Objectives

1. Compare and contrast definitions of communication, human communication, and interpersonal communication.
2. Explain why it is useful to study interpersonal communication.
3. Compare and contrast communication as action, interaction, and transaction.
4. Describe the key components of the communication process.
5. Discuss electronically mediated communication’s role in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships.
6. Discuss five principles of interpersonal communication.
7. Identify strategies that can improve your communication competence.

Outline

• What Is Interpersonal Communication?
• Why Is Interpersonal Communication Important to Your Life?
• Interpersonal Communication Myths
• The Communication Process
• Electronically Mediated Interpersonal Communication
• Principles of Interpersonal Communication
• Improving Your Interpersonal Communication Competence
Interpersonal communication is like breathing; it is a requirement for life. And, like breathing, interpersonal communication is inescapable. Unless you live in isolation, you communicate interpersonally every day. Listening to your roommate, talking to a teacher, meeting for lunch with a friend, and talking to your parents or your spouse are all examples of interpersonal communication.

It is impossible not to communicate with others. Even before we are born, we respond to movement and sound. With our first cry, we announce to others that we are here. Once we make contact with others, we communicate, and we continue to do so until we draw our last breath. Even though many of our messages are not verbalized, we nonetheless send messages to others—intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. Whatever our intentions, people draw conclusions from our behavior. Without interpersonal communication, a special form of human communication that occurs as we manage our relationships, people suffer and even die. Recluses, hermits, and people isolated in solitary confinement dream and hallucinate about talking with others face to face.

Human communication is at the core of our existence. Think of the number of times you communicated with someone today, as you worked, ate, studied, shopped, or went about your other daily activities. Most people spend between 80 and 90 percent of their waking hours communicating with others. It is through these interactions with others that we develop interpersonal relationships.

Because these relationships are so important to our lives, later chapters will focus on the communication skills and principles that explain and predict how we develop, sustain, and sometimes end relationships. We’ll explore such questions as the following: Why do we like some people and not others? How can we interpret other people’s unspoken messages with greater accuracy? Why do some relationships blossom and others deteriorate? How can we better manage disagreements with others? How can we better understand our relationships with our family, friends, and coworkers?

This chapter charts the course ahead, addressing key questions about what interpersonal communication is and why it is important. We will begin by seeing how our understanding of the interpersonal communication process has evolved. And we will conclude by examining how we initiate and sustain relationships through interpersonal communication.

**What Is Interpersonal Communication?**

To understand interpersonal communication, we must begin by understanding how it relates to two broader categories: communication in general and human communication. Scholars have attempted to arrive at a general definition of communication for decades, yet experts cannot agree on a single one. One research team counted more than 126 published definitions. In the broadest sense, communication is the process of acting on information. Someone does or says something, and others think or do something in response to the action or the words as they understand them.

To refine our broad definition, we can say that human communication is the process of making sense out of the world and sharing that sense with others by creating meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal messages. We learn about the world by listening, observing, tasting, touching, and smelling; then we share our...
conclusions with others. Human communication encompasses many media: speeches, e-mail, songs, radio and television broadcasts, online discussion groups, letters, books, articles, poems, and advertisements.

Interpersonal communication is a distinctive, transactional form of human communication involving mutual influence, usually for the purpose of managing relationships. The three essential elements of this definition differentiate the unique nature of interpersonal communication from other forms of human communication.7

Interpersonal Communication Is a Distinctive Form of Communication

For years, many scholars defined interpersonal communication simply as communication that occurs when two people interact face to face. This limited definition suggests that if two people are interacting, then they are engaging in interpersonal communication. Today, interpersonal communication is defined not just by the number of people who communicate, but also by the quality of the communication. Interpersonal communication occurs not simply when you interact with someone, but when you treat the other person as a unique human being.8

Think of all human communication as ranging on a continuum from impersonal to interpersonal communication. Impersonal communication occurs when you treat people as objects, or when you respond to their roles rather than to who they are as unique people. When you ask a server in a restaurant for a glass of water, you are interacting with the role, not necessarily with the individual. You know nothing personal about this individual, and he or she knows nothing personal about you (unless this person eavesdrops on your conversation).

Philosopher Martin Buber influenced our thinking about human communication when he presented the concept of honest dialogue as the essence of true, authentic communication.9 He described communication as consisting of two different qualities of relationships. He discussed an “I–It” relationship as an impersonal one; the other person is viewed as an “It” rather than as an authentic, genuine person. When you buy a pair of socks at a clothing store, you have a two-person, face-to-face, relatively brief interaction with someone. You communicate. Yet that interchange could hardly be described as intimate or personal.

Interpersonal communication occurs when you interact with another person as a unique, authentic individual rather than as an object or an “It.” Buber calls this kind of relationship an “I–Thou” relationship. In this kind of relationship, there is true dialogue. An “I–Thou” relationship is not self-centered. The communicators have developed an attitude toward each other that is honest, open, spontaneous, nonjudgmental, and based on equality rather than superiority.10

We’re not suggesting that the goal of every communication transaction is to develop a personal, intimate dialogue. That would be unrealistic and inappropriate. It’s possible to go through an entire day communicating with others but not be involved in interpersonal communication. As we noted earlier, interpersonal communication is a distinctive form of communication because it focuses on the uniqueness of others; it does not occur just because two people are communicating.

Additionally, although interpersonal communication is more intimate and reveals more about the people involved than does impersonal communication, not all interpersonal communication involves sharing closely guarded personal information. As we discuss later in the book, there are degrees of intimacy when interacting with others.
Interpersonal Communication Involves Mutual Influence Between Individuals

Every interpersonal communication transaction influences us. Mutual influence means that all partners in the communication are affected by a transaction. Interpersonal communication may or may not involve words. The degree of mutual influence varies a great deal from transaction to transaction. You probably would not be affected a great deal by a brief smile that you received from a traveling companion on a bus, but you would be greatly affected by your lover telling you he or she was leaving you. Sometimes interpersonal communication changes our lives dramatically, sometimes in small ways. Long-lasting interpersonal relationships are sustained not by one person giving and another taking, but by a spirit of mutual equality. Both you and your partner listen and respond with respect for each other. There is no attempt to manipulate others.

Buber’s concept of an “I–Thou” relationship includes the quality of being fully “present” when communicating with another person. To be present is to give your full attention to the other person. The quality of interpersonal communication is enhanced when both you and your partner are simultaneously present and focused on each other.

Interpersonal Communication Helps Individuals Manage Their Relationships

Question: What is neither you nor I, but always you and I? Answer: a relationship. A relationship is a connection established when you communicate with another person. When two individuals are in a relationship, what one person says or does influences the other person. As in dancing, people in relationships are affected by the beat of the music (that is, the situation in which they are communicating), their ability to interpret the music and move accordingly (the personal skills they possess), and the moves and counter-moves of their partner.

You initiate and form relationships by communicating with others whom you find attractive in some way. You seek to increase your interactions with people with whom you wish to develop relationships, and you continually communicate interpersonally to maintain the relationship. You also use interpersonal communication to end or redefine relationships that you have decided are no longer viable or need to be changed. In summary, to relate to someone is to “dance” with them. We dance with them in a specific time and place, with certain perceptions and expectations. Over time, this dance becomes an ongoing interpersonal relationship.
In this book, we define interpersonal communication as a unique form of human communication. There are other forms of communication, as well. **Mass communication** occurs when someone communicates the same message to many people at once, but the creator of the message is usually not physically present, and listeners have virtually no opportunity to respond immediately to the speaker. Messages communicated via radio and TV are examples of mass communication. **Public communication** occurs when a speaker addresses an audience in person. **Small group communication** occurs when a group of from three to fifteen people meet to interact with a common purpose and mutually influence one another. The purpose of the gathering could be to solve a problem, make a decision, learn, or just have fun. While communicating with others in a small group, it is also possible to communicate with others interpersonally—to communicate to manage a relationship with one or more individuals in the group. Finally, **intrapersonal communication** is communication with yourself. Thinking is perhaps the best example of intrapersonal communication. In our discussion of self and communication in Chapter 2, we discuss the relationships between your thoughts and your interpersonal communication with others.

**Why Is Interpersonal Communication Important to Your Life?**

Why learn about interpersonal communication? Because it touches every aspect of our lives. It is not only pleasant or desirable to develop quality interpersonal relationships with others, it is vital for our well-being. We have a strong need to communicate interpersonally with others. Learning how to understand and improve interpersonal communication can improve relationships with family, loved ones, friends, and colleagues and can enhance the quality of physical and emotional health.

**Improved Relationships with Family**

Relating to family members can be a challenge. The divorce statistics in the United States document the difficulties that can occur when people live in relationships with others: About half of all marriages end in divorce. We don’t claim that you will avoid all family conflicts or that your family relationships will always be harmonious if you learn principles and skills of interpersonal communication. You can, however, develop more options for responding when family communication challenges come your way. You will be more likely to develop creative, constructive solutions to family conflict if you understand what’s happening and can promote true dialogue with your spouse, partner, parent, brother, or sister. Furthermore, family relationships play a major role in determining how you interact with others. Family communication author Virginia Satir calls family communication “the largest single factor determining the kinds of relationships [people make] with others.” Being able to have conversations with family members and loved ones is the fundamental way of establishing close, personal relationships with them.

**mass communication** Process that occurs when one person issues the same message to many people at once; the creator of the message is usually not physically present, and there is virtually no opportunity for listeners to respond immediately to the speaker.

**public communication** Process that occurs when a speaker addresses an audience in person.

**small group communication** Process that occurs when a group of from three to fifteen people meet to interact with a common purpose and mutually influence one another.

**intrapersonal communication** Communication with yourself; thinking.
Improved Relationships with Friends and Lovers

For unmarried people, developing friendships and falling in love are the top-rated sources of satisfaction and happiness in life. Conversely, losing a relationship is among life’s most stressful events. Most people between the ages of 19 and 24 report that they have had from five to six romantic relationships and have been “in love” once or twice. Studying interpersonal communication may not unravel all the mysteries of romantic love and friendship, but it can offer insight into behaviors.

Improved Relationships with Colleagues

In many ways, colleagues at work are like family members. Although you choose your friends and lovers, you don’t always have the same flexibility in choosing those with whom or for whom you work. Understanding how relationships develop on the job can help you avoid conflict and stress and increase your sense of satisfaction. In addition, your success or failure in a job often hinges on how well you get along with supervisors and peers.

Several surveys document the importance of quality interpersonal relationships in contributing to success at work. The abilities to listen to others, manage conflict, and develop quality interpersonal relationships with others are usually at the top of the list of the skills employers seek in today’s job applicants.

Improved Physical and Emotional Health

Research has shown that the lack or loss of a close relationship can lead to ill health and even death. Physicians have long observed that patients who are widowed or divorced experience more medical problems such as heart disease, cancer, pneumonia, and diabetes than do married people. Grief-stricken spouses are more likely than others to die prematurely, especially around the time of the departed spouse’s birthday or near their wedding anniversary. Being childless can also shorten one’s life. One study found that middle-aged, childless wives were almost two-and-one-half times more likely to die in a given year than those who had at least one child. Terminally ill patients with a limited number of friends or no social support die sooner than those with stronger ties. Without companions and close friends, opportunities for intimacy and stress-minimizing interpersonal communication are diminished. Although being involved in intimate interpersonal relationships can lead to conflict and feelings of anger and frustration, researchers suggest that when all is said and done, having close relationships with others is a major source of personal happiness. Studying how to enhance the quality of your communication with others can make life more enjoyable and enhance your overall well-being.

Interpersonal Communication Myths

Although we’ve made impressive claims about the importance of interpersonal communication in enhancing our relationships and health, you shouldn’t get the idea that interpersonal communication principles and skills are like a magic elixir that, when applied, will solve all relationship problems. That’s unrealistic. There are benefits to learning about interpersonal communication and applying your knowledge, but there is no technique or set of skills that will cure all relational problems. That’s a myth. As we embark on our study of interpersonal communication, it’s just as important to unlearn some commonly held misconceptions as it is to learn research conclusions and time-tested principles of interpersonal communication. Don’t believe the following myths about interpersonal communication.
More Words Will Make the Meaning Clearer

More is not necessarily better. Piling on more words when your interpersonal communication partner is already baffled by what you are talking about can make matters worse. There is a time to stop talking, take a calming breath, and just listen.

Meanings Are in Words

In and of itself, whether spoken or written, a word has no meaning. It’s just a sound, marks on paper, or images on a computer screen. Other people provide the meaning to “connect the dots” between the words you’ve spoken and the meaning you intend to create. (Of course, sometimes people connect the dots in ways you had not intended.) Words are simply symbols we use to communicate with others. Remember, meanings are in people, not in words.

Information Equals Communication

“How many times do I have to tell you not to surf the Internet while you’re on the job?” “Can’t you read? It’s in the syllabus.” “Are you deaf? I’ve already told you that I love you a hundred times!” Each of these exasperated communicators seems to believe that information is the same thing as communication. But information is not communication. Presenting information doesn’t make people “get” your meaning. Like the proverbial tree that falls silently in the forest because no one is there to hear it, a message is not necessarily communication just because you’ve expressed it.

Interpersonal Relationship Problems Are Always Communication Problems

“You don’t understand me!” shouts Paul to his exasperated partner, Pat. “We just can’t communicate anymore!” Paul seems to think that the problem he and Pat are having is a communication problem. But Paul and Pat may understand each other perfectly; they may simply disagree. Although it’s certainly true that conflict and discord in interpersonal relationships can occur because of misunderstandings, not all conflict and bumpy relationships stem from misunderstandings. People can be self-centered or grumpy, or they may just disagree. The problem in the relationship may not be communication, but a non–other-oriented, self-absorbed communicator.

Studying interpersonal communication is undoubtedly a way to enhance the quality of your relationships with others. But it’s not a magic cure-all for relationship woes. If you know unicorns don’t exist, then you don’t look for them. Knowing the myths of interpersonal communication can help you avoid unrealistic expectations about the virtues of mastering interpersonal communication principles and skills.
The Communication Process

Interpersonal communication involves more than simply transferring or exchanging messages; it is a complex process of creating meaning in the context of an interpersonal relationship. So that we can understand this process more fully, it is useful to see how perspectives on the human communication process have evolved over the past half century. We will begin with the simplest and oldest model of the human communication process and then discuss more contemporary models.

Human Communication as Action: Message Transfer

“Did you get my message?” This simple sentence summarizes the communication-as-action approach to human communication. Communication takes place when a message is sent and received. Period. It is a way of transferring meaning from sender to receiver.

Figure 1.1 shows a basic model that depicts communication as a linear input/output process. Today, although they view the process as more complicated, researchers still define most of the key components in this model in basically the same way.

Source. The source for communication is the originator of a thought or emotion, who expresses ideas and feelings as a code that can be understood by a receiver. Translating ideas, feelings, and thoughts into a code is called encoding. Vocalizing a word, gesturing, and establishing eye contact are signals that we use to encode our thoughts into a message that can be decoded by someone. Decoding, the opposite process of encoding, occurs when the words or unspoken signals are interpreted by the receiver.

Message. Messages are the written, spoken, and unspoken elements of communication to which people assign meaning. You can send a message intentionally (talking to a professor before class) or unintentionally (falling asleep during class); verbally (“Hi. How are you?”), nonverbally (a smile and a handshake), or in written form (this book).

Channel. A message is communicated from sender to receiver via some pathway called a channel. Channels correspond to your senses. When you call your mother on the telephone, the channel is an auditory one. When you talk with your mother face to

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### RECAP Interpersonal Communication Myths

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>Reality</th>
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**source** Originator of a thought or emotion, who puts it into a code that can be understood by a receiver.

**encode** To translate ideas, feelings, and thoughts into code.

**decode** To interpret ideas, feelings, and thoughts that have been translated into a code.

**message** Written, spoken, and unspoken elements of communication to which people assign meaning.

**channel** Pathway through which messages are sent.
face, the channels are many. You see her: the visual channel. You hear her: the auditory channel. You may smell her perfume: the olfactory channel. You may hug her: the tactile channel. And when you’re apart from your mom, tasting a warm, gooey cinnamon roll may trigger memories of her homemade treats.

**Receiver.** The **receiver** is the person who decodes and attempts to make sense of what the source encoded. Think of a radio station as a source broadcasting to a receiver that picks up the station’s signal. In human communication, however, there is something in between the source and the receiver: People filter messages through past experiences, attitudes, beliefs, values, prejudices, and biases.

**Noise.** **Noise** is anything that interferes with a message and keeps it from being understood and achieving its intended effect. Without noise, all messages would be communicated with sublime accuracy. But noise is always present. It can be literal (the obnoxious roar of a neighbor’s lawn mower), or it can be psychological (instead of concentrating on your teacher’s lecture, you may start thinking about the chores you need to finish before the end of the day). Whichever kind it is, noise gets in the way of the message and may even distort it. Communicating accurate messages involves minimizing both external and psychological noise.

The action approach is simple and straightforward, but it has a key flaw: Human communication rarely, if ever, is as simple and efficient as “what we put in is what we get out.” Others cannot automatically know what you mean just because you think you know what you mean. Although by the early 1940s, when the action approach was formulated, communication scholars had already begun identifying an array of key elements in the communication process, the action approach overlooked the complexity of those elements.
Human Communication as Interaction: Message Exchange

The communication-as-interaction perspective used the same elements as the action model but added two new ones: feedback and context.

**Feedback** is the response to the message. Think of a Ping-Pong game. Like a Ping-Pong ball, messages bounce back and forth. We talk; someone listens and responds; we listen and respond to this response. This perspective can be summarized using a physical principle: For every action, there is a reaction.

Without feedback, communication is rarely effective. When you order a black olive pizza and the server says in response, “That’s a black olive pizza, right?” he has provided feedback to ensure that he decoded the message correctly. Like other messages, feedback can be intentional (your mother gives you a hug when you announce your engagement) or unintentional (you yawn as you listen to your uncle tell his story about bears again), verbal (“That’s a black olive pizza, right?”) or nonverbal (blushing after being asked to dance).

**Context**, a second component recognized by the interaction perspective, is the physical and psychological environment for communication. All communication takes place in some context. As the cliche goes, “Everyone has to be somewhere.” A conversation on the beach with your good friend would likely differ from a conversation the two of you might have in a funeral home. Context encompasses not only the physical environment but also the number of people present and their relationships with the communicators, the communication goal, and the culture of which the communicators are a part.26

The communication-as-interaction perspective, as shown in Figure 1.2, is more realistic than the action perspective, but it still has limitations. Although it emphasizes feedback and context, it does not quite capture the complexity of interpersonal communication.
communication, which typically takes place simultaneously. The interaction model of communication still views communication as a linear, step-by-step process. But in interpersonal situations, both the source and the receiver send and receive messages at the same time.

**Human Communication as Transaction: Message Creation**

The communication-as-transaction perspective acknowledges that when you talk to another person face to face, you are constantly reacting to your partner’s responses. Most scholars today view the transaction perspective as the most realistic model for interpersonal communication. Like action and interaction, transaction uses various components to describe communication. However, in this model, all the components are simultaneous. As Figure 1.3 indicates, you send and receive messages concurrently. Even as you talk, you are also interpreting your partner’s nonverbal and verbal responses.

The transactional approach to communication is based on systems theory. A system is a set of interconnected elements in which a change in one element affects all of the other elements. Your body is an example of a system. Key aspects of any system include inputs (all of the variables that go in to the system), throughputs (which are all of the things that make communication a process), and outputs (what the system produces). Systems theory, from a communication perspective, helps us to understand the transactional nature of communication, in that a change in any aspect of the communication system (source, message, channel, receiver, context, feedback) has a potential influence on all of the other elements of the system. Viewing communication as action or interaction does not quite capture the complexity of the communication process as a systems or transactional process does. From a systems theory point of view, all of the elements of communication are connected to every other element of communication.

**FIGURE 1.3**

A Model for Communication as Mutual Transaction

The source and receiver of a message experience communication simultaneously.
A transactional approach to communication suggests that no single cause explains why you interpret messages the way you do. In fact, it is inappropriate to point to a single factor to explain how you are making sense of the messages of others; communication is messier than that. The meaning of messages in interpersonal relationships evolves from the past, is influenced by the present, and is affected by visions of the future.

One researcher says that interpersonal communication is "the coordinated management of meaning" through episodes, sequence of interactions between individuals, during which the message of one person influences the message of another. Technically, only the sender and receiver of those messages can determine where one episode ends and another begins.

These words from Ishmael Reed’s essay "The World Is Here" remind us that America is not a one-dimensional culture. You need not travel to far-off places to develop interpersonal relationships with people from other cultures, races, or ethnic backgrounds. America has long been known as a melting pot—a place where people from a variety of cultures and traditions have come together to seek their fortunes. Others think America is more like a tossed salad than a melting pot—in a salad, each ingredient retains its essential character rather than melting together to form a united whole. Focusing on communication and diversity means much more than focusing on cultural differences. Culture consists of the learned values, behaviors, and expectations shared by a group of people. It takes skill and sensitivity to develop quality interpersonal relationships with others whose religion, race, ethnicity, age, gender, or sexual orientation differs from your own. Throughout the text, we include boxes like this one to help you develop your sensitivity to important issues related to cultural diversity. As you embark on your study of interpersonal communication, consider these questions, either individually or with a group of your classmates:

1. What are the implications of this melting pot or tossed salad culture for your study of interpersonal communication?
2. Is there too much emphasis on being politically correct on college campuses today? Support your answer.
3. What specific interpersonal skills will help you communicate effectively with others from different cultural and ethnic traditions?

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Electronically Mediated Interpersonal Communication

Can you really communicate interpersonally with people on the Internet without meeting them face to face (FtF)? Yes, of course. You probably communicate this way every day, to both initiate and maintain relationships. When you use a medium such as a cell phone or the Internet to carry your message, you are using electronically mediated communication (EMC). When you go on Facebook or text friends and family members, you are using one of the most ubiquitous communication tools you have for maintaining relationships. And with social networking applications such as Twitter now available on cell phones, you have quite sophisticated EMC technology at your fingertips wherever you go. The title of a book by Naomi Baron summarizes the impact of EMC on our lives: Because of EMC we’re Always On. We use technology to make and keep friends, to self-disclose, to “listen” and respond to and confirm and support others, and to coordinate other interactions. There is evidence that some EMC relationships can be as satisfying as face-to-face relationships. That’s why throughout this book we’ll discuss research findings about EMC as well as face-to-face interpersonal communication. The new media have a major impact on your real-life relationships.

Comparing Electronically Mediated Communication with Face-to-Face Communication

Mediated communication is not new; people have been communicating without being face to face for centuries; sending letters and other written messages to others is an age-old human way of relating to others. And even before written communication was widespread, humans used smoke signals and drum beats to communicate via long distances. What’s new today is that there are so many different ways of immediately connecting with someone, such as using a cell phone, social networking applications (such as MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn), text messages, e-mail, instant messaging, video messages on YouTube, or a host of other Internet-based ways of developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Just a few years ago, e-mail was the hot new way of connecting; then there was instant messaging (IM). There is evidence that these two technologies are declining in use. As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, texting from phones or BlackBerrys, as well as connecting via Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace, are among the most popular EMC technologies.

We use EMC to share information that ranges from the dramatic to the routine. By mid-2007, over 70 percent of Americans actively used the Internet (compared to just under 40 percent of Europeans). And we’re taking our BlackBerrys and phones with us; more people in the United States have mobile phones than land line phones. We’ve also dramatically increased our use of text messages. Just a few years ago, in 2006, Americans sent 158 billion text messages, double the number sent in 2005. And the numbers continue to grow: As of 2009, 125 million people were on MySpace or Facebook, 18 million of whom were using these applications on their cell phones.

How is electronically mediated interpersonal communication different from live, face-to-face conversations? There are six key differences, which have to do with (1) time, (2) varying degrees of anonymity, (3) potential for deception, (4) nonverbal cues, (5) role of the written word, and (6) distance.

Time. When you interact with others using EMC, you can do so asynchronously. An asynchronous message is a message that is not read, heard, or seen at the same time it is sent; there is a time delay between when you send such a message and when someone
else receives it. A text message sent to a friend’s phone or to someone who is not monitoring Facebook or a voicemail message are examples of asynchronous messages.

**Synchronous messages** are those that are sent and received instantly and simultaneously. Face-to-face conversations are synchronous—there is no time delay between when you send a message and when the other person receives it. A video conference is another example of a synchronous message.

The more synchronous an interaction, the more similar it is to face-to-face interactions. The more a technology simulates a face-to-face conversation, the more social presence it creates. **Social presence** is the feeling we have when we act and think as if we’re involved in an unmediated, FtF conversation. Technically, there is always some delay in sending and receiving messages (even in FtF interactions, sound takes time to travel). The key distinction among different forms of EMC and the degree of social presence we experience is whether we feel we are in a synchronous interaction. When we send text messages back and forth, or instant-message, we create a shared sense of social or psychological co-presence with our partners. Receiving a Twitter message from a friend letting us know what he or she is doing at that moment gives us the feeling of being instantly connected to that person.

Another time difference between EMC and FtF messages is that it takes longer to tap out a typewritten message than to speak or to convey a nonverbal message. The amount of delay (which corresponds to silence in FtF interactions) can have an impact on the interpretation of a message’s meaning. When texting, participants may expect to see a response to their message very quickly. This is one reason text messages are often very short and concise. (Another reason is that it can be tricky to type on smaller keyboards with your thumbs—although some people are quite adept at using tiny keyboards.) A rapid succession of short messages fosters a sense of synchronicity and social presence.

Texting someone allows you time to compose your message and craft it more carefully than you might in an FtF interaction. As a sender of text messages, you have more control over what you say and the impression you create; as the receiver of Internet messages, you no doubt realize that the other person has had the chance to shape his or her message carefully for its greatest impact on you.

**Varying Degrees of Anonymity.** Maybe you’ve seen the cartoon of a mutt sitting at a computer and saying to his companion, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” The cartoon canine communicator has a point: You may not always know precisely with whom you are communicating when you receive an e-mail message or are “friended” or “poked” by someone you don’t know. When you are friend ing someone on Facebook, that person may not know precisely who you are. (One study found seventeen Karl Marxes, four Anne Boleyns, seven Kermit the Frogs, and three people named Socrates of Athens who had Facebook pages.)35 Because you can be anonymous and there is less chance that anyone will find out who you are, you may say things that are bolder, more honest, or even more outrageous than you would if your audience knew who you were. And being anonymous may also tempt you to say things that aren’t true. Yet many of the EMC messages you send and receive are from people you know. So there are varying degrees of anonymity, depending on the technology that you are using and how honest you and your communication partners are.

**Potential for Deception.** Because with many forms of EMC you can’t see or hear others, it’s easy to lie. Here’s evidence that people are deceptive when using EMC: A survey of 191 students at one college that found 40 percent had lied on the Internet: 15 percent about their age, 8 percent about their weight, 6 percent about appearance, 6 percent about marital status, and 3 percent about what sex they were.36
Online deception is almost as easy as typing. We say “almost,” because you can assess the content of a written message for clues to deceit. In a study by Katherine Cornetto, college student respondents reported the most common indicator of deception was someone’s implausible statement or bragging. As friendships develop over the Internet, to detect deception people come to depend on personal knowledge and impressions of their partners acquired over the course of their correspondence. Interestingly, Cornetto’s study also found that those who reported lying most were the people most likely to suspect other users of lying. The ease with which someone can create a false persona means that you need to be cautious in forming relationships with strangers over the Internet.

Nonverbal Cues. Words and graphics become more important in EMC than in FtF communication, because when communicating electronically you must rely solely on words to carry nonverbal messages. Of course, a YouTube video does include nonverbal messages, but even on YouTube some cues may be limited, such as the surrounding context and reactions from others.

There are some basic things text users do to add emotion to their messages, including CAPITALIZING THE MESSAGE (which is considered “yelling”), making letters bold, and inserting emoticons—a smiley face :-), a frowning face with glasses 8-(, and so on. In FtF communication, we laugh and smile in direct response to what we or others are saying. In the EMC context, we use emoticons to provide emotional punctuation in our written messages. There are predictable places where we place a smiley face or a frowning face to underscore something we’ve just written. The ability to tease or make sarcastic remarks is limited with EMC, because there is no tone of voice in the written message—so emoticons must provide information about the intended emotional tone of what is written. You can also write out an accompanying interpretation—for example, “Boy, am I insulted by that! (just kidding)” to compensate for the limited emotional cues.

There is also typically less emphasis on a person’s physical appearance online than in FtF situations, unless you’re using MySpace or Facebook. In those forums, not only does your appearance help determine how others react to you, but one study found that the physical attractiveness or unattractiveness of your “friends” rubs off on you. If you have friends who are perceived as attractive, you will be perceived as more popular and attractive.

Role of the Written Word. The reliance on the written word also affects EMC interactions. One online scholar suggests that a person’s typing ability and writing skills affect the quality of any relationship that is developed. Not everyone is able to encode thoughts quickly and accurately into written words. Not only do writing skills affect your ability to express yourself and manage relationships, they also affect how others perceive you. Your written messages provide insights to others about your personality, skills, sense of humor, and even your values. Consider the following two text messages and think about the impressions you form of the two authors.

Parr: “Hey, babe, whaddup? no what im thinking now we shuld do?”

Chuck: “Hello, Ashley. I have been thinking about some options for our evening’s entertainment.”

What’s your impression of the two texters? What affected your impression? The first example is filled with grammar and spelling shortcuts that might create a negative
impression because the author is not particularly skilled at writing—or you might have
a positive reaction because you think the author is cool and contemporary. The second
author uses correct grammar and spelling, which may produce a positive impression,
yet (because text messages are typically brief and casual) you may think author number
two is a nerd, or at least older and more traditional. You communicate a message about
the nature of a relationship based on the formality or informality of language used and
whether your style reflects what the receiver expects.

**Distance.** Although we certainly can and do send text messages to people who live
and work in the same building we’re in (or even the same room), there is typically
greater physical distance between people who are communicating using EMC. When
using the Internet or a cell phone, we can just as easily send a text or a video message
to someone on the other side of the globe as we can someone who is on the other side
of the room.

In addition to these six differences between EMC and FtF messages, there are
questions about who is more likely to use EMC messages. For example, researchers
have asked whether people who spend a lot of time online generally have more or less
personal contact with other people. A team of researchers led by Robert Kraut and
Sara Kiesler made headlines when they published the results of their study, which con-
cluded that the more people use the Internet, the less they will interact with others in
person. The researchers also found a correlation between people saying they were
lonely and using the Internet. But other research contradicts this finding: Two follow-
up studies found that people who use the Internet are more likely to have a greater
number of friends, are more involved with community activities, and overall have
greater levels of trust in other people. The most recent research seems to suggest that
for some people—those who are already prone to being shy or introverted—there
may be a link between Internet use and loneliness or feelings of social isolation. How-
ever, their isolation may not be because of their use of the Internet, but simply
because they are less likely to make contact with others. For those who are generally
outgoing and who like to interact with others, the Internet is just another tool to reach
out and make contact.

Increasingly people use EMC forums such as Facebook or MySpace not to sub-
stitute completely for FtF contact, but to enrich it. In fact, using EMC messages can
result in relationships becoming more intimate in less time than they would through
FtF interpersonal communication. Researchers have found that people develop
hyperpersonal relationships using EMC. **Hyperpersonal relationships** are relations-
ships formed primarily through EMC that become more personal than equivalent face-
to-face relationships, in part because of the absence of distracting external
cues (such as physical qualities), an overdependence on just a few tidbits of personal
information (which increases the importance of the information), and idealization of
the partner. Hyperpersonal relationships were first identified in a study in which
pairs of students who were initially strangers interacted for up to an hour in a simu-
lated instant-messaging situation, while another group of pairs met face to face for
up to 15 minutes. Those in EMC interactions skipped the typical superficial getting-
aquainted questions and used more direct questioning and disclosing with their
partners. Online pairs engaged in more intimate probes and responses and reached
a similar level of understanding and ability to predict their partners’ behaviors as
those in FtF interactions.

A comprehensive study that investigated whether instant messages and text mes-
ages are more like speech or writing concluded that instant messages contain ele-
ments of both, but nonetheless differ from speech in grammar, style, syntax, and other

**hyperpersonal relationship**

A relationship formed primarily through electronically mediated communication that becomes more
personal than an equivalent face-to-face relationship because of the absence of distracting external
cues, smaller amounts of personal information, and idealization of the communication partner.
language factors. Text messages are more like writing than like spoken messages. There are also gender differences: Women’s text and instant messages use more words, longer sentences, and more emoticons and discuss and include more social and relational information than men’s messages.47

**Understanding Electronically Mediated Communication**

We’ve noted that EMC messages have both similarities to and differences from FtF messages. What theories and models of electronically mediated messages help us understand how relationships are developed and make predictions about how we will use EMC messages?

The communication models that we’ve presented (communication as action, interaction, and transaction) on pages 8–12 are certainly applicable to EMC. There are times when EMC is like the action model of communication. You post a message on a message board, blog, or Facebook wall and you get no immediate response from others. The communication is asynchronous—there’s a time delay, so you’re not really sure you’ve communicated with anyone. During some e-mail or text-message exchanges, your communication is more like the communication-as-interaction model; you send a text message and you wait for the response. There’s a time delay, but sooner or later you get a response. And then there are instances when you can see and hear the other person simultaneously, such as in a live conversation with someone via a webcam—which is a synchronous interaction. In this instance the EMC resembles the transactional communication model, in that communicating this way is almost like being there in person because of the immediacy of the communication.

Three theories have been developed to further explain and predict how EMC works.

**Cues-Filtered-Out Theory.** One early theory of communication via the Internet was called cues-filtered-out theory. This theory suggested that emotional expression is severely restricted when we communicate using only text messages; nonverbal cues such as facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice are filtered out. The assumption was that text messages were best used for brief, task-oriented communication, such as sharing information or asking questions; text messages were assumed to be less effective in helping people establish meaningful relationships with one another.48 The cues-filtered-out-theory also suggests that because of the lack of nonverbal cues and other social information, we’ll be less likely to use EMC to manage relationships because of its limited ability to carry emotional and relational information. Although Facebook and MySpace present photos and ample personal information, communication through those forums is still not as rich as an FtF conversation.

**Media Richness Theory.** Another theory helps us make predictions about which form of media we will use to send certain kinds of messages. We use different types of media depending on the richness of a medium—whether it allows us to express emotions and relational messages as well as send information. Media richness theory suggests that the richness of a communication channel is based on four criteria: (1) the amount of feedback that the communicator can receive, (2) the number of cues that the channel can convey and that can be interpreted by a receiver, (3) the variety of language that a communicator uses, and (4) the potential for expressing emotions and feelings.49 Using these four criteria, researchers have developed a continuum of communication channels, from communication-rich to communication-lean. Figure 1.4 illustrates this continuum.

There is some evidence that those wishing to communicate a negative message, such as a message ending a relationship, may select a less rich communication medium—they may be more likely to send a letter or an e-mail rather than sharing the bad news face
Similarly, people usually want to share good news in person, when they can enjoy the positive reaction to the message. Both the cues-filtered-out theory and media richness theory suggest that the restriction of nonverbal cues, which provide information about the nature of the relationship between communicators, hampers the quality of relationships that can be established using EMC. But a newer perspective suggests that although EMC may communicate fewer relational cues, eventually we are able to discern relational information.

Social Information-Processing Theory. Social information-processing theory suggests that we can communicate relational and emotional messages via the Internet, although such messages take longer to express without nonverbal cues.
with facial expressions and tone of voice. A key difference between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication is the rate at which information reaches you. During an in-person conversation, you process a lot of information quickly; you process the words you hear as well as the many nonverbal cues you see (facial expression, gestures, and body posture) and hear (tone of voice and the use of pauses). During text-only interactions, there is less information to process (no audio cues or visual nonverbal cues), so it takes a bit longer for the relationship to develop—but it does develop as you learn more about your partner’s likes, dislikes, and feelings.
Social information-processing theory also suggests that if you expect to communicate with your electronic communication partner again, you will likely pay more attention to the relationship cues—expressions of emotions that are communicated directly (as when someone writes “I’m feeling bored today”) or indirectly (as when an e-mail recipient responds to your long chatty e-mail with only a sentence, which suggests he or she may not want to spend much time “talking” today).

In one study that supported social-information processing theory, communication researchers Joseph Walther and Judee Burgoon found that the kinds of relationships that developed between people who met face to face differed little from those between people who had computer-mediated interactions. The general stages and patterns of communication were evident in both face-to-face and e-mail relationships. But over time, the researchers found that the computer-mediated communication actually developed into more socially rich relationships than face-to-face communication did. This finding reinforces the hypothesis that relationship cues are present in computer-mediated communication. It also supports the notion that we develop hyperpersonal relationships via EMC. So even though it may take more time for relationships to develop online, they can indeed develop and can be just as satisfying as relationships nurtured through face-to-face conversation.

Research suggests that when using EMC, we ask questions and interact with others to enhance the quality of our relationship with them. A study by W. Scott Sanders found that people who communicated via Facebook enhanced the nature of the relationship and reduced their uncertainty about others by asking questions based on information that was already present on the other person’s Facebook page. Lisa Tidwell and Joseph Walther found that people in computer-mediated conversations asked more direct questions, which resulted in people’s revealing more information about themselves when online. The pattern of differences between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication is still being explored as computer-mediated communication becomes an even more significant part of contemporary life.

In summary, we believe that EMC makes it possible for people to develop interpersonal relationships with others, whether they are miles away or in the next room. Walther and Tidwell use the “information superhighway” metaphor to suggest that EMC is not just a road for moving data from one place to another, but a boulevard where people pass each other, occasionally meet, and decide to travel together. You can’t see very much of other drivers unless you do travel together for some time. There are highway bandits, to be sure, who are not what they appear to be—one must drive defensively—and there are conflicts and disagreements when traveling, just as there are in “off-road,” or face-to-face, interactions.

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**RECAP**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cues-Filtered-Out Theory</td>
<td>The communication of emotion and relationship cues is restricted in e-mail or text messages because nonverbal cues, such as facial expression and tone of voice, are filtered out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Richness Theory</td>
<td>The richness or amount of information a communication medium has is based on the amount of feedback it permits, the number of cues in the channel, the variety of language used, and the potential for expressing emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Information-Processing Theory</td>
<td>Emotional and relationship messages can be expressed via electronic means, although such messages take longer to be communicated without the immediacy of nonverbal cues.</td>
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Principles of Interpersonal Communication

As we introduce the study of interpersonal communication in this chapter, it is useful to present fundamental principles that help explain its nature. Underlying our current understanding of interpersonal communication are five principles: Interpersonal communication connects us to others, is irreversible, is complicated, is governed by rules, and involves both content and relationship dimensions.

Interpersonal Communication Connects Us to Others

Unless you are living in a cave or have become a cloistered monk, you interact with others every day. We agree with author H. D. Duncan, who said, “We do not relate and then talk, but relate in talk.” Fundamental to an understanding of interpersonal communication is the assumption that the quality of interpersonal relationships stems from the quality of communication with others. It’s been said—and we noted earlier—that people can’t not communicate. Because people often don’t intend to express ideas or feelings, this perspective is debated among communication scholars. However, there is no question that interpersonal communication is inescapable in the twenty-first century.

The ever-present nature of interpersonal communication doesn’t mean others will accurately decode your messages; it does mean that others draw inferences about you and your behavior—inferences that may be right or may be wrong. Even as you silently stand in a crowded elevator, your lack of eye contact with others communicates your unwillingness to interact with fellow passengers. Your unspoken messages, even when you are asleep, provide cues that others interpret. Remember: People judge you by your behavior, not your intent. Your interpersonal communication is how you develop connections to others. Even in well-established interpersonal relationships, you may be evoking an unintended response by your behavior.

Interpersonal Communication Is Irreversible

“Disregard that last statement made by the witness,” instructs the judge. Yet the clever lawyer knows that once her client has told the jury that her husband gave her a black eye during an argument, the client cannot really “take it back,” and the jury cannot really disregard it. This principle applies to all forms of communication. We may try to modify the meaning of a spoken message by saying something like “Oh, I really didn’t mean it.” But in most cases, the damage has been done. Once created, communication has the physical property of matter; it can’t be uncreated. As the helical model in Figure 1.5 suggests, once interpersonal communication begins, it never loops back on itself. Instead, it continues to be shaped by the events, experiences, and thoughts of the communication partners. A Russian proverb nicely summarizes the point: “Once a word goes out of your mouth, you can never swallow it again.”

Interpersonal Communication Is Complicated

No form of communication is simple. If any were, we would know how to reduce the number of misunderstandings and conflicts in our world. Because of the variables involved in interpersonal exchanges, even simple requests are extremely complex. Life holds much uncertainty; there
are many things we do not know. One of the purposes of communication, according to communication theorists, is to reduce our uncertainty. The process of sharing information and asking questions helps us reduce our uncertainty about what is happening at any given moment. Communication theorists have noted that whenever you communicate with another person, there are really at least six “people” involved: (1) who you think you are; (2) who you think the other person is; (3) who you think the other person thinks you are; (4) who the other person thinks he or she is; (5) who the other person thinks you are; and (6) who the other person thinks you think he or she is. Whew! And when you add more people to the interaction, it becomes even more involved.

Moreover, when humans communicate, they interpret information from others as symbols. A **symbol** is a word, sound, or visual image that represents something else, such as a thought, concept, or object; it can have various meanings and interpretations. Language is a system of symbols. In English, symbols do not resemble the objects they represent. The word (symbol) for *cow* does not look at all like a cow; someone, somewhere, decided that *cow* should mean a beast that chews its cud and gives milk. The reliance on symbols to communicate poses a communication challenge; you are often misinterpreted. Sometimes you don’t know the code. Only if you are up to date on contemporary slang will you know, for example, that “fo’ shizzle” means “certainly,” “wikidemia” is a term paper entirely researched on Wikipedia.org, and “brodown” is a boys’ night out.

Messages are not always interpreted as we intend them. Osmo Wiio, a Scandinavian communication scholar, points out the messiness of communicating with others when he suggests the following maxims:

- If communication can fail, it will.
- If a message can be understood in different ways, it will be understood in just that way which does the most harm.
- There is always somebody who knows better than you what you meant by your message.
- The more communication there is, the more difficult it is for communication to succeed.

Although we are not as pessimistic as Professor Wiio, we do suggest that the task of understanding each other is challenging.

**Interpersonal Communication Is Governed by Rules**

According to communication researcher Susan Shimanoff, a **rule** is a “followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts.” The rules that help define appropriate and inappropriate communication in any given situation may be explicit or implicit. For your interpersonal communication class, explicit rules are probably spelled out in your syllabus. But your instructor has other rules that are more implicit. They are not written or verbalized, because you learned them long ago: Only one person speaks at a time, you raise your hand to be called on, you do not send text messages during class.

Interpersonal communication rules are developed by the people involved in the interaction and by the culture in which the individuals are communicating. Many times, we learn communication rules from experience, by observing and interacting with others.
British researcher Michael Argyle and his colleagues asked people to identify general rules for relationship development and maintenance and then rate their importance. The study yielded the following most important rules:

- Respect each other’s privacy.
- Don’t reveal each other’s secrets.
- Look the other person in the eye during conversation.
- Don’t criticize the other person publicly.

Although we may modify rules to achieve the goals of our relationships, and although there may be cultural differences, these general rules remain fairly constant. The rules of interpersonal relationships are mutually defined and agreed on. Most of us don’t like to be told what to do or how to behave all the time. Expectations and rules are continually renegotiated as the relationship unfolds. Few of us learn relationship rules by copying them from a book. Most of us learn these rules from experience, through observing and interacting with family members and friends. Individuals who grow up in environments in which these rules are not observed may not know how to behave in close relationships.

Interpersonal Communication Involves Both Content and Relationship Dimensions

What you say (your words) and how you say it (your tone of voice, amount of eye contact, facial expression, and posture) can reveal much about the true meaning of your message. If one of your roommates loudly and abruptly bellows, “HEY, DORK! CLEAN THIS ROOM!” and another roommate uses the same verbal message but more gently and playfully says, “Hey, dork. Clean this room,” both are communicating a message aimed at achieving the same outcome. But the two messages have different relationship cues. The shouted message suggests that roommate number one may be frustrated that the room is still full of leftovers from last night’s pizza party, whereas roommate number two’s teasing request suggests he or she may be fondly amused by your untidiness. What you say and how you say it provide information not only about content but also about the relationship you have with the other person.

Content Message. The content of a communication message consists of the information, ideas, or suggested action that the speaker wishes to share. You may think that your messages to others are primarily about content, but that’s not the whole story. You also provide clues about your relationship with others.

Relationship Message. The relationship dimension of a communication message is usually more implied; it offers cues about the emotions, attitudes, and amount of power and control the speaker feels with regard to the other person. This distinction between the content of a message (what is said) and relationship cues (how the message is expressed) explains why reading a transcript of what someone said can seem to reveal quite a different meaning from actually hearing the person say the message.

Metacommunication Message. Because messages have both content and relationship dimensions, one dimension can modify or even contradict the other dimension.
Communication theorists have a word that describes how we can communicate about our communication: metacommunication. Stated in the simplest way, metacommunication is communication about communication, and it can be nonverbal or verbal. Accurately decoding unspoken or verbalized metamessages helps you understand what people really mean and can help you “listen between the lines” of what someone is expressing.

You can express an idea nonverbally (for example, by smiling to communicate that you are pleased), and you can also express your positive feeling verbally (for example, by saying, “I’m happy to be here”). But sometimes your nonverbal communication can contradict your verbal message. You can say “Oh, that’s just great” and use your voice to provide relational cues that express the opposite of what the verbal content of the message means. The sarcasm communicated by the tone of your voice (a relationship cue) modifies the meaning of your verbal message (the content of your message).

Emotions don’t literally come from our hearts, yet for thousands of years poets, authors, and songwriters in Western culture have identified the heart as a metaphor for the source of human emotions. (In some cultures, it’s the liver rather than the heart that serves as a metaphorical source of emotions. But to us Westerners, this just doesn’t sound right, does it?) Perhaps it’s because the human heart is vital for survival that it has become an important metaphor for our emotions: If it stops beating, we die. Similarly, without experiencing emotions, we are not truly alive. And our emotions are related to everything—from how fast our heart beats to the intensity of our blood pressure and our breathing. Throughout this book we highlight the importance of emotion in a feature called Communication and Emotion.

What is emotion? How do emotions work? Precisely what causes us to experience emotions? There are various theories, but scholars don’t agree on any one specific answer to each of these questions.

One researcher described an emotion as a biological, cognitive, behavioral, and subjective affective reaction to an event. A closer look at that definition suggests that an emotional reaction includes four things: biological or physiological reactions (heart rate increases, changes in breathing); cognitive responses (angry thoughts, happy thoughts); behavioral reactions to our thoughts and feelings (frowning, laughing); and subjective affective responses (either mild or strong experiences of joy, panic, anger, pleasure, and the like). In summary, emotions include four things: biological/physiological reactions, cognitive responses, behavioral reactions to our thoughts and feelings, and subjective affective responses. To experience emotion is to experience life.
In addition to nonverbal cues, which provide communication about communication, you can also use words to explicitly talk about your message. For example, you can ask, “Is what I’m saying bothering you?” Your question is seeking information about the communication. We use metacommunication to check on how our message is being understood or to make sure we understand what someone else is saying. When you say, “I’m not sure what you said is clear to me,” you are using a metamesage to help you better understand the communication; it’s a metamesage because you are talking about your talk. Here’s another example of verbal metacommunication: “I’d like to talk with you about the way we argue.” Again, you are using communication to talk about communication. Talking about the way you talk can help clarify misunderstandings. Being aware of the metamesage, in both its verbal and its nonverbal forms, can help improve the accuracy of your interpretations of the meaning of message content as well as enhance the quality of your relationships with others.

Improving Your Interpersonal Communication Competence

Now that we have previewed the study of interpersonal communication, you may be saying to yourself, “Well, that’s all well and good, but is it possible to improve my own interpersonal communication? Aren’t some people just born with better interpersonal skills than others?” Just as some people have more musical talent or greater skill at throwing a football, evidence does suggest that some people may have an inborn, biological talent for communicating with others.75

A growing body of research on what is called the communibiological approach to communication suggests that some people inherit certain traits or characteristics that affect the way they communicate with others. There may be a genetic basis for why people communicate as they do.76 For example, perhaps someone you know may be a born introvert, always shy, and thus have more stage fright or anxiety when communicating with others.77 And some people may not be as comfortable interacting in interpersonal situations as others are.

So what are the implications of the communibiological approach to communication? Does it mean you can’t improve your interpersonal communication? Absolutely not! Some researchers and teachers believe that the communibiological approach puts too much emphasis on biology and not enough on how we can learn to compensate for what nature did not give us.78 The underlying premise of our study of interpersonal communication is that you can learn ways to enhance your interpersonal communication competence.

Social learning theory suggests that we can learn how to adapt and adjust our behavior toward others; how we behave is not solely dependent on our genetic makeup. By observing and interacting with others (hence the term social learning), we discover that we can adapt and adjust our behavior.79 Although biology unquestionably plays a key role in how we behave, we can’t blame biology for all aspects of our behavior. We believe that people can learn how to enhance their communication competence.

To be a competent communicator is to communicate in ways that are perceived to be both effective and appropriate.80 You communicate effectively when your message is understood by others and achieves its intended effect. For example, if you want your roommate to stop using your hair dryer, and after you talk to your roommate, he stops using your hair dryer, your message has been effective.

Competent communication should also be appropriate. By appropriate, we mean that the communicator should consider the time, place, and overall context of the message and should be sensitive to the feelings and attitudes of the listener.

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**communibiological approach**
Theoretical perspective that suggests communication behavior can be predicted based on personal traits and characteristics that result from people’s genetic or biological background.

**social learning theory** Theory of human behavior that suggests we can learn how to adapt and adjust our behavior toward others; how we behave is not solely dependent on our genetic or biological makeup.
determines what is appropriate? Communication scholar Mary Jane Collier suggests that competence is a concept based on privilege; to label someone as competent means that another person has made a judgment as to what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior. Collier asks the following questions: “... competence and acceptance for whom? Who decides the criteria? Who doesn’t? Competent or acceptable on the basis of what social and historical context?” What Collier points out is that we have to be careful not to insist on one approach (our own approach) to interpersonal communication competence. There is no single best way to communicate with others. There are, however, avenues that can help you become both more effective and more appropriate when communicating with others. We suggest a two-part strategy for becoming a more competent communicator. First, competent communicators are knowledgeable, skilled, and motivated. Second, they draw on their knowledge, skill, and motivation to become other-oriented.

Become Knowledgeable, Skilled, and Motivated

Become Knowledgeable. By reading this chapter, you have already begun improving your interpersonal communication competence. Effective communicators are knowledgeable. They know how communication works. They understand the components, principles, and rules of the communication process. As you read further in this book, you will learn theories, principles, concepts, and rules that will help you explain and predict how humans communicate interpersonally.

Understanding these things is a necessary prerequisite for enhancing your interpersonal effectiveness, but this kind of knowledge alone does not make you an effective communicator. You would not let someone fix your car’s carburetor if he or she had only read a book. Knowledge must be coupled with skill. And we acquire skill through practice.

Become Skilled. Effective communicators know how to translate knowledge into action. You can memorize the characteristics of a good listener but still not listen well. To develop skill requires practice and helpful feedback from others who can confirm the appropriateness of your actions.

It has been suggested that learning a social skill is not much different from learning how to drive a car or operate a computer. To learn any skill, you must break it down into subskills that you can learn and practice. “Hear it, see it, do it, correct it” is the formula that seems to work best for learning any new behaviors. In this book, we examine the elements of complex skills (such as listening), offer activities that let you practice the skills, and provide opportunities for you to receive feedback and correct your application of the skills.

Become Motivated. Practicing skills requires work. You need to be motivated to use your knowledge and skill. You must want to improve, and you must have a genuine desire to connect with others if you wish to become a competent communicator. You may know people who understand how to drive a car and have the skill to drive, yet hesitate to get behind the wheel. Or maybe you know someone who took a course in public speaking but is reluctant to stand in front of a crowd. Similarly, someone may pass a test about interpersonal communication principles with flying colors, but unless that person is motivated to use those newfound skills, his or her interactions with others may not improve.

Become Other-Oriented

It’s not always about you. Lucy Van Pelt, in the Peanuts cartoon on page 27, seems startled to learn that the world does not revolve around her. Perhaps you know some-
one like Lucy. Sometimes we may need someone like Linus to remind us that we’re not the center of the universe. The signature concept for our study of interpersonal communication is the goal of becoming other-oriented in relationships. To be an other-oriented communicator is to consider the thoughts, needs, experiences, personality, emotions, motives, desires, culture, and goals of your communication partners, while still maintaining your own integrity. The choices we make in forming our messages, in deciding how best to express those messages, and in deciding when and where to deliver those messages will be made more effectively when we consider the other person’s thoughts and feelings. To emphasize the importance of being an other-oriented communicator, throughout this book we will offer sidebar comments and questions to help you apply the concept of being other-oriented to your own interpersonal relationships.

Being other-oriented involves a conscious effort to consider the world from the point of view of those with whom you interact. This effort occurs almost automatically when you are communicating with those you like or who are similar to you. Thinking about the thoughts and feelings of those you dislike or who are different from you is more difficult and requires more effort and commitment.

Sometimes, we are egocentric communicators; we create messages without giving much thought to the person who is listening. To be egocentric is to be self-focused and self-absorbed. Scholars of evolution might argue that our tendency to look out for Number One ensures the continuation of the human species and is therefore a good thing. Yet, it is difficult to communicate effectively when we focus exclusively on ourselves. Research suggests that being egocentric is detrimental to developing healthy relationships with others. If we fail to adapt our message to our listener, we may not be successful in achieving our intended communication goal. Other people can often perceive whether we’re self-focused or other-oriented (especially if the person we’re talking with is a sensitive, other-oriented communicator).

Are people more self-focused today than in the past? Sociologist Jean Twenge suggests that people today are increasingly more narcissistic (self-focused) than they have been in previous generations—she dubs today’s narcissistic generation the “me generation.” Her research found that “in the early 1950s, only 12 percent of teens aged 14 to 16 agreed with the statement ‘I am an important person.’ By the late 1980s, an incredible 80 percent—almost seven times as many—claimed they were important.”

Using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, an instrument designed to assess egocentrism and self-focus, Twenge and two of her colleagues found corroborating evidence for an increased self-focus among contemporary students.

We may find ourselves speaking without considering the thoughts and feelings of our listener when we have a need to purge ourselves emotionally or to confirm our sense of self-importance, but doing so usually undermines our relationships with others. A self-focused communicator often alienates others. Research suggests
That fortunately, almost by necessity, we adapt to our partner in order to carry on a conversation.92

How do you become other-oriented? Being other-oriented is really a collection of skills rather than a single skill. We devote considerable discussion throughout the book to developing this collection of essential communication skills, including being self-aware, being aware of others, using and interpreting verbal messages, using and interpreting nonverbal messages, and listening and responding to others.93 Being empathic—able to experience the feelings and emotions of others—is especially important in becoming other-oriented. After listening to and empathizing with others, someone who is other-oriented is able to appropriately adapt messages to them.

To appropriately adapt messages to others is to be flexible. In this book, we do not identify tidy lists of sure-fire strategies that you can always use to win friends and influence people. The same set of skills is not effective in every situation, so other-oriented communicators do not assume that “one size fits all.” Rather, they assess each unique situation and adapt their behavior to achieve the desired outcome. Adaptation includes such things as simply asking questions in response to a communication partner’s disclosures, finding topics of mutual interest to discuss, selecting words and examples that are meaningful to our partner, and avoiding topics that we don’t feel comfortable discussing with another person. Adapting messages to others does not mean that we tell them only what they want to hear; that would be unethical.

Other-oriented communicators are ethical. Ethics are the beliefs, values, and moral principles by which we determine what is right or wrong. To be an ethical communicator means to be sensitive to the needs of others, to give people choices rather than forcing them to act a certain way. Unethical communicators believe that they know what other people need, even without asking them for their preferences. As we
discuss in Chapter 6, being manipulative and forcing opinions on others usually results in a climate of defensiveness. Effective communicators seek to establish trust and reduce interpersonal barriers, rather than erect them. Ethical communicators keep confidences; they keep private information that others wish to be kept private. They also do not intentionally decrease others’ feelings of self-worth. Another key element in being an ethical communicator is honesty. If you intentionally lie or distort the truth, then you are not communicating ethically or effectively. Ethical communicators also don’t tell people only what they want to hear. At the end of each chapter, in our Study Guide section, we pose ethical questions to help you explore the ethics of interpersonal relationships.

In addition to appropriately and ethically adapting to others, being other-oriented includes developing positive, healthy attitudes about yourself and others. In 1951, Carl Rogers wrote a pioneering book called *Client-Centered Therapy*, which transformed the field of psychotherapy. In it, Rogers explains how genuine positive regard for another person and an open supportive communication climate lay the foundation for trusting relationships. But Rogers did not invent the concept of developing a positive, healthy regard for others. The core principles of every religion and faith movement in the last 5000 years include a focus on the needs of others. Our purpose is certainly not to promote a specific religion or set of spiritual beliefs. What we suggest is that becoming other-oriented, as evidenced through knowledge, skill, and motivation, can enhance your interpersonal communication competence and the quality of your life.

**APPLYING AN OTHER-ORIENTATION to Being a Competent Interpersonal Communicator**

To be a competent interpersonal communicator is to be an other-oriented communicator—to focus on the needs, interests, values, and behaviors of others while being true to your own principles and ethical credo. In this chapter we’ve previewed some of the knowledge, provided a rationale for being motivated to master interpersonal competencies, and offered a glimpse of the skills that enhance an other-orientation.

**Knowledge.** When you view communication as a transactive process rather than as a simplistic action or even an interactive process, you gain realistic insight into the challenge of communicating with others and the potential for misunderstandings. Knowing the messiness and dynamic nature of communication, as well as the various components of the process (source, message, channel, receiver, context, and feedback) can help you better diagnose communication issues in your own relationships and improve your ability to accurately decode the messages of others.

**Motivation.** Why learn how to be other-oriented? As we’ve noted, learning about interpersonal communication has the potential to enhance both the quality of your relationships with others and your health. Developing your skill and knowledge of interpersonal communication can enhance your confidence to improve your relationships with family members, friends, lovers, and colleagues.

**Skill.** To be competently other-oriented takes more than knowledge of the elements and nature of communication (although that’s a good start), and more than a strong motivation to enhance your abilities. It takes skill. As you begin your study of interpersonal communication, you can be confident that in the chapters ahead you will learn how to listen, respond, use, and interpret verbal messages, express and interpret emotional meanings of messages, more accurately use and interpret nonverbal messages, manage conflict, and adapt to human differences. To be other-oriented is to have the knowledge, nurture the motivation, and develop the skill to relate to others in effective and ethical ways.

It is impossible not to communicate with others. In fact, human communication is at the core of our existence, in our daily interactions and the relationships we develop. Human communication can be seen as a continuum, with impersonal communication on one end, which treats people as objects, and interpersonal communication on the other, through which you interact with others as unique individuals. Interpersonal communication touches every aspect of our lives and is vital in developing and improving relationships with family, loved ones, friends, and colleagues, as well as contributing to our physical and emotional well-being.

Key Terms

Communication 2
Human communication 2
Interpersonal communication 3
Impersonal communication 3
Relationship 4

Mass communication 5
Public communication 5
Small group communication 5
Intrapersonal communication 6

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Draw a relationship scale on a piece of paper, and label it “impersonal” at one end and “intimate” at the other. Place your family members, friends, and work colleagues on the scale. Why do some fall toward the “impersonal” end? What makes those relationships less personal than others? Discuss and compare your entries with those of classmates.

2. Ethics: Think about your primary goal for this course. Is it to develop communication strategies to help you achieve personal goals? Is it to develop sensitivity to the needs of others? What is behind your goal? Is your purpose ethical?

3. Do you know someone who seems to subscribe to one or more of the myths on pages 6–7? How does that tendency affect his or her communication?

Activities

Briefly describe a recent interpersonal communication exchange that was not effective. Analyze the exchange. Write down some of the dialogue if you remember it. Did the other person understand you? Did your communication have the intended effect? Was your message ethical?

Web Resources

www.natcom.org/nca/ This is the home page of the National Communication Association, the largest professional association in the world. The site offers information, references, and resources about human communication.

The Communication Process (pages 8–12)

Interpersonal communication is a complex process of creating meaning in messages in the context of an interpersonal relationship. In order to understand this process, various perspectives and models have been developed over the years. Human communication as action is the oldest and most basic model, describing communication as a linear input/output process of transferring meaning from sender to receiver. Newer communication models include communication as interaction, which includes feedback as a crucial element in the communication process, and human communication as transaction, based on systems theory, which views source and receiver as experiencing the communication simultaneously.

Key Terms

Source 8
Encode 8
Decode 8
Message 8
Channel 8
Receiver 9

Noise 9
Feedback 10
Context 10
Systems theory 11
Episode 12

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What makes interpersonal communication a complex process? Explain, drawing on some of your own everyday communication exchanges.

2. Think of some recent interpersonal communication exchanges you’ve had. Which communication model best captures the nature of each exchange? Analyze each exchange, identifying the components of communication discussed in this section of the chapter. Was feedback an important component? Were you and your partner experiencing the communication simultaneously? What was the context? What were sources of internal and external noise? Did you or your partner have problems encoding or decoding each other’s messages?

Activities

Working with a group of your classmates or individually, develop your own model of interpersonal communication. Include all of the components that are necessary to describe how communication between people works. Your model could be a drawing or an object that symbolizes the communication process. Share your model with the class, describing the decisions you made in developing it. Illustrate your model with a conversation between two people, pointing out how elements of the conversation relate to the model.

Web Resources

www.wcaweb.org The home page of the World Communication Association includes a wealth of information, references, and resources about human communication.
Principles of Interpersonal Communication and Improving Your Communication Competence
(pages 21–29)

Five fundamental principles help explain interpersonal communication and enhance our understanding of how it works:

- Interpersonal communication connects us to others.
- Interpersonal communication is irreversible.
- Interpersonal communication is complicated.
- Interpersonal communication is governed by rules.
- Interpersonal communication involves both content and relational dimensions.

Although recent research suggests that some people may, in fact, be born with better interpersonal skills than others, you can learn ways to enhance your communication competence. Competent communicators are knowledgeable, skilled, and motivated, and they draw on their knowledge, skill, and motivation to become other-oriented. Other-oriented communicators are also ethical: honest, trustworthy, and sensitive to the needs of others.

Critical Thinking Questions


2. Ethics: Your parents want you to visit them for the holidays. You would rather spend the time with a friend. You don’t want to hurt your parents’ feelings, so you tell them that you are working on an important project and you won’t be able to come home for the holidays. Your message is understood. It achieves the intended effect: Your parents don’t seem to have hurt feelings, and you don’t go home. Explain whether your message is ethical or unethical.

Activities

Review the discussion of principles of interpersonal communication that begins on page 21. Give an example from your own relationships that illustrates each principle.

Web Resources

www.khake.com/page66.html This web site offers a host of resources and links to other sites that provide information about human communication.