitting electrical signals, not on the content of the information or the message. Because it focused on the mechanical and technical issues involved in message transmission, the model did not explain the complexities of human communication. Nevertheless, Shannon's ingenuity made two important contributions to the field of communication.

First, Shannon defined and quantified the sometimes imprecise notion of **information**, which is defined as stimuli from individuals' surroundings that contribute to their beliefs and knowledge (Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002). He believed that telephone signals, radio waves, photographs, film, and other media could all be considered information, and this information could be encoded in binary digits, or bits, which would enable relay circuits to perform complex

mathematical operations and to transmit this digital information without error. Almost 50 years elapsed before Shannon's information concept had practical application, but today this concept forms the operational basis used for computers and other electronic devices, making items such as CDs, DVDs, and broadband communication possible. In fact, Shannon is now referred to as the father of information technology and is credited with single-handedly creating today's digital revolution (Waldrop, 2001).

Second, the Shannon and Weaver linear communication model introduced the idea of **noise** into the communication process. Shannon defined noise as anything that interferes with, corrupts, or changes the communication signal as it travels through a channel. Again, Shannon primarily focused on technical noise in the signal transmission, such as static on a telephone line. But he recognized that communicators could experience semantic noise, which occurs when messages are misunderstood or misinterpreted or when interference arises because of the language used by one or more of the communication participants. We will return to the concept of noise in the next section where we describe the elements of communication.

Though Shannon originally developed his model of communication for mechanical communication, this early linear model was the first attempt to visually depict the communication process. In the linear model, the sender of the message is the primary and only active participant in the communication process. The sender is responsible for clearly and accurately communicating to the receiver, who passively accepts whatever message the sender transmits. If the communicated message fails to produce shared meaning or desired results, then researchers will simply examine how the sender formed the message or will develop methods for improving message transmission. If we use the linear model to analyze Kim and Pat's conversation about what to have for dinner, we might assume Kim is responsible for clear communication. and she is at fault when Pat does not know that she is available to have dinner with him. We might suggest that Kim's question, "What are we doing for dinner tonight?" should be more explicit or clearer, such as, "I'm available for dinner with you tonight after all—do you want to do something?"

In the 1950s and early 1960s, researchers adapted the Shannon and Weaver model and applied its concepts to the process of human communication. Several scholars during this time made significant contributions to our knowledge of interpersonal communication. One model in particular affects our understanding of interpersonal communication today.

The Transaction Model of Communication

As communication established a distinct discipline, researchers recognized that communication was not inherently linear and that both sender and receiver were influential, active participants in the communication process. As a result, researchers developed the *interaction model of communication*. The interaction model depicted the sender and the receiver, as the linear model of communication does, but also emphasized the participants' sequential turns when they exchanged messages with one another.

As the study of communication progressed, researchers recognized it was not necessary to receive a message before sending a message. Communicators could send and receive messages at the same time and had mutual influence during the interaction. For example, while one person was speaking, a second person could smile or frown and thus send a nonverbal message. The two participants in the interaction are both simultaneously a sender and a receiver of messages. Instead of comparing communication to shooting an arrow, as in the linear model, or hitting

a tennis ball back and forth, as in the interaction model, communication is more like a dance. Researchers acknowledged that participants would rely on each other's cues and that their combined movements influenced the direction of their interaction. This interplay between the communicators is known as a **transaction**, and these later models of communication are known as transaction models.

A **transaction model** of interpersonal communication identifies four major components of the communication process:

- Both parties are active participants who simultaneously serve as senders and receivers.
- Information flows in both directions.
- There are both verbal and nonverbal messages.
- Communication takes place to meet the needs of both people.

The sender and the receiver are mutually responsible for the creation of meaning. The two parties must negotiate to achieve as much shared meaning as possible. Elements of the transaction model—feedback, context, and noise, among others—are detailed here. Each of these can influence shared meaning between the parties.

Sender and Receiver

Though senders and receivers are addressed as separate elements of communication, each party in an interaction should be considered both a sender and a receiver, or simply, a communicator. The **sender** is the source of the communication—the person who initiates the interaction. The **receiver** is the recipient of the message the sender transmits. Early communication models considered the receiver a passive participant in the communication process, but researchers today believe the receiver is actively engaged in the communication process. Communication participants are simultaneously a sender and a receiver.

Before communication can occur, the sender must first **encode** the idea she wants to communicate, or put the idea into some form or code that the other person can understand. In other words, encoding involves the creation of meaning. Language is a type of verbal communication code. Nonverbal communications, such as gestures, eye contact, and touch, are codes as well. If the other person does not understand the message, she will not be able to **decode** or interpret the message in the way that the sender intends. For example, placing the thumb and forefinger together to form a circle is a nonverbal code that can mean “OK” in the United States. However, the same gesture is interpreted differently in Brazil and Germany and is considered an offensive gesture equivalent to the U.S. gesture of showing someone the middle finger (Hayden, 2007).

Message

In the communication process, the **message** is the content of the communication itself—the idea the sender wishes to communicate to the receiver. Messages are

- Perceived via one or more of our five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell)
- Planned, unintentional, or somewhere in between
- Communicated via both verbal and nonverbal codes

Messages are only understood if the idea is encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver in a similar manner, and if shared meaning is achieved.



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▲ We can use both verbal and nonverbal codes to communicate a message.

According to influential scholars of interpersonal communication, messages also contain both content and relational dimensions (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The content dimension of the message is the information the sender wants to communicate to the receiver. The relational dimension of the message is the complex relationship between the two communicators. The nature of the relationship can include factors such as who has more or less power or status, how much communicators like or dislike each other, and the feelings one or both communicators experience during the interaction. Typically, the content dimension is shared through verbal communication, and the relational dimension is expressed via nonverbal communication.

When compared with the content dimension of a message, the relational dimension is often less clear or ambiguous and may require verbal verification. For example, if your boss says, “I’d like to see you in my office,” the content of the message is clear and simple. However, the relational dimension may cause you to feel concern. Maybe you analyze your boss’s tone of voice or facial expressions. Perhaps you mentally review your recent work and interactions with your boss to predict if the meeting will be a positive or a negative experience. As you can see from this example, verbal and

nonverbal messages and the content and relational dimensions of messages all affect message encoding and decoding.

Channel

The **channel** is the medium or the means through which the message is transmitted from sender to receiver. Multiple channels can be employed in an interaction. For example, when two people talk face-to-face, they use the auditory channel when they speak and listen, the visual channel when they observe each other’s gestures and facial expressions, and the tactile channel when there is physical contact. In addition, the channel could be *mediated* in some way, which means that someone or something is intervening between the sender and the receiver in the communication process. For example, the cellular network and airwaves constitute a communication channel for someone on a cell phone; the Internet network would be a channel for someone sending an e-mail. When communication occurs via these mediated channels, other channel options are often limited. For example, mediated channels would easily support the visual and auditory channels described above, but make tactile (touch) or olfactory (scent) channels much more difficult or even impossible to use.

Feedback

As previously stated in this chapter, shared meaning is the goal of communication. For communication to be effective, the message must have the same or similar meaning—a shared understanding—for both communicators. We cannot be sure if the message that is sent is the same as the message that is received until we assess the feedback, one of the many elements of the communication process. **Feedback** is defined as any information a communicator gets from others in response to a message. Feedback can be verbal or nonverbal and often includes elements of both. For example, if you tell a child his lunch is ready, he might race into the house (nonverbal) and shout “hooray” (verbal), and both elements are forms of feedback. Feedback is an important

component in the communication process because it is the method we use to gauge the success of the communication. Feedback also provides the opportunity to alter our messages and to try to communicate again if the previous message is not understood or if shared understanding is not achieved.

Noise

Every day we are presented with countless messages and sensory experiences, from signs and advertisements to interactions with strangers. If these messages or sensations distract us from fully participating in an interaction, they are classified as noise. Recall that noise was first discussed in relation to Shannon and Weaver's linear model of communication, though Shannon's primary view of noise was technological in nature. Communication scholars have since determined there are four specific types of noise that can interfere with or garble a particular message:

- *Physical noise* includes distractions that originate from the environment rather than from the communicators—such as a ringing or vibrating cell phone, the hum of traffic outside your window, other students talking during class, or even pop-up advertisements on your computer screen. Physical noise is thus an external form of noise.
- *Psychological noise* occurs when one or both communicators' cognitions or mental states interfere with shared meaning. Biases, prejudices, stereotypes, and even extreme emotions such as rage are all examples of psychological noise. Psychological noise is thus an internal form of noise and is most likely to occur when a communicator has extreme views or even a viewpoint on the opposite end of the spectrum.
- *Physiological noise* occurs when one or both communicators have an impairment that restricts shared understanding. Examples of physiological impairment include visual or speech impairments, difficulty with or loss of hearing, and memory loss. An inability to understand someone's regional or cultural accent is also a type of physiological noise, even if both communicators speak the same language.
- *Semantic noise* occurs when one or both communicators assign different meanings to a message. One common example of semantic noise involves communicators who speak different languages—for example, one individual only speaks English, and the other only understands Spanish. Other examples can include misinterpretations of a nonverbal signal, such as the different interpretations of the "OK" hand gesture previously discussed. Use of complex terms or jargon can also create semantic noise, but even speech that is too vague or ambiguous can lead to semantic noise due to misinterpretation. On the television show *Seinfeld*, for example, George Costanza's girlfriend continuously uses the phrase "yadda, yadda, yadda," and George could not understand her because she frequently glossed over important points of the story.

Any or all of these forms of noise can be present in an interaction. Obviously, the more noise that there is during an interaction, the more difficulty the communicators will have focusing on the messages that they are exchanging and on creating shared meaning. Though we cannot fully eliminate noise from our interactions with others, knowing that noise can affect our communication can help us anticipate and deal with it.

Context

The transaction model acknowledges that communication does not take place in a vacuum; rather, a simple shift in where or when an interaction takes place can significantly alter it. As defined earlier in the chapter, *context* is the circumstances in which an interaction occurs, and it surrounds and infuses the interaction and affects the communicators' messages. A number of contextual aspects—including time, place, environment, the psychological dimension of each

communicator, and culture—can each play an integral role in shaping or changing the messages that are being shared.

Together, these elements combine to illustrate the process of communication as depicted by the transaction model of communication. For example, Kim and Pat are both senders and receivers in their interaction. Their messages are the things that they say both verbally and nonverbally to each other, and they used both mediated (e-mail and mobile phone texts and calls) and face-to-face channels to communicate these messages. When Kim said to Pat, “Fine, whatever,” she is providing him with feedback that indicates she is not being considerate of or taking seriously the message Pat has sent. Taking the analysis one step farther, there could be multiple types of noise present, including physical noise in the form of distractions at work and while on the road, and even psychological noise as both Kim and Pat became more angry and frustrated. Finally, the scenario context could involve the time of day—that it was close to dinnertime—and how each felt about the other and the relationship that they share. The transaction model thus is useful because it not only describes each of these elements but helps us identify the role of each element in a given interaction.

1.3 What Is Interpersonal Communication?

This text focuses on interpersonal communication: the building block for all other types of communication. **Interpersonal communication (IPC)** is a unique type of communication that involves two individuals interacting via face-to-face or mediated channels. This communication involves the smallest number of communicators—two, also known as a **dyad**. It can be unplanned, such as when people unexpectedly meet, exchange greetings, and have an impromptu conversation. It can also be planned, such as when two people arrange to sit down for coffee at a certain time and place to talk about a problem. Interpersonal communication can take place in an informal setting—a home, a yard, or a supermarket, for instance. Interpersonal communication can also occur in a formal setting, such as an employer’s office or a classroom. Interpersonal communication can even take place via mediated channels like telephones, computers, or video cameras.

Aspects of a typical interaction can be both planned and unplanned, both formal and informal. For example, the doctor–patient encounter would likely be considered a primarily formal and planned interaction. However, this interaction also can include informal greetings and chitchat when the doctor first enters the examination room. If the patient provides information about his symptoms during the exam that the doctor did not anticipate, unplanned communication will occur. If the patient follows up later with the doctor via e-mail, the interaction will span both face-to-face and mediated channels. As this example illustrates, the study of interpersonal communication is important because such interactions are complex, multilayered, and can reveal a lot about the communication process.

Functions of Interpersonal Communication

As social animals, we want and need connections with other people. We communicate to accomplish any number of mutual goals, and to relate to one another. Specifically, interpersonal communication is a social process, and we usually communicate for one of three primary purposes: (1) to meet personal needs; (2) to learn about ourselves, other people, and the world; and (3) to build and maintain relationships with others.

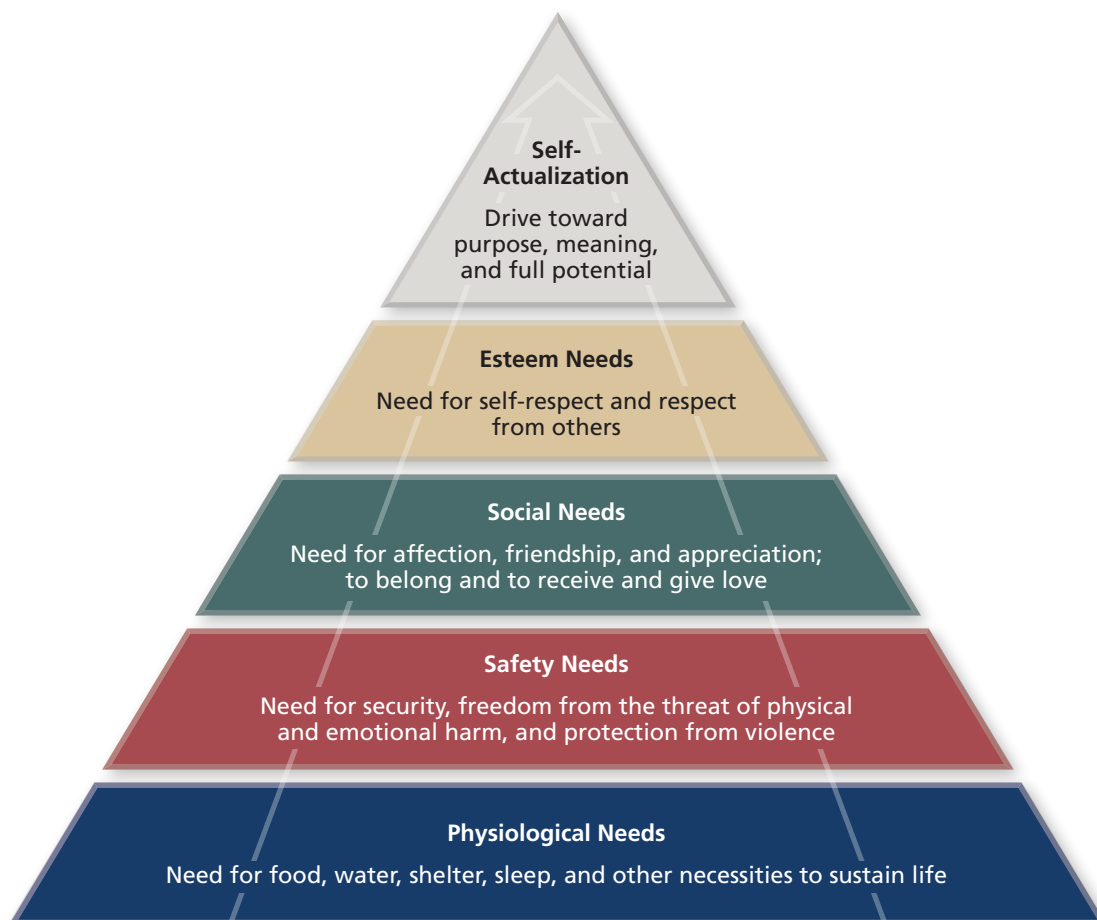
Meeting Personal Needs

One of the most basic reasons people interact with others is to satisfy personal needs. In 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a theory of human motivation, proposing that all humans have an essential nature and a set of basic human needs that motivate us to seek psychological health and full humanness, or **self-actualization** (Maslow, 1968). People have basic needs that must be met before they can move toward self-actualization. Essential needs such as safety and food must be satisfied before we can continue the process of self-actualization (Maslow, 1968). Like empty holes, deficiencies must be filled, and other people, through interpersonal communication and interactions, can help us satisfy these different personal needs (“Maslow’s hierarchy,” 2009).

The hierarchy of human needs that Maslow identified is usually represented in a pyramid. As the arrow in Figure 1.2 indicates, Maslow theorized that human needs emerge in order starting from the bottom of the pyramid. Lower-level needs must be satisfied first, and higher-level needs only arise once the basic needs are realized. Basic physiological needs, the necessities for life such as

Figure 1.2: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

Basic needs, those closer to the bottom of the pyramid, must be met before one is in the position to seek out self-actualization.



Source: Maslow, A. H., Frager, R. D., & Fadiman, J. (1987). *Motivation and personality* (3rd. ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc. ©1987. Printed and electronically reproduced by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.

food, water, and shelter, are the strongest needs. Maslow believed the first reason to communicate is for survival. Communication enables us to call attention to ourselves, to warn others of danger, and to exchange critical information to meet these physiological needs. Then we can turn our attention to the need for safety and security. We may have enough food to eat today, but we also need to feel secure that we will have food, water, and shelter tomorrow and the day after as well. Once these safety needs are met, we can then address social needs. The most basic social need is the need to belong. Friendship, acceptance by others, and the ability to both give and receive love are powerful needs for all humans, and they drive much of our interpersonal communication. After we satisfy these needs, we are then motivated to fulfill esteem needs, such as the need for recognition, the pride of accomplishment, and the satisfaction of self-respect.

Self-actualization is at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. A self-actualized individual is far less dependent on others and is more autonomous and self-directed. This person is able to pursue dreams, desires, and goals and to strive to reach full potential as a person because she is less needy of praise and affection and less anxious for honors, prestige, and rewards. This drive for self-actualization is only activated, however, when lower-level needs are met. Maslow theorized that only a small percentage of people reach a level of self-actualization, fully using their talents, capacities, and potential. But he also believed the motivation for self-actualization rarely disappears. Even if full potential is attained, the motivation to seek self-actualization will persist because there are always more things to learn and new ways to grow (Maslow, 1968).

Learning about Self and Others

In addition to interacting with other people to meet personal needs, another primary function of interpersonal communication is to learn about oneself, other people, and the world. It helps us develop a concept of ourselves. Researchers believe that self-concept is a complex mix of how we see ourselves, what others have told us about ourselves, and what society says we should be. This concept of self is learned and refined through interpersonal communication and can change throughout life. Chapter 2 further discusses how we develop this concept of self and carry it into communication with others. What people say to us and about us to others contributes to our concept of self, but we are free to accept or reject these judgments.

Communication is also one of the most important ways that societies maintain and pass on knowledge about their society and culture. All societies communicate the history, traditions, and values of their culture through oral communication. The roots of oral communication reach as far back in human history as scholars can trace, and more recently written language has been used to communicate from generation to generation. When we communicate with others, we learn about what is important in their culture, and we also learn about our own cultural heritage. Think about a recent time when you visited another culture—it could have been a foreign country, a different region of the United States, or even a group or association with interests that differ from yours. You may have tried to learn about this different culture before your visit, possibly by reading books, checking on websites, and asking friends who are members of or have previously visited that culture. When immersed in that culture, you likely were highly engaged and observant: You more carefully observed your and others' nonverbal behaviors, as well as elements of the environment that could give you better insight into your immediate surroundings and how they reflect that culture.

Building and Maintaining Relationships

A final important function of interpersonal communication is to help build and maintain relationships with other people. Because humans are social animals, we form a variety of relationships, and we often band together into larger groups to offer one another the protection and

strength of numbers and to pool our talents to help one another. Our ancestors employed this interpersonal communication function for survival. In fact, psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald (1991) argued that *Homo erectus* was a unique species because they were the first hunter-gatherers and were no longer living in isolation from one another. Their society, even in the absence of language, was one “where cooperation and social coordination of action were central to the species survival strategy” (Donald, 1991, pp. 149–150).

You probably have a variety of relationships and group memberships that you believe are central to who you are, including the relationships with your family of origin and the family and friendships that you form as an adult. Interpersonal communication is an integral component of building and maintaining these relationships; quite simply, a close relationship cannot begin or continue to exist without interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication helps us meet needs for belonging and for acceptance and enables us to share values and principles, which are the foundation of human society.

Challenges of Interpersonal Communication

Along with the many beneficial functions of interpersonal communication come a number of challenges. These interpersonal challenges occur frequently, and their presence increases the chance that the communicators will be unable to share meaning with one another.

Misperceptions

The most frequent and broadest challenge of interpersonal communication is misperception. As this chapter has illustrated, there are many factors that can cause misperceptions. For example, noise present during the interaction may contribute to misperceptions, or the receiver may not decode the message the way the sender intended. Kim and Pat’s interaction clearly illustrates misperceptions: Kim believed Pat was ignoring her when he did not respond to her text right away, but Pat was merely driving and unable to reply. As a result of this misperception, conflict occurs. Certainly, a conflict about what to do for dinner is not likely to end Kim and Pat’s relationship, but if the couple continually experience similar misperceptions in their interactions, it is likely that their relationship will suffer, and possibly even come to an end.

Misperceptions can also have serious consequences in medical interactions. One study found that primary care physicians who took the time to educate their patients about what to expect during the appointment and checked to make sure that the patients understood what they said were less often named in malpractice claims than physicians who did not strive to reduce misperceptions in these ways (Levinson, Roter, Mullooly, Dull, & Frankel, 1997). With so many elements in motion and sometimes in conflict with each other during a given interaction, it is amazing that communicators ever are able to share meaning with one another!

Long-Distance Relationships

Technological and transportation advances now give us the option to live almost anywhere, and we are also more likely to move multiple times to different homes, cities, and even countries during our lives (Zechner, 2008). One side effect of this increased mobility is the growth of the **long-distance relationship (LDR)**, where “communication opportunities are restricted (in the view of the individuals involved) because of geographic parameters and the individuals within the relationship have expectations of a continued close connection” (Stafford, 2005, p. 7). Long-distant relationships can take many forms, including romantic, friendship, or familial, and individuals can play a variety of roles in these LDRs, such as providing social support, resources, and care (Bevan & Sparks, 2011). You likely are in at least one long-distance relationship right now

because of school, a job, the military, or even because you moved to be with a spouse or closer to your elderly parents.

According to Erin Sahlstein (2006), although LDRs have similarities with geographically close relationships, long-distance partners encounter a unique set of challenges. A communication scholar and expert in the study of long-distance relationships, Sahlstein (2006) notes that individuals in long-distance relationships may encounter the following challenges, which can affect relationship maintenance:

- Unforeseen time, cost, and convenience issues
- Tension and stress management issues
- Belated information sharing
- Limited opportunities to provide comfort, reassurance, and support
- Fewer interactions, in terms of both quantity and quality
- Difficulties assisting with individual and relationship crises

However, Sahlstein's (2004) research also emphasizes that distance in LDRs can create unique perspectives; partners in these relationships spend time both together and apart, and they recognize there are both positive and negative aspects associated with each of these interdependent relational states. For example, there is pressure for distant partners to find time to spend together, but distant partners also feel appreciation for each other and relationship rejuvenation and renewal when they do reunite (Sahlstein, 2004). New technologies and transportation options that increase the likelihood of being in an LDR also provide abundant options for distant partners to connect and reconnect. Thus, LDRs can be considered both a challenge and an opportunity (we will take another look at LDRs in Chapter 8).



David Sacks/Photodisc/Thinkstock

▲ Intergenerational communication occurs when communicators in an interaction are members of different generations.

Increase in Intergenerational Relationships

Mary Lee Hummert (2012) proposes that “age is one of the most salient, and perhaps automatic, ways of categorizing ourselves as well as others” (p. 223). This is especially the case in intergenerational interactions, which occur when members of different generations communicate with one another. Members of a particular generation, such as Baby Boomers or Gen Xers, experience similar social trends, historical events, political and social occurrences, and technological advances that shape their individual perspectives and views about the world (Myers & Davis, 2012). Members of different generations who interact with one another are likely to approach the same situation or event in very different ways, creating an intergenerational communication challenge (Myers & Davis, 2012). Hummert (2012) presents three associations between life stage or age and communication that may also prompt intergenerational communication problems:

- Developmental stages of particular age groups can affect how members prefer to communicate and influence their actual communication practices.

- Age groups or generations are often characterized by differences in economic resources and status, resulting in intergenerational conflict.
- Age-related beliefs or stereotypes can negatively influence if and how members of different generations interact with one another.

There are, however, a number of other reasons why there are more opportunities for intergenerational interactions. Increased life expectancy, advances in medical testing and treatment options, and even the growing use of social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram all increase the probability that we will communicate with someone from a different generation. In 2012, for example, 53% of Americans age 65 and older reported that they went online to use the Internet and e-mail, and 30% of these seniors were also members of at least one social networking site (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012). Emerging studies also reveal that online intergenerational interactions can create constructive connections. Researchers have found that having a parent on Facebook actually decreased parent–child conflict for college students (Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012). Overall, intergenerational communication can sometimes be dissatisfying but can also be warm and respectful (Hummert, 2012). Whether the interactions are positive or negative, such communication experiences can certainly provide new and different insights about the world around us.

Benefits of Studying Interpersonal Communication

Though most of us are born with the ability to communicate, humans still have much to learn about communication, and everyone can benefit from systematically studying interpersonal communication. What are some specific benefits of an increased scholarly understanding of communication between two people? The field of communication research is broad and continues to evolve as communication itself adapts to new interactions. Further study, for example, can increase our understandings about our relationships or our health. We next discuss some specific reasons for the importance of studying interpersonal communication.

Understanding the Difficulty in Forming and Maintaining Interpersonal Relationships

A better understanding of interpersonal communication can improve how we relate to others in interpersonal relationships. Though it seems logical and natural for us to form and maintain interpersonal relationships, many of us have trouble doing both. For example, Americans reported having one-third fewer confidants in 2004 than in 1985; this is a decrease from approximately three to two confidants (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). In addition, even though we are surrounded by others every day (via both mediated and face-to-face channels), many individuals experience chronic loneliness, which is defined as an ongoing, bothersome experience that occurs when an individual's social network is viewed as somehow deficient; in other words, a person has fewer relationships than she desires (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Perlman & Peplau, 1981). One study that traced participants over seven years found that one-third of these Dutch adults and 40–50% of the elderly experienced loneliness at moderate to severe levels (Dykstra, van Tilburg, & de Jong Gierveld, 2005). A different study determined that U.S. college students reported having high-to-moderate levels of chronic loneliness (Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2008). These findings suggest that individuals have fewer people they can depend upon and that many adults consistently struggle with loneliness.

Individuals have similar difficulties maintaining their relationships. The U.S. divorce rate, which is one of the highest of all industrialized nations, is a major indicator of this struggle (Mullins, Brackett, McKenzie, & Djamba, 2012). According to the National Center for Health Statistics

(Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010), 35% of first marriages will end in separation or divorce within 10 years. Paul Amato (2010) notes that 43–46% of all U.S. marriages were predicted to end in divorce at the conclusion of the twentieth century. An emerging trend since the mid-1990s is the notable jump in divorces among older age groups, also referred to as *gray divorces* (Kreider & Ellis, 2009): Americans age 50 and over were twice as likely to divorce in 2010 as they were just 20 years earlier (Brown & Lin, 2012). Nearly all of the interpersonal predictors of divorce in Amato's (2010) review of divorce research also reflect difficulty with interpersonal communication between spouses. Such difficulties include

- Domestic violence behaviors
- Acts of infidelity
- The frequency of conflict
- The perception that there are numerous relational issues between the spouses

Many of the recent gray divorces are remarriages, which the researchers note are often burdened by communication issues such as stepchildren relationships, money and wills, and healthcare issues and decisions (Brown & Lin, 2012).

Researchers can also identify the impact of interpersonal communication on relationship maintenance if they can define the specific reasons why couples enter into marital therapy. For example, one study found that problematic communication was the most frequent reason spouses reported entering into couples therapy (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). Another study found that marital therapists ranked communication as the third most significant problem area for the couples that they see in therapy (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). These findings emphasize not only the complexity of maintaining relationships, specifically romantic relationships, but also serve as important justifications for further studies about the role of interpersonal communication in relationships. We will return to many of these issues—including relationship maintenance, infidelity, conflict, and relationship deterioration and termination—later in the text.

Understanding Links to Physical and Mental Health

Interpersonal communication issues affect a relationship's health, as we have just discussed, but some issues are also related to physical and mental health components. Both destructive and constructive interpersonal communication messages are connected with physical and mental health. **Constructive communication** involves positive, beneficial messages such as showing that you are supportive, listening to your partner, and being open and willing to share your thoughts and feelings. **Destructive communication**, on the other hand, is comprised of negative and harmful messages that include hostility, insults, and shouting or yelling. For example, greater levels of communication apprehension and topic avoidance during discussions with a close relational partner are examples of destructive communications related to greater severity of irritable bowel syndrome symptoms (Bevan, 2009).

The greatest amount of research on destructive communication and health, however, focuses on behaviors during conflicts. Specifically, across studies, the use of competitive or hostile messages in interpersonal conflicts is consistently linked to compromised functions in the cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems (Canary & Lakey, 2012; Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003). This relationship between hostile messages and health also includes nonverbal communication. For example, husbands' negative facial expressions during conflicts are associated with wives' physical illness symptoms (Gottman, Levenson, & Woodin, 2001). But conflict avoidance can also be harmful. A 17-year study of 192 married couples considered the effects of different conflict

management styles and found that when both spouses suppressed their anger, mortality was twice as likely than when one or both spouses expressed their anger to one another (Harburg, Kaciroti, Gleiberman, Julius, & Schork, 2008).

In contrast, two constructive messages that are beneficial to one's health are affectionate behaviors and social support. Kory Floyd's body of research (Floyd, 2002; Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008) tested his affection exchange theory and consistently found that giving and receiving affectionate messages is an important method for reducing individuals' physiological stress. Touch as a form of affectionate behavior can also reduce anxiety during surgery (Moon & Cho, 2001). In addition, a statistical review of 81 studies on social support and health found that the presence of social support in one's life contributed to increased cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune system functioning (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Social support also increases the likelihood that patients will adhere to their prescribed medical treatment regimens (DiMatteo, 2004). Overall, a study that examined patterns of findings in previous research (called a meta-analysis) determined that those with adequate interpersonal relationships have a 50% higher likelihood of survival compared to those whose relationships are poor (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). This interpersonal relationship effect is as significant as quitting smoking and has more of an impact than other risk factors such as lack of exercise and obesity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

These are just a few of the hundreds of studies that found a significant link between communication and health. There are numerous ways that communication and relationship quality are associated with health, and the potential physiological benefits of interpersonal communication further emphasizes the importance of continued study (see the *Web Field Trip* feature for more on the importance of interpersonal communication to mental health).

WEB FIELD TRIP

Making Interpersonal Connections

Mental Health America (<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/>) is an organization that aims to help community members achieve overall wellness by focusing on the importance of mental health. The organization's Live Your Life Well campaign, which you can access via the website's Living Well dropdown menu, suggests 10 tools that you can use to achieve mental wellness. Take a moment to review each of the ten tools, and then consider the questions below.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. According to Mental Health America, connecting with others is the top tool for living life well. How might our connections with others affect our individual health and overall well-being?
2. How might you apply some of the suggested relationship tips to your own interpersonal situations?

Understanding the Constant Evolution of Interpersonal Communication

Our methods of communication rapidly and constantly change, now more than ever before. Interpersonal communication was once limited to face-to-face or written formats such as letters, which often took weeks or months to arrive at their destination. The invention and adoption of the telegraph in the mid-1800s first allowed individuals to efficiently communicate over great distances. But it is only in the last 30 years that *how* we communicate with one another has substantially shifted and expanded. This shift started with the widespread adoption of the

Internet and e-mail, ramped up with the proliferation of mobile telephones, text messaging, and the development of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, and continues today with the expansion of video conferencing services such as Skype and FaceTime and sites such as Twitter and Instagram. With one mouse click or one screen tap, we can friend, unfriend, or tweet an individual online and alter our interpersonal relationships. But the increased incidence of cyberbullying also reveals the dark side of such online interactions.

Researchers have accordingly responded to these rapid changes in communication. There has been an explosion in the number of studies that examine how mobile phones and social networking impact how we relate to one another in just the last five years. For example, U.S. teens now use cell phones to text message more than any other means of communication (including face-to-face), and text messaging by teens increased from 51% in 2006 to 72% in 2010 (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). In addition, though romantic partners use cell phones significantly more than any other form of mediated communication to interact with each other, use of text messaging most strongly influences couples' communication and their satisfaction with their relationship (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011). To fully understand the nature of interpersonal communication, we must consider its continual evolution. Each chapter in this text includes the feature *IPC in the Digital Age*, which highlights specific research into the interesting new ways that we can relate to each other.

IPC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

It's Not Mediated versus Face-to-Face Communication, but Mediated and Face-to-Face Communication

Early studies of online interpersonal interactions focused on one of two objectives: (1) comparing face-to-face (FtF) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) to determine which is preferred or optimal in particular contexts or situations, or (2) examining one or more forms of CMC in complete isolation from FtF interaction. Now, however, there is a new line of research with roots in the communication department at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The scholars behind this research argue that continued separation of FtF and CMC analyses will not accurately reflect current communication styles. Instead, according to researchers John Caughlin and Liesel Sharabi (2012, 2013), the interaction between mediated and nonmediated communication is **interdependent**, or is mutually influenced by each other, and is a fairly common occurrence. They call this natural alternation between CMC and FtF the *communication interdependence perspective*.

This interdependence of mediated and nonmediated communication is a plausible connection considering that many of our daily conversations do not have a clear beginning or end; rather, they can recur at different times and in different forms. For example, Kim and Pat's interaction did not take place as a single event. Kim first e-mailed Pat about their potential dinner plans, they then continued their interaction via texting and talking on the phone as they both commuted home, transitioning to face-to-face discussions once Kim arrived.

Caughlin and Sharabi's (2012, 2013) research determined that FtF and CMC communication simultaneously occur and that there is frequent interdependence and overlap between these two modes of communication. In addition, the more that romantic partners are able to integrate their nonmediated and mediated communication, the more their relationships are close and satisfying (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2012). When romantic partners only discussed certain topics via mediated

(continued)

channels, relationship closeness and satisfaction declined, but the opposite was true for topics only discussed FtF—in such cases, both closeness and satisfaction actually increased (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). These findings, though preliminary, offer an interesting and accurate representation of the intricate and multifaceted ways we currently interact with one another. We have different channels available for exchanging verbal and nonverbal messages, and knowing this will help us determine which messages work best for the different circumstances we may encounter. Think about the most recent interaction you had with a romantic partner or a close friend, and then consider the questions below.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Can you pinpoint when your interaction started—the very first time you discussed a particular topic with this person?
2. Can you identify the different channels you have since used to continue this conversation—did you text, e-mail, use the phone, video conference, use social media, talk in person, write a note, any and/or all of the above?
3. How did shifting between different mediated and nonmediated forms of communication change the nature of the interaction? Was it easy for you to make the transitions?

1.4 How This Book Will Help You Communicate More Competently

The field of interpersonal communication encompasses a large body of information. The primary goals in this text are to increase your awareness of the principles of interpersonal communication and to appropriately and effectively apply these principles in everyday interactions. Interpersonal communication is a lifelong study that requires ongoing practice for everyone. The notion of being both appropriate and effective in your interactions with others is called **communication competence**, and we will return to this term throughout the text to illustrate its utility in a variety of communication situations.

To be a more competent communicator, be sure to keep the following principles in mind and work to demonstrate them in your everyday interactions with other people:

- *Take responsibility for your communication behavior.* Strive to be truthful, accurate, and clear in your communication with others.
- *Remember that communication involves shared meaning.* Each person in an interaction—not just the sender—has an equal responsibility to work toward achieving this mutual understanding and interpretation.
- *Acknowledge that your view of a situation is only one of many views.* Try to take the perspective of other people and consider how their point of view makes sense to them.
- *Respect others as well as yourself.* Strive for win-win outcomes in communication encounters, where both parties get their needs met, not outcomes where one person “wins” an argument or controls a discussion at the expense of the other person’s feelings or interests.
- *Listen and evaluate the other person’s statements before responding.* Choose your verbal and nonverbal messages carefully.
- *Practice being a competent communicator.* Communication skills are learned through knowledge, motivation, and the skill that is earned through practice. Each chapter in this text will provide suggestions that will help you improve your communication competence.

Summary and Resources

Human beings are social animals and are born into this world communicating with those around them. We may think that communication is natural and take it for granted; however, competent communication is a skill that must be learned and is crucial in both personal and professional life. It requires awareness of what we (and others) are doing when we communicate, and it requires effort to improve communication skills and to minimize misunderstandings. Communication is thus defined as a process where two or more people strive to create shared meaning using non-verbal and verbal messages in a variety of contexts.

The goal of human communication is to create shared meaning. Because meaning is in people, not in words, communication skills must be used to reach mutual understanding about what a symbol or word means. Communication involves interactions with other people that continue throughout life. It is ongoing and ever changing. The give-and-take of human communication appears to be unique to human beings, and it takes work to build and maintain the relationships we form with others.

The study of interpersonal communication as an academic discipline began in the mid-twentieth century and is flourishing today. Researchers continue to learn about the complex subject of interpersonal communication, adding to our understanding of this subject. Theories and models of communication that evolved during the first decades of formal study can be divided into two types: (1) the linear model that envisioned interpersonal communication as one-directional, much like shooting an arrow at a passive receiver; and (2) transaction models, in which the participants are senders and receivers simultaneously, similar to a dance in which each person gets cues from the other, and each individual's moves influence the direction of the communication. The interpersonal communication process consists of several key elements:

- The sender—the source of the communication
- The receiver—the recipient of the message and an active participant in the communication process
- The message—the content of the communication, which is transmitted in some type of code
- The channel—the medium through which the communication is transmitted
- Feedback—the response to the communication that a communicator gets from others about the message
- The communication context—the situation or environment in which the communication takes place

Noise, information unrelated to the message, can take different forms and can disturb or interrupt the communication process. Interpersonal communication is a specific type of communication in which two individuals interact—a dyad—using mediated or face-to-face channels (often both). Interpersonal communication helps us meet personal needs, including self-actualization. It helps us develop a concept of self and learn about others, and it is one of the most important ways in which societies pass on their cultural heritage. Interpersonal communication also helps us build and maintain relationships and enables us to share values and principles.

Yet interpersonal communication can also be challenging in a number of ways. We can experience misperceptions and deal with unique difficulties in our long-distance and intergenerational relationships. Understanding these challenges is one benefit to studying interpersonal communication. Other benefits to this investigation include further uncovering why it is difficult to form

and maintain interpersonal relationships, understanding how interpersonal communication is related to mental and physical health, and learning how interpersonal communication is constantly evolving in response to the rapid growth of technology and mediated communication.

Communication is a complex process, and we will never know everything there is to know about ourselves and our relationships with others. However, the more we do understand, the better we can relate to others in our world, the more we can enhance our interpersonal relationships, and the more competent we can be in our interactions with others.

Key Terms

channel The path through which the message is transmitted from sender to receiver.

communication A process by which two or more individuals create shared meaning using verbal and nonverbal messages in a variety of contexts.

communication competence The notion of being both appropriate and effective in communication interactions with others.

constructive communication Positive, beneficial messages such as showing support, listening, and being open and willing to share thoughts and feelings.

context The circumstances in which an interaction occurs.

decode The process of interpreting the message in the way the sender intends.

destructive communication Negative and harmful messages that include hostility, insults, and shouting or yelling.

dyad Communication between two people, which is the building block for all other types of communication.

emojicons Combinations of keyboard characters that indicate the emotional state of the person writing the message.

encode The form or code of the message a sender wants to communicate to a receiver.

feedback Any information, verbal or nonverbal, a communicator gets from others in response to a message.

information Stimuli from individuals' surroundings that contribute to their beliefs and knowledge.

information source The sender of the message that is being transmitted.

interdependent A situation in which individuals or message channels exert mutual influence upon one another.

interpersonal communication (IPC) A unique type of communication that involves two individuals interacting via face-to-face or mediated channels.

language The unique ability to create, use, and exchange common words or symbols that represent objects and events.

long-distance relationship (LDR) A relationship in which the individuals involved are separated by large geographic distances.

mediated communication Communication in which someone or something intervenes between the sender and the receiver in the communication process.

message The content or idea the sender wishes to communicate to the receiver.

models Simple representations of a process or an object that clarifies the complicated nature of a specific phenomenon or process.

noise Anything that interferes with, corrupts, or changes the communication signal as it travels through a channel.

nonverbal communication Visual and vocal means, other than language, used to communicate information.

receiver The recipient of the message the sender transmits.

self-actualization A concept identified by Abraham Maslow that emphasizes that humans have an essential nature and a set of basic human needs that motivate us to seek psychological health and full humanness.

sender The source, or initiator, of the communication.

signal A transmitted message, which travels along a channel or path to a destination.

symbols Words, pictures, sounds, marks, or objects used to represent particular ideas, objects, or qualities.

theories Formal claims and beliefs that researchers develop and test in controlled studies or in real-world scenarios.

transaction The continual interplay, or back and forth, of messages between communication participants. Both parties are active participants who simultaneously send and receive information.

transaction model A later communication model that emphasizes the role of transactions in the communication process. Communication takes place to meet the needs of both parties.

verbal communication Language or the use of words to communicate.

Critical Thinking and Discussion Questions

1. Consider a conversation that you recently had that you felt was successful and another one that you believe went poorly. Consider the elements of the transaction model of communication: What are specific differences in these two conversations that resulted in these different outcomes?
2. How can noise interfere with shared meaning in an interaction? Which of the four types of noise do you think could create the most interference and why?
3. Which element of the transaction model of communication do you think is the most important for creating shared meaning in an interaction and why?
4. How is face-to-face communication similar to and different from mediated communication? Use terms from the chapter to complete your answer.
5. To what extent do you believe that your own interpersonal relationships are affected by the problems or challenges with interpersonal communication discussed in this chapter?