KEYS TO COMMUNICATION

An Essential Guide to Communication in the Real World

EDITED & ADAPTED BY
JEFFERSON WALKER

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Jefferson Walker and [Author removed at request of original publisher]

UNIVERSITY OF MONTEVALLO DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION
MONTEVALLO, AL

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For questions about this textbook, please contact jwalker6@montevallo.edu.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Define communication.
2. Identify and define elements of the communication process.
3. Compare and contrast the three models of communication.
4. List the four forms of communication.
5. Explain connections between communication concepts and practice.
6. Discuss ways to be a more competent communicator.
7. Articulate ethical communication principles.

What comes to mind when you think of communication? The ways we verbally communicate in conversations and presentations? How about the ways we communicate through text, photographs, and videos on social media? Or maybe you think about how your attire and posture communicate something about who you are. These are just a few examples of how communication is all-encompassing and almost inescapable.

This book views communication as crucial and advocates for developing a knowledge base and skillset that will help you become more competent communicators in your personal, professional, and civic lives. As you read through this introductory chapter, you are encouraged to take note of aspects of communication that you haven't thought about before and begin to apply the principles of communication to various parts of your life.

1.1 Defining Communication

How would you define communication? What elements does your definition include? How would you visually illustrate your concept of communication? Throughout the years, there have been a wide variety of definitions and models of communication—some simple and some complex. This book defines **communication** as the process of generating shared meaning through the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages. In the following section, we discuss some of the essential elements that make up communication, introduce three models of the communication process, and discuss the four primary forms of communication.

Elements of Communication

Although individual definitions of communication vary, those definitions often include some of the same essential

elements. Seven important components of the communication process include participants, symbols, encoding, decoding, channels, feedback, and noise.

What communication elements can you identify in this picture? Photo by fauxels from Pexels.

What are some elements of the communication process that your definition includes? Unless you're thinking of intrapersonal communication (the act of talking to yourself), your definition probably includes two or more **participants**, the senders and/or receivers of messages. The messages those participants send and receive are made up of **symbols**, verbal or non-verbal signifiers that represent ideas and serve as the building blocks of communication. For example, when you say "Hello!" to your friend as a greeting, you are using a verbal symbol (a word) to convey your meaning. Alternatively, non-verbal symbols to greet someone could include a wave or a handshake.

The internal cognitive process that allows participants to send, receive, and understand messages is the encoding and decoding process. **Encoding** is the sender's process of turning thoughts into messages. **Decoding** is the receiver's process of taking and interpreting a message. Although these definitions make them sound like intentional, well-thought-out processes, the level of conscious thought that goes into encoding and decoding messages varies. In everyday conversation, encoding and decoding sometimes seem instantaneous. At other times, participants carefully choose every word they use in the encoding process.

An encoded message is sent through a **channel**, a medium through which communication occurs. Think of the various channels that you use daily. You speak to your professors face-to-face, you chat with friends through Snapchat, you talk to a family member on FaceTime, you watch an influencer's videos on TikTok, or you scroll through posts on Reddit. Many of these channels allow for immediate **feedback**, any response from the receiver to the sender of a message. You might leave a comment on a YouTube video or ask a follow-up question to a teacher. Face-to-face communication is often considered the richest channel of communication, in part because of its allowance for immediate verbal and non-verbal feedback. Yet, all channels have their own strengths and limitations. For example, you can reach a large audience quickly on Twitter, but not all messages can be effectively conveyed in a text-based and character-limited Tweet.

As we know, there are often barriers to effective communication. **Noise** is anything that interferes with a message being sent between participants in a communication encounter. Even if a speaker encodes a clear message, noise may interfere with a message being accurately received and decoded. **External noise** includes any physical or audible noise present in a communication encounter. Other people talking in a crowded diner could interfere with your ability to transmit a message and have it successfully decoded. **Internal noise** includes stimuli in our minds or bodies that could detract from our ability to listen to and decode a message. If you were stressed about an exam or tired from a lack of sleep, you might not be able to effectively listen to a professor's lecture.

Models of Communication

To better understand communication, it may be helpful to visualize what communication looks like. After all, communication is a complex process. It can be difficult to determine where or with whom a communication encounter starts and ends. Models of communication simplify the process by providing a visual representation of the various aspects of a communication encounter. We will discuss three models of communication: the linear model, the interaction model, and the transactional model.

The Linear Model of Communication

The **linear model of communication** describes communication as a one-way process in which a sender intentionally transmits a message to a receiver (Ellis & McClintock, 1990). This model focuses on the sender and message within a communication encounter. Although the receiver is included in the model, this role is viewed as more of a target or end point rather than part of an ongoing process. As this model does not account for feedback, we are left to presume that the receiver either successfully receives and understands the message or does not.

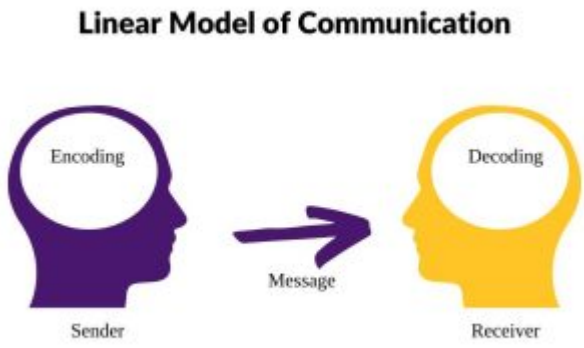

Figure 1.1 *The Linear Model of Communication*

Today, many view the linear model of communication as oversimplified or underdeveloped. But consider how the scholars who designed this model were influenced by the prevalent technologies of their time, such as telegraphy and radio (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Think of how a radio message is sent from a person in the radio studio to you listening in your car. The radio announcer (the sender) transmits a message by a radio tower through electromagnetic waves (the channel) and eventually reaches your (the receiver's) ears via an antenna and speakers. The radio announcer doesn't really know if you received their message or not, but if the equipment is working and the channel is free of static (external noise), then there is a good chance that the message was successfully received. Since this model is sender and message focused, responsibility is put on the sender to ensure the message is successfully conveyed.

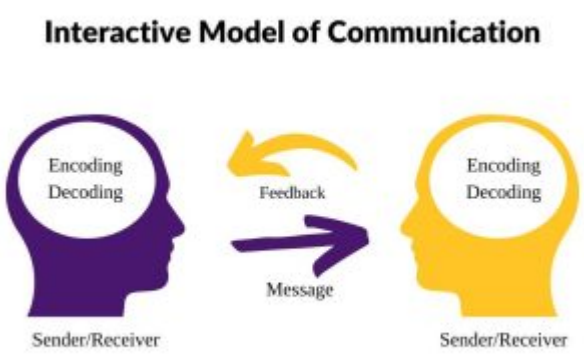

Figure 1.2 *The Interactive Model of Communication*

The Interactive Model of Communication

The **interactive model of communication** describes communication as a process in which participants alternate positions as sender and receiver and generate meaning by sending messages and receiving feedback (Schramm, 1997). Rather than illustrating communication as a linear, one-way process, the interactive model incorporates feedback, which makes communication a more interactive, two-way process. In the interactive model, each participant alternates roles as sender and receiver in order to keep a communication encounter going. Although this seems like a

perceptible and deliberate process, we alternate between the roles of sender and receiver very quickly and often without conscious thought.

The interactive model is also less message focused and more interaction focused. While the linear model focused on how a message was transmitted and whether or not it was received, the interactive model acknowledges that there are so many messages being sent at one time that many of them may not even be received. Some messages are also unintentionally sent. Therefore, communication isn't judged effective or ineffective in this model based on whether or not a single message was successfully transmitted and received.

The Transactional Model of Communication

As the study of communication progressed, models expanded to account for more of the communication process. Many scholars view communication as more than a process that is used to carry on conversations and convey meaning. We don't send messages like computers, and we don't always neatly alternate between the roles of sender and receiver as an interaction unfolds. We can't consciously decide to stop communicating, because communication is more than sending and receiving messages (Barnlund, 1970).

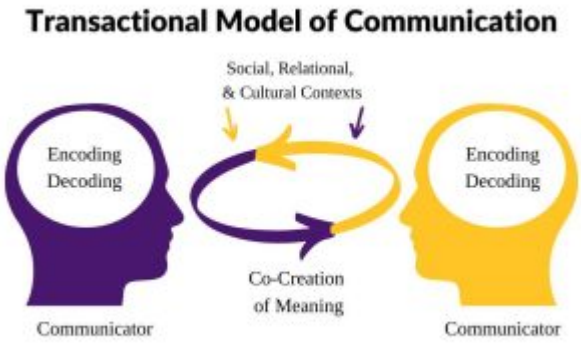

Figure 1.3 *The Transactional Model of Communication*

The **transactional model of communication** describes communication as a process in which communicators generate social realities within social, relational, and cultural contexts. In this model, we don't just communicate to exchange messages; we communicate to create relationships, form intercultural alliances, shape our self-concepts, and engage with others in dialogue to create communities. In short, we don't communicate about our realities; communication helps to construct our realities.

The roles of sender and receiver in the transactional model of communication differ significantly from the other models. Instead of labeling participants as senders and receivers, the people in a communication encounter are referred to as *communicators* that simultaneously send and receive messages. For example, on a first date, as you send verbal messages about your interests and background, your date reacts nonverbally. You don't wait until you are done sending your verbal message to start receiving and decoding the nonverbal messages of your date. Instead, you are simultaneously sending your verbal message and receiving your date's nonverbal messages. This is an important addition to the model because it allows us to understand how we are able to adapt our communication—for example, a verbal message—in the middle of sending it based on the communication we are simultaneously receiving from our communication partner.

The transactional model of communication also includes a more complex understanding of context. Since the transactional model views communication as a force that shapes our realities before and after specific interactions occur, it accounts for contextual influences outside of a single interaction. To do this, the transactional model considers how social, relational, and cultural contexts frame and influence our communication encounters.

Social context refers to the stated rules or unstated norms that guide communication. As we are socialized into our various communities, we learn rules and implicitly pick up on norms for communicating. Some common rules that influence social contexts include don't lie to people, don't interrupt people, don't pass people in line, greet

people when they greet you, thank people when they pay you a compliment, and so on. Parents and teachers often explicitly convey these rules to their children or students. Rules may be explicitly stated over and over again.

Conversely, norms are social conventions that we pick up on through observation, practice, and trial and error. We may not even know we are breaking a social norm until we notice people looking at us strangely or someone corrects or teases us. For example, as a new employee you may over- or underdress for the company's holiday party because you don't know the norm for formality. Although there probably isn't a stated rule about how to dress at the holiday party, you will notice your error without someone having to point it out, and you will likely not deviate from the norm again in order to save yourself any potential embarrassment.

Relational context includes the previous interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). We communicate differently with someone we just met versus someone we've known for a long time. Initial interactions with people tend to be more highly scripted and governed by established norms and rules, but when we have an established relational context, we may be able to bend or break social norms and rules more easily. For example, you would likely follow social norms of politeness and attentiveness and might spend the whole day cleaning the house for the first time you invite your new neighbors to visit. Once the neighbors are in your house, you may also make them the center of your attention during their visit. If you end up becoming friends with your neighbors and establishing a relational context, you might not think as much about having everything cleaned and prepared or even giving them your whole attention during later visits.

Cultural context includes various aspects of identities such as race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and ability. Whether we are aware of it or not, we all have multiple cultural identities that influence our communication. Some people, especially those with identities that have been historically marginalized, are regularly aware of how their cultural identities influence their communication and influence how others communicate with them. Conversely, people with identities that are dominant or in the majority may rarely, if ever, think about the role their cultural identities play in their communication.

Forms of Communication

Forms of communication vary in terms of participants, channels used, and contexts. The main forms of communication, all of which will be explored in much more detail in this course, are interpersonal, group, public, and mass communication. If you find one of these forms particularly interesting, you may be able to take additional courses that focus specifically on it. The following discussion provides a brief summary of each form of communication.

Interpersonal communication is communication between people whose lives mutually influence one another. Interpersonal communication builds, maintains, and ends our relationships, and we spend more time engaged in interpersonal communication than the other forms of communication. Interpersonal communication occurs in various contexts and is addressed in subfields of study within communication studies such as intercultural communication, organizational communication, health communication, and mediated communication.

Group communication is communication among three or more people interacting to achieve a shared goal (Powell, 1996). You have likely worked in groups in high school and college, and if you're like most students, you didn't enjoy it. Even though it can be frustrating, group work in an academic setting provides useful experience and preparation for group work in professional settings. Organizations have been moving toward more team-based work models, and whether we like it or not, groups are an integral part of people's lives. Therefore, the study of group communication is valuable in many contexts.

How do the four different forms of communication overlap? Photo by fauxels from Pexels.

Public communication is communication from one person to a large audience. Public speaking is something that many people fear, or at least don't enjoy. Later in the chapter, we'll learn some strategies for managing speaking anxiety. Compared to interpersonal and group communication, public communication is the most consistently intentional, formal, and goal-oriented form of communication we have discussed so far.

Mass communication is communication that is transmitted to many people through traditional and interactive media. Traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television continue to be important channels for mass communication, although they have suffered much in recent years due to evolving technology and trends. Social media, streaming platforms, podcasts, and blogs are mass communication channels that you probably engage with regularly. The technology required to send mass communication messages distinguishes it from the other forms of communication.

1.2 Studying and Improving Communication

Taking this course will change how you view communication. Most people admit that communication is important, but it is often in the back of our minds or viewed as something that "just happens." Putting communication at the front of your mind and becoming more aware of how you communicate can be informative and have many positive effects. The following section discusses *why* and *how* we study communication. First, we provide a brief overview of the field of communication studies. Second, we describe the importance of communication competence.

As we learn more about the study of communication, you are encouraged to take note of aspects of communication that you haven't thought about before and begin to apply the principles of communication to various parts of your life.

Communication Studies

Communication studies is a diverse and vibrant field of study. Within a single communication program, you might

find students and faculty who study communication in contexts as far-ranging as relationships, politics, science, sports, social movements, healthcare, and businesses. It's likely that no matter what your specific interests are, you can find ways to explore them through communication theories and perspectives.

"Aristotle" by Nick in exsilio is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

How did communication studies grow into such a rich and varied field? To begin answering this question, we can trace the study of communication to different ancient civilizations around the world. For example, in Africa, ancient communities conceptualized **nommo**, or the creative power of the spoken word (Asante, 1998). In China, Confucian philosophers were concerned about the ethical consequences of public speaking (Lu, 1998). In Greece, philosophers like Aristotle studied **rhetoric**, or the art of persuasive speaking. Today, the field of communication studies is enriched by these historical perspectives and elements of communication, along with many newer concepts, theories, and ideas.

As a discipline, communication studies stands out because of its practicality and ability to be integrated into our professional, personal, and civic lives.

Professional

Communication skills are consistently ranked from year-to-year as one of the top traits employers look for in the college graduates they hire (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2022). Desired communication skills vary from career to career, but this textbook provides a foundation onto which you can build communication skills specific to your major or field of study. Research has shown that introductory communication courses provide important skills necessary for functioning in entry-level jobs, including listening, writing, persuading, communicating interpersonally, informational interviewing, and small-group problem solving (DiSalvo, 1980).

While communication studies courses can help students develop communication skills that will benefit them in any career, a major or minor in communication studies also prepares students for specific career opportunities, such as:

- **Business.** Sales, customer service, management, real estate, human resources, training and development.
- **Public relations/advertising.** Public relations, advertising/marketing, public opinion research, development, event coordination.
- **Media.** Social media administration, editing, copywriting, publishing, producing, directing, media sales, broadcasting.
- **Nonprofit.** Administration, grant writing, fundraising, volunteer coordination.
- **Government, law, and politics.** City management, community affairs, lobbying, conflict negotiation/mediation, campaign management, speech writing.
- **Education.** University admissions, student support services, administration, high school speech teacher, forensics/debate coach, graduate school to further communication study.

Personal

Many students know from personal experience and from the prevalence of communication counseling on television talk shows and in self-help books that communication forms, maintains, and ends our interpersonal relationships. While we do learn from experience, until we learn specific vocabulary and develop foundational knowledge of communication concepts and theories, we do not have the tools needed to make sense of these experiences. The field of communication studies gives us a vocabulary to name the communication phenomena in our lives, thereby increasing our ability to consciously alter our communication to achieve our goals, avoid miscommunication, and analyze and learn from our inevitable mistakes.

Civic

Civic engagement refers to working to make a difference in our communities by improving the quality of life of community members; raising awareness about social, cultural, or political issues; or participating in a wide variety of political and nonpolitical processes (Ehrlich, 2000). The civic part of our lives is developed through engagement with the decision making that goes on in our society at the small-group, local, state, regional, national, or international level. Such involvement ranges from serving on a neighborhood advisory board to sending an e-mail to a US senator. The field of communication studies is rife with concepts in persuasion, deliberation, media literacy, and conflict management that are critical to effective civic engagement.

Communication Competence

Communication competence refers to the knowledge of appropriate, ethical, and effective communication patterns and the ability to use and adapt that knowledge in various contexts (Cooley & Roach, 1984). To better understand this definition, let's break apart its three key components: appropriateness, ethics, and effectiveness.

Appropriateness

A competent communicator understands that they must adapt the way they communicate to make it appropriate for different situations. For example, someone texting a friend might use emojis and informal language without paying much attention to spelling or grammar. However, when sending an email to a professor, that same person will likely use a formal greeting, write in complete sentences, and double check their email for errors. While there may not be formal rules for how we should send texts vs. emails or how we should communicate with friends vs. professors, a competent communicator adapts their message based on the unwritten norms and expectations.

Competent communicators strive towards appropriate, ethical, and effective communication. Photo by Dani Hart from Pexels.

Ethics

Communication ethics deals with the process of negotiating and reflecting on our actions and communication

regarding what we believe to be right and wrong. The emphasis in the study of communication ethics is on practices and actions, rather than thoughts and philosophies. Many people claim high ethical standards but do not live up to them in practice. A competent communicator prioritizes ethical communication practices such as truthfulness, fairness, integrity, and respect for self and others.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness refers to an individual's ability to achieve their goals through communication. Knowledge, skills, and motivation are important factors in an individual's ability to be an effective communicator. For example, you might know strategies for being an effective speaker, but public speaking anxiety that kicks in when you get in front of the audience may prevent you from fully putting that knowledge into practice (see Box 1.1 for strategies to deal with communication apprehension). It's not enough to know what good communication consists of; you must also have the motivation to reflect on and better your communication and the skills needed to do so.

Key Concepts: Managing Communication Apprehension

Decades of research conducted by communication scholars shows that communication apprehension is common among college students (Priem & Solomon, 2009). **Communication apprehension** is fear or anxiety experienced by a person due to actual or imagined communication with another person or persons. This includes multiple forms of communication, not just public speaking. Some people get nervous in one-on-one communication settings, such as interviews or first dates. Others may fear speaking up in small group settings such as team meetings. Communication apprehension is a common issue faced by many people.

Seven Ways to Reduce Communication Apprehension

1. Remember, you are not alone. Communication apprehension is common, so don't ignore it—confront it.
2. Take deep breaths. It releases endorphins, which naturally fight the adrenaline that causes anxiety.
3. Look the part. Dress professionally to enhance confidence.
4. Practice and get feedback from a trusted source. This applies to public speaking, interviewing, and even making small talk.
5. Keep things in perspective. You can't literally "die of embarrassment." Audiences are forgiving and understanding.
6. Visualize success through positive thinking.
7. Prepare, prepare, prepare! Practice is a communicator's best friend

Discussion Questions:

1. What types of communication situations do you feel most nervous in (e.g., public speaking, interviews, small group meetings, etc.)?
2. What are some strategies that have been successful for you in dealing with communication apprehension? What are some strategies that you'd like to try?

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Credits

Chapter 2: Communication, Perception, and Identity

Learning Objectives

1. Define perception.
2. Describe the three steps of the perception process.
3. Recognize the roles that impressions and cultural influences play in the perception of others.
4. Define self-concept and discuss how we develop our self-concept.
5. Define self-presentation and discuss common self-presentation strategies.
6. Identify outcomes and implications for self-presentation choices.
7. Discuss strategies for improving perception of self and others.

Think back to the first day of classes. Did you plan ahead for what you were going to wear? Did you get the typical school supplies together? Did you try to find your classrooms ahead of time or look for the syllabus online? Did you look up your professors on an online professor evaluation site? Based on your answers to these questions, I could form an impression of who you are as a student. But would that perception be accurate? Would it match up with how you see yourself as a student? And perception, of course, is a two-way street. You also formed impressions about your professors based on their appearance, dress, organization, demeanor, and approachability. The impressions that both teacher and student make on the first day help set the tone for the rest of the semester.

As we go through our daily lives, we perceive all sorts of people and objects, and we often make sense of these perceptions by using previous experiences to help filter and organize the information we take in. Sometimes we encounter new or contradictory information that changes the way we think about a person, group, or object. The perceptions that we make of others and that others make of us affect how we communicate and act. In this chapter, we will learn about how we perceive others, how we perceive and present ourselves, and how we can improve our perceptions.

2.1 Perceiving Others

Are you a good judge of character? How quickly can you "size someone up?" Interestingly, research shows that many people are surprisingly accurate at predicting how an interaction with someone will unfold based on initial impressions. In politics, research has also been done on the ability of voters to make a judgment about a candidate's competence after as little as 100 milliseconds of exposure to the politician's face. Even more surprising is that people's judgments of competence, after exposure to two candidates for senate elections, accurately predicted election outcomes (Ballew II & Todoroy, 2007). In short, after only minimal exposure to

a candidate's facial expressions, people made judgments about the person's competence, and those candidates judged more competent were people who actually won elections! As you read this part of the chapter, keep in mind that these principles apply to how you perceive others and to how others perceive you. Just as others make impressions on us, we make impressions on others. The following sections describe the process of perception, as well as the external influences that help determine how we perceive others.

The Perception Process

Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. Although perception is a largely cognitive and psychological process, how we perceive the people and objects around us affects our communication. We respond differently to an object or person that we perceive favorably than we do to something we find unfavorable. But how do we filter through the mass amounts of incoming information, organize it, and make meaning from what makes it through our perceptual filters and into our social realities?

Think of all of the sensory information you take in at a party. Selection is the process of focusing our attention on the most relevant, attention-grabbing stimuli. Photo by ELEVATE from Pexels.

Selecting Information

We take in information through all five of our senses, but our perceptual field (the world around us) includes so many stimuli that it is impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all. As information comes in through our senses, various factors influence what actually continues through the perception process (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Selecting is the first part of the perception process, in which we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information. Think about how, out of many other possible stimuli to pay attention to, you may hear a familiar voice in the hallway, see a pair of shoes you want to buy from across the store, or smell something cooking for dinner when you get home from work. We quickly cut through and push to the background all kinds of sights, smells, sounds, and other stimuli, but how do we decide what to select and what to leave out?

We tend to pay attention to information that is salient. **Salience** is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. The thing attracting our attention can be abstract, like a concept, or concrete, like an object. For example, a person's identity as a Native American may become salient when they are protesting at the Columbus Day parade in Denver, Colorado. A bright flashlight shining in your face while camping at night is sure to be salient. We tend to find salient things that are visually or aurally stimulating, as well as things that meet our needs or interests (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Organizing Information

Organizing is the second part of the perception process, in which we sort and categorize information that we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns. Three ways we sort things into patterns are by using proximity, similarity, and difference (Coren & Girgus, 1980). In terms of *proximity*, we tend to think that things

that are close together go together. We also group things together based on *similarity*, tending to believe that similar-looking or similar-acting things belong together. Additionally, we organize information that we take in based on *difference*, assuming that the item that looks or acts different from the rest doesn't belong with the group.

Think of the ways you might organize things at home or work. Those methods are likely similar to the strategies used in the organizational step of the perception process. Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels.

These strategies for organizing information are so common that they are built into how we teach our children basic skills and how we function in our daily lives. I'm sure we all had to look at pictures in grade school and determine which things went together and which thing didn't belong. If you think of the literal act of organizing something, like your desk at home or work, we follow these same strategies. If you have a bunch of papers and mail on the top of your desk, you will likely sort and categorize those papers into separate piles. Your desk may have one drawer for pens, pencils, and other supplies and another drawer for files. In this case you are grouping items based on similarities and differences. You may also group things based on proximity, for example, by putting financial items like your checkbook, a calculator, and your pay stubs in one area so you can update your budget efficiently. In summary, we simplify information and look for patterns to help us more efficiently communicate and get through life.

Simplification and categorizing based on patterns isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, without this capability we would likely not have the ability to speak, read, or engage in other complex cognitive/behavioral functions. Our brain innately categorizes and files information and experiences away for later retrieval, and different parts of the brain are responsible for different sensory experiences. In short, it is natural for things to group together in some ways. There are differences among people and looking for patterns helps us in many practical ways. However, the judgments we place on various patterns and categories are not natural; they are learned and culturally and contextually relative. Our perceptual patterns become unproductive and even unethical when the judgments we associate with certain patterns are based on stereotypical or prejudicial thinking.

Interpreting Information

Although selecting and organizing incoming stimuli happens very quickly, and sometimes without much conscious thought, interpretation can be a much more deliberate and conscious step in the perception process. **Interpretation** is the third part of the perception process, in which we assign meaning to our experiences.

One of the most important parts of the interpretation process is **attribution**, or the creation of an explanation for what is happening. In most interactions, we are constantly running an attribution script in our minds. Why did my neighbor slam the door when she saw me walking down the hall? Why is my partner being extra nice to me today? Why did my officemate miss our project team meeting this morning? In general, we seek to attribute the cause of others' behaviors to internal or external factors. **Internal attributions** connect the cause of behaviors to personal aspects such as personality traits. **External attributions** connect the cause of behaviors to situational factors. Attributions are important to consider because our reactions to others' behaviors are strongly influenced by the explanations we reach.

Think of a recent argument you've had with a friend or family member. Did you attribute the cause of that argument to an internal or external factor? [Photo by Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels.]

To demonstrate the difference between internal and external attributions, imagine that Gloria and Jerry are dating. One day, Jerry gets frustrated and raises his voice to Gloria. She may find that behavior more offensive and even consider breaking up with him if she attributes the cause of the blow up to his personality (an internal attribution). Conversely, Gloria may be more forgiving if she attributes the cause of his behavior to situational factors beyond Jerry's control (an external attribution). This process of attribution is ongoing, and, as with many aspects of perception, we are sometimes aware of the attributions we make, and sometimes they are automatic and/or unconscious. Attribution has received much scholarly attention because it is in this part of the perception process that some of the most common perceptual errors or biases occur.

One of the most common perceptual errors is the **fundamental attribution error**, which refers to our tendency to explain others' behaviors using internal rather than external attributions (Sillars, 1980). For example, many people get frustrated at parking enforcement officers, saying things like, "I got a parking ticket! I can't believe those people. Why don't they get a real job and stop ruining my life!" In this case, illegally parked individuals attribute the cause of their situation to the malevolence of the parking officer, essentially saying they got a ticket because the officer was a mean/bad person, which is an internal attribution. Individuals seem less likely to acknowledge that the officer was just doing their job (an external attribution) and the ticket was a result of the decision to park illegally.

Just as we tend to attribute others' behaviors to internal rather than external causes, we do the same for ourselves, especially when our behaviors have led to something successful or positive. When our behaviors lead to failure or something negative, we tend to attribute the cause to external factors. This **self-serving bias** is a perceptual error through which we attribute the cause of our successes to internal personal factors while attributing our failures to external factors beyond our control. When we look at the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias together, we can see that we are likely to judge ourselves more favorably than another person, or at least less personally.

Influences on Perception

As we perceive others, we make impressions about their personality, likeability, attractiveness, and other characteristics. Although much of our impressions are personal, what forms them is sometimes based more on circumstances and external factors, rather than personal characteristics. All the information we take in isn't treated equally. How important are first impressions? Does the last thing you notice about a person stick with you longer because it's more recent? How do our cultural identities affect our perceptions? This section will help answer these questions.

First and Last Impressions

The old saying "You never get a second chance to make a good impression" points to the fact that first impressions matter. The brain is a predictive organ in that it wants to know, based on previous experiences and patterns, what to expect next, and first impressions function to fill this need, allowing us to determine how we will proceed with an interaction after only a quick assessment of the person with whom we are interacting (Hargie, 2011).

What are some ways to make a positive first impression? Photo by fauxels from Pexels.

First impressions are enduring because of the **primacy effect**, which leads us to place more value on the first information we receive about a person. So if we interpret the first information we receive from or about a person as positive, then a positive first impression will form and influence how we respond to that person as the interaction continues. Likewise, negative interpretations of information can lead us to form negative first impressions. If you sit down at a restaurant and servers walk by for several minutes and no one greets you, then you will likely interpret that negatively and not have a good impression of your server when he finally shows up. This may lead you to be short with the server, which may lead him to not be as attentive as he normally would. At this point, a series of negative interactions has set into motion a cycle that will be very difficult to reverse and make positive.

The **recency effect** leads us to put more weight on the most recent impression we have of a person's communication over earlier impressions. Even a positive first impression can be tarnished by a negative final impression. Imagine that a professor has maintained a relatively high level of credibility with you over the course of the semester. She made a good first impression by being organized, approachable, and interesting during the first days of class. The rest of the semester went fairly well with no major conflicts. However, during the last week of the term, she didn't have final papers graded and ready to turn back by the time she said she would, which left you with some uncertainty about how well you needed to do on the final exam to earn an A in the class. When you did get your paper back, on the last day of class, you saw that your grade was much lower than you expected. If this happened to you, what would you write on the instructor evaluation? Because of the recency effect, many students would likely give a disproportionate amount of value to the professor's actions in the final week of the semester, negatively skewing the evaluation, which is supposed to be reflective of the entire semester. Even though the professor only returned one assignment late, that fact is very recent in students' minds and can overshadow the positive impression that formed many weeks earlier.

Cultural Influences

Our cultural identities affect our perceptions. Sometimes we are conscious of the effects and sometimes we are not. In either case, we tend to favor others who exhibit cultural traits that match up with our own. This tendency is so strong that it often leads us to assume that people we like are more similar to us than they actually are. Knowing more about how these forces influence our perceptions can help us become more aware of and competent about the impressions we form of others.

Race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, nationality, and age all affect the perceptions that we make. As

we are socialized into various cultural identities, we internalize beliefs, attitudes, and values shared by others in our cultural group. Unless we are exposed to various cultural groups and learn how others perceive us and the world around them, we will likely have a narrow or naïve view of the world and assume that others see things the way we do. Exposing yourself to and experiencing cultural differences in perspective doesn't mean that you have to change your worldview to match that of another cultural group. Instead, it may offer you a chance to better understand why and how your viewpoints were constructed the way they were.

As we have learned, perception starts with information that comes in through our senses. How we perceive even basic sensory information is influenced by our culture, as is illustrated in the following list:

- **Sight.** People in different cultures "read" art in different ways, differing in terms of where they start to look at an image and the types of information they perceive and process.
- **Sound.** "Atonal" music in some Asian cultures is considered displeasing by those who are not accustomed to it.
- **Touch.** In some cultures, it would be very offensive for a man to touch—even tap on the shoulder—a woman who isn't a relative.
- **Taste.** Tastes for foods vary greatly around the world. "Stinky tofu," which is a favorite snack of people in Taipei, Taiwan's famous night market, would likely be very off-putting in terms of taste and smell to many foreign tourists.
- **Smell.** While US Americans spend considerable effort to mask natural body odor, which we typically find unpleasant, with soaps, sprays, and lotions, some other cultures would not find unpleasant or even notice what we consider "B.O." Those same cultures may find an American's "clean" (soapy, perfumed, deodorized) smell unpleasant.

How we "read" and perceive art differs from culture to culture. Photo by Vincent Tantardini on Unsplash.

As we discussed earlier in the chapter, our brain processes information by putting it into categories and looking for predictability and patterns. The previous examples have covered how we do this with sensory information, but we also do this with people. When we categorize people, we generally view them as "like us" or "not like us." This simple us/them split affects subsequent interactions, including impressions and attributions. For example, we tend to view people we perceive to be like us as more trustworthy, friendly, and honest than people we perceive to be not like us (Brewer, 1999). We are also more likely to use internal attribution to explain negative behavior of people we perceive to be different from us. These tendencies can have negative consequences, and later we will discuss how forcing people into rigid categories leads to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

2.2 Perceiving and Presenting Self

Just as our perception of others affects how we communicate, so does our perception of ourselves. But what

influences our self-perception? How much of our self is a product of our own making and how much of it is constructed based on how others react to us? How do we present ourselves to others in ways that maintain our sense of self or challenge how others see us? We will begin to answer these questions in this part of the chapter, as we explore self-concept and self-presentation.

Our self-concept is influenced by how we view ourselves, in addition to how others view us. [Photo by Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels.]

Self-Concept

If I said, "Tell me who you are," your answers would be clues about your **self-concept**, or the overall idea of how a person views themself. Each person has an overall self-concept that might be encapsulated in a short list of overarching characteristics that they find important. But each person's self-concept is also influenced by context, meaning we think differently about ourselves depending on the situation we are in. In some situations, personal characteristics, such as our abilities, personality, and other distinguishing features, will best describe who we are. You might consider yourself laid back, traditional, funny, open-minded, or driven, or you might label yourself a leader or a thrill-seeker. In other situations, our self-concept may be tied to group or cultural membership. For example, you might consider yourself a Southerner, a fraternity brother, or a member of the track team.

Our self-concept is also formed through our interactions with others and their reactions to us. The concept of the **looking-glass self** explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people's reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us (Cooley, 1902). This reflective process of building our self-concept is based on what other people have actually said, such as "You're a good listener," and other people's actions, such as coming to you for advice. These thoughts evoke emotional responses that feed into our self-concept. For example, you may think, "I'm glad that people can count on me to listen to their problems."

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons to other people. **Social comparison theory** states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to others. This includes comparisons on characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and more. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn't always a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn't appropriate. Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If a man wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, he may be discouraged by his difficulty keeping up with the aerobics instructor or running partner and judge himself as inferior, which could negatively affect his self-concept. Using as a reference group people who have only recently started a fitness program but have shown progress could help maintain a more accurate and hopefully positive self-concept.

Figure 2.1 *The Relationship Between Self-Concept, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Esteem*

Social comparisons can affect our **self-esteem**, or the judgements and evaluations we make about our self-concept. If I again prompted you to "Tell me who you are," and then asked you to evaluate (label as good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable) each of the things you listed about yourself, I would get clues about your self-esteem. Generally, some people are more likely to evaluate themselves positively, while others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively (Brockner, 1988). More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our life span and across contexts.

Self-esteem isn't the only factor that contributes to our self-concept; perceptions about our competence also play a role in developing our sense of self. **Self-efficacy** refers to the judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context (Bandura, 1997). As you can see in Figure 2.1, judgments about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which influences our self-concept.

Self-Presentation

Think of the ways you engage in self-presentation, both in-person and online. Photo by Hamann La from Pexels.

How we perceive ourselves manifests in how we present ourselves to others. **Self-presentation** is the process of strategically concealing or revealing personal information in order to influence others' perceptions (Human et al., 2012). We engage in this process daily and for different reasons. Although people occasionally intentionally deceive others in the process of self-presentation, in general we try to make a good impression while remaining authentic.

Numerous public examples demonstrate that we stand to lose quite a bit if we are caught intentionally misrepresenting ourselves. In 2022, New York congressman-elect George Santos faced public outrage after it was discovered that he had lied about his job experience and college education on the campaign trail. In 2012, the dean of admissions for the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology was dismissed after it became known that she had only attended one year of college and had falsely indicated that she had a bachelor's and master's degree (Webber & Korn, 2012). Such incidents clearly show that although people can get away with such false self-presentation for a while, the eventual consequences of being found out are dire. As communicators, we sometimes engage in more subtle forms of inauthentic self-presentation. For example, a person may state or imply that they know more about a subject or situation than they actually do in order to seem smart or "in the loop." During a speech, a speaker could work on polished and competent delivery to distract from a lack of substantive content. These cases of strategic self-presentation may not ever be found out, but communicators should still avoid them as they do not live up to the standards of ethical communication.

In general, we strive to present a public image that matches up with our self-concept, but we can also use self-presentation strategies to enhance our self-concept (Hargie, 2011). When we present ourselves in order to evoke a positive evaluative response, we are engaging in self-enhancement. In the pursuit of self-enhancement, a person might try to be as appealing as possible in a particular area or with a particular person to gain feedback that will enhance one's self-esteem. For example, a singer might train and practice for weeks before singing in front of a well-respected vocal coach but not invest as much effort in preparing to sing in front of her friends. Although positive feedback from her friends could be beneficial, positive feedback from an experienced singer could significantly enhance her self-concept. Self-enhancement can be productive and achieved competently, or it can be used inappropriately. Using self-enhancement behaviors just to gain the approval of others or out of self-centeredness may lead people to communicate in ways that are perceived as phony or overbearing and end up making an unfavorable impression (Sosik et al., 2002).

2.3 Improving Perception

So far, we have learned about how we perceive others and ourselves. Now we will turn to a discussion of how to improve our perception. Our self-perception can be improved by becoming aware of self-fulfilling prophecies and by engaging in supportive interpersonal relationships. How we perceive others can be improved by becoming aware of stereotypes and prejudice and engaging in perception checking.

Improving Self-Perception

Our self-perceptions can and do change. Recall that we have an overall self-concept and self-esteem that are relatively stable, and we also have context-specific self-perceptions. Context-specific self-perceptions vary depending on the person with whom we are interacting, our emotional state, and the subject matter being discussed. Becoming aware of the process of self-perception and the various components of our self-concept (which you have already started to do by studying this chapter) will help you understand and improve your self-perceptions.

Life-changing events, like a graduation, can quickly alter our self-perception. [Photo by RODNAE Productions from Pexels.]

Since self-concept and self-esteem are so subjective and personal, it would be inaccurate to say that someone's self-concept is "right" or "wrong." Instead, we can identify negative and positive aspects of self-perceptions as well as discuss common barriers to forming accurate and positive self-perceptions. We can also identify common patterns that people experience that interfere with their ability to monitor, understand, and change their self-perceptions. Changing your overall self-concept or self-esteem is not an easy task given that these are overall reflections on who we are and how we judge ourselves that are constructed over many interactions. A variety of life-changing events can relatively

quickly alter our self-perceptions. Think of how your view of self changed when you moved from high school to college. Similarly, other people's self-perceptions likely change when they enter into a committed relationship, have a child, make a geographic move, or start a new job.

Aside from experiencing life-changing events, we can make slower changes to our self-perceptions with concerted efforts aimed at becoming more competent communicators through self-monitoring and reflection. Let's now discuss some suggestions to help avoid common barriers to accurate and positive self-perceptions and patterns of behavior that perpetuate negative self-perception cycles.

Beware of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Self-fulfilling prophecies are thought and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behavior that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true (Guyll et al., 2010). For example, let's say a student's biology lab instructor is a Chinese person who speaks English as a second language. The student falsely believes that the instructor will not be a good teacher because he speaks English with an accent. Because of this belief, the student doesn't attend class regularly and doesn't listen actively when she does attend. Because of these behaviors, the student fails the biology lab, which then reinforces her original belief that the instructor wasn't a good teacher.

Although the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies was originally developed to be applied to social inequality and discrimination, it has since been applied in many other contexts, including interpersonal communication. This research has found that some people are chronically insecure, meaning they are very concerned about being accepted by others but constantly feel that other people will dislike them. This can manifest in relational insecurity, which is again based on feelings of inferiority resulting from social comparison with others perceived to be more secure and superior. Such people often end up reinforcing their belief that others will dislike them because of the behaviors triggered by their irrational belief.

Creating and maintaining supportive interpersonal relationships is a key to improving self-perception. Photo by nappy from Pexels.

Take the following scenario as an example: An insecure person assumes that his date will not like him. During the date he doesn't engage in much conversation, discloses negative information about himself, and exhibits anxious behaviors. Because of these behaviors, his date forms a negative impression and suggests they not see each other again, reinforcing his original belief that the date wouldn't like him. The example shows how a pattern of thinking can lead to a pattern of behavior that reinforces the thinking, and so on. Luckily, experimental research shows that self-affirmation techniques can be successfully used to intervene in such self-fulfilling prophecies. Thinking positive thoughts and focusing on personality strengths can stop this negative cycle of thinking and has been shown to have positive effects on academic performance, weight loss, and interpersonal relationships (Stinston et al., 2011).

Create and Maintain Supportive Interpersonal Relationships

Aside from giving yourself affirming messages to help with self-perception, it is important to find interpersonal support. Although most people have at least some supportive relationships, many people also have people in their

lives who range from negative to toxic. When people find themselves in negative relational cycles, whether it is with friends, family, or romantic partners, it is difficult to break out of those cycles. But we can all make choices to be around people who will help us be who we want to be and not be around people who hinder our self-progress. This notion can also be taken to the extreme, however. It would not be wise to surround yourself with people who only validate you and do not constructively challenge you, because this too could lead to distorted self-perceptions.

Overcoming Barriers to Perceiving Others

There are many barriers that prevent us from competently perceiving others. While some are more difficult to overcome than others, they can all be addressed by raising our awareness of the influences around us and committing to monitoring, reflecting on, and changing some of our communication habits.

Beware of Stereotypes and Prejudice

Stereotypes are sets of beliefs that we develop about groups, which we then apply to individuals from that group. Stereotypes are organizing patterns that are taken too far, as they reduce and ignore a person's individuality and the diversity present within a larger group of people. Stereotypes can be based on cultural identities, physical appearance, behavior, speech, beliefs, and values, among other things, and are often caused by a lack of information about the target person or group (Guyll et al., 2010). Stereotypes can be positive, negative, or neutral, but all run the risk of lowering the quality of our communication.

While the negative effects of stereotypes are pretty straightforward in that they devalue people and prevent us from adapting and revising our schemata, positive stereotypes also have negative consequences. For example, the "model minority" stereotype has been applied to some Asian cultures in the United States. Seemingly positive stereotypes of Asian Americans as hardworking, intelligent, and willing to adapt to "mainstream" culture are not always received as positive and can lead some people within these communities to feel objectified, ignored, or overlooked.

Stereotypes can also lead to double standards that point to larger cultural and social inequalities. There are many more words to describe a sexually active woman than a man, and the words used for women are disproportionately negative, while those used for men are more positive. Since stereotypes are generally based on a lack of information, we must take it upon ourselves to gain exposure to new kinds of information and people, which will likely require us to get out of our comfort zones. When we do meet people, we should base the impressions we make on describable behavior rather than inferred or secondhand information. When stereotypes negatively influence our overall feelings and attitudes about a person or group, prejudiced thinking results.

Prejudice is negative feelings or attitudes toward people based on their identity or identities. Prejudice can have individual or widespread negative effects. At the individual level, a hiring manager may not hire a young man with a physical disability (even though that would be illegal if it were the only reason), which negatively affects that one man. However, if pervasive cultural thinking that people with physical disabilities are mentally deficient leads hiring managers all over the country to make similar decisions, then the prejudice has become a social injustice.

Engage in Perception Checking

Perception checking is a strategy to help us monitor our reactions to and perceptions about people and communication. There are some internal and external strategies we can use to engage in perception checking. In terms of internal strategies, review the various influences on perception that we have learned about in this chapter and always be willing to ask yourself, "What is influencing the perceptions I am making right now?" Even being aware of what influences are acting on our perceptions makes us more aware of what is happening in the perception process. In terms of external strategies, we can use other people to help verify our perceptions. The cautionary adage "Things aren't always as they appear" is useful when evaluating your own perceptions. Sometimes it's a good idea to bounce your thoughts off someone, especially if the perceptions relate to some high-stakes situation.

Key Concepts: Perception Checking

Perception checking helps us slow down perception and communication processes and allows us to have more control over both. Perception checking involves being able to describe what is happening in a given situation, provide multiple interpretations of events or behaviors, and ask yourself and others questions for clarification. Some of this process happens inside our heads, and some happens through interaction. Let's take an interpersonal conflict as an example.

Stefano and Patrick are roommates. Stefano is in the living room playing a video game when he sees Patrick walk through the room with his suitcase and walk out the front door. Since Patrick didn't say or wave good-bye, Stefano has to make sense of this encounter, and perception checking can help him do that. First, he needs to try to describe (not evaluate yet) what just happened. This can be done by asking yourself, "What is going on?" In this case, Patrick left without speaking or waving good-bye. Next, Stefano needs to think of some possible interpretations of what just happened. One interpretation could be that Patrick is mad about something (at him or someone else). Another could be that he was in a hurry and simply forgot, or that he didn't want to interrupt the video game. In this step of perception checking, it is good to be aware of the attributions you are making. You might try to determine if you are overattributing internal or external causes. Last, you will want to verify and clarify. So Stefano might ask a mutual friend if she knows what might be bothering Patrick or going on in his life that made him leave so suddenly. Or he may also just want to call, text, or speak to Patrick. During this step, it's important to be aware of punctuation. Even though Stefano has already been thinking about this incident, and is experiencing some conflict, Patrick may have no idea that his actions caused Stefano to worry. If Stefano texts and asks why he's mad (which wouldn't be a good idea because it's an assumption) Patrick may become defensive, which could escalate the conflict. Stefano could just describe the behavior (without judging Patrick) and ask for clarification by saying, "When you left today you didn't say bye or let me know where you were going. I just wanted to check to see if things are OK."

The steps of perception checking as described in the previous scenario are as follows:

- Step 1: Describe the behavior or situation without evaluating or judging it.
- Step 2: Think of some possible interpretations of the behavior, being aware of attributions and other influences on the perception process.
- Step 3: Verify what happened and ask for clarification from the other person's perspective. Be aware of punctuation, since the other person likely experienced the event differently than you.

Discussion Questions:

1. Give an example of how perception checking might be useful to you in professional, personal, and civic contexts.
2. Which step of perception checking do you think is most challenging and why?

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Credits

Chapter 3: Verbal Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and discuss the functions of language.
2. Distinguish between denotation and connotation.
3. Identify and discuss the four main types of linguistic expressions.
4. Discuss the power of language to express our identities, affect our credibility, control others, and perform actions.
5. Explain how grammar and slang contribute to the dynamic nature of language.
6. Identify the ways in which language can separate people and bring them together.
7. Identify strategies for using language to accomplish goals.

When we first think about communication, we most likely come up with examples of verbal communication. Talking in person with friends, chatting over FaceTime with family, listening to a podcast, and giving a presentation are all examples of verbal communication. This chapter defines **verbal communication** as the process of generating meaning using language. Notably, this can include spoken or written words. To demonstrate verbal communication's role and consequence in our lives, this chapter will discuss the relationship between language and meaning and will provide guidance on how to use words well.

Verbal communication is defined as the process of generating meaning using language. It can include the use of both spoken and written words. Photo by Anastasiya Gepp from Pexels.

3.1 Language and Meaning

The relationship between language and meaning is not a straightforward one. One reason for this complicated relationship is the limitlessness of modern language systems like English (Crystal, 2005). Language is productive in the sense that there are an infinite number of utterances we can make by connecting existing words in new ways. In addition, there is no limit to a language's vocabulary, as new words are coined daily. Of course, the complicated relationship between language and meaning can sometimes lead to confusion, frustration, or even humor. We may even experience a little of all three, when we stop to think about how there are some twenty-five definitions available to tell us the meaning of the word *meaning*! (Crystal, 2005). Since language and symbols are the primary

vehicle for our communication, it is important that we not take the characteristics of our verbal communication for granted. In this section, we will discuss how language is symbolic, expressive, powerful, dynamic, and relational.

Language is Symbolic

You'll recall from Chapter 1 that our language system is primarily made up of **symbols**, signifiers that stand in for or represent something else. Symbols can be communicated verbally (speaking the word *hello*), in writing (putting the letters H-E-L-L-O together), or nonverbally (waving your hand back and forth). In any case, the symbols we use stand in for something else, like a physical object or an idea. They do not actually correspond to the thing being referenced in any direct way. Unlike hieroglyphics in ancient Egypt, which often did have a literal relationship between the written symbol and the object being referenced, the symbols used in modern languages look nothing like the object or idea to which they refer.

Think about the different meanings of the word "Cowboy." What are some positive and negative connotations of that word? [Photo by Brett Sayles from Pexels.]

Definitions help us narrow the meaning of particular symbols, but it is important to recognize that symbols have both denotative and connotative meanings. **Denotation** refers to definitions that are accepted by the language group as a whole, or the dictionary definition of a word. For example, the denotation of the word *cowboy* is a man who takes care of cattle. Another denotation is a reckless and/or independent person. A more abstract word, like *change*, would be more difficult to understand due to the word's multiple denotations.

Connotation refers to definitions that are based on emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word. Returning to our previous examples, the word *change* can have positive or negative connotations depending on a person's experiences. A person who just ended a long-term relationship may think of change as good or bad depending on what they thought about their former partner. A word like *cowboy* has many connotations. For example, many connect the word to the frontier and the western history of the United States, which has mythologies associated with it that help shape the narrative of the nation. While people who grew up with cattle or have family that ranch may have a very specific connotation of the word *cowboy* based on personal experience, other people's connotations may be more influenced by popular cultural symbolism like that seen in westerns.

Language is Expressive

At its essence, language is expressive. Verbal expressions help us communicate our observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs (McKay et al., 1995).

Expressing Observations

When we express observations, we report on the sensory information we are taking or have taken in. Eyewitness testimony is a good example of communicating observations. Witnesses are not supposed to make judgments or offer conclusions; they only communicate factual knowledge as they experienced it. For example, a witness could say, "I saw a white Mitsubishi Eclipse leaving my neighbor's house at 10:30 pm." When you are trying to make sense of an experience, expressing observations in a descriptive rather than evaluative way can lessen defensiveness, which facilitates competent communication.

Expressing Thoughts

When we express thoughts, we draw conclusions based on what we have experienced. Whereas our observations are based on sensory information (what we saw, what we read, what we heard), thoughts are connected to our beliefs (what we think is true/false), attitudes (what we like and dislike), and values (what we think is right/wrong or good/bad). Jury members are expected to express thoughts based on reported observations to help reach a conclusion about someone's guilt or innocence. A juror might express the following thought: "The neighbor who saw the car leaving the night of the crime seemed credible. And the defendant seemed to have a shady past—I think he's trying to hide something."

Expressing Feelings

Society's gender stereotypes often contribute to boys exercising emotional restraint as they age. Photo by Phil Nguyen from Pexels.

When we express feelings, we communicate our emotions. Expressing feelings is a difficult part of verbal communication because there are many social norms about how, why, when, where, and to whom we express our emotions. Norms for emotional expression also vary based on cultural identities and characteristics such as age and gender. In terms of age, young children are typically freer to express positive and negative emotions in public. Gendered elements intersect with age as boys grow older and are socialized into a norm of emotional restraint. Although individual men vary in the degree to which they are emotionally expressive, there is still a prevailing social norm that encourages and even expects women to be more emotionally expressive than men.

Even though expressing feelings is more complicated than other forms of expression, emotion sharing is an important part of how we create social bonds and empathize with others, and it can be improved. In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous our emotions will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, *happy* is mild, *delighted* is moderate, and *ecstatic* is intense; *ignored* is mild, *rejected* is moderate, and *abandoned* is intense (Hargie, 2011).

Expressing Needs

When we express needs, we are communicating in an instrumental way to help us get things done. Since we

almost always know our needs more than others do, it's important for us to be able to convey those needs to others. Expressing needs can help us get a project done at work or help us navigate the changes of a long-term romantic partnership. Not expressing needs can lead to feelings of abandonment, frustration, or resentment. For example, if one romantic partner expresses the following thought, "I think we're moving too quickly in our relationship," but doesn't also express a need, the other person in the relationship doesn't have a guide for what to do in response to the expressed thought. Stating, "I need to spend some time with my hometown friends this weekend. Would you mind if I went home by myself?" would likely make the expression more effective. Be cautious of letting evaluations or judgments sneak into your expressions of need. Saying, "I need you to stop suffocating me!" really expresses a thought-feeling mixture more than a need.

Language is Powerful

The contemporary American philosopher David Abram wrote, "Only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world" (Abram, 1997). This statement encapsulates many of the powerful features of language. Next, we will discuss how language expresses our identities, affects our credibility, serves as a means of control, and performs actions.

Language plays a crucial role in expressing our identities. Photo by Liza Summer from Pexels.

Language Expresses Our Identities

The power of language to express our identities varies depending on the origin of the label (self-chosen or other-imposed) and the context. People are usually comfortable with the language they use to describe their own identities but may have issues with the labels others place on them. In terms of context, many people express their "Irish" identity on St. Patrick's Day, but they may not think much about it over the rest of the year. There are many examples of people who have taken a label that was imposed on them, one that usually has negative connotations, and intentionally used it in ways that counter previous meanings. Some country music singers and comedians have reclaimed the label *redneck*, using it as an identity marker they are proud of rather than a pejorative term. Other examples of people reclaiming identity labels include the "black is beautiful" movement of the 1960s that repositioned *black* as a positive identity marker for African Americans and the "queer" movement of the 1980s and '90s that reclaimed *queer* as a positive identity marker for some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Even though some people embrace reclaimed words, they can still carry their negative connotations and are not openly accepted by everyone.

Language Affects Our Credibility

One of the goals of this chapter is to help you be more competent with your verbal communication. People make assumptions about your credibility based on how you speak and what you say. You have to use language clearly and be accountable for what you say in order to be seen as trustworthy. Using informal language and

breaking social norms wouldn't enhance your credibility during a professional job interview, but it might with your friends at a party. Politicians know that the way they speak affects their credibility, but they also know that using words that are too scientific or academic can lead people to perceive them as eggheads, which would hurt their credibility. Politicians and many others in leadership positions need to be able to use language to put people at ease, relate to others, and still appear confident and competent.

Language is a Means of Control

Control is a word that has negative connotations, but our use of it here can be positive, neutral, or negative. Verbal communication can be used to reward and punish. We can offer verbal communication in the form of positive reinforcement to praise someone. We can withhold verbal communication or use it in a critical, aggressive, or hurtful way as a form of negative reinforcement.

Both negative and positive reinforcement are examples of how language can be used as a means of control. Photo by Liza Summer from Pexels.

Directives are utterances that try to get another person to do something. They can range from a rather polite *ask* or *request* to a more forceful *command* or *insist*. Context informs when and how we express directives and how people respond to them. Promises are often paired with directives in order to persuade people to comply, and those promises, whether implied or stated, should be kept in order to be an ethical communicator. Keep this in mind to avoid arousing false expectations on the part of the other person (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990).

Rather than verbal communication being directed at one person as a means of control, the way we talk creates overall climates of communication that may control many. Verbal communication characterized by empathy, understanding, respect, and honesty creates open climates that lead to more collaboration and more information exchange. Verbal communication that is controlling, deceitful, and vague creates a closed climate in which people are less willing to communicate and less trusting (Brown & Edmunds, 2019).

Language is Dynamic

As we have discussed, language is essentially limitless. We may create a one-of-a-kind sentence combining words in new ways and never know it. Aside from the endless structural possibilities, words change meaning, and new words are created daily. In this section, we'll learn more about the dynamic nature of language by focusing on grammar and slang.

Grammar

Any language system has to have rules to make it learnable and usable. **Grammar** refers to the rules that govern how words are used to make phrases and sentences. Someone would likely know what you mean by the question "Where's the remote control?" But "The control remote where's?" is likely to be unintelligible or at least confusing (Crystal, 2005). Knowing the rules of grammar is important in order to be able to write and speak to be understood, but knowing these rules isn't enough to make you an effective communicator. Even though teachers

have long enforced the idea that there are right and wrong ways to write and say words, there really isn't anything inherently right or wrong about the individual choices we make in our language use. Rather, it is our collective agreement that gives power to the rules that govern language.

Some linguists have viewed the rules of language as fairly rigid and limiting in terms of the possible meanings that we can create with words and sentences within that system (de Saussure, 1974). Others have viewed these rules as more open and flexible, allowing a person to make choices to determine meaning (Eco, 1976).

Looking back to our discussion of connotation, we can see how individuals play a role in how meaning and language are related, since we each bring our own emotional and experiential associations with a word that are often more meaningful than a dictionary definition. In addition, we have quite a bit of room for creativity, play, and resistance with the symbols we use. Have you ever had a secret code with a friend that only you knew? This can allow you to use a code word in a public place to get meaning across to the other person who is "in the know" without anyone else understanding the message. The fact that you can take a word, give it another meaning, have someone else agree on that meaning, and then use the word in your own fashion clearly demonstrates the dynamic nature of language. As we will discuss next, many slang words developed because people wanted a covert way to talk about certain topics without outsiders catching on.

Consider the different slang words for money that have been used through the years: green, scratch, cabbage, coin, dough, bacon, Benjamins, bucks… [Photo by David McBee from Pexels.]

Slang

Slang is a great example of the dynamic nature of language. **Slang** refers to new or adapted words that are specific to a group, context, and/or time period; regarded as less formal; and representative of people's creative play with language. Research has shown that only about 10 percent of the slang terms that emerge over a fifteen-year period survive. Many more take their place though, as new slang words are created using inversion, reduction, or old-fashioned creativity (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Inversion is a form of word play that produces slang words like *sick*, *wicked*, and *bad* that refer to the opposite of their typical meaning. Reduction creates slang words such as *pic*, *sec*, and *later* from *picture*, *second*, and *see you later*. New slang words often represent what is edgy, current, or simply relevant to the daily lives of a group of people. Many creative examples of slang refer to illegal or socially taboo topics like sex, drinking, and drugs. It makes sense that developing an alternative way to talk about taboo topics could make life easier for the people who want to discuss them. Slang allows people who are in "in the know" to break the code and presents a linguistic barrier for unwanted outsiders.

It's often difficult for us to identify the slang we use at any given moment because it is worked into our everyday language patterns and becomes very natural. Just as we learned here, new words can create a lot of buzz and become a part of common usage very quickly. The same can happen with new slang terms. Most slang words also disappear quickly, and their alternative meaning fades into obscurity. For example, you don't hear anyone using the word *macaroni* to refer to something cool or fashionable. But that's exactly what the common slang meaning

of the word was at the time the song "Yankee Doodle" was written. Yankee Doodle isn't saying the feather he sticks in his cap is a small, curved pasta shell; he is saying it's cool or stylish.

Language is Relational

We use verbal communication to initiate, maintain, and terminate our interpersonal relationships. The first few exchanges with a potential romantic partner or friend help us size the other person up and figure out if we want to pursue a relationship or not. We then use verbal communication to remind others how we feel about them and to check in with them—engaging in relationship maintenance through language use. When negative feelings arrive and persist, or for many other reasons, we often use verbal communication to end a relationship.

Language Can Bring Us Together

Interpersonally, verbal communication is key to bringing people together and maintaining relationships. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, our use of words like *I*, *you*, *we*, *our*, and *us* affect our relationships. "We language" includes the words *we*, *our*, and *us* and can be used to promote a feeling of inclusiveness. "I language" can be useful when expressing thoughts, needs, and feelings because it leads us to "own" our expressions and avoid the tendency to mistakenly attribute the cause of our thoughts, needs, and feelings to others. Communicating emotions using "I language" may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying, "You're making me crazy!" you could say, "I'm starting to feel really anxious because we can't make a decision about this." Conversely, "you language" can lead people to become defensive and feel attacked, which could be divisive and result in feelings of interpersonal separation.

Aside from the specific words that we use, the frequency of communication impacts relationships. Of course, the content of what is said is important, but research shows that romantic partners who communicate frequently with each other and with mutual friends and family members experience less stress and uncertainty in their relationship and are more likely to stay together (McCornack, 2007). When frequent communication combines with supportive messages, which are messages communicated in an open, honest, and non-confrontational way, people are sure to come together.

"You" language can lead to conversational partners being defensive. "We" and "I" language might be more effective at resolving conflicts. Photo by Keira Burton from Pexels.

Language Can Separate Us

Whether it's criticism, teasing, or language differences, verbal communication can also lead to feelings of separation. Language differences alone do not present insurmountable barriers. We can learn other languages with time and effort, there are other people who can translate and serve as bridges across languages, and we can also communicate quite a lot nonverbally in the absence of linguistic compatibility. People who speak the same language can intentionally use language to separate. The words *us* and *them* can be a powerful start to separation. Think of how language played a role in segregation in the United States as the notion of "separate but equal" was

upheld by the Supreme Court and how apartheid affected South Africa as limits, based on finances and education, were placed on the Black majority's rights to vote.

At the interpersonal level, unsupportive messages can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and actual separation or dissolution of a relationship. It's impossible to be supportive in our communication all the time, but consistently unsupportive messages can hurt others' self-esteem, escalate conflict, and lead to defensiveness. People who regularly use unsupportive messages may create a toxic win/lose climate in a relationship. Six common verbal tactics that can lead to feelings of defensiveness and separation include:

1. **Global labels.** "You're a liar." Labeling someone irresponsible, untrustworthy, selfish, or lazy calls their whole identity as a person into question. Such sweeping judgments and generalizations are sure to only escalate a negative situation.
2. **Sarcasm.** "No, you didn't miss anything in class on Wednesday. We just sat here and looked at each other." Even though sarcasm is often disguised as humor, it usually represents passive-aggressive behavior through which a person indirectly communicates negative feelings.
3. **Dragging up the past.** "I should have known not to trust you when you never paid me back that $100 I let you borrow." Bringing up negative past experiences is a tactic used by people when they don't want to discuss a current situation. Sometimes people have built up negative feelings that are suddenly let out by a seemingly small thing in the moment.
4. **Negative comparisons.** "Jade graduated from college without any credit card debt. I guess you're just not as responsible as her." Holding a person up to the supposed standards or characteristics of another person can lead to feelings of inferiority and resentment. Parents and teachers may unfairly compare children to their siblings.
5. **Judgmental "you" statements.** "You're never going to be able to hold down a job." Accusatory messages are usually generalized overstatements about another person that go beyond labeling but still do not describe specific behavior in a productive way.
6. **Threats.** "If you don't stop texting back and forth with your ex, both of you are going to regret it." Threatening someone with violence or some other negative consequence usually signals the end of productive communication. Aside from the potential legal consequences, threats usually overcompensate for a person's insecurity.

3.2 Using Words Well

Have you ever gotten lost because someone gave you directions that didn't make sense to you? Have you ever puzzled over the instructions for how to put something like a bookshelf or grill together? When people don't use words well, there are consequences that range from mild annoyance to legal actions. When people do use words well, they can be inspiring and make us better people. In this section, we will learn how to use words well by using words clearly, using words affectively, and using words ethically.

Using Words Clearly

The level of clarity with which we speak varies depending on whom we talk to, the situation we're in, and our own intentions and motives. We sometimes make a deliberate effort to speak as clearly as possible. We can indicate this concern for clarity nonverbally by slowing our rate or verbally by saying, "Frankly…" or "Let me be clear…" Sometimes it can be difficult to speak clearly—for example, when we are speaking about something with which we are unfamiliar. Emotions and distractions can also interfere with our clarity. Being aware of the varying levels of abstraction within language can help us create clearer messages.

The **ladder of abstraction**, illustrated in Figure 3.1, is a model used to demonstrate how language can range from concrete to abstract. As we follow a concept up the ladder of abstraction, more and more of the "essence" of the original object is lost or left out, which leaves more room for interpretation, which can lead to misunderstanding (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). When shared referents are important, we should try to use language that is lower on the ladder of abstraction. Being intentionally concrete is useful when giving directions, for example, and can help prevent misunderstanding. We sometimes intentionally use abstract language. Since abstract language is often unclear or vague, we can use it as a means of testing out a potential topic (like asking a favor), offering negative feedback indirectly (to avoid hurting someone's feelings or to hint), or avoiding the specifics of a topic.

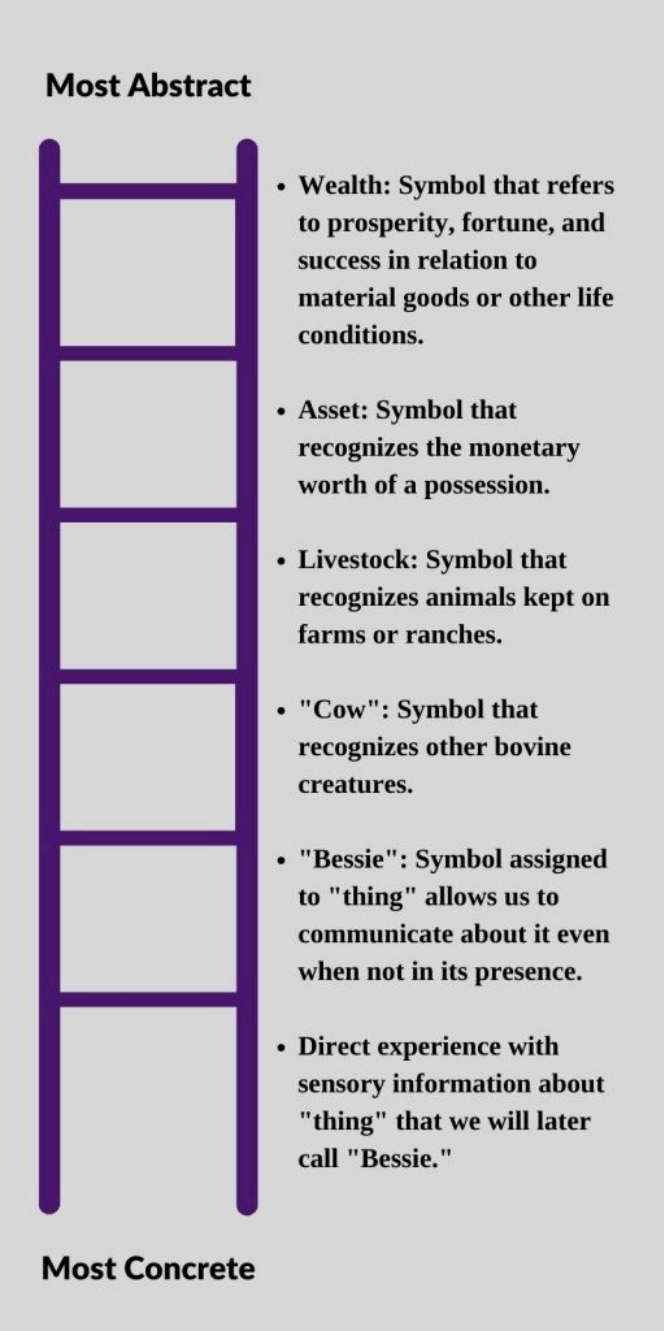


Figure 3.1 *The Ladder of Abstraction. Adapted from Hayakawa & Hayakawa (1990, p. 85).*

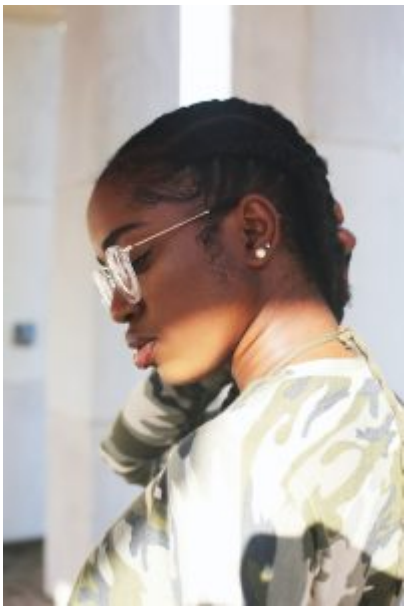
Knowing more about the role that abstraction plays in the generation of meaning can help us better describe and define the words we use. As we learned earlier, denotative definitions are those found in the dictionary—the official or agreed-on definition. Since definitions are composed of other words, people who compile dictionaries take for granted that there is a certain amount of familiarity with the words they use to define another word—otherwise we would just be going in circles. One challenge we face when defining words is our tendency to go up the ladder of abstraction rather than down (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). For example, if I asked you to define the word *blue*, you'd likely say it's a color. To define it more clearly, by going down the ladder of

abstraction, you could say, “It’s the color of Frank Sinatra’s eyes,” or “It’s what the sky looks like on a clear day.” People often come to understanding more quickly when a definition is descriptive and/or ties into their personal experiences.

Although it is often helpful to use specific words and reference points down the ladder of abstraction, there are times when those references won’t be recognized by broad or diverse audiences. **Jargon** refers to specialized words used by a certain group or profession. Since jargon is specialized, it is often difficult to relate to a diverse audience and should therefore be limited when speaking to people from outside the group—or should at least be clearly defined when it is used.

Communication accommodation theory is a theory that explores why and how people modify their communication to fit situational, social, cultural, and relational contexts (Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973). Within communication accommodation, conversational partners may use **convergence**, meaning a person makes their communication more like another person’s. People who are accommodating in their communication style are seen as more competent, which illustrates the benefits of communicative flexibility. In order to be flexible, of course, people have to be aware of and monitor their own and others’ communication patterns. Conversely, conversational partners may use **divergence**, meaning a person uses communication to emphasize the differences between their conversational partner and themself.

Convergence and divergence can take place within the same conversation and may be used by one or both conversational partners. Convergence functions to make others feel at ease, to increase understanding, and to enhance social bonds. Divergence may be used to intentionally make another person feel unwelcome or perhaps to highlight a personal, group, or cultural identity. For example, many Black women use certain verbal communication patterns when communicating with other Black women as a way to highlight their racial identity and create group solidarity. In situations where multiple races interact, the women usually don’t use those same patterns, instead accommodating the language patterns of the larger group.



Although code-switching can lead to positive outcomes, it may make individuals feel like they cannot be their authentic selves. Consider how code-switching may affect minorities who feel pressure to conform to the norms of a dominant culture. Photo by Ogo from Pexels.

While communication accommodation might involve anything from adjusting how fast or slow you talk to how long you speak during each turn, **code-switching** refers to changes in accent, dialect, or language (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). There are many reasons that people might code-switch. For example, if a Southerner thinks their accent is leading others to form unfavorable impressions, they can consciously change their accent with much practice and effort. Once their ability to speak without their Southern accent is honed, they may be able to switch very quickly between their native accent when speaking with friends and family and their modified accent when speaking in professional settings. Additionally, people who work or live in multilingual settings may code-switch many times throughout the day, or even within a single conversation.

Using Words Affectively

Affective language refers to language used to express a person's feelings and create similar feelings in another person (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). Affective language can be intentionally used in relational contexts to create or enhance interpersonal bonds and can also be effectively employed in public speaking to engage an audience and motivate them in particular ways. We also use affective language spontaneously and less intentionally. People who "speak from the heart" connect well with others due to the affective nature of their words. Sometimes people become so filled with emotion that they have to express it, and these exclamations usually arouse emotions in others. Hearing someone exclaim, "I'm so happy!" can evoke similar feelings of joy, while hearing someone exclaim, "Why me!?" while sobbing conjures up similar feelings of sadness and frustration. There are also specific linguistic devices that facilitate affective communication.

Figurative Language

When people say something is a "figure of speech," they are referring to a word or phrase that deviates from expectations in some way in meaning or usage (Yaguello, 1998). Figurative language is the result of breaking semantic rules, but in a way that typically enhances meaning or understanding rather than diminishes it. To understand figurative language, a person has to be familiar with the semantic rules of a language and also with social norms and patterns within a cultural and/or language group, which often makes it difficult for non-native speakers to grasp. Figurative language has the ability to convey much meaning in fewer words, because some of the meaning lies in the context of usage (what a listener can imply by the deviation from semantic norms) and in the listener (how the listener makes meaning by connecting the figurative language to his or her personal experience). Some examples of figurative speech include simile, metaphor, and personification.

Many of the great speeches in U.S. history, from Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" are elevated by their use of figurative language. Photo by Pixabay from Pexels.

A **simile** is a direct comparison of two things using the words *like* or *as*. Similes can be very explicit for the purpose of conveying a specific meaning and can help increase clarity and lead people to personally connect to a meaning since they must visualize the comparison in their minds. For example, Forrest Gump's famous simile, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get," conjures up feelings of uncertainty and excitement. More direct similes like "I slept like a baby" and "That bread was hard as a rock" do not necessarily stir the imagination but still offer an alternative way of expressing something.

A **metaphor** is an implicit comparison of two things that are not alike or are not typically associated. Metaphors become meaningful as people realize the speaker's purpose for relating the two seemingly disparate ideas. In 1946, just after World War II ended, Winston Churchill stated the following in a speech: "An iron curtain has descended across the continent of Europe." Even though people knew there was no literal heavy metal curtain that had been lowered over Europe, the concepts of iron being strong and impenetrable and curtains being a divider combined to create a stirring and powerful image of a continent divided by the dark events of the previous years (Carpenter, 1999). Some communication scholars argue that metaphors serve a much larger purpose and function

to structure our human thought processes (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The metaphor "time is money" doesn't just represent an imaginative connection; it shapes our social realities. We engage in specific actions that "save time," "spend time," or "waste time" because we have been socialized to see time as a resource.

Many metaphors spring from our everyday experiences. For example, many objects have been implicitly compared to human body parts (e.g., a clock, which we say has a face and hands). **Personification** refers to the attribution of human qualities or characteristics of other living things to nonhuman objects or abstract concepts. This can be useful when trying to make something abstract more concrete and can create a sense of urgency or "realness" out of something that is hard for people to conceive. Personification has been used successfully in public awareness campaigns because it allows people to identify with something they think might not be relevant to them, as you can see in the following examples: "Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sleeping enemy that lives in many people and will one day wake up and demand your attention if you do not address it now." "Crystal meth is stalking your children whether you see it or not. You never know where it's hiding."

Evocative Language

Vivid language captures people's attention and their imagination by conveying emotions and action. Think of the array of mental images that a poem or a well-told story from a friend can conjure up. Evocative language can also lead us to have physical reactions. Words like *shiver* and *heartbroken* can lead people to remember previous physical sensations related to the word. As a speaker, there may be times when evoking a positive or negative reaction could be beneficial. Evoking a sense of calm could help you talk a friend through troubling health news. Evoking a sense of agitation and anger could help you motivate an audience to action. When we are conversing with a friend or speaking to an audience, we are primarily engaging others' visual and auditory senses. Evocative language can help your conversational partner or audience members feel, smell, or taste something as well as hear it and see it. Good writers know how to use words effectively and affectively. The rich fantasy worlds conceived in *Star Trek*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Twilight* show the power of figurative and evocative language to capture our attention and our imagination.

Some words are so evocative that their usage violates the social norms of appropriate conversations. Although we could use such words to intentionally shock people, we can also use euphemisms, or indirect and less evocative references to words or ideas that are deemed inappropriate to discuss directly. We have many euphemisms for things like sex and death (Allan & Burridge, 2006). While euphemisms can be socially useful and creative, they can also lead to misunderstanding and problems in cases where more direct communication is warranted despite social conventions.

Using Words Ethically

We learned in Chapter 1 that communication is irreversible. As the National Communication Association's "Credo for Ethical Communication" states, we should be held accountable for the long- and short-term effects of our communication. The way we talk, the words we choose to use, and the actions we take after we are done speaking are all important aspects of communication ethics. Knowing that language can have real effects for people increases our need to be aware of the ethical implications of what we say. In this section, we will focus on civility and accountability.

While many lament the decline of civility, standards and expectations for what is considered civil communication have changed over time. [Photo by Rosemary Ketchum from Pexels.]

Civility

Our strong emotions regarding our own beliefs, attitudes, and values can sometimes lead to incivility in our verbal communication. Incivility occurs when a person deviates from established social norms and can take many forms, including insults, bragging, bullying, gossiping, swearing, deception, and defensiveness, among others (Miller, 2001). Some people lament that we live in a time when civility is diminishing, but since standards and expectations for what is considered civil communication have changed over time, this isn't the only time such claims have been made (Miller, 2001).

Some journalists, media commentators, and scholars have argued that the "flaming" that happens on comment sections of websites and blogs is a type of verbal incivility that presents a threat to our democracy (Brooks & Greer, 2007). Other scholars of communication and democracy have not as readily labeled such communication "uncivil" (Cammaerts, 2009). It has long been argued that civility is important for the functioning and growth of a democracy (Kingwell, 1995). But in the new digital age of democracy where technologies like Twitter and Facebook have started democratic revolutions, some argue that the Internet and other new media have opened spaces in which people can engage in cyberactivism and express marginal viewpoints that may otherwise not be heard (Dahlberg, 2007). In any case, researchers have identified several aspects of language use online that are typically viewed as negative: name-calling, character assassination, and the use of obscene language (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). So what contributes to such uncivil behavior—online and offline? The following are some common individual and situational influences that may lead to breaches of civility (Miller, 2001):

- **Individual differences.** Some people differ in their interpretations of civility in various settings, and some people have personality traits that may lead to actions deemed uncivil on a more regular basis.
- **Ignorance.** In some cases, especially in novel situations involving uncertainty, people may not know what social norms and expectations are.
- **Lack of skill.** Even when we know how to behave, we may not be able to do it. Such frustrations may lead a person to revert to undesirable behavior such as engaging in personal attacks during a conflict because they don't know what else to do.
- **Lapse of control.** Self-control is not an unlimited resource. Even when people know how to behave and have the skill to respond to a situation appropriately, they may not do so. Even people who are careful to monitor their behavior have occasional slipups.
- **Negative intent.** Some people, in an attempt to break with conformity or challenge societal norms, or for self-benefit (publicly embarrassing someone in order to look cool or edgy), are openly uncivil. Such behavior can also result from mental or psychological stresses or illnesses.

Accountability

The complexity of our verbal language system allows us to present inferences as facts and mask judgments within seemingly objective or oblique language. As an ethical speaker and a critical listener, it is important to be able to distinguish between facts, inferences, and judgments (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). **Inferences** are conclusions based on thoughts or speculation, but not direct observation. **Facts** are conclusions based on direct observation or group consensus. **Judgments** are expressions of approval or disapproval that are subjective and not verifiable.

Linguists have noted that a frequent source of miscommunication is **inference-observation confusion**, or the misperception of an inference (conclusion based on limited information) as an observation (an observed or agreed-on fact) (Haney, 1992). We can see the possibility for such confusion in the following example: If a student posts on a professor-rating site the statement "This professor grades unfairly and plays favorites," then they are presenting an inference and a judgment that could easily be interpreted as a fact. Using some of the strategies discussed earlier for speaking clearly can help present information in a more ethical way—for example, by using concrete and descriptive language and owning emotions and thoughts through the use of "I language." To help clarify the message and be more accountable, the student could say, "I worked for three days straight on my final paper and only got a C," which we will assume is a statement of fact. This could then be followed up with "But my friend told me she only worked on hers the day before it was due and she got an A. I think that's unfair and I feel like my efforts aren't recognized by the professor." Of the last two statements, the first states what may be a fact (note, however, that the information is secondhand rather than directly observed) and the second states an inferred conclusion and expresses an owned thought and feeling. Sometimes people don't want to mark their statements as inferences because they want to believe them as facts. In this case, the student may have attributed her grade to the professor's "unfairness" to cover up or avoid thoughts that her friend may be a better student in this subject area, a better writer, or a better student in general. Distinguishing between facts, inferences, and judgments, however, allows your listeners to better understand your message and judge the merits of it, which makes us more accountable and therefore more ethical speakers.

Key Concepts: Engaging Language

Employing language in an engaging way requires some effort for most people in terms of learning the rules of a language system, practicing, and expanding your vocabulary and expressive repertoire. Only milliseconds pass before a thought is verbalized and "out there" in the world. Since we've already learned that we have to be accountable for the short- and long-term effects of our communication, we know being able to monitor our verbal communication and follow the old adage to "think before we speak" is an asset. Using language for effect is difficult, but it can make your speech unique whether it is in a conversation or in front of a larger audience. Aside from communicating ideas, speech also leaves lasting impressions. The following are some tips for using words well that can apply to various settings but may be particularly useful in situations where one person is trying to engage the attention of an audience.

- Use concrete words to make new concepts or ideas relevant to the experience of your listeners.
- Use an appropriate level of vocabulary. It is usually obvious when people are trying to speak at a level that is out of their comfort zone, which can hurt credibility.
- Avoid public speeches that are too rigid and unnatural. Even though public speaking is more formal than conversation, it is usually OK to use contractions and personal pronouns. Not doing so would make the speech awkward and difficult to deliver since it is not a typical way of speaking.
- Avoid "bloating" your language by using unnecessary words. Don't say "it is ever apparent" when you can just say "it's clear."
- Use vivid words to paint mental images for your listeners. Take them to places outside of the immediate setting through rich description.
- Use repetition to emphasize key ideas.
- When giving a formal speech that you have time to prepare for, record your speech and listen to your words. Have your outline with you and take note of areas that seem too bland, bloated, or confusing and then edit them before you deliver the speech.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some areas of verbal communication that you can do well on? What are some areas of verbal communication that you could improve?
2. Think of a time when a speaker's use of language left a positive impression on you. What concepts from this chapter can you apply to their verbal communication to help explain why it was so positive?
3. Think of a time when a speaker's use of language left a negative impression on you. What concepts from this chapter can you apply to their verbal communication to help explain why it was so negative?

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Credits

Chapter 4: Nonverbal Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Define nonverbal communication.
2. Provide examples of the functions of nonverbal communication.
3. List and define five types of nonverbal communication: kinesics, haptics, vocalics, proxemics, and chronemics.
4. Describe the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication.
5. Identify the outcomes and implications of nonverbal communication choices.

When we think about communication, we most often focus on how we exchange information using words. While verbal communication is important, humans relied on nonverbal communication for thousands of years before we developed the capability to communicate with words. **Nonverbal communication** is the process of generating meaning using behavior other than words. Rather than thinking of nonverbal communication as the opposite of or as separate from verbal communication, it's more accurate to view them as operating side by side—as part of the same system. In this chapter, we will discuss in more detail the functions and types of nonverbal communication and conclude with some guidance on how to improve our nonverbal communication competence.

4.1 Functions of Nonverbal Communication

Think of how we communicate through all five senses on a first date. Nonverbal communication encompasses everything from the smell of cologne to the ambience of the location. Photo by Katerina Holmes from Pexels.

As you'll recall from our introductory chapter, a channel is the sensory route on which a message travels. Oral communication only relies on one channel, because spoken language is transmitted through sound and picked up by our ears. Nonverbal communication, on the other hand, can be taken in by all five of our senses. Since most of our communication relies on visual and auditory channels, those will be the primary focus of this chapter. But we can also receive messages and generate meaning through touch, taste, and smell. Touch is an especially powerful form of nonverbal communication that we will discuss in this chapter, but we will not get into taste and smell, which have not received as much scholarly attention in relation to nonverbal communication as the other senses.

To further define nonverbal communication, we need to distinguish between vocal and verbal aspects of communication. Verbal and nonverbal communication include both vocal and nonvocal elements. A vocal element of verbal communication is spoken words—for example, "Come back here." A vocal element of nonverbal communication is **paralanguage**, which is the vocalized but not verbal part of a spoken message, such as speaking rate, volume, and pitch. Nonvocal elements of verbal communication include the use of unspoken symbols to convey meaning. Writing and American Sign Language (ASL) are nonvocal examples of verbal communication and are not considered nonverbal communication. Nonvocal elements of nonverbal communication include body language such as gestures, facial expressions, and eye-contact. Gestures are nonvocal and nonverbal since most of them do not refer to a specific word like a written or signed symbol does.

Nonverbal communication has a distinct history and serves separate evolutionary functions from verbal communication. For example, nonverbal communication is primarily biologically based while verbal communication is primarily culturally based. This is evidenced by the fact that some nonverbal communication has the same meaning across cultures, while no verbal communication systems share that same universal recognizability (Andersen, 1999). Nonverbal communication also evolved earlier than verbal communication and served an early and important survival function that helped humans later develop verbal communication. While some of our nonverbal communication abilities, like our sense of smell, lost strength as our verbal capacities increased, other abilities like paralanguage and movement have grown alongside verbal complexity.

In this section, we will highlight five functions of nonverbal communication, including its ability to convey meaning, regulate conversational flow, affect relationships, express our identities, and affect how we feel about ourselves.

Nonverbal Communication Conveys Meaning

You may have heard that more meaning is generated from nonverbal communication than from verbal. Some studies have found that 65 percent or more of our meaning is derived from nonverbal signals (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). Nonverbal communication conveys meaning by reinforcing, substituting for, or contradicting verbal communication.

Gestures can convey or reinforce meaning. [Photo by cottonbro studio from Pexels.]

As we've already learned, verbal and nonverbal communication are two parts of the same system that often work side by side, helping us generate meaning. In terms of reinforcing verbal communication, gestures can help describe a space or shape that another person is unfamiliar with in ways that words alone cannot. Gestures also reinforce basic meaning—for example, pointing to the door when you tell someone to leave. Facial expressions reinforce the emotional states we convey through verbal communication. For example, smiling while telling a funny story better conveys your emotions (Hargie, 2011). Vocal variation can help us emphasize a particular part of a message, which helps reinforce a word or sentence's meaning. For example, saying "What are *you* doing here?" conveys a different meaning than "What are you doing *here*?"

Nonverbal communication can substitute for verbal communication in a variety of ways. Nonverbal communication can convey much meaning when verbal communication isn't effective because of language barriers. Nonverbal communication is also useful in a quiet situation where verbal communication would cause a disturbance; for example, you may use a gesture to signal to a friend that you're ready to leave the library. Crowded or loud places can also impede verbal communication and lead people to rely more on nonverbal messages. Finally, there are just times when we know it's better not to say something aloud. If you want to point out a person's unusual outfit or signal to a friend that you think their date is a loser, you're probably more likely to do that nonverbally.

Last, nonverbal communication can convey meaning by contradicting verbal communication. For example, a person may say, "You can't do anything right!" in a mean tone but follow that up with a wink, which could indicate the person is teasing or joking. Such **mixed messages**, or messages in which verbal and nonverbal signals contradict each other, risk causing uncertainty and confusion on the part of receivers. Mixed messages lead us to look for more information to try to determine which message is more authentic. If we are unable to resolve the discrepancy, we are likely to react negatively and potentially withdraw from the interaction (Hargie, 2011).

Nonverbal Communication Regulates Conversational Flow

A student raising their hand is an example of using nonverbal communication to regulate the flow of conversation in the classroom. Photo by Arthur Krijgsman from Pexels.

Conversational interaction has been likened to a dance, where each person has to make moves and take turns without stepping on the other's toes. Nonverbal communication helps us regulate our conversations so we don't end up constantly interrupting each other or waiting in awkward silences between speaker turns. Pitch helps us cue others into our conversational intentions. A rising pitch typically indicates a question and a falling pitch indicates the end of a thought or the end of a conversational turn. We can also use a falling pitch to indicate closure, which can be very useful at the end of a speech to signal to the audience that you are finished, which cues the applause and prevents an awkward silence that the speaker ends up filling with "That's it" or "Thank you." We also signal our turn is coming to an end by stopping hand gestures and shifting our eye-contact to the person who we think will speak next (Hargie, 2011). Conversely, we can "hold the floor" with nonverbal signals even when we're not exactly sure what we're going to say next. Repeating a hand gesture or using one or more verbal fillers can extend our turn even though we are not verbally communicating at the moment.

Nonverbal Communication Affects Relationships

To successfully relate to other people, we must possess some skill at encoding and decoding nonverbal

communication. The nonverbal messages we send and receive influence our relationships in positive and negative ways and can work to bring people together or push them apart. Nonverbal communication in the form of immediacy behaviors and expressions of emotion are just two of many examples that illustrate how nonverbal communication affects our relationships.

Holding hands with a loved one is an example of a nonverbal immediacy behavior. Photo by Thirdman from Pexels.

Immediacy behaviors play a central role in bringing people together and have been identified by some scholars as the most important function of nonverbal communication (Andersen & Andersen, 2005). **Immediacy behaviors** are verbal and nonverbal behaviors that lessen real or perceived physical and psychological distance between communicators and include things like smiling, nodding, making eye-contact, and occasionally engaging in social, polite, or professional touch (Comadena et al., 2007). Immediacy behaviors are a good way of creating rapport, or a friendly and positive connection between people. Skilled nonverbal communicators are more likely to be able to create rapport with others due to attention-getting expressiveness, warm initial greetings, and an ability to get "in tune" with others, which conveys empathy (Riggio, 1992). These skills are important to help initiate and maintain relationships.

While verbal communication is our primary tool for solving problems and providing detailed instructions, nonverbal communication is our primary tool for communicating emotions. This makes sense when we remember that nonverbal communication emerged before verbal communication and was the channel through which we expressed anger, fear, and love for thousands of years of human history (Andersen, 1999). Touch and facial expressions are two primary ways we express emotions nonverbally. Love is a primary emotion that we express nonverbally and that forms the basis of our close relationships. Although no single facial expression for love has been identified, it is expressed through prolonged eye-contact, close interpersonal distances, increased touch, and increased time spent together, among other things. Given many people's limited emotional vocabulary, nonverbal expressions of emotion are central to our relationships.

Nonverbal Communication Expresses Our Identities

Nonverbal communication expresses who we are. Our identities (the groups to which we belong, our cultures, our hobbies and interests, etc.) are conveyed nonverbally through the way we set up our living and working spaces, the clothes we wear, the way we carry ourselves, and the accents and tones of our voices. Our physical bodies give others impressions about who we are, and some of these features are more under our control than others. Height, for example, has been shown to influence how people are treated and perceived in various contexts. Our level of attractiveness also influences our identities and how people perceive us. Although we can temporarily alter our height or looks—for example, with different shoes or different color contact lenses—we can only permanently alter these features using more invasive and costly measures such as cosmetic surgery. We have more control over some other aspects of nonverbal communication in terms of how we communicate our identities. For example,

the way we carry and present ourselves through posture, eye-contact, and tone of voice can be altered to present ourselves as warm or distant depending on the context.

Aside from our physical body, **artifacts**, which are the objects and possessions that surround us, also communicate our identities. Examples of artifacts include our clothes, jewelry, and space decorations. In all the previous examples, implicit norms or explicit rules can affect how we nonverbally present ourselves. For example, in a particular workplace it may be a norm (implicit) for people in management positions to dress casually, or it may be a rule (explicit) that different levels of employees wear different uniforms or follow particular dress codes. We can also use nonverbal communication to express identity characteristics that do not match up with who we actually think we are. Through changes to nonverbal signals, a capable person can try to appear helpless, a guilty person can try to appear innocent, or an uninformed person can try to appear credible.

Flags and jerseys are examples of artifacts that communicate someone's identity as a fan. Photo by El gringo photo from Pexels.

Nonverbal Communication Affects How We Feel About Ourselves

Adopting a confident posture or stance might affect how confident you actually feel. Photo by Muhammad-taha Ibrahim from Pexels.

Our nonverbal behaviors not only affect how others view us, but how we view ourselves. Changing our nonverbal signals can affect our own thoughts and emotions. Knowing this allows us to have more control over the trajectory of our communication, possibly allowing us to intervene in a negative cycle. For example, if you are waiting in line to get your driver's license renewed and the agents in front of you are moving slower than you'd like and the man in front of you doesn't have his materials organized and is asking unnecessary questions, you might start to exhibit nonverbal clusters that signal frustration. You might cross your arms, a closing-off gesture, and combine that with wrapping your fingers tightly around one bicep and occasionally squeezing, which is a self-touch adaptor that results from anxiety and stress. The longer you stand like that, the more frustrated and defensive you will become, because that nonverbal cluster reinforces and heightens your feelings. Increased awareness about these cycles can help you make conscious moves to change your nonverbal communication and, subsequently, your cognitive and emotional states (McKay et al., 1995).

4.2 Types of Nonverbal Communication

Just as verbal language is broken up into various categories, there are also different types of nonverbal communication. As we learn about each type of nonverbal signal, keep in mind that nonverbals often work in concert with each other, combining to repeat, modify, or contradict the verbal message being sent.

Kinesics

The word **kinesics** comes from the root word *kinesis*, which means "movement," and refers to the study of hand, arm, body, and face movements. Specifically, this section will outline the use of gestures, head movements and posture, eye-contact, and facial expressions as nonverbal communication.

Gestures

There are three main types of gestures: adaptors, emblems, and illustrators (Andersen, 1999). **Adaptors** are touching behaviors and movements that indicate internal states typically related to excitement or anxiety. Adaptors can be targeted toward the self, objects, or others. In regular social situations, adaptors result from uneasiness, anxiety, or a general sense that we are not in control of our surroundings. Many of us subconsciously click pens, shake our legs, or engage in other adaptors during classes, meetings, or while waiting as a way to do something with our excess energy. Public speaking students who watch video recordings of their speeches notice nonverbal adaptors that they didn't know they used. In public speaking situations, people most commonly use self- or object-focused adaptors.

Emblems are gestures that have a specific agreed-on meaning. A hitchhiker's raised thumb, the "OK" sign with thumb and index finger connected in a circle with the other three fingers sticking up, and the raised middle finger are all examples of emblems that have an agreed-on meaning or meanings with a culture.

Peace and love hand signs are examples of emblems that have an agreed-on meaning within a culture. Photo by Anna Shvets from Pexels.

Illustrators are the most common type of gesture and are used to illustrate the verbal message they accompany. For example, you might use hand gestures to indicate the size or shape of an object. Unlike emblems, illustrators do not typically have meaning on their own and are used more subconsciously than emblems. These largely involuntary and seemingly natural gestures flow from us as we speak but vary in terms of intensity and frequency based on context. Although we are never explicitly taught how to use illustrative gestures, we do it automatically. Think about how you still gesture when having an animated conversation on the phone even though the other person can't see you.

Head Movements and Posture

Head movements and posture are often both used to acknowledge others and

communicate interest or attentiveness. In terms of head movements, a head nod is a universal sign of acknowledgement in cultures where the formal bow is no longer used as a greeting. In these cases, the head nod essentially serves as an abbreviated bow. An innate and universal head movement is the headshake back and forth to signal "no." This nonverbal signal begins at birth, even before a baby has the ability to know that it has a corresponding meaning. We also move our head to indicate interest. For example, a head up typically indicates an engaged or neutral attitude, a head tilt indicates interest and is an innate submission gesture that exposes the neck and subconsciously makes people feel more trusting of us, and a head down signals a negative or aggressive attitude (Pease & Pease, 2004).

There are four general human postures: standing, sitting, squatting, and lying down (Hargie, 2011). Within each of these postures there are many variations, and when combined with particular gestures or other nonverbal cues they can express many different meanings. Most of our communication occurs while we are standing or sitting. One interesting standing posture involves putting our hands on our hips and is a nonverbal cue that we use subconsciously to make us look bigger and show assertiveness. When the elbows are pointed out, this prevents others from getting past us as easily and is a sign of attempted dominance or a gesture that says we're ready for action. In terms of sitting, leaning back shows informality and indifference, while leaning forward shows interest and attentiveness (Pease & Pease, 2004).

Eye-contact serves a number of purposes. In this image, eye-contact conveys attentiveness. Photo by Mizuno K from Pexels.

Eye-Contact

We also communicate through eye behaviors, primarily eye-contact. While eye behaviors are often studied under the category of kinesics, they have their own branch of nonverbal studies called **oculesics**, which comes from the Latin word *oculus*, meaning "eye." The face and eyes are the main point of focus during communication, and along with our ears our eyes take in most of the communicative information around us.

Eye-contact serves several communicative functions, ranging from regulating interaction to monitoring interaction, to conveying information, to establishing interpersonal connections. For example, we use eye-contact to signal to others that we are ready to speak or we use it to cue others to speak. I'm sure we've all been in that awkward situation where a teacher asks a question, no one else offers a response, and the teacher looks directly at us as if to say, "What do you think?" In that case, the teacher's eye-contact is used to cue us to respond. Other specific functions of eye-contact include:

- Regulating interaction and providing turn-taking signals
- Monitoring communication by receiving nonverbal communication from others
- Signaling cognitive activity (we look away when processing information)
- Expressing engagement (we show people we are listening with our eyes)
- Conveying intimidation
- Expressing flirtation
- Establishing rapport or connection

Facial Expressions

Our faces are the most expressive part of our bodies. Think of how photos are often intended to capture a particular expression "in a flash" to preserve for later viewing. Even though a photo is a snapshot in time, we can still interpret much meaning from a human face caught in a moment of expression, and basic facial expressions are recognizable by humans all over the world.

Smiles and facial expressions are powerful communicative signals. Photo by Fox from Pexels.

Smiles are powerful communicative signals and a key immediacy behavior. Although facial expressions are typically viewed as innate and several are universally recognizable, they are not always connected to an emotional or internal biological stimulus; they can actually serve a more social purpose. For example, most of the smiles we produce are primarily made for others and are not just an involuntary reflection of an internal emotional state (Andersen, 1999). These social smiles, however, are slightly but perceptibly different from more genuine smiles. People generally perceive smiles as more genuine when the other person smiles "with their eyes." This particular type of smile is difficult if not impossible to fake because the muscles around the eye that are activated when we spontaneously or genuinely smile are not under our voluntary control. It is the involuntary and spontaneous contraction of these muscles that moves the skin around our cheeks, eyes, and nose to create a smile that's distinct from a fake or polite smile (Evans, 2001). People are able to distinguish the difference between these smiles, which is why photographers often engage in cheesy joking with adults or use props with children to induce a genuine smile before they snap a picture.

In the context of public speaking, facial expressions help set the emotional tone for a speech. In order to set a positive tone before you start speaking, briefly look at the audience and smile to communicate friendliness, openness, and confidence. Beyond your opening and welcoming facial expressions, facial expressions communicate a range of emotions and can be used to infer personality traits and make judgments about a speaker's credibility and competence. Facial expressions can communicate that a speaker is tired, excited, angry, confused, frustrated, sad, confident, smug, shy, or bored. Even if you aren't bored, for example, a slack face with little animation may lead an audience to think that you are bored with your own speech, which isn't likely to motivate them to be interested. So make sure your facial expressions are communicating an emotion, mood, or personality trait that you think your audience will view favorably, and that will help you achieve your speech goals.

Vocalics

We learned earlier that *paralanguage* refers to the vocalized but nonverbal parts of a message. **Vocalics** is the study of paralanguage, which includes the vocal qualities that go along with verbal messages, such as pitch, volume, rate, vocal quality, and verbal fillers (Andersen, 1999).

Pitch helps convey meaning, regulate conversational flow, and communicate the intensity of a message. Even

babies recognize a sentence with a higher pitched ending as a question. We also learn that greetings have a rising emphasis and farewells have falling emphasis. Of course, no one ever tells us these things explicitly; we learn them through observation and practice. We do not pick up on some more subtle or complex patterns of paralanguage involving pitch until we are older. Children, for example, have a difficult time perceiving sarcasm, which is usually conveyed through paralinguistic characteristics like pitch and tone rather than the actual words being spoken (Andersen, 1999).

Paralanguage provides important context for the verbal content of speech. For example, **volume** helps communicate intensity. A louder voice is usually thought of as more intense, although a soft voice combined with a certain tone and facial expression can be just as intense. We typically adjust our volume based on our setting, the distance between people, and the relationship. In our age of computer-mediated communication, TYPING IN ALL CAPS is usually seen as offensive, as it is equated with yelling. A voice at a low volume or a whisper can be very appropriate when sending a covert message or flirting with a romantic partner, but it wouldn't enhance a person's credibility if used during a professional presentation.

Speaking rate refers to how fast or slow a person speaks and can lead others to form impressions about our emotional state, credibility, and intelligence. As with volume, variations in speaking rate can interfere with the ability of others to receive and understand verbal messages. A slow speaker could bore others and lead their attention to wander. A fast speaker may be difficult to follow, and the fast delivery can distract from the message. Whether speaking quickly or slowly, it is important that a speaker also clearly articulate and pronounce their words.

Our **tone of voice** can be controlled somewhat with pitch, volume, and emphasis, but each voice has a distinct quality or vocal signature. Voices vary in terms of resonance, pitch, and tone, and some voices are more pleasing than others. People typically find pleasing voices that employ vocal variety and are not monotone.

Vocal fillers are sounds that fill gaps in our speech as we think about what to say next. They are considered a part of nonverbal communication because they are not like typical words that stand in for a specific meaning or meanings. Vocal fillers such as "um," "uh," "like," and "so" are common in regular conversation and are not typically disruptive. As we learned earlier, the use of vocal fillers can help a person "keep the floor" during a conversation if they need to pause for a moment to think before continuing on with verbal communication. Vocal fillers in more formal settings, like a public speech, can be a distraction and hurt a speaker's credibility.

Haptics

Think of how touch has the power to comfort someone in moments of sorrow when words alone cannot. This positive power of touch is countered by the potential for touch to be threatening because of its connection to sex and violence. To learn about the power of touch, we turn to **haptics**, which refers to the study of communication by touch.

We probably get more explicit advice and instruction on how to use touch than any other form of nonverbal communication. A lack of nonverbal communication competence related to touch could have negative interpersonal consequences. For example, if we don't follow the advice we've been given about the importance of a firm handshake, a person might make negative judgments about our confidence or credibility. A lack of

competence could have more dire negative consequences, including legal punishment, if we touch someone inappropriately (intentionally or unintentionally). Touch is necessary for human social development, and it can be welcoming, threatening, or persuasive.

Preferences for communicating through touch vary both culturally and individually. For example, while shaking hands might be the most common greeting in the United States, cheek kissing is commonly used in parts of the Middle East. Meanwhile, at the individual level, people might have different preferences for hugging or holding hands. The standards for touch in professional and social situations are often formal and ritualized, but individual preferences make the rules more ambiguous among friends, family, and romantic partners. Individuals must negotiate their own comfort levels with various types of touch and may encounter some uncertainty if their preferences don't match up with their relational partner's.

As depicted here, an embrace between loved ones can communicate joy and affection. Photo by Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels.

Proxemics

Proxemics refers to the study of how space and distance influence communication. We only need look at the ways in which space shows up in common metaphors to see that space, communication, and relationships are closely related. For example, when we are content with and attracted to someone, we say we are "close" to them. When we lose connection with someone, we may say that we are "distant." In general, space influences how people communicate and behave. To better understand how proxemics functions in nonverbal communication, we will more closely examine the proxemic distances associated with personal space and the concept of territoriality.

We all have varying definitions of what our "personal space" is, and these definitions are contextual and depend on the situation and the relationship. Although our bubbles are invisible, people are socialized into the norms of personal space within their cultural group. Scholars have identified four zones for US Americans, which are public, social, personal, and intimate distance (Hall, 1968).

Public Space (12 Feet or More)

Public space starts about twelve feet from a person and extends out from there. This is the least personal of the four zones and would typically be used when a person is engaging in a formal speech and is removed from the audience to allow the audience to see or when a high-profile or powerful person like a celebrity or executive maintains such a distance as a sign of power or for safety and security reasons. In terms of regular interaction, we are often not obligated or expected to acknowledge or interact with people who enter our public zone. It would be difficult to have a deep conversation with someone at this level because you have to speak louder and don't have the physical closeness that is often needed to promote emotional closeness and/or establish rapport.

Maintaining a social distance became the norm during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by Tim Mossholder from Pexels.

Social Space (4-12 Feet)

Communication that occurs in the social zone, which is four to twelve feet away, is typically in the context of a professional or casual interaction, but not intimate or public. This distance is preferred in many professional settings because it reduces the suspicion of any impropriety. The expression "keep someone at an arm's length" means that someone is kept out of the personal space and kept in the social/professional space. If two people held up their arms and stood so just the tips of their fingers were touching, they would be around four feet away from each other, which is perceived as a safe distance because the possibility for intentional or unintentional touching doesn't exist. The closer that people advance into our social zone, the more we feel obligated to at least acknowledge their presence.

Personal Space (1.5-4 Feet)

Much of our communication occurs in the personal zone, which is what we typically think of as our "personal space bubble" and extends from 1.5 feet to 4 feet away. We are most comfortable interacting with friends, close acquaintances, and significant others in this zone. This zone can help facilitate meaningful conversation, self-disclosure, and feelings of closeness—but even people who know each other could be uncomfortable spending too much time in this zone unnecessarily.

Intimate Space (0-1.5 Feet)

As we breach the invisible line that is 1.5 feet from our body, we enter the intimate zone, which is reserved for only our closest friends, family, and romantic partners. It is impossible to completely ignore people when they are in this space, even if we are trying to pretend that we're ignoring them. A breach of this space can be comforting in some contexts and annoying or frightening in others.

So what happens when our space is violated? Although these zones are well established in research for personal space preferences of US Americans, individuals vary in terms of their reactions to people entering certain zones, and determining what constitutes a "violation" of space is subjective and contextual. For example, another person's presence in our social or public zones doesn't typically arouse suspicion or negative physical or communicative reactions, but it could in some situations or with certain people. However, many situations lead to our personal and intimate space being breached by others against our will, and these breaches are more likely to be upsetting, even when they are expected. We've all had to get into a crowded elevator or wait in a long line. In such situations, we may rely on some verbal communication to reduce immediacy and indicate that we are not interested in closeness and are aware that a breach has occurred. People make comments about the crowd, saying, "We're really packed in here like sardines," or use humor to indicate that they are pleasant and well-adjusted and uncomfortable with the breach like any "normal" person would be.

Chronemics

We likely all have friends who are chronically late. Think about what their use of time communicates about them. They could be labeled as inconsiderate, disorganized, free-spirited, or busy. Regardless, their treatment of time communicates something about them as individuals and about their relationships with others. This demonstrates the importance of **chronemics**, or the study of how time affects communication.

A monochronic individual is likely to be stressed when they are running late. Photo by Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels.

The way we experience time varies based on our mood, our interest level, and other factors. Think about how quickly time passes when you are interested in and therefore engaged in something. I have taught fifty-minute classes that seemed to drag on forever and three-hour classes that zipped by. Individuals also vary based on whether they are future- or past-oriented. People with past-time orientations may want to reminisce about the past, reunite with old friends, and put considerable time into preserving memories and keepsakes in scrapbooks and photo albums. People with future-time orientations may spend the same amount of time making career and personal plans, writing out to-do lists, or researching future vacations, potential retirement spots, or what book they're going to read next.

Cultural factors also impact how we view time. Polychronic people keep more flexible schedules and may engage in several activities at once. Monochronic people tend to schedule their time more rigidly and do one thing at a time. A polychronic or monochronic orientation to time influences our social realities and how we interact with others.

Additionally, the way we use time depends in some ways on our status. For example, doctors can make their patients wait for extended periods of time, and executives and celebrities may run consistently behind schedule, making others wait for them. Promptness and the amount of time that is socially acceptable for lateness and waiting varies among individuals and contexts.

Nonverbal Congruence

As this overview of different types of nonverbal communication has demonstrated, nonverbal communication is multichannel, and we rarely send a nonverbal message in isolation. For example, a posture may be combined with a touch or eye behavior to create what is called a nonverbal cluster (Pease & Pease, 2004). **Nonverbal congruence** refers to consistency among different nonverbal expressions within a cluster. Congruent nonverbal communication is more credible and effective than ambiguous or conflicting nonverbal cues. Even though you may intend for your nonverbal messages to be congruent, they could still be decoded in a way that doesn't match up with your intent, especially since nonverbal expressions vary in terms of their degree of conscious encoding. In

this sense, the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication creates the potential of both increased credibility and increased ambiguity.

When we become more aware of the messages we are sending, we can monitor for nonverbal signals that are incongruent with other messages or may be perceived as such. If a student is talking to his professor about his performance in the class and concerns about his grade, the professor may lean forward and nod, encoding a combination of a body orientation and a head movement that conveys attention. If the professor, however, regularly breaks off eye-contact and looks anxiously at her office door, then she is sending a message that could be perceived as disinterest, which is incongruent with the overall message of care and concern she probably wants to encode. Increasing our awareness of the multiple channels through which we send nonverbal cues can help us make our signals more congruent in the moment.

Key Concepts: Impression Management

Our nonverbal communication helps us express our identities and play a crucial part in impression management. Being able to control nonverbal expressions and competently encode them allows us to better manage our persona and project a desired self to others—for example, a self that is perceived as competent, socially attractive, and engaging. Being nonverbally expressive during initial interactions usually leads to more favorable impressions. So smiling, keeping an attentive posture, and offering a solid handshake help communicate confidence and enthusiasm that can be useful on a first date, during a job interview, when visiting family for the holidays, or when running into an acquaintance at the grocery store. Nonverbal communication can also impact the impressions you make as a student. Research has also found that students who are more nonverbally expressive are liked more by their teachers and are more likely to have their requests met by their teachers (Mottet et al., 2004).

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss how each of the five categories of nonverbal communication (kinesics, haptics, vocalics, proxemics, and chronemics) play a role in impression management.
2. Identify some nonverbal behaviors that would signal a positive interaction on a first date and on a job interview. Then identify some nonverbal behaviors that would signal a negative interaction in each of those contexts.

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Credits

Chapter 5: Listening

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the stages of the listening process.
2. Compare and contrast the four main listening styles.
3. Discuss common barriers to effective listening.
4. Identify strategies for improving listening competence.
5. Summarize the characteristics of active listening.
6. Describe how to employ listening skills in order to critically analyze messages.

In our sender-oriented society, listening is often overlooked as an important part of the communication process. Yet research shows that adults spend about 45 percent of their time listening, which is more than any other communicative activity. In some contexts, we spend even more time listening than that. On average, workers spend 55 percent of their workday listening, and managers spend about 63 percent of their day listening (Hargie, 2011).

Listening is a primary means through which we learn new information, provide support to our relational partners, and develop an accurate self-concept. Overall, improving our listening skills can help us be better students, better relational partners, and more successful professionals.

Think of all of the activities you engage in that involve listening. What percentage of your day is spent listening? Photo by Christina Morillo from Pexels.

5.1 Understanding How and Why We Listen

Listening is the learned process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. We begin to engage with the listening process long before we engage in any recognizable verbal or nonverbal communication. It is only after listening for months as infants that we begin to consciously practice our own forms of expression. In this section, we will learn more about the stages of the listening process and the four styles of listening.

The Listening Process

Listening is a process and as such doesn't have a defined start and finish. Like the communication process, listening has cognitive, behavioral, and relational elements and doesn't unfold in a linear, step-by-step fashion. Models of processes are informative in that they help us visualize specific components, but keep in mind that they do not capture the speed, overlapping nature, or overall complexity of the actual process in action. The four stages of the listening process are receiving, interpreting, recalling, and responding.

Receiving

Before we can engage other steps in the listening process, we must take in stimuli through our senses. We primarily take in information needed for listening through auditory and visual channels. Although we don't often think about visual cues as a part of listening, they influence how we interpret messages. For example, seeing a person's face when we hear their voice allows us to take in nonverbal cues from facial expressions and eye-contact. The fact that these visual cues are missing in e-mail, text, and phone interactions presents some difficulties for reading contextual clues into meaning received through only auditory channels.

In chapter 1, we discussed noise, which is a factor that influences how we receive messages. Some noise interferes primarily with *hearing*, which is the physical process of receiving stimuli through internal and external components of the ears and eyes, and some interferes with *listening*, which is the cognitive process of processing the stimuli taken in during hearing. While hearing leads to listening, they are not the same thing. External noises, such as other people talking, the sounds of traffic, and music, interfere with the physiological aspects of hearing. Internal noises, like stress and anger, interfere primarily with the cognitive processes of listening. We can enhance our ability to receive, and in turn listen, by trying to minimize noise.

Interpreting

During the interpreting stage of listening, we attempt to make meaning out of the visual and auditory information we receive. The interpreting stage engages cognitive and relational processing, as we take in informational, contextual, and relational cues in an effort to understand and evaluate what we hear.

When we understand something, we are able to attach meaning by connecting information to previous experiences. The interpreting phase can be almost instantaneous when we are easily able to connect the information we are hearing to our existing knowledge and experience. Alternatively, the interpreting phase can be long and strenuous when we have a difficult time making those connections.

When we evaluate something, we make judgments about its credibility, completeness, and worth. In terms of credibility, we try to determine the degree to which we believe a speaker's statements are correct and/or true. In terms of completeness, we try to "read between the lines" and evaluate the message in relation to what we know about the topic or situation being discussed. We evaluate the worth of a message by making a value judgment about whether we think the message or idea is good/bad, right/wrong, or desirable/undesirable. Our ability to evaluate a message during the interpreting stage requires skills in critical thinking.

Recalling

After hearing and interpreting a message, we attempt to store it in our memory. Overall, our memories are known to be fallible. We forget about half of what we hear immediately after hearing it, recall 35 percent after eight hours, and recall 20 percent after a day (Hargie, 2011).

Taking notes during classes and meetings can help with the recall stage of listening. [Photo by RDNE Stock project from Pexels.]

Recall is an important part of the listening process because it is most often used to assess listening abilities and effectiveness. Many quizzes and tests in school are based on recall and are often used to assess how well students comprehended information presented in class, which is seen as an indication of how well they listened. When recall is our only goal, we excel at it. Experiments have found that people can memorize and later recall a set of faces and names with near 100 percent recall when sitting in a quiet lab and asked to do so. But throw in external noise, more visual stimuli, and multiple contextual influences, and we can't remember the name of the person we were just introduced to one minute earlier. Even in interpersonal encounters, we rely on recall to test whether or not someone was listening. Imagine that Azam is talking to his friend Belle, who is sitting across from him in a restaurant booth. Azam, annoyed that Belle keeps checking her phone, stops and asks, "Are you listening?" Belle inevitably replies, "Yes," since we rarely fess up to our poor listening habits, and Azam replies, "Well, what did I just say?"

Responding

Responding entails sending verbal and nonverbal messages that indicate attentiveness and understanding or a lack thereof. From our earlier discussion of communication models in Chapter 1, you may be able to connect this part of the listening process to feedback. Later, we will learn more specifics about how to encode and decode the verbal and nonverbal cues sent during the responding stage, but we all know from experience some signs that indicate whether a person is paying attention and understanding a message or not.

We send verbal and nonverbal feedback while another person is talking and after they are done. **Back-channel cues** are the verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking and can consist of verbal cues like "uh-huh," "oh," and "right," and/or nonverbal cues like direct eye-contact, head nods, and leaning forward. Back-channel cues are generally a form of positive feedback that indicates others are actively listening. People also send cues intentionally and unintentionally that indicate they aren't listening. If another person is looking away, fidgeting, texting, or turned away, we will likely interpret those responses negatively.

Paraphrasing is a responding behavior that can also show that you understand what was communicated. When you paraphrase information, you rephrase the message into your own words. For example, you might say the following to start off a paraphrased response: "What I heard you say was…" or "It seems like you're saying…" You can also ask clarifying questions to get more information. It is often a good idea to pair a paraphrase with a question to keep a conversation flowing. For example, you might pose the following paraphrase and question pair: "It seems like you believe you were treated unfairly. Is that right?" Or you might ask a standalone question

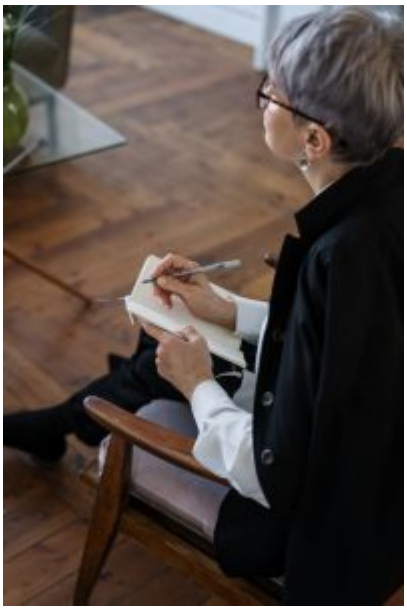
like “What did your boss do that made you think he was ‘playing favorites?’” Make sure to paraphrase and/or ask questions once a person’s turn is over, because interrupting can also be interpreted as a sign of not listening. Paraphrasing is also a good tool to use in computer-mediated communication, especially since miscommunication can occur due to a lack of nonverbal and other contextual cues.

Styles of Listening

Listening serves many purposes, and different situations require different styles of listening. The style of listening we engage in affects our communication and how others respond to us. For example, when we listen to empathize with others, our communication will likely be supportive and open, which will then lead the other person to feel “heard” and supported and hopefully view the interaction positively (Bodie & Villaume, 2003). People may be categorized as one or more of the following listeners: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented listeners. Research finds that 40 percent of people have more than one preferred listening style, and that they choose a style based on the listening situation (Bodie & Villaume, 2003). Other research finds that people often still revert back to a single preferred style in times of emotional or cognitive stress, even if they know a different style of listening would be better (Worthington, 2003). The following summaries provide an overview of each listening style.

People-Oriented Listeners

People-oriented listeners are concerned about the emotional states of others and listen with the purpose of offering support in interpersonal relationships. People-oriented listeners can be characterized as “supporters” who are caring and understanding. These listeners are sought out because they are known as people who will “lend an ear.” A potential drawback is that these listeners may get distracted from a specific task or the content of a message because they are so concerned about the needs and feelings of the communicator. These listeners may or may not be valued for the advice they give, but all people often want is a good listener. This type of listening may be especially valuable in interpersonal communication involving emotional exchanges, as a people-oriented listener can create a space where people can make themselves vulnerable without fear of being cut off or judged. People-oriented listeners are likely skilled empathetic listeners and may find success in supportive fields like counseling, social work, or nursing.



Therapists and counselors are often excellent people-oriented listeners. Photo by cottonbro studio from Pexels.

Action-Oriented Listeners

Action-oriented listeners focus on what action needs to take place in regard to a received message and try to formulate an organized way to initiate that action. These listeners are frustrated by unorganized or inconsistent information because it detracts from the possibility of actually doing something. Action-oriented listeners can be thought of as “builders”—like an engineer, a construction site foreperson, or a skilled project manager. This style of listening can be very effective when a task needs to be completed under time, budgetary, or other logistical constraints. One research study found that people prefer an action-oriented

style of listening in instructional contexts (Imhof, 2004). In other situations, such as interpersonal communication, action-oriented listeners may not actually be very interested in listening, instead taking a "What do you want me to do?" approach.

Content-oriented listeners often do well in academic settings. Photo by fauxels from Pexels.

Content-Oriented Listeners

Content-oriented listeners like to listen to complex information and evaluate the content of a message, often from multiple perspectives, before drawing conclusions. These listeners can be thought of as "learners," and they also ask questions to solicit more information to fill out their understanding of an issue. Content-oriented listeners may not do well under time restraints, as their desire to be thorough may be difficult to manage when immediate action is needed. Content-oriented listeners often enjoy high perceived credibility because of their thorough, balanced, and objective approach to engaging with information. Content-oriented listeners are likely skilled informational and critical listeners and may find success in academic careers or as judges.

Time-Oriented Listeners

Time-oriented listeners are concerned with completing tasks and achieving goals in a timely manner. They do not like information perceived as irrelevant and like to stick to a schedule. Often, these listeners will verbalize the time constraints under which they are operating. For example, a time-oriented supervisor may say the following to an employee who has just entered his office and asked to talk: "Sure, I can talk, but I only have about five minutes." These listeners may also exhibit nonverbal cues that indicate time and/or attention shortages, such as looking at a clock, avoiding eye-contact, or nonverbally trying to close down an interaction. Time-oriented listeners are also more likely to interrupt others, which may make them seem insensitive to emotional/personal needs. On the positive side, time-oriented listeners may be effective at navigating quickly through less important information and coming up with quick decisions when necessary.

5.2 Becoming More Effective Listeners

Many people admit that they could stand to improve their listening skills. This section will help us do that. In this section, we will discuss common barriers to listening, as well as specific strategies for becoming effective active listeners.

Barriers to Listening

Barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process (Hargie, 2011). At the receiving

stage, noise can block or distort incoming stimuli. At the interpreting stage, complex or abstract information may be difficult to relate to previous experiences, making it difficult to reach understanding. At the recalling stage, natural limits to our memory and challenges to concentration can interfere with remembering. At the responding stage, a lack of paraphrasing and questioning skills can lead to misunderstanding. In the following section, we will explore how environmental and physical factors, cognitive and personal factors, and bad listening practices present barriers to effective listening.

What external noises interfere with your ability to effectively listen? Photo by Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels.

Environmental and Physical Barriers to Listening

Environmental factors such as lighting, temperature, and furniture affect our ability to listen. A room that is too dark can make us sleepy, just as a room that is too warm or cool can raise awareness of our physical discomfort to a point that it is distracting. Some seating arrangements facilitate listening, while others separate people. In general, listening is easier when listeners can make direct eye-contact with and are in close physical proximity to a speaker. The ability to effectively see and hear a person increases people's confidence in their abilities to receive and process information. Eye-contact and physical proximity can still be affected by noise. As we learned in Chapter 1, external noises such as a whirring air conditioner, barking dogs, or a ringing fire alarm can obviously interfere with listening despite direct lines of sight and well-placed furniture.

Physiological factors, such as physical illness, injury, or bodily stress, can also interfere with our ability to process incoming information. These are considered physical barriers to effective listening because they emanate from our physical body. Various ailments can range from annoying to unbearably painful and impact our listening relative to their intensity.

Internal noises often bridge physical and cognitive barriers to effective listening. Noise stemming from our psychological states including moods and levels of arousal can facilitate or impede listening. Any mood or state of arousal, positive or negative, that is too far above or below our regular baseline creates a barrier to message reception and processing. The generally positive emotional state of being in love can be just as much of a barrier as feeling hatred. Being excited about an upcoming party can distract as much as being stressed about an upcoming exam. While we will explore additional cognitive barriers to effective listening more in the next section, internal noise is relevant here given that the body and mind are not completely separate. In fact, they can interact in ways that further interfere with listening. Fatigue, for example, is usually a combination of psychological and physiological stresses that manifests as stress, weakness, and tiredness. Additionally, mental anxiety can also manifest itself in our bodies through trembling, sweating, blushing, or even breaking out in rashes.

Cognitive and Personal Barriers to Listening

Aside from the barriers to effective listening that may be present in the environment or emanate from our bodies, cognitive limits and prejudices can interfere with listening.

Whether you call it multitasking, daydreaming, wandering, or drifting off, we all cognitively process other things while receiving messages. If you think of your listening mind as a wall of ten televisions, you may notice that

in some situations five of the ten televisions are tuned into one channel. If that one channel is a lecture being given by your professor, then you are exerting about half of your cognitive processing abilities on one message. In another situation, all ten televisions may be on different channels. The fact that we have the capability to process more than one thing at a time offers some advantages and disadvantages. But unless we can better understand how our cognitive capacities and personal preferences affect our listening, we are likely to experience more barriers than benefits.

Sometimes our minds wander because of the difference between speech and thought rate. While people speak at a rate of 125 to 175 words per minute, we can process between 400 and 800 words per minute (Hargie, 2011). This gap between speech rate and thought rate gives us an opportunity to side-process any number of thoughts that can be distracting from a more important message. Because of this gap, it is exceedingly difficult to give one message our "undivided attention," but we can occupy other channels in our minds with thoughts related to the central message. For example, using some of your extra cognitive processing abilities to repeat, rephrase, or reorganize messages coming from one source allows you to use that extra capacity in a way that reinforces the primary message.

Information overload is a common barrier to effective listening. Photo by energepic.com from Pexels.

Poor message delivery is another common cause of a distracted mind. Sometimes our trouble listening originates in the sender. In terms of message construction, poorly structured messages or messages that are too vague, too jargon filled, or too simple can present listening difficulties. In terms of speakers' delivery, verbal fillers, monotone voices, distracting movements, or a disheveled appearance can inhibit our ability to cognitively process a message (Hargie, 2011). Speakers can employ particular strategies to create listenable messages that take some of the burden off the listener by tailoring a message to be heard and processed easily. Listening also becomes difficult when a speaker tries to present too much information. **Information overload** is a common barrier to effective listening that good speakers can help mitigate by building redundancy into their speeches and providing concrete examples of new information to help audience members interpret and understand the key ideas.

Bad Listening Practices

The previously discussed barriers to effective listening may be difficult to overcome because they are at least partially beyond our control. Physical barriers and cognitive limitations exist within all of us, and it is more realistic to believe that we can become more conscious of and lessen them than it is to believe that we can eliminate them altogether. Other "bad listening" practices may be habitual, but they are easier to address with some concerted effort. Here are seven bad practices that listeners can work to improve:

1. **Rehearsing** – We tend to rehearse what we are going to say next while a speaker is still talking. Rehearsal can be an important part of the listening process but becomes problematic when we listen with the goal of responding, rather than the goal of understanding. This poor listening habit can lead us to miss important information that could influence our response.

2. **Judging** – When we engage in prejudiced listening, we are usually trying to preserve our ways of thinking and avoid being convinced of something different. This type of prejudice is a barrier to effective listening, because when we prejudge a person based on their identity or ideas, we usually stop listening in an active and/or ethical way.
3. **Interrupting** – Interruptions can be intentional or unintentional. Sometimes we misread cues and think a person is done speaking. At other times, people use interruptions in an effort to dominate a conversation. In either case, excessive interruptions can make a communicator form a negative impression of the interrupter and may lead to them withdrawing from the conversation.
4. **Eavesdropping** – Eavesdropping is a bad listening practice that involves a calculated and planned attempt to secretly listen to a conversation. There is a difference between eavesdropping on and overhearing a conversation. While people may eavesdrop for different reasons, it is unethical because it is a violation of people's privacy.
5. **Aggressive Listening** – Aggressive listening is a bad listening practice in which people pay attention in order to attack something that a speaker says (McCornack, 2007). Aggressive listeners like to ambush speakers in order to critique their ideas, personality, or other characteristics. Such behavior often results from built-up frustration within an interpersonal relationship.
6. **Narcissistic Listening** – Narcissistic listening is a form of self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them (McCornack, 2007). A common sign of narcissistic listening is the combination of a "pivot," when listeners shift the focus of attention back to them, and "one-upping," when listeners try to top what previous speakers have said during the interaction.
7. **Pseudo-Listening** – Pseudo-listening is behaving as if you're paying attention to a speaker when you're actually not (McCornack, 2007). Outwardly visible signals of attentiveness are an important part of the listening process, but when they are just an "act," the pseudo-listener is engaging in bad listening behaviors.

Active Listening

Active listening refers to the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices. Active listening can help address many of the environmental, physical, cognitive, and personal barriers to effective listening that we identified. The behaviors associated with active listening can also enhance informational, critical, and empathetic listening.

Overcoming Barriers Through Active Listening

Being an active listener starts before you actually start receiving a message. Active listeners make strategic choices and take action in order to set up ideal listening conditions. Physical and environmental noises can often be managed by moving locations or by manipulating the lighting, temperature, or furniture. When possible, avoid important listening activities during times of distracting psychological or physiological noise. For example, we often know when we're going to be hungry, full, more awake, less awake, more anxious, or less anxious, and advance planning can alleviate the presence of these barriers. For college students, who often have some flexibility

in their class schedules, knowing when you best listen can help you make strategic choices regarding what class to take when. Of course, we don't always have control over our schedule, in which case we will need to utilize other effective listening strategies.

In terms of cognitive barriers to effective listening, we can prime ourselves to listen by analyzing a listening situation before it begins. For example, you could ask yourself the following questions:

1. "What are my goals for listening to this message?"
2. "How does this message relate to me / affect my life?"
3. "What listening style is most appropriate for this message?"

Active listening refers to the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices. Photo by Brett Sayles from Pexels.

As we learned earlier, the difference between speech and thought processing rate means listeners' level of attention varies while receiving a message. Effective listeners must work to maintain focus as much as possible and refocus when attention shifts or fades (Wolvin & Coakley, 1993). One way to do this is to find the motivation to listen. If you can identify intrinsic and or extrinsic motivations for listening to a particular message, then you will be more likely to remember the information presented. Ask yourself how a message could impact your life, your career, your intellect, or your relationships. This can help overcome our tendency toward selective attention.

Given that we can process more words per minute than people can speak, we can engage in internal dialogue, making good use of our intrapersonal communication, to become a better listener. Three possibilities for internal dialogue include covert coaching, self-reinforcement, and covert questioning; explanations and examples of each follow (Hargie, 2011):

- **Covert coaching** involves sending yourself messages containing advice about better listening, such as "You're getting distracted by things you have to do after work. Just focus on what your supervisor is saying now."
- **Self-reinforcement** involves sending yourself affirmative and positive messages: "You're being a good active listener. This will help you do well on the next exam."
- **Covert questioning** involves asking yourself questions about the content in ways that focus your attention and reinforce the material: "What is the main idea from that PowerPoint slide?" "Why is he talking about his brother in front of our neighbors?"

Other tools can help with concentration and memory. **Mental bracketing** refers to the process of intentionally separating out intrusive or irrelevant thoughts that may distract you from listening (McCornack, 2007). This requires that we monitor our concentration and attention and be prepared to let thoughts that aren't related to a speaker's message pass through our minds without us giving them much attention. **Mnemonic devices** are techniques that can aid in information recall (Hargie, 2011). Starting in ancient Greece and Rome, educators used these devices to help people remember information. They work by imposing order and organization on

information. Common mnemonic devices include acronyms (e.g., “Roy G. Biv” for the colors of the rainbow), rhymes (e.g., “Righty tighty, lefty loosey” to remember which way to turn a screw), and songs (e.g., The Alphabet Song).

Active Listening Behaviors

From the suggestions discussed previously, you can see that we can prepare for active listening in advance and engage in certain cognitive strategies to help us listen better. We also engage in active listening behaviors as we receive and process messages.

Eye-contact is a key sign of active listening. [Photo by fauxels from Pexels.]

Eye-contact is a key sign of active listening. Speakers usually interpret a listener’s eye-contact as a signal of attentiveness. While a lack of eye-contact may indicate inattentiveness, it can also signal cognitive processing. When we look away to process new information, we usually do it unconsciously. Be aware, however, that your conversational partner may interpret this as not listening. If you really do need to take a moment to think about something, you could indicate that to the other person by saying, “That’s new information to me. Give me just a second to think through it.” We already learned the role that back-channel cues play in listening. An occasional head nod and “uh-huh” signal that you are paying attention. However, when we give these cues as a form of “autopilot” listening, others can usually tell that we are pseudo-listening, and whether they call us on it or not, that impression could lead to negative judgments.

A more direct way to indicate active listening is to reference previous statements made by the speaker. Norms of politeness usually call on us to reference a past statement or connect to the speaker’s current thought before starting a conversational turn. Being able to summarize what someone said to ensure that the topic has been satisfactorily covered and understood or being able to segue in such a way that validates what the previous speaker said helps regulate conversational flow. Asking probing questions is another way to directly indicate listening and to keep a conversation going, since they encourage and invite a person to speak more. You can also ask questions that seek clarification and not just elaboration. Speakers should present complex information at a slower speaking rate than familiar information, but many will not. Remember that your nonverbal feedback can be useful for a speaker, as it signals that you are listening but also whether or not you understand. If a speaker fails to read your nonverbal feedback, you may need to follow up with verbal communication in the form of paraphrased messages and clarifying questions.

As active listeners, we want to be excited and engaged, but don’t let excitement manifest itself in interruptions. Being an active listener means knowing when to maintain our role as listener and resist the urge to take a conversational turn. Research shows that people with higher social status are more likely to interrupt others, so keep this in mind and be prepared for it if you are speaking to a high-status person, or try to resist it if you are the high-status person in an interaction (Hargie, 2011).

Note-taking can also indicate active listening. Translating information through writing into our own cognitive

structures and schemata allows us to better interpret and assimilate information. Of course, note-taking isn't always a viable option. It would be awkward to take notes during a first date or a casual exchange between new coworkers. But in some situations where we wouldn't normally consider taking notes, a little awkwardness might be worth it for the sake of understanding and recalling the information. For example, many people don't think about taking notes when getting information from their doctor or banker. To help facilitate your note-taking, you might say something like "Do you mind if I jot down some notes? This seems important."

In summary, active listening is exhibited through verbal and nonverbal cues, including steady eye-contact with the speaker; smiling; slightly raised eyebrows; upright posture; body position that is leaned in toward the speaker; nonverbal back-channel cues such as head nods; verbal back-channel cues such as "OK," "mmhmm," or "oh"; and a lack of distracting mannerisms like doodling or fidgeting (Hargie, 2011).

Types of Listening

Different situations call for different types of listening. As a student, you're often tasked with informational listening to help you understand and retain content in the classroom. In other situations, such as talking to friends about various hardships they might be experiencing, you are more likely to engage in empathetic listening. Meanwhile, when engaging in civic life by watching a debate or campaign speech, you could benefit by engaging in critical listening. Understanding types of listening as they relate to different contexts can help us more competently apply these skills.

Think about which types of listening you use in different contexts. Photo by Brett Jordan from Unsplash.

Informational listening entails listening with the goal of comprehending and retaining information. This type of listening is not evaluative and is common in teaching and learning contexts ranging from a student listening to an informative speech to an out-of-towner listening to directions to the nearest gas station. We also use informational listening when we listen to news reports, voice mail, and briefings at work. Since retention and recall are important components of informational listening, good concentration and memory skills are key. These also happen to be skills that many college students struggle with, at least in the first years of college, but will be expected to have mastered once they get into professional contexts. In many professional contexts, informational listening is important, especially when receiving instructions.

Empathetic listening occurs when a listener becomes actively and emotionally involved in an interaction in such a way that it is conscious on the part of the listener and perceived by the speaker (Bodie, 2011). To be a better empathetic listener, we need to suspend or at least attempt to suppress our judgment of the other person or their message so we can fully attend to both. Paraphrasing is an important part of empathetic listening, because it helps us put the other person's words into our frame of experience without making it about us. In addition, speaking the words of someone else in our own way can help evoke within us the feelings that the other person felt while saying them (Bodie, 2011). Active-empathetic listening is more than echoing back verbal messages. We can also engage in mirroring, which refers to a listener's replication of the nonverbal signals of a speaker (Bruneau, 1993).

Therapists, for example, are often taught to adopt a posture and tone similar to their patients in order to build rapport and project empathy.

Critical listening involves evaluating the credibility, completeness, and worth of a speaker's message. Some listening scholars note that critical listening represents the deepest level of listening (Floyd, 1985). Since people can say just about anything they want, we are surrounded by countless messages that vary tremendously in terms of their value, degree of ethics, accuracy, and quality. Therefore, it falls on us to responsibly and critically evaluate the messages we receive. Some critical listening skills include distinguishing between facts and inferences, evaluating supporting evidence, discovering your own biases, and thinking beyond the message. A good critical listener asks the following questions: What is being said and what is not being said? In whose interests are these claims being made? Whose voices/ideas are included and excluded? These questions take into account that speakers intentionally and unintentionally slant, edit, or twist messages to make them fit particular perspectives or for personal gain. Although we like to think that we are most often persuaded through logical evidence and reasoning, we are susceptible to persuasive shortcuts that rely on the credibility or likability of a speaker or on our emotions rather than the strength of their evidence (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Critical listening gives us more awareness and control over the influence people have on us.

Key Concepts: Becoming a "Listening Leader"

Dr. Rick Bommelje has popularized the concept of the "listening leader" (Listen-Coach.com, 2012). As a listening coach, he offers training and resources to help people in various career paths increase their listening competence. For people who are very committed to increasing their listening skills, organizations like the International Listening Association and the Compassionate Listening Project offer advanced training.

Scholarly research has consistently shown that listening ability is a key part of leadership in professional contexts and competence in listening aids in decision making. A survey sent to hundreds of companies in the United States found that poor listening skills create problems at all levels of an organizational hierarchy, ranging from entry-level positions to CEOs (Hargie, 2011). Leaders such as managers, team coaches, department heads, and executives must be versatile in terms of listening type and style in order to adapt to the diverse listening needs of employees, clients/customers, colleagues, and other stakeholders.

Even if we don't have the time or money to invest in one of these professional-listening training programs, we can draw inspiration from the goal of becoming a listening leader. By reading this book, you are already taking an important step toward improving a variety of communication competencies, including listening, and you can always take it upon yourself to further your study and increase your skills in a particular area to better prepare yourself to create positive communication climates and listening environments. You can also use these skills to make yourself a more desirable employee.

Discussion Questions:

1. Make a list of the behaviors that you think a listening leader would exhibit. Which of these do you think you do well? Which do you need to work on?
2. What do you think has contributed to the perceived shortage of listening skills in professional contexts?
3. Given your personal career goals, what listening skills do you think you will need to possess and employ in order to be successful?

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Credits

Chapter 6: Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Define interpersonal communication.
2. Discuss the functional and cultural aspects of interpersonal communication.
3. Describe stages of relational interaction.
4. Explain communication theories related to relationships coming together and coming apart.
5. Identify patterns and triggers of interpersonal conflict.
6. Compare and contrast the five styles of interpersonal conflict management.
7. Apply connections between relevant interpersonal communication theory and practice.

Each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers consistently ranks interpersonal communication skills as one of the most desired traits for new hires. Photo by fauxels from Pexels.

Interpersonal communication has many implications for us in the real world. Did you know that interpersonal communication played an important role in human development? Early humans who lived in groups, rather than alone, were more likely to survive, which meant that those with the capability to develop interpersonal bonds were more likely to pass these traits on to the next generation (Leary, 2001). Did you know that interpersonal skills have a measurable impact on psychological and physical health? People with higher levels of interpersonal communication skills are better able to adapt to stress, have more friends, have greater satisfaction in relationships, and have less depression and anxiety (Hargie, 2011). In fact, prolonged isolation has been shown to severely damage a human (Williams & Zadro, 2001). Aside from making your relationships and health better, interpersonal communication skills are highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking as one of the most desired traits for new hires in national surveys (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019). Each of these examples illustrates how interpersonal communication meets our basic needs as humans for security in our social bonds, health, and careers. But we are not born with all the interpersonal communication skills we'll need in life. In order to make the most out of our interpersonal relationships, we must learn some basic principles. In this chapter, we will provide an overview of some principles of interpersonal communication, discuss communication's impact on our relationships, and provide guidance on managing interpersonal conflict.

6.1 Principles of Interpersonal Communication

In order to understand interpersonal communication, we must understand how interpersonal communication functions to meet our needs and goals and how our interpersonal communication connects to larger social and cultural systems. **Interpersonal communication** is the process of exchanging messages between people whose lives mutually influence one another in unique ways in relation to social and cultural norms. This definition highlights the fact that interpersonal communication involves two or more people who are interdependent to some degree and who build a unique bond based on the larger social and cultural contexts to which they belong. In this section, we will discuss both the functional and cultural aspects of interpersonal communication.

Interpersonal communication helps us meet relational needs, serving to maintain social bonds with friends, family members, and co-workers. [Photo by Keira Burton from Pexels.]

Functional Aspects of Interpersonal Communication

We have different needs that are met through our various relationships. Whether we are aware of it or not, we often ask ourselves, "What can this relationship do for me?" In order to understand how relationships achieve strategic functions, we will look at instrumental goals, relationship-maintenance goals, and self-presentation goals.

What motivates you to communicate with someone? We frequently engage in communication designed to fulfill **instrumental needs**, or needs that help us get things done in our day-to-day lives and achieve short- and long-term goals. Interpersonal communication intended to meet instrumental needs can include gaining compliance (getting someone to do something for us), getting information we need, or asking for support (Burleson et al., 2000). In short, instrumental talk helps us "get things done" in our relationships. The following are examples of communicating for instrumental needs:

- You ask your friend to help you move this weekend (gaining/resisting compliance).
- You ask your coworker to remind you how to balance your cash register till at the end of your shift (requesting or presenting information).
- You console your roommate after he loses his job (asking for or giving support).

Relational needs include needs that help us maintain social bonds and interpersonal relationships. When we communicate to fulfill relational needs, we are striving to maintain a positive relationship. Engaging in relationship-maintenance communication is like taking your car to be serviced at the repair shop. To have a good relationship, just as to have a long-lasting car, we should engage in routine maintenance. For example, have you ever wanted to stay in and order a pizza and watch a movie, but your friend suggests that you go to a local restaurant and then to the theatre? Maybe you don't feel like being around a lot of people or spending money (or changing out of your pajamas), but you decide to go along with her suggestion. In that moment, you are putting

your relational partner's needs above your own, which will likely make her feel valued. It is likely that your friend has made or will also make similar concessions to put your needs first, which indicates that there is a satisfactory and complementary relationship. Other routine relational tasks include celebrating special occasions or honoring accomplishments, spending time together, and checking in regularly by phone, text, social media, or face-to-face communication. The following are examples of communicating for relational needs:

- You organize an office party for a coworker who has just become a US citizen (celebrating/honoring accomplishments).
- You make breakfast with your mom while you are home visiting (spending time together).
- You post a message on a long-distance friend's Instagram post saying you miss him (checking in).

Identity needs include our need to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular and desired ways. Just as many companies, celebrities, and politicians create a public image, we desire to present different faces in different contexts. The well-known scholar Erving Goffman compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts (Goffman, 1959). Indeed, competent communicators can successfully manage how others perceive them by adapting to situations and contexts. A mom may perform the role of stern head of household, supportive shoulder to cry on, or hip and culturally aware friend to her child. A newly hired employee may initially perform the role of serious and agreeable coworker. Here are some other examples of communicating to meet self-presentation goals:

- As your boss complains about struggling to format the company newsletter, you tell her about your experience with Canva and editing and offer to look over the newsletter once she's done to fix the formatting (presenting yourself as competent).
- You and your new college roommate stand in your dorm room full of boxes. You let him choose which side of the room he wants and then invite him to eat lunch with you (presenting yourself as friendly).
- You say, "I don't know," in response to a professor's question even though you have an idea of the answer (presenting yourself as aloof, or "too cool for school").

The functional perspective of interpersonal communication indicates that we communicate to achieve certain goals in our relationships. We get things done in our relationships by communicating for instrumental goals. We maintain positive relationships through relational goals. We also strategically present ourselves in order to be perceived in particular ways. As our goals are met and our relationships build, they become little worlds we inhabit with our relational partners, complete with their own relationship cultures.

Cultural Aspects of Interpersonal Communication

Aside from functional aspects of interpersonal communication, communicating in relationships also helps establish relationship cultures. Just as large groups of people create cultures through shared symbols (language), values, and rituals, people in relationships also create cultures at a smaller level. **Relationship cultures** are the climates established through interpersonal communication that are unique to the relational partners but based on larger cultural and social norms. We also enter into new relationships with expectations based on experiences we have from previous relationships and knowledge we have learned from our larger society and culture. So

from our life experiences in our larger cultures, we bring building blocks, or expectations, into our relationships, which fundamentally connect our relationships to the outside world (Burleson et al., 2000). Even though we experience our relationships as unique, they are at least partially built on preexisting cultural norms. Some additional communicative acts that create our relational cultures include relational storytelling, personal idioms, routines and rituals, and rules and norms.

Storytelling plays an important part in all stages of a relationship. Photo by cottonbro studio from Pexels.

Storytelling is an important part of how we create culture in larger contexts and how we create a uniting and meaningful storyline for our relationships. In fact, an anthropologist coined the term *homo narrans* to describe the unique storytelling capability of modern humans (Fisher, 1985). We often rely on relationship storytelling to create a sense of stability in the face of change, test the compatibility of potential new relational partners, or create or maintain solidarity in established relationships. Think of how you use storytelling among your friends, family, coworkers, and other relational partners. If you recently moved to a new place for college, you probably experienced some big changes. One of the first things you started to do was reestablish a social network—remember, human beings are fundamentally social creatures. As you began to encounter new people in your classes, at your new job, or in your new housing, you most likely told some stories of your life before—about your friends, job, or teachers back home. One of the functions of this type of storytelling, early in forming interpersonal bonds, is a test to see if the people you are meeting have similar stories or can relate to your previous relationship cultures. Although storytelling will continue to play a part in your relational development with these new people, you may be surprised at how quickly you start telling stories with your new friends about things that have happened since you met. You may recount stories about your first trip to the dance club together, the weird geology professor you had together, or the time you all got sick from eating the cafeteria food. In short, your old stories will start to give way to new stories that you've created. Storytelling within relationships helps create solidarity, or a sense of belonging and closeness.

We also create personal idioms in our relationships (Bell & Healey, 1992). If you've ever studied world languages, you know that idiomatic expressions like "I'm under the weather today" are basically nonsense when translated. For example, the equivalent of this expression in French translates to "I'm not in my plate today." When you think about it, it doesn't make sense to use either expression to communicate that you're sick, but the meaning would not be lost on English or French speakers, because they can decode their respective idiom. This is also true of idioms we create in our interpersonal relationships. Just as idioms are unique to individual cultures and languages, **personal idioms** are unique to certain relationships, and they create a sense of belonging due to the inside meaning shared by the relational partners. In romantic relationships, for example, it is common for individuals to create nicknames for each other that may not directly translate for someone who overhears them. You and your partner may find that calling each other "booger" is sweet, while others may think it's gross. Idioms help create cohesiveness, or solidarity in relationships, because they are shared cues between cultural insiders. They also communicate the uniqueness of the relationship and create boundaries, since meaning is only shared within the relationship.

Scheduling regular FaceTime calls with long-distance friends or relatives is an example of a relationship routine. Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels.

Routines and rituals help form relational cultures through their natural development in repeated or habitual interaction (Burleson et al., 2000). While "routine" may connote boring in some situations, **relationship routines** are communicative acts that create a sense of predictability in a relationship that is comforting. Some communicative routines may develop around occasions or conversational topics. For example, it is common for long-distance friends or relatives to schedule a recurring phone conversation or for couples to review the day's events over dinner. Other routines develop around entire conversational episodes. For example, two best friends recounting their favorite spring-break story may seamlessly switch from one speaker to the other, finish each other's sentences, speak in unison, or gesture simultaneously because they have told the story so many times. **Relationship rituals** take on more symbolic meaning than do relationship routines and may be variations on widely recognized events—such as birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays—or highly individualized and original.

Relationship rules and norms help with the daily function of the relationship. They help create structure and provide boundaries for interacting in the relationship and for interacting with larger social networks (Burleson et al., 2000). **Relationship rules** are explicitly communicated guidelines for what should and should not be done in certain contexts. A couple could create a rule to always confer with each other before letting their child spend the night somewhere else. If a mother lets her son sleep over at a friend's house without consulting her partner, a more serious conflict could result. **Relationship norms** are similar to routines and rituals in that they develop naturally in a relationship and generally conform to or are adapted from what is expected and acceptable in the larger culture or society. For example, it may be a norm that you and your coworkers do not "talk shop" at your Friday happy-hour gathering. So when someone brings up work at the gathering, his coworkers may remind him that there's no shop talk, and the consequences may not be that serious. Regarding topics of conversation, norms often guide expectations of what subjects are appropriate within various relationships. Do you talk to your boss about your personal finances? Do you talk to your parents about your sexual activity? Do you tell your classmates about your medical history? In general, there are no rules that say you can't discuss any of these topics with anyone you choose, but relational norms usually lead people to answer "no" to the questions above. Violating relationship norms and rules can negatively affect a relationship, but in general, rule violations can lead to more direct conflict, while norm violations can lead to awkward social interactions. Developing your interpersonal communication competence will help you assess your communication in relation to the many rules and norms you will encounter.

6.2 Communication in Relationships

Communication is at the heart of forming our interpersonal relationships. We relate to each other through the everyday conversations and otherwise trivial interactions that form the fabric of our relationships. It is through our communication that we adapt to the dynamic nature of our relational worlds, given that relational partners do not enter each encounter or relationship with compatible expectations. Communication allows us to test and

be tested by our potential and current relational partners. It is also through communication that we respond when someone violates or fails to meet those expectations (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). In this section, we discuss how communication plays a role in how relationships come together and come apart.

Coming Together

Many communication scholars have conducted research into the formative stages of interpersonal relationships. Charles R. Berger and Richard J. Calabrese (1975) came up with **Uncertainty Reduction Theory**, which posits that we are uncomfortable with uncertainty and seek to reduce that uncertainty through communication. This theory explains why we engage in initial interactions with others to try and find common ground and reduce our levels of discomfort. Psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor (1973) introduced **social penetration theory** to explain how the reciprocal process of self-disclosure affects how a relationship develops. This theory compares the process of self-disclosure to an onion: in most relationships, people gradually penetrate the layers of each other's personality, much like we peel the layers from an onion.

Communication scholar Mark Knapp (1984) identified 5 stages of "coming together" in a relationship. As you read through each stage in more detail, keep the following things in mind: relational partners do not always go through the stages sequentially, some relationships do not experience all the stages, and we do not always consciously move between stages. Although this model has been applied most often to romantic relationships, most relationships follow a similar pattern that may be adapted to a particular context.

Initiating

In the **initiating stage**, people size each other up and try to present themselves favorably. Whether you run into someone in the hallway at school or in the produce section at the grocery store, you scan the person and consider any previous knowledge you have of them, expectations for the situation, and so on. Initiating is influenced by several factors. If you encounter a stranger, you may say, "Hi, my name's Rich." If you encounter a person you already know, you've already gone through this before, so you may just say, "What's up?" Time constraints also affect initiation. A quick passing calls for a quick hello, while a scheduled meeting may entail a more formal start. If you already know the person, the length of time that's passed since your last encounter will affect your initiation. For example, if you see a friend from high school while home for winter break, you may set aside a long block of time to catch up; however, if you see someone at work that you just spoke to ten minutes earlier, you may skip initiating communication.

Experimenting

The scholars who developed these relational stages have likened the **experimenting stage**, where people exchange information and often move from strangers to acquaintances, to the "sniffing ritual" of animals (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). A basic exchange of information is typical as the experimenting stage begins. For example, on the first day of class, you may chat with the person sitting beside you and take turns sharing your year in school, hometown, residence hall, and major. Then you may branch out and see if there are any common interests that emerge. Finding out you're both Atlanta Hawks fans could then lead to more conversation about basketball and other hobbies or interests; however, sometimes the experiment may fail. If your attempts at information exchange

with another person during the experimenting stage are met with silence or hesitation, you may interpret their lack of communication as a sign that you shouldn't pursue future interaction.

Intensifying

As we enter the **intensifying stage**, we indicate that we would like or are open to more intimacy, and then we wait for a signal of acceptance. This incremental intensification of intimacy can occur over a period of weeks, months, or years and may involve inviting a new friend to join you at a party, then to your place for dinner, then to go on vacation with you. It would be seen as odd, even if the experimenting stage went well, to invite a person who you're still getting to know on vacation with you without engaging in some less intimate interaction beforehand. In order to save face and avoid making ourselves overly vulnerable, steady progression is key in this stage. Aside from sharing more intense personal time, requests for and granting favors may also play into intensification of a relationship. For example, one friend helping the other prepare for a big party on their birthday can increase closeness. However, if one person asks for too many favors or fails to reciprocate favors granted, then the relationship can become unbalanced, which could result in a transition to another stage, such as differentiating.

Integrating

In the **integrating stage**, two people's identities and personalities merge, and a sense of interdependence develops. Even though this stage is most evident in romantic relationships, there are elements that appear in other relationship forms. Some verbal and nonverbal signals of the integrating stage are when the social networks of two people merge; those outside the relationship begin to refer to or treat the relational partners as if they were one person (e.g., always referring to them together—"Let's invite Olaf and Bettina"); or the relational partners present themselves as one unit (e.g., both signing and sending one holiday card or opening a joint bank account). Even as two people integrate, they likely maintain some sense of self by spending time with friends and family separately, which helps balance their needs for independence and connection.

Bonding

The **bonding stage** includes a public ritual that announces formal commitment. These types of rituals include weddings, commitment ceremonies, and civil unions. Obviously, this stage is primarily applicable to romantic couples. In some ways, the bonding ritual is arbitrary, in that it can occur at any stage in a relationship. In fact, bonding rituals are often later annulled or reversed because a relationship doesn't work out, perhaps because there wasn't sufficient time spent in the experimenting or integrating phases. However, bonding warrants its own stage because the symbolic act of bonding can have very real effects on how two people communicate about and perceive their relationship. For example, the formality of the bond may lead the couple and those in their social network to more diligently maintain the relationship if conflict or stress threatens it.

The bonding stage includes public rituals, such as weddings, that announce a formal commitment in a relationship. Photo by Emma Bauso from Pexels.

Coming Apart

Communication scholars are also interested in the causes and impact of relationships stagnating, deteriorating, and ending. **Social exchange theory** essentially entails a weighing of the costs and rewards in a given relationship (Harvey & Wenzel, 2006). When we perceive the costs of a relationship as greater than the outcomes or rewards, we may negatively evaluate and potentially choose to diminish or end the relationship.

Knapp's five stages of "coming apart" include differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating. Photo by RDNE Stock project from Pexels.

Knapp's (1984) relationship model continues with five stages of "coming apart." As you read through these stages, remember that there is nothing innately positive or negative about relationships coming together or coming apart. These stages are also not a prediction or a prescription—many relationships that enter these stages can be repaired, others may stall at a certain point and never progress to the termination stage, while others may skip several stages and end abruptly. Still, these stages provide insight into the complicated process that affects relational deterioration.

Differentiating

Individual differences can present a challenge at any given stage in the relational interaction model; however, in the **differentiating stage**, communicating these differences becomes a primary focus. Differentiating is the reverse of integrating, as *we* and *our* reverts back to *I* and *my*. For example, Carrie may reclaim friends who became "shared" as she got closer to her roommate Julie and their social networks merged by saying, "I'm having *my friends* over to the apartment and would like to have privacy for the evening." Differentiating may occur in a relationship that bonded before the individuals knew each other in enough depth and breadth. Even in relationships where the bonding stage is less likely to be experienced, such as a friendship, unpleasant discoveries about the other person's past, personality, or values during the integrating or experimenting stage could lead a person to begin differentiating.

Circumscribing

To circumscribe means to draw a line around something or put a boundary around it (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2011). In the **circumscribing stage** of a relationship, communication decreases and certain areas or subjects become restricted as individuals verbally close themselves off from each other. They may say things like "I don't want to talk about that anymore" or "You mind your business and I'll mind mine." If one person was more interested in differentiating in the previous stage, or the desire to end the relationship is one-sided, verbal expressions of commitment may go unechoed—for example, when one person's statement, "I know we've had some problems lately, but I still like being with you," is met with silence. Passive-aggressive behavior may occur more frequently in this stage. Once the increase in boundaries and decrease in communication becomes a pattern, the relationship further deteriorates toward stagnation.

Stagnating

During the **stagnating stage**, the relationship may come to a standstill, as individuals basically wait for the relationship to end. Outward communication may be avoided, but internal communication may be frequent. During this stage, a person's internal thoughts may lead them to avoid communication. For example, a person may think, "There's no need to bring this up again, because I know exactly how he'll react!" This stage can be prolonged in some relationships. Parents and children who are estranged, couples who are separated and awaiting a divorce, or friends who want to end a relationship but don't know how to do it may have extended periods of stagnation. Short periods of stagnation may occur right after a failed exchange in the experimental stage, where you may be in a situation that's not easy to get out of, but the person is still there. Although most people don't like to linger in this unpleasant stage, some may do so to avoid potential pain from termination, some may still hope to rekindle the spark that started the relationship, or some may enjoy leading their relational partner on.

Avoiding

Moving to the **avoiding stage** may be a way to end the awkwardness that comes with stagnation, as people signal that they want to close down the lines of communication. Communication in the avoiding stage can be very direct—"I don't want to talk to you anymore"—or more indirect—"I have to meet someone in a little while, so I can't talk long." While physical avoidance such as leaving a room or requesting a schedule change at work may help clearly communicate the desire to terminate the relationship, we don't always have that option. In a parent-child relationship, where the child is still dependent on the parent, or in a roommate situation, where a lease agreement prevents leaving, people may engage in cognitive dissociation, which means they mentally shut down and ignore the other person even though they are still physically copresent.

The avoiding stage of a relationship may include physical avoidance or cognitive dissociation. Photo by Alex Green from Pexels.

Terminating

The **terminating stage** of a relationship can occur shortly after initiation or after a ten- or twenty-year relational history has been established. Termination can result from outside circumstances such as geographic separation or internal factors such as changing values or personalities that lead to a weakening of the bond. Termination exchanges involve some typical communicative elements and may begin with a summary message that recaps the relationship and provides a reason for the termination (e.g., "We've had some ups and downs over our three years together, but I'm getting ready to go to college, and I either want to be with someone who is willing to support me, or I want to be free to explore who I am."). The summary message may be followed by a distance message that further communicates the relational drift that has occurred (e.g., "We've really grown apart over the past year."), which may be followed by a disassociation message that prepares people to be apart by projecting what happens after the relationship ends (e.g., "I know you'll do fine without me. You can use this time to explore your options and figure out if you want to go to college too or not."). Finally, there is often a message regarding the possibility for future communication in the relationship (e.g., "I think it would be best if we don't see each other for the first few months, but text me if you want to.") (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009).

6.3 Conflict and Interpersonal Communication

Who do you have the most conflict with right now? Your answer to this question probably depends on the various contexts in your life. If you still live at home with a parent or parents, you may have daily conflicts with your family as you try to balance your autonomy, or desire for independence, with the practicalities of living under your family's roof. If you've recently moved away to go to college, you may be negotiating roommate conflicts as you adjust to living with someone you may not know at all. You probably also have experiences managing conflict in romantic relationships or in the workplace. So think back and ask yourself, "How well do I handle conflict?" As with all areas of communication, we can improve if we have the background knowledge to identify relevant communication phenomena and the motivation to reflect on and enhance our communication skills.

Interpersonal conflict is inevitable and can lead to negative feelings when not handled well. [Photo by Yan Krukau from Pexels.]

Interpersonal conflict occurs in interactions where there are real or perceived incompatible goals, scarce resources, or opposing viewpoints. Interpersonal conflict may be expressed verbally or nonverbally along a continuum ranging from a nearly imperceptible cold shoulder to a very obvious blowout. Conflict is an inevitable part of close relationships and can take a negative emotional toll. It takes effort to ignore someone or be passive-aggressive, and the anger or guilt we may feel after blowing up at someone are valid negative feelings. However, conflict isn't always negative or unproductive. In fact, numerous research studies have shown that the quantity of conflict in a relationship is not as important as how the conflict is handled (Markman et al., 1993). Additionally, when conflict is well managed, it has the potential to lead to more rewarding and satisfactory relationships (Canary & Messman, 2000). This section explores interpersonal conflict by identifying common conflict patterns and reviewing strategic choices for managing conflict.

Identifying Conflict Patterns

Conflict is inevitable and it is not inherently negative. A key part of developing interpersonal communication competence involves being able to effectively manage the conflict you will encounter in all your relationships. To handle conflict better, it is beneficial to notice patterns of conflict in specific relationships and to develop an idea of what causes you to react negatively and what your reactions usually are.

Triggers of Conflict

Four common triggers for conflict are criticism, demand, cumulative annoyance, and rejection (Christensen & Jacobson, 2000). We all know from experience that criticism, or comments that evaluate another person's personality, behavior, appearance, or life choices, may lead to conflict. Comments do not have to be meant as criticism to be perceived as such. If Gary comes home from college for the weekend and his mom says, "Looks like you put on a few pounds," she may view this as a statement of fact based on observation. Gary, however,

may take the comment personally and respond negatively back to his mom, starting a conflict that will last for the rest of his visit. A simple but useful strategy to manage the trigger of criticism is to follow the old adage "Think before you speak." In many cases, there are alternative ways to phrase things that may be taken less personally, or we may determine that our comment doesn't need to be spoken at all.

Criticism, demands, cumulative annoyance, and rejection are common triggers for conflict. [Photo by Liza Summer from Pexels.]

Demands also frequently trigger conflict, especially if the demand is viewed as unfair or irrelevant. As with criticism, thinking before you speak and before you respond can help manage demands and minimize conflict episodes. Oftentimes, demands are met with withdrawal rather than a verbal response. If you are doing the demanding, remember a higher level of information exchange may make your demand clearer or more reasonable to the other person. If you are being demanded of, responding calmly and expressing your thoughts and feelings are likely more effective than withdrawing, which may escalate the conflict.

Cumulative annoyance is a building of frustration or anger that occurs over time, eventually resulting in a conflict interaction. For example, your friend shows up late to drive you to class three times in a row. You didn't say anything the previous times, but on the third time you say, "You're late again! If you can't get here on time, I'll find another way to get to class." Cumulative annoyance can build up like a pressure cooker, and as it builds up, the intensity of the conflict also builds. The problem here is that while the annoyance builds up for one individual, the other may be completely unaware of the problem. You've likely been surprised when someone has blown up at you due to cumulative annoyance or surprised when someone you have blown up at didn't know there was a problem building. A good strategy for managing cumulative annoyance is to monitor your level of annoyance and occasionally let some steam out of the pressure cooker by processing through your frustration with a third party or directly addressing what is bothering you with the source.

No one likes the feeling of rejection. Rejection can lead to conflict when one person's comments or behaviors are perceived as ignoring or invalidating the other person. Vulnerability is a component of any close relationship. When we care about someone, we verbally or nonverbally communicate. We may tell our best friend that we miss them, or plan a home-cooked meal for our partner who is working late. The vulnerability that underlies these actions comes from the possibility that our relational partner will not notice or appreciate them. When someone feels exposed or rejected, they often respond with anger to mask their hurt, which ignites a conflict. Managing feelings of rejection is difficult because it is so personal, but controlling the impulse to assume that your relational partner is rejecting you, and engaging in communication rather than reflexive reaction, can help put things in perspective. If your partner doesn't get excited about the meal you planned and cooked, it could be because they are physically or mentally tired after a long day.

Reactions to Conflict

Two common conflict pitfalls are one-upping and mindreading (Gottman, 1994). **One-upping** is a quick reaction to communication from another person that escalates the conflict. If Sam comes home late from work and Nicki says, "I wish you would call when you're going to be late" and Sam responds, "I wish you would get off my back," the reaction has escalated the conflict. **Mindreading** is communication in which one person attributes

something to the other using generalizations. If Sam says, “You don’t care whether I come home at all or not,” she is presuming to know Nicki’s thoughts and feelings. Nicki is likely to respond defensively, perhaps saying, “You don’t know how I’m feeling!” One-upping and mindreading are often reactions that are more reflexive than deliberate. Taking a moment to respond mindfully rather than react with a knee-jerk reflex can lead to information exchange, which could deescalate the conflict.

Validating the person with whom you are in conflict can be an effective way to deescalate conflict. Often validation can be as simple as demonstrating good listening skills like making eye-contact and giving verbal and nonverbal back-channel cues like saying “mmm-hmm” or nodding your head (Gottman, 1994). This doesn’t mean that you must give up your own side in a conflict or that you agree with what the other person is saying. Rather, you are hearing the other person out, which validates them and may also give you some more information about the conflict that could minimize the likelihood of a reaction rather than a response.

Knee-jerk reactions to conflict can escalate the situation. Practicing validation and positive listening skills can be more productive. [Photo by Timur Weber from Pexels.]

As with all the aspects of communication competence we have discussed so far, you cannot expect that everyone you interact with will have the same knowledge of communication that you have. But it often only takes one person with conflict management skills to make an interaction more effective. Remember that it’s not the quantity of conflict that determines a relationship’s success; it’s how the conflict is managed, and one person’s competent response can deescalate a conflict.

Conflict Management Styles

Would you describe yourself as someone who prefers to avoid conflict? Do you like to get your way? Are you good at working with someone to reach a solution that is mutually beneficial? Odds are that you have been in situations where you could answer yes to each of these questions, which underscores the important role context plays in conflict and conflict management styles. The way we view and deal with conflict is learned and contextual.

There has been much research done on different types of conflict management styles, which are communication strategies that attempt to avoid, address, or resolve a conflict. The five strategies for managing conflict we will discuss are competition, avoidance, accommodation, compromise, and collaboration. Each of these conflict styles

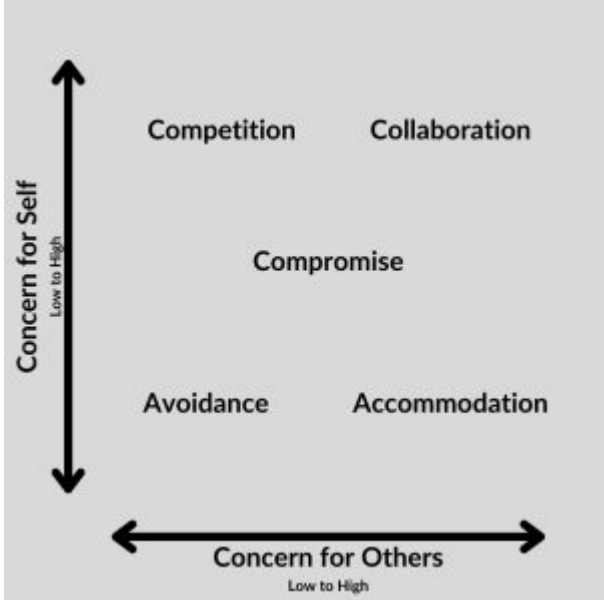

Figure 6.1 *Five Styles of Conflict Management*

accounts for the concern we place on self versus the concern we place on others (see Figure 6.1 “Five Styles of Interpersonal Conflict Management”).

Someone using the competition style sees conflict as a “win-lose” proposition. Photo by Pixabay from Pexels.

Competition

The **competing** style indicates a high concern for self and a low concern for other. When we compete, we are striving to “win” the conflict, potentially at the expense or “loss” of the other person. One way we may gauge our win is by being granted or taking concessions from the other person. Competition can be negative in relationships if it is linked to aggression or creates hostility. In many scenarios, a “win” for one person could only be a short-term result and could lead to conflict escalation. Interpersonal conflict is rarely isolated, meaning there can be ripple effects that connect the current conflict to previous and future conflicts. Competition in relationships isn’t always negative, and people who enjoy engaging in competition may not always do so at the expense of another person’s goals. In fact, research has shown that some couples engage in competitive shared activities like sports or games to maintain and enrich their relationship (Dindia & Baxter, 1987).

Avoidance

The **avoiding** style of conflict management often indicates a low concern for self and a low concern for other, and no direct communication about the conflict takes place. The avoiding style is either passive or indirect, meaning there is little information exchange, which may make this strategy less effective than others. We may decide to avoid conflict for many different reasons, some of which are better than others. If you view the conflict as having little importance to you, it may be better to ignore it. If the person you’re having conflict with will only be working in your office for a week, you may perceive a conflict to be temporary and choose to avoid it and hope that it will solve itself. In both of these cases, avoiding doesn’t really require an investment of time, emotion, or communication skill, so there is not much at stake to lose. Unfortunately, avoidance is not always an easy conflict management choice, as the person we have conflict with isn’t usually a temp in our office or a weekend houseguest. When conflict arises in a meaningful, long-term relationship, avoidance can just make a problem worse. For example, avoidance could first manifest as changing the subject, then progress from avoiding the issue to avoiding the person altogether, to even ending the relationship.

Accommodation

The **accommodating** conflict management style indicates a low concern for self and a high concern for other and is often viewed as passive or submissive, in that someone complies with or obliges another without providing personal input. The context for and motivation behind accommodating play an important role in whether or not it is an appropriate strategy. Generally, we accommodate because we are being generous, we are obeying, or we are yielding (Bobot, 2010). If we are being generous, we accommodate because we genuinely want to; if we are obeying, we don’t have a choice but to accommodate (perhaps due to the potential for negative consequences or punishment); and if we yield, we may have our own views or goals but give up on them due to fatigue, time

constraints, or because a better solution has been offered. Accommodating can be appropriate when there is little chance that our own goals can be achieved, when we don't have much to lose by accommodating, when we feel we are wrong, or when advocating for our own needs could negatively affect the relationship (Isenhart & Spangle, 2000). The occasional accommodation can be useful in maintaining a relationship, but one-sided accommodation over time is a sign of an unhealthy power dynamic between friends or romantic partners.

Compromise

The **compromising** style shows a moderate concern for self and other and may indicate that there is a low investment in the conflict and/or the relationship. Even though we often hear that the best way to handle a conflict is to compromise, the compromising style isn't a win/win solution; it is a partial win/lose. In essence, when we compromise, we give up some or most of what we want. It's true that the conflict gets resolved temporarily, but lingering thoughts of what you gave up could lead to a future conflict. Compromising may be a good strategy when there are time limitations or when prolonging a conflict may lead to relationship deterioration. Compromise may also be good when both parties have equal power or when other resolution strategies have not worked (Macintosh & Stevens, 2008).

Compromise and collaboration can both involve negotiation. In a compromise, both sides give something up in order to resolve the conflict. In a collaboration, a mutually beneficial solution is agreed to. Photo by MART PRODUCTION from Pexels.

Collaboration

The **collaborating** style involves a high degree of concern for self and other and usually indicates investment in the conflict situation and the relationship. Although the collaborating style takes the most work in terms of communication competence, it ultimately leads to a win/win situation in which neither party has to make concessions because a mutually beneficial solution is discovered or created. The obvious advantage is that both parties are satisfied, which could lead to positive problem solving in the future and strengthen the overall relationship. The disadvantage is that this style is often time consuming, and only one person may be willing to use this approach while the other person is eager to compete to meet their goals or willing to accommodate.

Here are some tips for collaborating and achieving a win/win outcome (Hargie, 2011):

- Do not view the conflict as a contest you are trying to win.
- Remain flexible and realize there are solutions yet to be discovered.
- Distinguish the people from the problem (don't make it personal).
- Determine what the underlying needs are that are driving the other person's demands (needs can still be met through different demands).
- Identify areas of common ground or shared interests that you can work from to develop solutions.
- Ask questions to allow them to clarify and to help you understand their perspective.
- Listen carefully and provide verbal and nonverbal feedback.

Key Concepts: Conflict Management

Whether you have a roommate by choice, by necessity, or through the random selection process of your school's housing office, it's important to be able to get along with the person who shares your living space. While having a roommate offers many benefits such as making a new friend, having someone to experience a new situation like college life with, and having someone to split the cost on your own with, there are also challenges. Some common roommate conflicts involve neatness, noise, having guests, sharing possessions, value conflicts, money conflicts, and personality conflicts (Ball State University, 2001). Read the following scenarios and answer the discussion questions that follow:

Scenario 1: Noise and having guests. Your roommate has a job waiting tables and gets home around midnight on Thursday nights. She often brings a couple of friends from work home with her. They watch television, listen to music, or play video games and talk and laugh. You have an 8 a.m. class on Friday mornings and are usually asleep when she returns. Last Friday, you talked to her and asked her to keep it down in the future. Tonight, their noise has woken you up and you can't get back to sleep.

Scenario 2: Sharing possessions. When you go out to eat, you often bring back leftovers to have for lunch the next day during your short break between classes. You didn't have time to eat breakfast, and you're really excited about having your leftover pizza for lunch until you get home and see your roommate sitting on the couch eating the last slice.

Scenario 3: Value and personality conflicts. You like to go out to clubs and parties and have friends over, but your roommate is much more of an introvert. You've tried to get her to come out with you or join the party at your place, but she'd rather study. One day she tells you that she wants to break the lease so she can move out early to live with one of her friends. You both signed the lease, so you have to agree or she can't do it. If you break the lease, you automatically lose your portion of the security deposit.

Discussion Questions:

1. Which conflict management style, from the five discussed, would you use in this situation?
2. What are the potential strengths of using this style?
3. What are the potential weaknesses of using this style?

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Credits

Chapter 7: Culture and Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Define culture.
2. Define personal, social, and cultural identities.
3. Compare and contrast individualistic/collectivistic, high-context/low-context, and large power distance/small power distance cultures.
4. Define intercultural communication.
5. Articulate how diverse cultural standpoints influence communication interaction.
6. Explain how motivation, knowledge, and tolerance for uncertainty relate to intercultural communication competence.

Humans have always been diverse in their cultural beliefs and practices. But as new technologies have led to the perception that our world has shrunk, and demographic and political changes have brought attention to cultural differences, people communicate across cultures more now than ever before. The oceans and continents that separate us can now be traversed instantly with an email, phone call, Tweet, or status update. Additionally, many of our workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods have become more diverse along lines that include race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other factors. But just because we are exposed to more difference doesn't mean we understand it, can communicate across it, or appreciate it. This chapter will help you do all three.

When you first think of the word "culture," you might first think of unique and vibrant cultural traditions from around the world, like Japan's Kabuki theatre, depicted here. But it is easy to overlook the ways that your own culture affects your life. [Photo by Susann Schuster on Unsplash.]

7.1 Understanding Culture

Culture is a complicated word to define, as there are at least six common ways that culture is used in the United States. For the purposes of exploring the communicative aspects of culture, we will define **culture** as the ongoing negotiation of learned and patterned beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Unpacking the definition, we can see that culture shouldn't be conceptualized as stable and unchanging. Culture is "negotiated," culture is dynamic, and cultural changes can be traced and analyzed to better understand why our society is the way it is. The definition

also points out that culture is learned, which accounts for the importance of socializing institutions like family, school, peers, and the media. Culture is patterned in that there are recognizable widespread similarities among people within a cultural group. There is also deviation from and resistance to those patterns by individuals and subgroups within a culture, which is why cultural patterns change over time. Last, the definition acknowledges that culture influences our beliefs about what is true and false, our attitudes including our likes and dislikes, our values regarding what is right and wrong, and our behaviors. It is from these cultural influences that our identities are formed.

Culture and Identity

Ask yourself the question "Who am I?" Recall from our discussion of self-concept in Chapter 2 that we develop a sense of who we are based on what is reflected back on us from other people. Our parents, friends, teachers, and the media help shape our identities. While this happens from birth, most people in Western societies reach a stage in adolescence where maturing cognitive abilities and increased social awareness lead them to begin to reflect on who they are. This begins a lifelong process of thinking about who we are now, who we were before, and who we will become (Tatum, 2000). Our identities make up an important part of our self-concept and can be broken down into three main categories: personal, social, and cultural identities.

Joining, or even cheering on, a sports team is an example of a social identity. Photo by Wallace Chuck from Pexels.

We must avoid the temptation to think of our identities as constant. Instead, our identities are formed through processes that started before we were born and will continue after we are gone; therefore, our identities aren't something we achieve or complete. Two related but distinct components of our identities are our personal and social identities (Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2009). **Personal identities** include the components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences. For example, you might consider yourself a puzzle lover or a fan of hip-hop music. Our **social identities** are the components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed. For example, we may derive aspects of our social identity from our family or from a community of fans for a sports team. Social identities differ from personal identities because they are externally organized through membership. Our membership may be voluntary (Greek organization on campus) or involuntary (family) and explicit (we pay dues to our labor union) or implicit (we purchase and play board games). There are innumerous options for personal and social identities. While our personal identity choices express who we are, our social identities align us with particular groups. Through our social identities, we make statements about who we are and who we are not.

Cultural identities are based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for social behavior or ways of acting (Yep, 1998). Common ways of being and acting within a cultural identity group are expressed through communication. To be accepted as a member of a cultural group, members must be **acculturated**, essentially learning and using a code that other group members will be able to recognize. We are acculturated into our various cultural identities in obvious and less obvious ways. For example,

we may literally have a parent or friend tell us what it means to be a man or a woman. We may also unconsciously consume messages from popular culture that offer representations of gender.

Cosplayers who self-identify as "comic book nerds" have alignment between their ascribed and avowed identities. Photo by Kashawn Hernandez on Unsplash.

Any of these identity types can be ascribed or avowed. **Ascribed identities** are personal, social, or cultural identities that are placed on us by others, while **avowed identities** are those that we claim for ourselves (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Sometimes people ascribe an identity to someone else based on stereotypes. You may see a person who likes to read science-fiction books, watches documentaries, has glasses, and collects Star Trek memorabilia and label them a nerd. If the person doesn't avow that identity, it can create friction, and that label may even hurt the other person's feelings. But ascribed and avowed identities can match up. To extend the previous example, many people have embraced the *nerd* label, turning it into a positive descriptor and identifying with nerd subculture.

Although some identities are essentially permanent, the degree to which we are aware of them, also known as salience, changes. The intensity with which we avow an identity also changes based on context. For example, an African American may not have difficulty deciding which box to check on the demographic section of a survey. But if an African American becomes president of her college's Black Student Union, she may more intensely avow her African American identity, which has now become more salient. If she studies abroad in Africa her junior year, she may be ascribed an identity of American by her new African friends, rather than African American. For the Africans, their visitor's identity as American is likely more salient than her identity as someone of African descent.

Throughout modern history, cultural and social influences have established dominant and nondominant groups (Allen, 2011). **Dominant groups** historically have had more resources and influence, while **nondominant groups** historically have had less resources and influence. It's important to remember that these distinctions are being made at the societal level, not the individual level. There are obviously exceptions, with people in groups considered nondominant obtaining more resources and power than a person in a dominant group. However, the overall trend is that difference based on cultural groups exists and exceptions do not change this fact. Because of this uneven distribution of resources and power, members of dominant groups are granted privileges while nondominant groups are at a disadvantage. Nondominant groups often face various forms of discrimination, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. As we will discuss later, privilege and disadvantage are not "all or nothing." No two people are completely different or completely similar, and no one person is completely privileged or completely disadvantaged.

Types of Cultures

Numerous factors including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age intersect and combine to form one's cultural identity. The myriad of ways that these factors intersect make it impossible

to describe the nuanced differences and similarities of every type of culture. However, it is helpful to discuss some broad categories we can use to distinguish between types of cultures. In this section, we will compare individualistic and collectivistic cultures, high-context and low-context cultures, and large power distance and small power distance cultures.

Individualistic vs. Collectivistic Cultures

The distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is an important dimension across which all cultures vary. **Individualistic cultures** emphasize individual identity over group identity and prioritize individual goals, achievements, and personal freedoms. **Collectivistic cultures** value group identity over individual identity and place a greater emphasis on interdependence, collective goals, and social harmony.

The United States is largely considered to have an individualistic culture. Photo by Brett Sayles from Pexels.

Most consider the larger culture of the United States to be individualistic. For example, the narrative of the "American Dream" prioritizes individualistic values like independence and self-determination. Within the narrative, a person can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" to achieve personal success. Comparatively, Japan's national culture is more collectivistic. In Japan, individuals often feel a strong sense of duty to fulfilling social roles and prioritize the needs of the community over their personal desires. While these broad characterizations are true, it is important to note that there are elements of both individualism and collectivism in each culture. In the largely individualistic United States, collectivistic values often appear in families, religious communities, and other groups. In Japan, globalization and other cultural trends have led to individualistic values becoming more prevalent in recent years.

Low-Context vs. High-Context Cultures

In a **low-context culture**, much of the meaning generated within an interaction comes from the verbal communication used rather than nonverbal or contextual cues. Communicators provide clear, explicit, and detailed messages. Conversely, much of the meaning generated in a **high-context culture** comes from nonverbal and contextual cues. Cultures with a high-context orientation generally use less or more ambiguous verbal communication and require communicators to pay close attention to nonverbal signals and consider contextual influences on a message (Lustig & Koester, 2006).

Many Native American cultures have a high-context orientation where communication often relies on shared cultural knowledge and nonverbal cues. Many Western European countries have low-context cultures and value directness and clarity in communication. Individuals from low-context cultures may feel frustrated by the ambiguity of speakers from high-context cultures, while speakers from high-context cultures may feel overwhelmed or even insulted by the level of detail used by low-context communicators.

Large Power Distance vs. Small Power Distance Cultures

Cultures vary in how they distribute power and differentiate between high-status and low-status individuals. In a **large power distance** culture, there is a clear hierarchy of power that entails a significant gap in privilege and

status between individuals. In a **small power distance** culture, power is more evenly distributed and differences in status are minimized (Hofstede et al., 2010). Status in various cultures could be related to age, seniority, wealth, or profession. In large power distance cultures, differences in status are respected and accentuated. In such cultures, lower-status individuals communicate with a degree of deference and formality to higher-status people. While small power distance cultures may still involve different levels of status, they de-emphasize and decentralize those differences. Communication in small power distance cultures tends to be open and informal, even between people of different status levels.

In a college or university setting, you are likely to come across examples of both large and small power distance subcultures. You might take an art class with an instructor who asks you to call her by her first name and who interacts with you informally both inside and outside of the classroom. In an accounting class, you might encounter another instructor who asks that you address her as "Dr." or "Professor" and who only interacts with you through the institution's formal channels of communication (e.g., email and visits during office hours). These examples demonstrate the differences that can exist within the same larger culture based on context, individual preferences, and other factors.

Military training camps typically have large power distance cultures. Photo by Pixabay from Pexels.

7.2 Intercultural Communication

It is through intercultural communication that we come to create, understand, and transform culture and identity. **Intercultural communication** is communication between people with differing cultural identities. As we have discussed, numerous factors contribute to creating one's cultural identity. Therefore, intercultural communication can best be thought of as occurring on a spectrum. Consider to what extent you would classify these examples as intercultural communication:

1. A tourist asking for directions from someone who speaks a different language.
2. Two people from different parts of the world playing a video game together online.
3. A Muslim woman chatting with her Catholic co-worker.
4. An elderly man sharing stories with a group of teenagers.
5. A medical doctor discussing treatment options with her patient.

These examples demonstrate the different degrees to which an interaction could be considered as intercultural communication. While some examples are clear-cut (e.g., when there are differences in language), others are less so (e.g., when there are differences in profession or age). Still, the communicators in each example would benefit from being aware of potential cultural differences.

In addition to making us better communicators, understanding intercultural communication helps us foster greater self-awareness (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Our thought process regarding culture is often "other focused," meaning that the culture of the other person or group is what stands out in our perception. However, the old adage "know thyself" is appropriate, as we become more aware of our own culture by better understanding other cultures and perspectives. Intercultural communication can allow us to step outside of our comfortable, usual frame of reference and see our culture through a different lens. Additionally, as we become more self-aware, we may also become more ethical communicators as we challenge our **ethnocentrism**, or our tendency to view our own culture as superior to other cultures.

An international tourist asking for directions is clear example of intercultural communication. What are some less obvious examples of intercultural communication that you engage in regularly? Photo by cottonbro studio from Pexels.

Intercultural communication is complicated, messy, and at times contradictory. It is not always easy to conceptualize or study. In this section, we describe a dialectical approach to help capture the dynamism of intercultural communication. Afterwards, we take a look at intercultural relationships and conclude with some advice for enhancing your intercultural communication competence.

A Dialectical Approach to Intercultural Communication

A **dialectic** is a relationship between two opposing concepts that constantly push and pull one another (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). To put it another way, thinking dialectically helps us realize that our experiences often occur in between two different phenomena. This perspective is especially useful for interpersonal and intercultural communication, because when we think dialectically, we think relationally. This means we look at the relationship between aspects of intercultural communication rather than viewing them in isolation. We can better understand intercultural communication by examining six dialectics (Martin & Nakayama, 1999).

The **cultural-individual dialectic** captures the interplay between patterned behaviors learned from a cultural group and individual behaviors that may be variations on or counter to those of the larger culture. This dialectic is useful because it helps us account for exceptions to cultural norms. For example, earlier we learned about high- and low-context cultures. The United States is said to be a low-context culture, which means that we value verbal communication as our primary, meaning-rich form of communication. Conversely, China is said to be a high-context culture, which means they often look for nonverbal clues like tone, silence, or what is not said for meaning. However, you can find people in the United States who intentionally put much meaning into *how* they say things, perhaps because they are not as comfortable speaking directly what's on their mind. We often do this in situations where we may hurt someone's feelings or damage a relationship. Does that mean we come from a high-context culture? Does the Chinese man who speaks more than is socially acceptable come from a low-context culture? The answer to both questions is no. Neither the behaviors of a small percentage of individuals nor occasional situational choices constitute a cultural pattern.

The **personal-contextual dialectic** highlights the connection between our personal patterns of and preferences for communicating and how various contexts influence the personal. In some cases, our communication patterns and preferences will stay the same across many contexts. In other cases, a context shift may lead us to alter our communication and adapt. For example, an American businesswoman may prefer to communicate with her employees in an informal and laid-back manner. When she is promoted to manage a department in her company's office in Malaysia, she may again prefer to communicate with her new Malaysian employees the same way she did with those in the United States. In the United States, we know that there are some accepted norms that communication in work contexts is more formal than in personal contexts. However, we also know that individual managers often adapt these expectations to suit their own personal tastes. This type of managerial discretion would likely not go over as well in Malaysia where there is a greater emphasis put on power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010). So, while the American manager may not know to adapt to the new context unless she has a high degree of intercultural communication competence, Malaysian managers would realize that this is an instance where the context likely influences communication more than personal preferences.

The differences-similarities dialectic guides us to not focus exclusively on differences or similarities. Photo by Pixabay from Pexels.

The **differences-similarities dialectic** allows us to examine how we are simultaneously similar to and different from others. As was noted earlier, it's easy to fall into a view of intercultural communication as "other oriented" and set up dichotomies between "us" and "them." When we overfocus on differences, we can end up polarizing groups that actually have things in common. When we overfocus on similarities, we essentialize, or reduce/overlook important variations within a group. This tendency is evident in most of the popular, and some of the academic, conversations regarding "gender differences." The book *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus* makes it seem like men and women aren't even species that hail from the same planet. The media is quick to include a blurb from a research study indicating again how men and women are "wired" to communicate differently. However, the overwhelming majority of current research on gender and communication finds that while there are differences between how men and women communicate, there are far more similarities (Allen, 2011).

The **static-dynamic dialectic** suggests that culture and communication change over time yet often appear to be and are experienced as stable. Our cultural beliefs and practices are rooted in the past and some cultural values remain relatively consistent over time, allowing us to make some generalizations about a culture. However, many aspects of a culture can change dramatically over time. For example, many associate Greek life on college campuses with hazing, binge drinking, and other toxic behaviors. However, on many campuses today, sororities and fraternities have open, inclusive, and welcoming cultures far removed from popular stereotypes.

The **history/past-present/future dialectic** reminds us to understand that current and future cultural conditions are linked to the past. We always view history through the lens of the present and we should also view the present with an understanding of the past. For example, many argue that solutions to various conflicts in the Middle East requires a deep understanding of a complex history that includes wars, colonization, ethnic and religious rivalries, and other factors.

The **privileges-disadvantages dialectic** captures the complex interrelation of unearned, systemic advantages and disadvantages that operate among our various identities. As was discussed earlier, our society consists of dominant and nondominant groups. Our cultures and identities have certain privileges and/or disadvantages. To understand this dialectic, we must view culture and identity through a lens of **intersectionality**, which asks us to acknowledge that we each have multiple cultures and identities that intersect with each other. Because our identities are complex, no one is completely privileged, and no one is completely disadvantaged. For example, while we may think of a white, heterosexual male as being very privileged, he may also have a disability that leaves him without the able-bodied privilege that a Latina woman has.

As these dialectics reiterate, culture and communication are complex systems that intersect with and diverge from many contexts. A better understanding of all these dialectics helps us be more critical thinkers and competent communicators in a changing world.

Intercultural Relationships

Intercultural relationships are formed between people with different cultural identities and include friends, romantic partners, family, and coworkers. Intercultural relationships have many benefits, such as increasing cultural knowledge, challenging previously held stereotypes, and learning new skills (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). However, intercultural relationships also present challenges. Whereas differences between people's cultural identities may be obvious, it often takes some effort to uncover commonalities that can form the basis of a relationship. Negative stereotypes may also hinder progress toward relational development, especially if the individuals are not open to adjusting their preexisting beliefs. Intercultural relationships may also take more work to nurture and maintain. The benefit of increased cultural awareness is often achieved because the relational partners explain their cultures to each other. This type of explaining requires time, effort, and patience and may be an extra burden that some are not willing to carry. Last, engaging in intercultural relationships can lead to questioning or even backlash from one's own cultural group. While these challenges range from mild inconveniences to more serious repercussions, they are important to be aware of.

As noted earlier, intercultural relationships can take many forms. The focus of this section is on friendships and romantic relationships, but much of the following discussion can be extended to other relationship types.

Intercultural Friendships

Even within the United States, views of friendship vary based on cultural identities. Research on friendship has shown that Latinos/as value relational support and positive feedback, Asian Americans emphasize exchanges of ideas like offering feedback or asking for guidance, African Americans value respect and mutual acceptance, and European Americans value recognition of each other as individuals (Coller, 1996). Despite the differences in emphasis, research also shows that the overall definition of a close friend is similar across cultures. A close friend is thought of as someone who is helpful and nonjudgmental, who you enjoy spending time with but can also be independent, and who shares similar interests and personality traits (Lee, 2006).

Intercultural friendships bring potential challenges and advantages. Photo by Kampus Production from Pexels.

Intercultural friendships may face challenges that other friendships do not. Prior intercultural experience and overcoming language barriers increase the likelihood of intercultural friendship formation (Sias et al., 2008). In some cases, previous intercultural experience, like studying abroad in college or living in a diverse place, may motivate someone to pursue intercultural friendships once they are no longer in that context. When friendships cross nationality, it may be necessary to invest more time in common understanding, due to language barriers. With sufficient motivation and language skills, communication exchanges through self-disclosure can then further relational formation. The potential for broadening one's perspective and learning more about cultural identities is not always balanced, however. In some instances, members of a dominant culture may be more interested in sharing their culture with their intercultural friend than they are in learning about their friend's culture, which illustrates how context and power influence friendships (Lee, 2006). Again, intercultural friendships illustrate the complexity of culture and the importance of remaining mindful of your communication and the contexts in which it occurs.

Romantic relationships between same-sex and interracial couples still face societal prejudice and discrimination today. Photo by Anna Shvets from Pexels.

Culture & Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships are influenced by society and culture, and still today some people face discrimination based on who they love. Specifically, sexual orientation and race affect societal views of romantic relationships. Although many in the United States have become more accepting of gay and lesbian relationships, there is still a climate of prejudice and discrimination that individuals in same-gender romantic relationships must face. While interracial relationships have occurred throughout history, anti-miscegenation laws were common in states and made it illegal for people of different racial/ethnic groups to marry until 1967, when the Supreme Court declared these laws to be unconstitutional.

Intercultural romantic relationships require partners to work through various challenges. Differences in religion, race, ethnicity, and other cultural markers are increasingly common, as more people engage in intercultural romantic relationships today than in previous years (Alberts et al., 2022). But while challenges exist, many studies on intercultural couples counter the notion that partners may be less satisfied in their relationships due to cultural differences. For example, a study examining interracial relationships found that satisfaction was not significantly different for interracial partners even though the challenges they may face in finding acceptance from other people could lead to stressors that are not as strong for intracultural partners (Gaines Jr. & Brennan, 2011). Other studies have found positives for intercultural relationships, including increased empathy and knowledge of alternative perspectives (Gaines Jr. & Liu, 2000).

Intercultural Communication Competence

Throughout this book we have been putting various tools in our communication toolbox to improve our communication competence. Many of these tools can be translated into intercultural contexts. Some key components to intercultural communication competence include motivation, knowledge, and tolerance for uncertainty.

Initially, a person's motivation for communicating with people from other cultures must be considered. **Motivation** refers to the root of a person's desire to foster intercultural relationships and can be intrinsic or extrinsic (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Put simply, if a person isn't motivated to communicate with people from different cultures, then the components of intercultural communication competence discussed next don't really matter. If a person has a healthy curiosity that drives them toward intercultural encounters in order to learn more about self and others, then there is a foundation from which to build additional competence-relevant attitudes and skills. This intrinsic motivation makes intercultural communication a voluntary, rewarding, and lifelong learning process. Motivation can also be extrinsic, meaning that the desire for intercultural communication is driven by an outside reward like money, power, or recognition. Both types of motivation can contribute to one's intercultural communication competence.

Knowledge supplements motivation and is an important part of building competence. Knowledge includes self- and other-awareness, mindfulness, and cognitive flexibility. Building knowledge of our own cultures, identities, and communication patterns takes more than passive experience (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). As you'll recall from Chapter 2, we learn who we are through our interactions with others. Developing cultural self-awareness often requires us to get out of our comfort zones. Listening to people who are different from us is a key component of developing self-awareness. This may be uncomfortable, because we may realize that people think of our identities differently than we thought.

When direct encounters with other cultures is not possible, classes, books, and documentaries also serve as useful educational sources to learn about other cultures. Photo by Leeloo Thefirst from Pexels.

The most effective way to develop other-awareness is by direct and thoughtful encounters with other cultures. However, people may not readily have these opportunities for a variety of reasons. Despite the overall diversity in the United States, many people still only interact with people who are similar to them. Even in a racially diverse educational setting, for example, people often group off with people of their own race. While a heterosexual person may have a gay or lesbian friend or relative, they likely spend most of their time with other heterosexuals. Unless an able-bodied person interacts with people with disabilities as part of their job or has a person with a disability in their friend or family group, they likely spend most of their time interacting with other able-bodied people. Living in a rural area may limit one's ability to interact with a range of cultures, and most people do not travel internationally regularly. Because of this, we may have to make a determined effort to interact with other cultures or rely on educational sources like college classes, books, or documentaries. Learning another language is also a good way

to learn about a culture, because you can then read the news or watch movies in the native language, which can offer insights that are lost in translation.

Developing self- and other-awareness is an ongoing process that will continue to adapt and grow as we encounter new experiences. Mindfulness and cognitive flexibility will help as we continue to build our intercultural communication competence (Pusch, 2009). **Mindfulness** is a state of self- and other-monitoring that informs later reflection on communication interactions. As mindful communicators we should ask questions that focus on the interactive process like "How is our communication going? What are my reactions? What are their reactions?" Being able to adapt our communication in the moment based on our answers to these questions is a skill that we should seek to develop. Reflecting on the communication encounter later to see what can be learned is also a way to build competence. We should then be able to incorporate what we learned into our communication frameworks, which requires cognitive flexibility. **Cognitive flexibility** refers to the ability to continually supplement and revise existing knowledge to create new categories rather than forcing new knowledge into old categories. Cognitive flexibility helps prevent our knowledge from becoming stale and also prevents the formation of stereotypes and can help us avoid prejudging an encounter or jumping to conclusions. In summary, to be better intercultural communicators, we should know much about others and ourselves and be able to reflect on and adapt our knowledge as we gain new experiences.

Motivation and knowledge can inform us as we gain new experiences, but how we feel in the moment of intercultural encounters is also important. **Tolerance for uncertainty** refers to an individual's attitude about and level of comfort in uncertain situations (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Some people perform better in uncertain situations than others, and intercultural encounters often bring up uncertainty. Whether communicating with someone of a different gender, race, or nationality, we are often wondering what we should or shouldn't do or say. Situations of uncertainty most often become clearer as they progress, but the anxiety that an individual with a low tolerance for uncertainty feels may lead them to leave the situation or otherwise communicate in a less competent manner. Individuals with a high tolerance for uncertainty may exhibit more patience, waiting on new information to become available or seeking out information, which may then increase the understanding of the situation and lead to a more successful outcome (Pusch, 2009). Individuals who are intrinsically motivated toward intercultural communication may have a higher tolerance for uncertainty, in that their curiosity leads them to engage with others who are different because they find the self- and other-knowledge gained rewarding.

Key Concepts: Thinking Under the Influence

Communication and culture scholar Brenda Allen (2011) coined the phrase "thinking under the influence" (TUI) to highlight a reflective process that can help us hone our intercultural communication competence. As we discussed earlier, being mindful is an important part of building competence. Once we can become aware of our thought processes and behaviors, we can more effectively monitor and intervene in them. She asks us to monitor our thoughts and feelings about other people, both similar to and different from us. As we monitor, we should try to identify instances when we are guilty of TUI, such as uncritically accepting the dominant belief systems, relying on stereotypes, or prejudging someone based on their identities.

Allen recounts seeing a picture on the front of the newspaper with three men who appeared Latino. She found herself wondering what they had done, and then found out from the caption that they were the relatives of people who died in a car crash. She identified that as a TUI moment and asked herself if she would have had the same thought if they had been black, white, Asian, or female. When we feel "surprised" by someone different, this often points to a preexisting negative assumption that we can unpack and learn from. Allen also found herself surprised when a panelist at a conference who used a wheelchair and was hearing impaired made witty comments. Upon reflection, she realized that she had an assumption that people with disabilities would have a gloomy outlook on life. While these examples focus on out-groups, she also notes that it's important for people, especially in nondominant groups, to monitor their thoughts about their own group, as they may have internalized negative attitudes about their group from the dominant culture. As a black woman, she notes that she has been critical of black people who "do not speak mainstream English" based on stereotypes she internalized about race, language, and intelligence.

It is not automatically a bad thing to TUI. Even Brenda Allen, an accomplished and admirable scholar of culture and communication, catches herself doing it. When we notice that we TUI, it's important to reflect on that moment and try to adjust our thinking processes. This is an ongoing process, but it is an easy-to-remember way to cultivate your intercultural communication competence. Keep a record of instances where you catch yourself "thinking under the influence."

Discussion Questions:

1. What triggers you to TUI?
2. Where did these influences on your thought come from?
3. What concepts from this chapter can you apply to change your thought processes?

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Credits

Chapter 8: Communicating in Groups and Organizations

Learning Objectives

1. Define small group communication.
2. Explain the characteristics, functions, and types of small groups.
3. Discuss advantages and disadvantages of small groups.
4. Define organizational communication.
5. Discuss the classical management, human relations, and human resources perspectives on organizations.
6. Discuss internal and external communication in organizations.
7. Compare and contrast different leadership styles.
8. Identify and discuss task, relational, and individual member roles.

Most of the communication skills discussed in the preceding chapters are directed toward dyadic communication, meaning that they are applied in two-person interactions. While many of these skills can be transferred and used in contexts with more people, the complex nature of group and organizational interaction necessitates some adaptation and some additional skills. In this chapter, we will delve into small group communication, organizational communication, and the dynamics of leadership and membership in group and organizational contexts.

8.1 Small Group Communication

When you think of small groups, you probably think of the much dreaded "group assignment" that you've endured in high school and college. You are less likely to think of the numerous other groups to which you belong that bring more positive experiences, such as your family and friendship groups or shared-interest groups. Group communication scholars are so aware of this common negative sentiment toward group communication that they coined the term **grouphate** to describe it. Small groups, however, aren't just entities meant to torture students; they have served a central purpose in human history and evolution. Groups make it easier for us to complete a wide variety of tasks; help us establish meaningful social bonds; and help us create, maintain, and change our sense of self (Hargie, 2011).

Small group communication occurs in many different environments. Photo by Christina Morillo from Pexels.

Small group communication refers to interactions among three or more people who are connected through a common purpose, mutual influence, and a shared identity. In this section, we will learn about the characteristics, types, and advantages and disadvantages of small groups.

Characteristics of Small Groups

Different groups have different characteristics, serve different purposes, and can lead to positive, neutral, or negative experiences. While our interpersonal relationships primarily focus on relationship building, small groups usually focus on some sort of task completion or goal accomplishment. A college learning community focused on math and science, a campaign team for a state senator, and a group of local organic farmers are examples of small groups that would all have a different size, structure, identity, and interaction pattern. Three defining characteristics of a small group are size, identity, and interdependence.

In terms of size, there is no set number for the ideal small group. But a small group requires a minimum of three people (because two people would be a pair or dyad). While the upper range of group size is contingent on the purpose of the group, when groups grow beyond fifteen-to-twenty members, it becomes difficult to consider them a small group. Small groups who add too many members increase the potential for group members to feel overwhelmed or disconnected.

Next, group members create a shared identity. Shared identity can be exhibited through group names, slogans, songs, handshakes, clothing, or other symbols. At a family reunion, for example, matching t-shirts specially made for the occasion, dishes made from recipes passed down from generation to generation, and shared stories of family members who have passed away help establish a shared identity and social reality.

Small groups are characterized by interdependence, meaning the actions or efforts of one group member affects all members of the group. Photo by Pixabay from Pexels.

The third defining characteristic of a small group is that they exhibit **interdependence**, meaning they share a common purpose and a common fate. If the actions of one or two group members lead to a group deviating from or not achieving their purpose, then all members of the group are affected. Conversely, if the actions of only a few of the group members lead to success, then all members of the group benefit. This is a major contributor to many college students' dislike of group assignments, because they feel a loss of control and independence that they have when they complete an assignment alone. This concern is valid in that their grades might suffer because of the negative actions of someone else or their hard work may go to benefit the group member who just skated by. Although it can be frustrating to have your job, grade, or reputation partially dependent on the actions of others, the interdependent nature of

groups can also lead to higher-quality performance and output, especially when group members are accountable for their actions.

Types of Small Groups

There are many types of small groups, but the most common distinction made between types of small groups is that of task-oriented and relational-oriented groups (Hargie, 2011). **Task-oriented groups** are formed to solve a problem, promote a cause, or generate ideas or information (McKay et al., 1995). In such groups, like a committee or study group, interactions and decisions are primarily evaluated based on the quality of the final product or output. Task-oriented groups require honed problem-solving skills to accomplish goals, and the structure of these groups is more rigid than that of relational-oriented groups.

Relational-oriented groups are formed to promote interpersonal connections and are more focused on quality interactions that contribute to the well-being of group members. Decision making is directed at strengthening or repairing relationships rather than completing discrete tasks or debating specific ideas or courses of action. All groups include task and relational elements, so it's best to think of these orientations as two ends of a continuum rather than as mutually exclusive. For example, although a family unit works together daily to accomplish tasks like getting the kids ready for school and friendship groups may plan a surprise party for one of the members, their primary and most meaningful interactions are still relational.

Teams are task-oriented groups in which members are especially loyal and dedicated to the task and other group members (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). In professional and civic contexts, the word *team* has become popularized as a means of drawing on the positive connotations of the term—connotations such as "high-spirited," "cooperative," and "hardworking." Scholars who have spent years studying highly effective teams have identified several common factors related to their success. Successful teams have clear and inspiring goals, a results-driven structure, competent team members, a collaborative climate, high standards for performance, external support and recognition, and ethical and accountable leadership (Adler & Elmhorst, 2005).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Small Groups

As with anything, small groups have their advantages and disadvantages. Advantages of small groups include shared decision making, shared resources, and exposure to diversity. Individuals making high-stakes decisions in a vacuum could have negative consequences given the lack of feedback, input, questioning, and proposals for alternatives that would come from a group interaction. Group decision making is especially helpful when judgment calls have ethical implications or the potential to negatively affect people. Additionally, group members help expand our social networks, which provide access to more resources. Participating in groups can also increase our exposure to diversity and broaden our perspectives. Even when group members share cultural identities, the diversity of experience and opinion within a group can lead to broadened perspectives as alternative ideas are presented and opinions are challenged and defended.

There are also disadvantages to small group interaction. In some cases, one person can be just as or more effective than a group of people. Think about a situation in which a highly specialized skill or knowledge is needed to get

something done. In this situation, one very knowledgeable person is probably a better fit for the task than a group of less knowledgeable people. Group interaction also has a tendency to slow down the decision-making process. Individuals connected through a hierarchy or chain of command often work better in situations where decisions must be made under time constraints. When group interaction does occur under time constraints, having one "point person" or leader who coordinates action and gives final approval or disapproval on ideas or suggestions for actions is best.

Group communication also presents interpersonal challenges. A common problem is coordinating and planning group meetings due to busy and conflicting schedules. The interdependence of group members that we discussed earlier can also create some disadvantages. Group members may take advantage of the anonymity of a group and engage in **social loafing**, meaning they contribute less to the group than other members or than they would if working alone (Karau & Williams, 1993). Social loafers expect that no one will notice their behaviors or that others will pick up their slack. It is this potential for social loafing that makes many students and professionals dread group work, especially those who have a tendency to cover for other group members to prevent the social loafer from diminishing the group's productivity or output.

When a group's advantages outweigh its disadvantages, cohesion among the group's members creates a positive group climate. **Group climate** refers to the relatively enduring tone and quality of group interaction that is experienced similarly by group members. Climate has also been described as group morale. The following are some qualities that contribute to a positive group climate and morale (Marston & Hecht, 1988):

Positive group climate is caused by factors such as equal participation, confirming messages, and positive feedback. Photo by fauxels from Pexels.

- **Participation.** Group members feel better when they feel included in discussion and a part of the functioning of the group.
- **Messages.** Confirming messages help build relational dimensions within a group, and clear, organized, and relevant messages help build task dimensions within a group.
- **Feedback.** Positive, constructive, and relevant feedback contribute to group climate.
- **Equity.** Aside from individual participation, group members also like to feel as if participation is managed equally within the group and that appropriate turn taking is used.
- **Clear and accepted roles.** Group members like to know how status and hierarchy operate within a group. Knowing the roles isn't enough to lead to satisfaction, though—members must also be comfortable with and accept those roles.
- **Motivation.** Member motivation is activated by perceived connection to and relevance of the group's goals or purpose.

Unfortunately, what appears to be a positive climate can sometimes mask **groupthink**, the negative group phenomenon characterized by a lack of critical evaluation of proposed ideas that results from high levels of cohesion and/or high conformity pressures (Janis, 1972). When group members fall victim to groupthink, the

effect is the uncritical acceptance of the group's decisions. Group meetings that appear to go smoothly with only positive interaction among happy, friendly people may seem ideal, but these actions may be symptomatic of groupthink (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). When people rush to agreement or fear argument, groupthink tends to emerge. Decisions made as a result of groupthink may range from a poorly-thought-out presentation method that bores the audience to a mechanical failure resulting in death.

Two primary causes of groupthink are high levels of cohesion and excessive conformity pressures. When groups exhibit high levels of social cohesion, members may be reluctant to criticize or question another group member's ideas or suggestions for fear that it would damage the relationship. When group members have a high level of task cohesion, they may feel invincible and not critically evaluate ideas. For those who aren't blinded by the high levels of cohesion, internal conformity pressures may still lead them to withhold criticism of an idea because the norm is to defer to decisions made by organization leaders or a majority of group members. External conformity pressures because of impending reward or punishment, time pressures, or an aggressive leader are also factors that can lead to groupthink.

Here are some actions groups can take to avoid groupthink (Hargie, 2011):

- Divvy up responsibilities between group members so decision-making power isn't in the hands of a few.
- Encourage and reward the expression of minority or dissenting opinions.
- Allow members to submit ideas prior to a discussion so that opinions aren't swayed by members who propose ideas early in a discussion.
- Question each major decision regarding its weaknesses and potential negative consequences relative to competing decisions (encourage members to play "devil's advocate").
- Have decisions reviewed by an outside party who wasn't involved in the decision-making process.
- Have a "reflection period" after a decision is made and before it is implemented during which group members can express reservations or second thoughts about the decision.

8.2 Organizational Communication

When you think of organizations, you might first think of mega-corporations like Apple, Walmart, and Toyota. You're probably less likely to think of a local church, a family business, or a campus sorority. But organizations can be large or small and you're likely affiliated with more organizations than you realize. As Amitai Etzioni (1964) states, "We are born in organizations, educated by organizations, and most of us spend much of our lives working for organizations" (p. 1). Simply put, from cradle to grave, organizations impact every aspect of our lives (Deetz, 2001).

When you think of organizations, you might first think of mega-corporations like McDonald's. Photo by Robi Pastores from Pexels.

Organizational communication refers to interactions between interrelated individuals within an organization, as well as communication between an organization and its external stakeholders. But what is an organization and how do communication scholars approach the study of organizational communication? This section answers these questions.

Perspectives on Organizations

Organizations share many characteristics in common with small groups. Like groups, organizations exist to achieve common goals ranging from social to political to professional. Like group members, organizational members exhibit a large degree of interdependence, relying on each other to accomplish tasks. Additionally, effective groups and organizations both cultivate a shared identity among their members. Unlike groups, organizations are not restricted in size. Another distinction is that communication within organizations is often more complex than in small groups. Ultimately, organizations are complicated, dynamic systems that take on a personality and culture of their own, with unique rules, hierarchies, structures, and divisions of labor.

Over the years, numerous perspectives have been developed to better understand organizations. While many of these perspectives were initially designed to study businesses and worker productivity, they can also be applied to other types of organizations. Three significant perspectives include the classical management approach, the human relations approach, and the human resources approach.

Classical Management Perspective

At the beginning of the industrial age, when people thought science could solve almost any problem, organizations wanted to know how they could maximize worker productivity through the application of scientific solutions. The **classical management perspective** suggests that three basic aspects should exist in organizations: specialization, standardization, and predictability (Miller, 2014). This approach for understanding organizations can be described using a machine metaphor. This perspective argues that every employee should have a specialized function and that any individual should be able to perform a job if they are properly trained. If one individual fails to do the job, they are easily replaceable with another person since people are seen simply as parts of a machine.

The classical management perspective emphasizes reward-punishment tactics and limits employee participation in decision making. Managers subscribing to this perspective often believe that employees are basically lazy or unmotivated. Because of this, managers must closely supervise their workers and incentivize them through rewards or penalties for their work.

Organizations using this approach can still be found today. Have you ever had a boss or manager who treated you like an interchangeable part of a machine who had little value? If so, you've experienced aspects of the classical management perspective at work. While scientific approaches to organizations were an interesting starting point for determining how to communicate, the classical management approach fell short in many ways. Thus, development and refinement continued to occur regarding ways to understand organizations.

The classical management perspective is often described using a machine metaphor. Photo by Pixabay from Pexels.

Human Relations and Human Resources Perspectives

Because classical management was so mechanical and did not treat people as humans, organizational scholars wanted to focus on the human elements of organizations. The **human relations approach** focuses on how organizational members relate to one another and how individuals' needs influence their performance in organizations. Unlike the classical management perspective, the human relations perspective contends that workers are self-motivated, seek responsibility, and want to achieve success. Human Relations managers invite feedback and encourage a degree of participation in organizational decision-making, focusing on human relationships as a way to motivate employee productivity.

The primary criticism of the human relations perspective was that it still focused on productivity, trying to achieve worker productivity simply by making workers happy. While the idea that a happy employee would be a productive employee is appealing, happiness does not always correlate with productivity. Scholars also sought to improve on the human relations perspective because they found that manipulative managers were misusing it by inviting participation from employees on the surface, but not really doing anything with the employees' contributions. Imagine your boss encouraging everyone to put their ideas into a suggestion box but never looking at them.

The **human resources approach** attempts to truly embrace participation by all organizational members, viewing each person as a valuable human resource who should be fully involved to manifest their abilities and productivity. Using this approach, organizations began to encourage employee participation in decision-making.

Internal and External Communication in Organizations

Organizational communication scholars view communication as essential to the creation, maintenance, and success of organizations. Communication is how organizations represent, present, and constitute their climate, culture, values, and goals that characterize the organization and its members. Communication scholars focus on interactions within the organization, as well as communication between an organization and interested external parties.

Internal Communication

One challenge to communication within organizations comes from the **theory of bureaucracy**, which contends

that effective hierarchies help organizations operate effectively. This theory states that precise rules, a division of labor, centralized authority, and a distinctly defined hierarchy are essential for an effective organization. Think about the bureaucracy of your college campus: there are numerous divisions of labor, rules, policies, and procedures. Registering for classes, tracking transcripts, obtaining financial aid, and selecting a meal plan are all completed by navigating the bureaucracy on your campus. Imagine a campus without bureaucracy. What if you couldn't easily access your transcripts? What if no one kept track of your progress through college? How would you know what to do and when you were done? While bureaucracies can be slow, tedious, and often inefficient, they provide structures we have come to rely on to accomplish personal and professional goals.

An example of upward communication would be an employee going to speak to their manager. Photo by Sora Shimazaki from Pexels.

The existence of organizational hierarchies underscores the importance of directional communication. **Upward communication** refers to communication moving up the organizational chain-of-command from employee to supervisor. **Downward communication** refers to communication with subordinates. **Horizontal communication** takes place in peer-to-peer interactions. In some organizations with strict bureaucracies, following the formal directional channels of communication can be frustrating, as messages may not efficiently make it up or down the chain-of-command or may become distorted as they pass through different levels. To combat this, **informal communication channels** sometimes serve as a work-around. Returning to the college campus as an example, think about the formal and informal channels of communication that exist. Formally, you may be expected to communicate with your professors during class hours, during office hours, through email, and through a learning management system. But informally, you may decide to connect over social media or chat when you run into them in the cafeteria. Most organizational members use both formal and informal channels in order to communicate effectively.

External Communication

The study of organizational communication can also include how members of the organization communicate to external audiences, such as customers, clients, stakeholders, and the general public. Examples of external communication include press releases, social media posts, product advertisements, and newsletters.

Communication to stakeholders may be informative or persuasive. When first starting a relationship with one of these stakeholders, the communication is likely to be persuasive in nature, trying to convince either a client to take services, a customer to buy a product, or a funding source to provide financing. Once a relationship is established, communication may take the form of more informative progress reports and again turn persuasive when it comes time to renegotiate or renew a contract or agreement.

As with internal organizational communication, information flow is important. When an organization faces a crisis, it is important to have spokespeople at appropriate levels of the organization come forward with a response. Individuals providing conflicting responses may lead to external confusion and internal tensions. The lack of information flow may also be seen as a sign of trouble, so communicators want to be consistent in their level of communication even when there isn't a major development to report. While organizations sometimes

employ strategic ambiguity, too much ambiguity can lead to suspicions that can damage the public image of the organization.

8.3 Leadership and Membership

What makes a good leader? What are some positive and negative roles that followers play in groups and organizations? This part of the chapter will begin to answer those questions, because leadership and group member roles influence the performance of small groups. Whether you consider yourself a leader or not, all members of a group can perform leadership functions, and being familiar with these behaviors can improve your group's performance. Likewise, knowing the various roles that typically emerge in a group can help you better understand a group's dynamics and hopefully improve your overall group experience.

Leadership

There are many different leadership approaches and styles. Photo by fauxels from Pexels.

Leadership is one of the most studied aspects of group and organizational communication. Scholars in business, communication, psychology, and many other fields have written extensively about the qualities of leaders, theories of leadership, and how to build leadership skills. It's important to point out that although a group may have only one official leader, other group members play important leadership roles. Making this distinction also helps us differentiate between leaders and leadership (Hargie, 2011). The **leader** is a group role that is associated with a high-status position and may be formally or informally recognized by group members. **Leadership** is a complex of beliefs, communication patterns, and behaviors that influence the functioning of a group and move a group toward the completion of its task. A person in the role of leader may provide no or poor leadership. Likewise, a person who is not recognized as a "leader" in title can provide excellent leadership. In this section, we will discuss some common leadership approaches and styles.

Approaches to Leadership

What traits would you list if you were asked to define a leader? The **trait approach** to studying leadership distinguishes leaders from followers based on traits, or personal characteristics, such as intelligence, personality, communication ability, and/or physical appearance (Pavitt, 1999). Oftentimes, we explicitly look for certain traits, such as extroversion, confidence, or intelligence, in leaders. Other times, we subconsciously associate traits with leadership. For example, designated leaders often tend to be taller than other group members.

The trait approach to studying leaders has provided some useful information regarding how people view ideal leaders, but it has not provided much insight into why some people become and are more successful leaders than others. There is no comprehensive or undisputed list of ideal traits, as excellent leaders can have few, if any, of these traits and poor leaders can possess many. Additionally, traits are difficult to change or control

without much time and effort. Because traits are enduring, there isn't much room for people to learn and develop leadership skills, which makes this approach less desirable for communication scholars who view leadership as a communication competence.

An alternative approach to studying leadership is the **situational approach**, which considers how leaders emerge in groups that are initially leaderless and how situational contexts affect this process (Pavitt, 1999). The situational context that surrounds a group influences what type of leader is best. For example, a group of local business owners who form a group for professional networking might prefer a leader with a relational style, since these group members are likely already leaders in their own right and therefore might resent a person who takes a rigid task-oriented style over a more collegial style.

A third approach to the study of leadership is called the **functional approach**, because it focuses on how particular communication behaviors function to create the conditions of leadership. This approach is the most useful for communication scholars and for people who want to improve their leadership skills, because leadership behaviors (which are learnable and adaptable) rather than traits or situations (which are often beyond our control) are the primary focus of study. As we've already learned, any group member can exhibit leadership behaviors, not just a formally designated leader. Therefore, leadership behaviors are important for all of us to understand even if we don't anticipate serving in leadership positions (Cragan & Wright, 1991).

Leadership Styles

Given the large amount of research done on leadership, it is not surprising that there are several different ways to define or categorize leadership styles. In general, effective leaders do not fit solely into one style in any of the following classifications. Instead, they are able to adapt their leadership style to fit the relational and situational context (Wood, 1977). One traditional way to study leadership style is to make a distinction among autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leaders (Lewin et al., 1939). These leadership styles can be described as follows:

- **Autocratic leaders** set policies and make decisions primarily on their own, taking advantage of the power present in their title or status to set the agenda for the group.
- **Democratic leaders** facilitate group discussion and like to take input from all members before making a decision.
- **Laissez-faire leaders** take a "hands-off" approach, preferring to give group members freedom to reach and implement their own decisions.

Coaches are known to use a variety of leadership styles. Which do you think would be most effective? Photo by Pixabay from Pexels.

While this is a frequently cited model of leadership styles, communication and leadership scholars have introduced new and more nuanced styles in recent decades.

The transformational leadership style is one of the most popular and widely studied today. A **transformational leader** is one who acts as a mentor, role model, and motivator. In large part, transformational leaders are defined by the relationships they foster with their followers. They encourage personal development and are attentive to

the individual needs and goals of their followers. Transformational leaders are further characterized by their high ethical standards, vision for the future, and willingness to challenge the status quo (Alberts et al., 2022).

Membership

Just as leaders have been long studied as a part of groups and organizations, so too have member roles. Member roles are more dynamic than leadership roles in that a role can be formal or informal and played by more than one team member. Additionally, one group member may exhibit various role behaviors within a single meeting or play a few consistent roles over the course of their involvement with a team. Some people's role behaviors result from their personality traits, while other people act out a certain role because of a short-term mood, as a reaction to another team member, or out of necessity. Communication scholars have cautioned us to not always think of these roles as neatly bounded all-inclusive categories. After all, we all play multiple roles within a group and must draw on multiple communication behaviors in order to successfully play them. In this section, we will discuss the three categories of common member roles: task-related roles, maintenance roles, and individual roles (Benne & Sheats, 1948).

Task Roles

Task roles contribute directly to the group's completion of a task or achievement of its goal or purpose. Task-related roles typically serve leadership, informational, or procedural functions. Three common examples of task roles include the information provider, information seeker, and recorder.

The **information provider** presents new ideas, initiates discussions of new topics, and contributes their own relevant knowledge and experiences. When group members are brought together because they each have different types of information, early group meetings may consist of group members taking turns briefing each other on their area of expertise. In other situations, only one person in the group may be chosen because of their specialized knowledge and this person may be expected to be the primary information provider for all other group members.

The **information seeker** asks for more information, elaboration, or clarification on items relevant to the group's task. The information sought may include factual information or group member opinions. In general, information seekers ask questions for clarification, but they can also ask questions that help provide an important evaluative function. Most groups could benefit from more critically oriented information-seeking behaviors. As our discussion of groupthink notes, critical questioning helps increase the quality of ideas and group outcomes and helps avoid groupthink. By asking for more information, people have to defend (in a non-adversarial way) and/or support their claims, which can help ensure that the information being discussed is credible, relevant, and thoroughly considered. When information seeking or questioning occurs as a result of poor listening skills, it risks negatively impacting the group. Skilled information providers and seekers are also good active listeners. They increase all group members' knowledge when they paraphrase and ask clarifying questions about the information presented.

The **recorder** takes notes on the discussion and activities that occur during a group meeting. The recorder is the only role that is essentially limited to one person at a time since in most cases it wouldn't be necessary or beneficial to have more than one person recording. At less formal meetings there may be no recorder, while at formal meetings there is almost always a person who records meeting minutes, which are an overview of what occurred at the meeting.

Recording notes on a discussion is often a formal task role assigned to a group member. Photo by cottonbro studio from Pexels.

Relational Roles

Relational roles create and maintain social cohesion and fulfill the interpersonal needs of group members. All these role behaviors require strong and sensitive interpersonal skills. Three common examples of relational roles include the supporter, harmonizer, and gatekeeper.

The role of **supporter** is characterized by communication behaviors that encourage other group members and provide emotional support as needed. The supporter's work primarily occurs in one-on-one exchanges that are more intimate and in-depth than the exchanges that take place during full group meetings. While many group members may make supporting comments publicly at group meetings, these comments are typically superficial and/or brief. A supporter uses active empathetic listening skills to connect with group members who may seem down or frustrated by saying something like "Tayesha, you seemed kind of down today. Is there anything you'd like to talk about?" Supporters also follow up on previous conversations with group members to maintain the connections they've already established by saying things like "Alan, I remember you said your mom is having surgery this weekend. I hope it goes well. Let me know if you need anything." The supporter's communication behaviors are probably the least noticeable of any of the other maintenance roles, which may make this group member's efforts seem overlooked. Leaders and other group members can help support the supporter by acknowledging their contributions.

The **harmonizer** role is played by group members who help manage the various types of group conflict that emerge during group communication. They keep their eyes and ears open for signs of conflict among group members and ideally intervene before it escalates. For example, the harmonizer may sense that one group member's critique of another member's idea wasn't received positively, and they may be able to rephrase the critique in a more constructive way, which can help diminish the other group member's defensiveness. Harmonizers also deescalate conflict once it has already started—for example, by suggesting that the group take a break and then mediating between group members in a side conversation. These actions can help prevent conflict from spilling over into other group interactions. In cases where the whole group experiences conflict, the harmonizer may help lead the group in perception-checking discussions that help members see an issue from multiple perspectives. For a harmonizer to be effective, it's important that they be viewed as impartial and committed to the group as a whole rather than to one side of an issue or one person or faction within the larger group.

Relational roles create and maintain social cohesion and fulfill the interpersonal needs of group members. Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels.

The **gatekeeper** manages the flow of conversation in a group, ensuring that all voices are heard. The gatekeeper may prompt others to provide information by saying something like "Let's each share one idea we have for a movie to show during Black History Month." They may also help correct an imbalance between members who have provided much information already and members who have been quiet by saying something like "Jackie, we've heard a lot from you today. Let's hear from someone else. Beau, what are your thoughts on Jackie's suggestion?" Gatekeepers should be cautious about "calling people out" or at least making them feel that way. Effective gatekeepers are invitational and make group members feel included.

Negative Individual Roles

Understanding the negative and disruptive roles individuals play in groups can help us analyze group interactions and potentially better understand why some groups are more successful than others. It's important to acknowledge that we all perform some negative behaviors within groups but that those behaviors do not necessarily constitute a role. Negative behaviors can be enacted with varying degrees of intensity and regularity, and their effects may range from mild annoyance to group failure. In general, the effects grow increasingly negative as they increase in intensity and frequency. While a single enactment of a negative role behavior may still harm the group, regular enactment of such behaviors would constitute a role, and playing that role is guaranteed to negatively impact the group. Three common examples of negative individual roles include the attention-seeker, the monopolizer, and the aggressor.

The **attention-seeker** seeks constant recognition by the group that is often not task-related. Attention-seeking manifests in a variety of behaviors. For example, one attention-seeker might be a "class clown" who consistently uses sarcasm, plays pranks, or tells jokes in order to seek attention. Another might be a compliment seeker who wants constant validation from other group members. Another might continuously try to gain sympathy from the group by bringing up insecurities and asking for help (Alberts et al., 2022). Attention-seekers often make it more difficult for groups to focus on the task at hand.

The **monopolizer** is a group member who makes excessive verbal contributions, preventing equal participation by other group members. In short, monopolizers like to hear the sound of their own voice and do not follow typical norms for conversational turn taking. There are some people who are well informed, charismatic, and competent communicators who can get away with impromptu lectures and long stories, but monopolizers rarely possess the magnetic qualities of such people. A group member's excessive verbal contributions are more likely to be labeled as monopolizing when they are not related to the task or when they provide unnecessary or redundant elaboration. Some monopolizers do not intentionally speak for longer than they should. Instead, they think they are making a genuine contribution to the group. These individuals likely lack sensitivity to nonverbal cues, or they would see that other group members are tired of listening or annoyed. Other monopolizers just like to talk and don't care what others think.

The **aggressor** exhibits negative behaviors such as putting others' ideas down, attacking others personally when they feel confronted or insecure, and competing unnecessarily to "win" at the expense of others within the group.

An aggressor's behaviors can quickly cross the fine line between being abrasive or dominant and being unethical. For example, a person vigorously defending a position that is relevant and valid is different from a person who claims others' ideas are stupid but has nothing to contribute. The aggressor's behaviors fall into a continuum based on their intensity. On the more benign end of the continuum is assertive behavior, toward the middle is aggressive behavior, and on the unethical side is bullying behavior. At their worst, an aggressor's behaviors can lead to shouting matches or even physical violence within a group. Establishing group rules and norms that set up a safe climate for discussion and include mechanisms for temporarily or permanently removing a group member who violates that safe space may proactively prevent such behaviors.

Key Concepts: Leadership and Membership

As you work in groups and organizations over the years, you may notice that there are times to step up and become a leader and there are times to step back and be a productive member. As we have discussed, there are many different leadership styles and member roles and some are more effective than others.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think of a leader you have worked with who made a strong (positive or negative) impression on you. Which leadership style did they use most frequently? Cite specific communication behaviors to back up your analysis.
2. Which of the task or relational roles do you think you've performed the best in previous group experiences? How did your communication and behaviors help you perform the role's functions? Which role have you had the most difficulty or least interest in performing? Why?
3. Describe a situation in which you have witnessed a person playing one of the negative individual roles in a group. How did the person communicate? What were the effects?

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Credits

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Chapter 9: Public Speaking

Learning Objectives

1. Understand how to craft speeches appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context.
2. Compose audience-centered general purpose, specific purpose, and thesis statements for a speech.
3. Identify appropriate and credible sources for a speech.
4. Identify common components of an introduction and conclusion.
5. Identify common organizational patterns.
6. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the four methods of speech delivery.
7. Employ visual aids that enhance a speaker's message.

Public speaking skills transfer to many other areas of your life. Photo by Pavel Danilyuk from Pexels.

In chapter 1, we defined **rhetoric** as the art of persuasive speaking. We begin this chapter with this definition because the history of public speaking education in the United States is heavily influenced by ancient Greek and Roman theories of rhetoric. Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* covers many of the same topics addressed in public speaking textbooks today, such as speech organization, audience analysis, and persuasive appeals. Even though these principles have been around for thousands of years and have been taught to millions of students, it's still a challenge to get students to see the value of public speaking. Some students think they already know everything they need to know about speaking in public. Others don't think they'll engage in public speaking very often, if at all. Last, many students are anxious or even scared by the thought of speaking in front of an audience. Regardless of how you currently feel about public speaking, try to approach this chapter with an open mind. Learning about and practicing public speaking fosters transferable skills that will help you organize your thoughts, outline information, do research, adapt to various audiences, and utilize and understand persuasive techniques. These skills will be useful in other college classes, your career, your personal relationships, and your civic life.

9.1 Preparing a Speech

There are many steps that go into the speech-making process. Many people do not approach speech preparation in an informed and systematic way, which results in many poorly planned or executed speeches that are not pleasant

to sit through as an audience member and don't reflect well on the speaker. Good speaking skills can help you stand out from the crowd in increasingly competitive environments. While a polished delivery is important and will be discussed more in section 9.2, good speaking skills must be practiced much earlier in the speech-making process.

Analyzing the Audience

Before jumping into the speech writing process, it is worthwhile to engage in audience analysis. One of the first questions you should ask yourself is, "Who is my audience?" While there are some generalizations you can make about an audience, a competent speaker always assumes there is a diversity of opinion and background among their listeners. You can't assume from looking that everyone in your audience is the same age, race, sexual orientation, or religion. Even if you did have a fairly homogeneous audience, with only one or two people who don't match up, you should still consider those one or two people. In short, a good speaker shouldn't intentionally alienate even one audience member.

It is important to focus on both commonalities and differences when analyzing an audience. [Photo by Matheus Bertelli from Pexels.]

Even though you should remain conscious of the differences among audience members, you can also focus on commonalities. When delivering a speech in a college classroom, you can rightfully assume that everyone in your audience is currently living in the general area of the school, is enrolled at the school, and is currently taking the same speech class. In professional speeches, you can often assume that everyone is part of the same professional organization if you present at a conference, employed at the same place or in the same field if you are giving a sales presentation, or experiencing the nervousness of starting a new job if you are leading an orientation or training. You may not be able to assume much more, but that's enough to add some tailored points to your speech that will make the content more relevant.

In persuasive contexts, understanding your audience allows you to best identify the most effective appeals you can include in your speech. Ethos, logos, and pathos were Aristotle's three rhetorical proofs, or modes of persuasion, and are still used to reach audiences today.

Ethos is defined as the credibility of a speaker and includes both competence and trustworthiness (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003). Competence refers to the perception of a speaker's expertise in relation to the topic being discussed. A speaker can enhance their perceived competence by presenting a speech based in solid research and that is well organized and practiced. Trustworthiness refers to the degree that audience members perceive a speaker to be presenting accurate, credible information in a nonmanipulative way. Perceptions of trustworthiness come from the content of the speech and the personality of the speaker (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003).

Logos is defined as the reasoning or logic of an argument. Speakers employ logos by presenting credible information as supporting material and verbally citing their sources during their speech. Carefully choosing

supporting material that is verifiable, specific, and unbiased can help a speaker appeal to logos, as can citing personal experience and providing the credentials and/or qualifications of sources of information (Cooper & Nothstine, 1996). Presenting a rational and logical argument is important, but speakers can often be more effective persuaders if they bring in and refute counterarguments. The most effective persuasive messages are those that present two sides of an argument and refute the opposing side (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003).

Pathos refers to emotional appeals. Aristotle was suspicious of too much emotional appeal, yet pathos appears to have become more acceptable in public speaking over time. Stirring emotions in an audience is a way to get them involved in the speech, and involvement can create more opportunities for persuasion and action. Of course, intentionally stirring someone's emotions to get them involved in a message that has little substance would be unethical. Yet such spellbinding speakers have taken advantage of people's emotions to get them to support causes, buy products, or engage in behaviors that they might not otherwise, if given the chance to see the faulty logic of a message. More than any other appeal, ethical speakers must be careful not to misuse pathos.

Understanding as much as you can about your audience, then analyzing what types of appeals will work best to reach them, allows you to take an audience-centered approach to public speaking. Balancing these appeals is also important in your pursuit of being a competent and ethical public speaker.

Selecting and Researching a Topic

When beginning the process of coming up with and researching a speech topic, you first want to understand the **general purpose** of your speech. Speeches typically fall into one of three categories. In some cases, we speak to inform, meaning we attempt to teach our audience using factual objective evidence. In other cases, we speak to persuade, as we try to influence an audience's beliefs, attitudes, values, or behaviors. Last, we may speak to entertain or amuse our audience. In summary, while there may be some overlap between general purposes, most speeches can be placed into one of the categories based on the overall content of the speech.

Once you have determined your general purpose, you can begin the process of choosing a topic. In this class, you may have a lot of freedom to choose a topic for a speech, but in most academic, professional, and personal settings, there will be some parameters set that will help guide your topic selection. For example, speeches delivered at work will usually be directed toward a specific goal such as welcoming new employees, informing about changes in workplace policies, or presenting quarterly sales figures. In short, it's not often that you'll be starting from scratch when you begin to choose a topic.

Whether you've received parameters that narrow your topic range or not, the first step in choosing a topic is brainstorming. **Brainstorming** involves generating many potential topic ideas in a fast-paced and nonjudgmental manner. Brainstorming can take place multiple times as you narrow your topic. For example, you may begin by brainstorming a list of your personal interests that can then be narrowed down to a speech topic. It makes sense that you will enjoy speaking about something that you care about or find interesting. The research and writing will be more interesting, and the delivery will be easier since you won't have to fake enthusiasm for your topic. While it's good to start with your personal interests, some speakers may get stuck here if they don't feel like they can make their interests relevant to the audience. In that case, you can look around for ideas. If your topic is something

that's being discussed in newspapers, on television, in the lounge of your residence hall, or around your family's dinner table, then it's likely to be of interest and be relevant since it's current.

Once you have brainstormed, narrowed, and chosen your topic, you can begin to draft your specific purpose statement. Your **specific purpose** is a one-sentence statement that includes the objective you want to accomplish in your speech. You do not speak aloud your specific purpose during your speech; you use it to guide your researching, organizing, and writing. A good specific purpose statement is audience centered, agrees with the general purpose, addresses one main idea, and is realistic. The following is a good example of a good specific purpose statement for an informative speech: "By the end of my speech, the audience will be better informed about the effects the green movement has had on schools." The statement is audience centered, seems like a realistic objective for a short speech, and matches with the general purpose by stating, "the audience will be better informed."

Your **thesis statement** is a one-sentence summary of the central idea of your speech that you either explain or defend. You would explain the thesis statement for an informative speech, since these speeches are based on factual, objective material. You would defend your thesis statement for a persuasive speech, because these speeches are argumentative and your thesis should clearly indicate a stance on a particular issue. The thesis statement is different from the specific purpose in two main ways. First, the thesis statement is content centered, while the specific purpose statement is audience centered. Second, the thesis statement is incorporated into the spoken portion of your speech, while the specific purpose serves as a guide for your research and writing and an objective that you can measure. A good thesis statement is declarative, agrees with the general and specific purposes, and focuses and narrows your topic. Although you will likely end up revising and refining your thesis as you research and write, it is good to draft a thesis statement soon after drafting a specific purpose to help guide your progress. As with the specific purpose statement, your thesis helps ensure that your research, organizing, and writing are focused so you don't end up wasting time with irrelevant materials. The following examples show how a general purpose, specific purpose, and thesis statement match up with a topic area:

1. **Topic:** Renewable Energy
    - **General purpose:** To Inform
    - **Specific purpose:** By the end of my speech, the audience will be able to explain the basics of using biomass as fuel.
    - **Thesis statement:** Biomass is a renewable resource that releases gases that can be used for fuel.

- **Topic:** Privacy Rights
    - **General purpose:** To Persuade
    - **Specific purpose**: By the end of my speech, my audience will believe that parents should not be able to use tracking devices to monitor their teenage child's activities.
    - **Thesis statement:** I believe that it is a violation of a child's privacy to be electronically monitored by their parents.

After generating your topic, purpose, and thesis, you can begin to research and come up with ideas for the content of the speech. Depending on how familiar you are with a topic, you will need to do more or less background research before you actually start incorporating sources to support your speech. **Background research** is just a review of summaries available for your topic that helps refresh or create your knowledge about the subject. Beyond that, you will need to do more focused research that you will actually use in your speech.

There are numerous research methods, including using library databases and asking a reference librarian for help. [Photo by Polina Zimmerman from Pexels.]

There are several different types of sources that may be relevant for your speech topic including periodicals, newspapers, books, reference tools, interviews, documentaries, and websites. As you find sources, it is also important that you evaluate their credibility. Ask questions like: Is the source reliable and unbiased? Is the information well-supported and up-to-date? Can the information be cross-checked with other sources? Citing credible sources influences the quality of your speech's content, as well as your own credibility as a speaker.

Organizing the Speech

As you organize your thoughts and supporting materials into speech form, it is helpful to create an outline. Think of your outline as a living document that grows and takes form throughout your speech-making process. Outlines can take different forms (e.g., formal/full-sentence outlines or shorthand/key-word outlines), but generally include the introduction, body, and conclusion of the speech.

Introduction

We all know that first impressions matter. Research shows that students' impressions of instructors on the first day of class persist throughout the semester (Laws et al., 2010). Similarly, in the first minute or so of a speech, an audience decides whether or not they are interested in listening to the rest of the presentation. There are five objectives that speakers often aim to accomplish in an introduction. They include getting the audience's attention, introducing the topic, establishing the speaker's credibility, demonstrating the topic's significance, and previewing the speech's main points.

An **attention-getting device** is used to capture the audience's attention and make them want to listen to the speech. There are several strategies you can use to get your audience's attention, including using humor, citing a startling fact or statistic, using a poignant quotation, asking a question, and telling a story. Effective speakers select an attention-getting device that is creative, appropriate to the topic, and relevant to the audience.

Introducing the topic of your speech is the most obvious objective of an introduction, but speakers sometimes forget to do this or do not do it clearly. As the author of your speech, you may think that what you're talking about is obvious. But sometimes a speech topic doesn't become obvious until the middle of a speech and, by that time, many audience members will have become frustrated and tuned out. It is important to include the thesis statement, discussed earlier in this chapter, to clearly articulate the focus of the speech.

Numerous factors influence a speaker's ethos, or credibility, including attire and delivery. A credibility statement is used to demonstrate a speaker's knowledge or expertise on their speech topic. Photo by Mikhail Nilov from Pexels.

The speech's introduction is also an appropriate time to explicitly demonstrate your credibility as it relates to your speech topic. A **credibility statement** allows you to share any training, expertise, or credentials relevant to your topic. This statement could include firsthand experience, previous classes you have taken, or even a personal interest related to your topic.

As you begin a speech, many in the audience might think to themselves, "Why should I care about this topic?" You can address this concern by including a **significance statement** in the speech's introduction, which answers the "so what?" question by describing the topic's relevance or importance. An effective significance statement addresses the audience sitting directly in front of you. While many are good at making a topic relevant to humanity in general, it takes more effort to make the content relevant to a specific audience.

The **preview of main points** is usually the last sentence of your introduction and serves as a map of what's to come in the speech. This statement succinctly previews the main points you will focus on in the speech's body. It is typically one sentence and includes key words like, "first," "second," and "finally," to clearly indicate to an audience how the speech's points are organized.

Body

Writing the body of your speech takes the most time in the speech-writing process. Your specific purpose and thesis statements should guide the initial development of the body, which will then be more informed by your research process. You will determine main points that help achieve your purpose and match your thesis. You will then fill information into your main points by incorporating various types of supporting material.

There are several ways you can organize your main points, and some patterns correspond well to a particular subject area or speech type. Determining which pattern you will use helps filter through your list of central ideas generated from your research and allows you to move on to the next step of inserting supporting material into your speech. Here are five common organizational patterns:

1. **Topical Pattern:** Breaks a larger idea or category into smaller ideas or subcategories.
    - **Example:** In a speech about the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, you could discuss three genres of music performed: (1) folk, (2) funk, and (3) rock.
2. **Chronological Pattern:** Structures a speech based on a timeline or sequence.
    - **Example:** In a speech about the history of your campus, you could discuss (1) the institution's founding, (2) how it developed over time, and (3) what the institution looks like today.

3. **Spatial Pattern:** Arranges main points based on their layout or proximity to each other.
    - **Example:** In a speech about theatre, you could discuss the different areas and components of a stage.
4. **Problem-Solution Pattern:** Presents a problem and then suggests a solution.
    - **Example:** In a speech about rising textbook costs, you could discuss (1) the high costs for college students and (2) open educational resources and other low-cost alternatives as solutions.
5. **Cause-Effect Pattern:** Sets up a relationship between ideas that shows a progression from origin to result.
    - **Example:** In a speech about college sports, you might focus on how NIL (Name, Image, Likeness) deals have affected the recruitment and retention of athletes.

Regardless of how you organize your main points, you want to include signposts to help audience members understand where you are in your speech. **Signposts** are words or phrases that help transition between points or thoughts. For example, *aside from* and *while* are good ways to transition between thoughts within a main point. Organizing signposts like *first*, *second*, and *finally* can be used within a main point to help the speaker move through information. Clear transition statements are especially important in between main points. For example, "Now that you know more about the history of Habitat for Humanity, let's look at the work they have done in our area."

Conclusion

A strong conclusion makes it more likely that you will receive a favorable response from the audience. Photo by Werner Pfennig from Pexels.

How you conclude a speech leaves an impression on your audience. There are three important objectives to accomplish in your conclusion. They include restating your thesis, reviewing your main points, and closing your speech.

As you transition from the body of your speech to the conclusion, **restating the thesis** of the speech helps reiterate the topic's importance and cues the audience that you are beginning to wrap things up. After restating the thesis, a **review statement** reminds the audience of the different main points you discussed. The review statement in the conclusion is very similar to the preview statement in your introduction. Repeating your thesis and summarizing your main points helps the audience retain information from the speech.

Finally, your **closing statement** adds a sense of closure and completeness to a speech. Like the attention-getting device, your closing statement is an opportunity for you to exercise your creativity as a speaker. The closing statement could amplify the topic's significance, provide some take-away message, or call the audience to act.

Another option is to refer back to the introduction in the closing of the speech, finishing an illustration or answering a rhetorical question that you started in the introduction.

9.2 Delivering a Speech

Think of a speech or presentation you have seen that was poorly delivered. How did that affect your view of the speaker and their topic? Is a poorly delivered speech more bearable if the information is solid and organized? In most cases, bad delivery distracts us so much from a message that we don't even evaluate or absorb the information being presented. In short, a well-researched and well-prepared speech is not much without effective delivery.

In chapter 1, we briefly discussed managing communication apprehension, including public speaking anxiety, which affects speech delivery. In chapter 4, we covered kinesics and vocalics, which are comprised of many important elements of delivery for public speaking, such as gestures, eye-contact, posture, pitch, volume, and rate. This section covers other important information related to delivery, including selecting an appropriate delivery method, practicing the speech, and employing effective visual aids.

Delivery Methods and Practice Sessions

Different speaking occasions call for different delivery methods. While it may be acceptable to speak from memory in some situations, lengthy notes may be required in others. The four most common delivery methods are impromptu, manuscript, memorized, and extemporaneous.

Different speaking situations call for different modes of delivery. Photo by Henri Mathieu-Saint-Laurent from Pexels.

When using **impromptu delivery**, a speaker has little to no time to prepare for a speech. This means there is little time for research, audience analysis, organizing, and practice. For this reason, impromptu speaking often evokes higher degrees of speaking anxiety than other delivery types. Only skilled public speakers with much experience are usually able to "pull off" an impromptu delivery without looking unprepared. Otherwise, a speaker who is very familiar with the subject matter can sometimes be a competent impromptu speaker because their expertise can compensate for the lack of research and organizing time.

Manuscript delivery involves speaking from a script that contains the entirety of a speech. Manuscript delivery can be the best choice when a speech has complicated information and/or the contents of the speech are going to be quoted or published. Despite the fact that most novice speakers are not going to find themselves in that situation, many are drawn to this delivery method because of the security they feel with having everything they're going to say in front of them. Unfortunately, the security of having every word you want to say at your disposal translates to a poorly delivered and unengaging speech.

Even with every word written out, speakers can still make mistakes as they lose their place in the manuscript or get tripped up over their words. The alternative, of course, is that a speaker reads the manuscript the whole time, effectively cutting themself off from the audience.

Completely memorizing a speech and delivering it without notes is known as **memorized delivery**. Some students attempt to memorize their speech because they think it will make them feel more confident to not have to look at their notes; however, when their anxiety level spikes at the beginning of their speech and their mind goes blank for a minute, many admit they should have chosen a different delivery method. When using any of the other delivery methods, speakers still need to rely on their memory. An impromptu speaker must recall facts or experiences related to their topic, and speakers using a manuscript want to have some of their content memorized so they do not read their entire speech to their audience. The problem with memorized delivery overall is that it puts too much responsibility on our memory, which we all know from experience is fallible.

Extemporaneous delivery entails memorizing the overall structure and main points of a speech and then speaking from keyword/key-phrase notes. This delivery mode brings together many of the strengths of the previous three methods. Since you only internalize and memorize the main structure of a speech, you don't have to worry as much about the content and delivery seeming stale. Extemporaneous delivery brings in some of the spontaneity of impromptu delivery but still allows a speaker to carefully plan the overall structure of a speech and incorporate supporting materials that include key facts, quotations, and paraphrased information. You can also more freely adapt your speech to fit various audiences and occasions, since every word and sentence isn't predetermined.

Practicing a speech is essential no matter which delivery method you use. You should start by practicing the speech early. Reading sections of your speech aloud as you draft them will help ensure your speech is fluent and sounds good for the audience. As you progress through the speech-crafting process, you should also practice in front of and solicit feedback from a trusted source. Doing so helps boost your confidence and gives you valuable feedback that you can use to improve the end product. Finally, you may also want to audio or video record your speech. All of these methods of practice will help you improve your delivery and gain familiarity with your content.

Using Visual Aids

Visual aids help a speaker reinforce speech content visually, which helps amplify the speaker's message. There are several types of visual aids, and each has its strengths in terms of the type of information it lends itself to presenting. But while visual aids can help bring your speech to life, they can also add more opportunities for things to go wrong. Therefore, we will discuss some tips for effective creation and delivery as we discuss the following types of visual aids: objects, posters and handouts, whiteboards, videos, and presentation software.

Objects

Objects are common visual aids in demonstration speeches and training sessions. In other speeches, objects can be used to represent an idea, offering the audience a direct, concrete way to understand what you are saying. Models also fall into this category, as they are scaled versions of objects that may be too big (the International Space Station) or too small (a molecule) to actually show to your audience. Additionally, different types of pictures are objects that you can use to connect to your audience on a personal level. Here are some tips for using objects effectively:

1. Make sure your objects are large enough for the audience to see.
2. Think twice about if and when you'd like to pass the objects around, as that can be distracting.
3. Hold your objects up long enough for the audience to see them.
4. Do not talk to your object, wiggle or wave it around, tap on it, or obstruct the audience's view of your face with it.
5. Practice with your objects so your delivery will be fluent and there won't be any surprises.

Your occasion, audience, and purpose dictate what type of visual aids you should consider using. Photo by Antoni Shkraba from Pexels.

Posters and Handouts

Posters generally include text and graphics and often summarize an entire presentation or select main points. Posters are frequently used to present original research, as they can be broken down into the various steps to show how a process worked. Posters can be useful if you are going to have audience members circulating around the room before or after your presentation, so they can take the time to review the poster and ask questions. Posters are not often good visual aids during a speech, because it's difficult to make the text and graphics large enough for a room full of people to adequately see. The best posters are those created using computer software and professionally printed on large, laminated paper.

Handouts can be a useful alternative to posters. Think of them as mini posters that audience members can reference and take with them. Audience members will likely appreciate a handout that is limited to one page, is neatly laid out, and includes the speaker's contact information. It can be appropriate to give handouts to an audience before a long presentation where note taking is expected, complicated information is presented, or the audience will be tested on or have to respond to the information presented. In most regular speeches less than fifteen minutes long, it would not be wise to distribute handouts ahead of time, as they will distract the audience from the speaker. It's better to distribute the handouts after your speech or at the end of the program if there are others speaking after you.

Whiteboards

Whiteboards (along with chalkboards, flip charts, and other similar visual aids) can be useful for interactive speeches. If you are polling the audience or brainstorming, you can write down audience responses easily for everyone to see and for later reference. They can also be helpful for unexpected clarification. If audience members

look confused, you can take a moment to expand on a point or concept using the board. Since many people are uncomfortable writing on whiteboards due to handwriting or spelling issues, it's good to anticipate things that you may have to expand on and have prepared extra visual aids or slides that you can include if needed. You can also have audience members write things on boards or flip charts themselves, which helps get them engaged and takes some of the pressure off you as a speaker. When using whiteboards as a primary visual aid, you should also think about how often your back is turned to the audience, as that can hurt audience engagement.

Videos

Video clips as visual aids can be powerful and engaging for an audience, but they can also be troublesome for speakers. Whether embedded in a PowerPoint presentation or accessed through YouTube, video clips are notorious for tripping up speakers. Technology is not always reliable and online videos often have built-in advertisements that can be distracting. Therefore, it is very important to test your technology and any video clips you plan to show before your speech, have a backup method of delivery if possible, and be prepared to go on without the video if all else fails. Although sometimes tempting, you should not let the video take over your speech. You should also make sure your video is relevant and that it is cued to where it needs to be.

Presentation Software

Whether it's PowerPoint, Prezi, Canva, Keynote, or Google Slides, presentation software is often a convenient and effective visual aid. But despite the fact that most of us have viewed and created numerous PowerPoint presentations, we still see many poorly executed slideshows that detract from speeches. In order to effectively use PowerPoint and similar products, follow these tips:

1. Use a consistent theme with limited variation in font style and font size.
2. Be concise and avoid complete sentences.
3. Limit the amount of text and bullet points per slide.
4. Use relevant images.
5. Avoid unnecessary animation or distracting slide transitions.
6. Only have a slide displayed when it is relevant to what you're discussing.
7. Don't read directly from the slides.

PowerPoint presentations are common in professional and educational settings. [Photo by Pavel Danilyuk from Pexels.]

Key Concepts: Content and Delivery

Take some time to think about the balance between the value of content and delivery in a speech. We know it's important to have solid content and to have an engaging and smooth delivery to convey that content, but how should each category be weighted and evaluated? Most people who have made it to college can put the time and effort into following assignment guidelines to put together a well-researched and well-organized speech. But some people are naturally better at delivering speeches than others. Some people are more extroverted, experience less public speaking anxiety, and are naturally more charismatic than others. Sometimes a person's delivery and charisma might distract an audience away from critically evaluating the content of their speech. Charismatic and well-liked celebrities and athletes, for example, are used to endorse products and sell things to the public. We may follow their advice because we like them, instead of basing our choice on their facts or content. Aristotle, Cicero, and other notable orators instructed that delivery should be good enough to present the material effectively but not so good or so bad that it draws attention to itself. But in today's celebrity culture, the packaging is sometimes more valued than the contents. This leads us to some questions that might help us unpack the sometimes tricky relationship between content and delivery.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think worries about content or delivery contribute more to speaking anxiety? Explain your choice.
2. How should someone be evaluated who works hard to research, organize, and write a speech, but doesn't take the time to practice so they have good delivery? What if they practice, but still don't deliver the speech well on speech day?
3. How should we evaluate a speaker who delivers an engaging speech that gets the audience laughing and earns a big round of applause, but doesn't verbally cite sources or present well-organized ideas?
4. Is it ethical for someone to use their natural charisma or speaking abilities to win over an audience rather than relying on the merit and strength of their speech content? In what speaking situations would this be more acceptable? Less acceptable?

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Credits

Chapter 10: Media, Technology, and Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Define mass media and differentiate between traditional and new media.
2. Identify key functions of the mass media.
3. Discuss media effects theories, including bullet theory, agenda-setting theory, and uses and gratifications theory.
4. Explore ethical issues of control, representation, and surveillance in the mass media.
5. Employ media literacy skills to evaluate media messages.

The ever-changing media and technological landscapes have huge implications on how we communicate. Photo by Tracy Le Blanc from Pexels.

Throughout history, evolving media technologies have changed the ways we relate and communicate. In 2007, for example, a joint venture between the 24-hour news network CNN and the video-sharing site YouTube allowed voters to pose questions directly to presidential candidates in two televised debates. Voters could record their questions and upload them to YouTube, and a selection of these videos were then chosen by the debate moderators and played directly to the presidential candidates. This new format opened up the presidential debates to a wider array of people, allowing for greater voter participation than had been possible in the past, where questions were posed solely by journalists or a few carefully chosen audience members.

In today's world of smartphones and streaming, our expectations of our leaders, celebrities, teachers, and even ourselves are changing in even more drastic ways. This chapter examines the ever-changing media and technological landscapes and their effects on communication. First, we will explore the functions and effects of mass communication. Second, we will turn to ethics and media literacy.

10.1 Mass Media and Communication

To begin, it is important to define and distinguish different types of media. Often, this chapter will reference the broad category of **mass media**, defined as various channels of communication that are designed to reach a wide audience. Many textbooks also make a distinction between "old" or "traditional" media and "new" media. **Traditional media** consists of channels that have been around for decades, including print, radio, and television/

film. Traditional media tends to use one-way and delayed communication. For example, we don't have a way to influence an episode of *The Last of Us* as we watch it. We could send messages to the show's producers and hope our feedback is received, or we could yell at the television, but neither is likely to influence the people responsible for sending the message. In contrast, **new media** consists of interactive, immediate, and portable channels of communication made possible through the technological advances of recent decades. Examples include social media, text messages, and emails. Consider how new media, as opposed to traditional media, allows us to communicate directly and immediately with different individuals and organizations using messages, comments, likes and dislikes, subscriptions, follows, and other interactions.

So how does mass mediated communication function differently than interpersonal communication? Do we have relationships with media like we have relationships with people? How does mediated communication influence society? To answer these questions, we can look at some of the functions and effects of mass communication.

Functions of Mass Communication

Mass mediated communication fulfills several basic roles in our society. One obvious role is entertainment. Media can act as a springboard for our imaginations, a source of fantasy, and an outlet for escapism. In the 19th century, Victorian readers disillusioned by the grimness of the Industrial Revolution found themselves drawn into fantastic worlds of fairies and other fictitious beings. In the 21st century, American television viewers can escape to galaxies far, far away in the Star Wars universe or to a pineapple under the sea in SpongeBob SquarePants. Through bringing us stories of all kinds, the mass media has the power to take us away from ourselves.

The mass media can also provide information and education. Information can come in many forms, and it may sometimes be difficult to separate from entertainment. Today, news websites, papers, magazines, and television shows make available stories from across the globe, allowing readers or viewers in London to access voices and videos from Baghdad, Tokyo, or Buenos Aires. Websites like *Wikipedia* have articles on topics from presidential nicknames to child prodigies to tongue twisters in various languages. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has posted free lecture notes, exams, and audio and video recordings of classes on its OpenCourseWare website, allowing anyone with an Internet connection access to world-class professors.

The mass media serves entertainment, informational, and educational purposes. Photo by cottonbro studio from Pexels.

Another important function of the mass media is to serve as a **watchdog**, or an entity that monitors and investigates government, business, and other institutions. Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle* exposed the miserable conditions in the turn-of-the-century meatpacking industry; and in the early 1970s, *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein uncovered evidence of the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up, which eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. But purveyors of mass media may also be

beholden to particular agendas because of political slant, advertising funds, or ideological bias, thus constraining their ability to act as a watchdog.

As we consider the functions of the mass media, it's important to remember that not all media are created equal. While some forms of mass communication are better suited to entertainment, others make more sense as a venue for spreading information. For example, books are durable and able to contain a lot of information, but are relatively slow and expensive to produce. In contrast, websites are quick and easy to update, making them a better medium for the quick turnover of daily news. Podcasts and radio programs are easily accessible while driving and doing other tasks, but television provides vastly more visual information. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1965) took these ideas one step further, famously coining the phrase **"the medium is the message."** By this, McLuhan meant that every medium delivers information in a different way and that content is fundamentally shaped by the medium of transmission. For instance, although television news has the advantage of offering video and live coverage, making a story come alive more vividly, it is also a faster-paced medium. That means more stories get covered in less depth. A story told on television will probably be flashier, less in-depth, and with less context than the same story covered in a monthly magazine; therefore, people who get the majority of their news from television may have a particular view of the world shaped not by the *content* of what they watch but its *medium*.

Media scholars often look at how models presented in magazines, films, and advertisements affect society's views of style and beauty. Photo by Skylar Kang from Pexels.

Effects of Mass Communication

Media effects are the intended or unintended consequences of what the mass media does (McQuail, 2010). Many of the key theories in mass communication rest on the assumption that the media has effects on audience members. The degree and type of effect varies depending on the theory. In general, we underestimate the effect that the media has on us, as we tend to think that media messages affect others more than us. The **third-party effect** describes the phenomenon of people thinking they are more immune to media influence than others. If this were true, though, would advertisers and public relations professionals spend billions of dollars a year carefully crafting messages aimed at influencing viewers?

There are certain media effects that are fairly obvious and most of us would agree are common (even for ourselves). For example, we change our clothes and our plans because we watch the forecast on the local news, look up information about a band and sample their music after we see them perform on a television show, or stop eating melons after we read about a salmonella outbreak. Other effects are more difficult to study and more difficult for people to accept because they are long term and/or more personal. For example, media may influence our personal sense of style, views on sex, perceptions of other races, or values just as our own free will, parents, or friends do. It is difficult, however, to determine in any specific case how much influence the media has on a belief or behavior in proportion to other factors that influence us. Media messages may also affect viewers in ways not intended by the creators of the message. Three theories focused on media effects include bullet theory, agenda-setting theory, and uses and gratifications theory.

Bullet Theory

An early approach to studying media effects was called the **hypodermic needle approach**, or **bullet theory** and suggested that the media constructed a message with a particular meaning that was "injected" or "shot" into individuals within the mass audience. It was assumed that the effects were common to each individual and that the meaning wasn't altered as it was transferred. Through experiments and surveys, researchers hoped to map the patterns within the human brain so they could connect certain stimuli to certain behaviors. For example, researchers might try to prove that a message announcing that a product is on sale at a reduced price will lead people to buy a product they may not otherwise want or need. As researchers investigated bullet theory over the years, they began to find flaws within this line of thinking. New theories emerged that didn't claim such a direct connection between the intent of a message and any single reaction on the part of receivers. Instead, these new theories claimed that meaning could be partially transferred, that patterns may become less predictable as people are exposed to a particular stimulus more often, and that interference at any point in the transmission could change the reaction.

Agenda-Setting Theory

In contrast to the extreme views of bullet theory, the **agenda-setting theory** of media stated that mass media determine the issues that concern the public, rather than the public's views. Under this theory, the issues that receive the most attention from media become the issues that the public discusses, debates, and demands action on. This means that the media is determining what issues and stories the public thinks about. Therefore, when the media fails to address a particular issue, it becomes marginalized in the minds of the public (Hanson, 2009).

Consider how the front page of a newspaper sets the agenda for what issues the public should view as important. Photo by cottonbro studio from Pexels.

When critics claim that a particular media outlet has an agenda, they are drawing on this theory. Agendas can range from a perceived political bias in the news media to the propagation of certain worldviews in films. For example, the agenda-setting theory explains such phenomena as the rise of public opinion against smoking. Before the mass media began taking an anti-smoking stance, smoking was considered a personal health issue. By promoting anti-smoking sentiments through advertisements, public relations campaigns, and a variety of media outlets, the mass media moved smoking into the public arena, making it a public health issue rather than a personal health issue (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). More recently, coverage of mass shootings has been prominent in the news. However, when news coverage wanes, so does the general public's interest.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Practitioners of the **uses and gratifications theory** study the ways the public consumes media. This theory states that consumers use the media to satisfy specific needs or desires. For example, you may enjoy watching a reality show while simultaneously chatting about it on social media with your friends. Many people use the internet to seek out entertainment, to find information, to communicate with like-minded individuals, or to pursue self-

expression. Each of these uses gratifies a particular need, and the needs determine the way in which media is used. By examining factors of different groups' media choices, researchers can determine the motivations behind media use (Papacharissi, 2009).

Researchers have identified a number of common motives for media consumption. These include relaxation, social interaction, entertainment, arousal, escape, and a host of interpersonal and social needs. By examining the motives behind the consumption of a particular form of media, researchers can better understand both the reasons for that medium's popularity and the roles that the medium fills in society. A study of the motives behind a given user's interaction with Snapchat, for example, could explain the role Snapchat takes in society and the reasons for its appeal.

Uses and gratification theory examines the ways that the public uses the media to satisfy specific needs or desires. Photo by August de Richelieu from Pexels.

10.2 Ethics and Media Literacy

Given the potential for mass communication messages to reach thousands to millions of people, the potential for positive or negative consequences of those messages exceeds those of interpersonal, small group, organizational or even public communication messages. Because of this, questions of ethics have to be closely considered when discussing mass communication and the media. In this section, we will discuss ethical issues in mass communication and how media literacy can help combat those issues.

Ethics

Ethical issues exist at all levels of media usage. An individual may unethically engage in cyber-bullying or misrepresent themselves on a social media profile. A tabloid news organization may spread false information online. A government may put out propaganda or spy on its citizens. Three broad categories of ethical concerns include control, representation, and surveillance.

Media Control and Ownership

Media interests and ownership have become concentrated in recent decades through mergers and consolidations. Companies that you're familiar with now but may not have known were once separate entities include Warner Bros. Discovery (which includes Warner Bros., HBO, Discovery, CNN, Turner Broadcasting, and more) and the Walt Disney Company (which includes Disney, ABC, ESPN, FX, and National Geographic, among others). The mergers of these media companies were meant to provide a synergy that could lower costs and produce higher profits. Critics decry consolidated media ownership as unfair, as smaller or independent companies are unable to compete with in time, resources, or money.

Disney is an example of a media conglomerate with a high level of control over the media landscape. Photo by David Guerrero from Pexels.

Consolidated media ownership has also led to a decrease in localism in terms of local news and local reporters, radio DJs, and editors (Austin, 2011). Since business is handled from a central hub that might be hundreds or thousands of miles away from a market the media outlet serves, many of the media jobs that used to exist in a city or region have disappeared.

Issues of ownership and control are present in new media as they are in traditional mass media. Although people may think they are multitasking and accessing different media outlets, they may not be. To help keep users within their domain, some large new media platforms like Facebook create expansive environments that include news, social media connections, advertising, and entertainment, which allow users to click around and feel like they are moving freely even though they are not leaving the general owner's space.

Media and Representation

Another area of concern for those who study mass media is the representation of diversity (or lack thereof) in media messages. The U.S. population is becoming increasingly diverse. Yet in television and streaming programs, major publications, and other forms of mass media and entertainment, minorities are often either absent or presented as heavily stereotyped, two-dimensional characters. The stereotyping of women, LGBTQ individuals, and individuals with disabilities in mass media has also been a source of concern. Whether we want them to be or not, the people we see featured in media messages serve as role models for many that view them. These people help set the tone for standards of behavior, beauty, and intelligence, among other things. **Social learning theory** claims that media portrayals influence the development of schemata or scripts, especially as children, about different groups of people (Signorielli, 2009). For example, a person who grows up in a relatively homogenous white, middle-class environment can develop schemata about African Americans and Latina/os based on how they are depicted in media messages.

A similar lack of diversity has been found in new media. In a study of gender representation in online news sources, the Global Media Monitoring Project found after analyzing news stories on 76 websites in 16 countries that only 36 percent of the stories were reported by women, and women were the focus of only 23 percent of all the stories written (Gallagher, 2010). Another look at popular, blog-style news sites such as *The Huffington Post*, *The Daily Beast*, *Slate*, and *Salon* found that representations of minorities conformed to stereotypes. For example, African Americans were featured primarily in stories about athletics, Latino/as appeared in stories about immigration, and Native and Asian Americans were absent (Jackson, 2012).

Media Filtering and Surveillance

Research shows that internet content filtering is increasing as new technologies allow governments and other entities to effectively target and block internet users from accessing undesirable information. For example, in 2002 only two countries, China and Saudi Arabia, were known to actively filter internet content within their borders. Presently, many more countries, including the United States, engage in such content filtering. While internet service providers can block content, other institutions can also censor content using software or other technical

means. This type of blocking may be carried out to meet the objectives or values of a particular institution—for example, to block sexually explicit information from school computers. Finally, censorship can occur at the individual computer level. In such cases, parents may want to control the information available to their children.

Typically, blocked content includes pornography or other materials deemed sexually explicit, information deemed harmful to national security or public safety (e.g., bomb-making information), and information that challenges a government or regime's power (Deibert, 2008). In 2009, Bahrain was reported to make the most substantial increase in filtering of any country, as it limited many social, religious, political, and human rights sites (Faris & Zittrain, 2009). In terms of politics and human rights blocking, China blocked access to Twitter in the lead-up to the twenty-year anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests. Religiously offensive material can also be blocked as evidenced by Pakistan's practice of blocking information that is offensive to Islam.

Many governments and institutions have restricted access to TikTok due to security threats posed by the popular app. Photo by cottonbro studio from Pexels.

Electronic espionage has been around since communication technologies like the telegraph, sound-recording devices, and radios were invented. Many countries, including the United States, have long had limitations on and protections against the use of electronic surveillance on US citizens, but these restrictions have been lessened and reinterpreted over time. With new media come new opportunities for electronic surveillance. Internet based "wiretaps"—the unauthorized and unknown monitoring or collection of e-mail, web-surfing data, or even keyboard strokes—are now employed, and that information may be shared with law enforcement or intelligence agencies (Deibert, 2008).

Such surveillance techniques are not just used by government or intelligence agencies; they are also used by companies. You're likely used to clicking "accept" on lengthy terms of use agreements and privacy policies that pop up when using an app or website. These agreements often allow companies to track our usage of their program or product. While this tracking often improves a product's functionality or connects us with services that the program deems useful or relevant to us, it also raises ethical concerns.

Media Literacy

Media literacy involves our ability to critique and analyze the potential impact of the media. The word *literacy* refers to our ability to read and comprehend written language, but just as we need literacy to be able to read, write, and function in our society, we also need to be able to read media messages. Media literacy isn't meant to censor or blame the media, nor does it advocate for us to limit or change our engagement with the media in any particular way. Instead, media literacy ties in with critical thinking and listening, which we have learned about throughout this book already. Media literacy skills are important because media outlets are **culture makers**, meaning they reflect much of current society but also reshape and influence sociocultural reality and real-life practices. Some may mistakenly believe that frequent exposure to media or that growing up in a media-saturated environment

leads to media literacy. Knowing how to use technology to find and use media is different from knowing how to analyze it. Like other critical thinking skills, media literacy doesn't just develop; it must be taught, learned, practiced, and reflected on.

Media literacy skills teach us to analyze the media and to realize the following:

Media literacy skills can be applied to both news and entertainment media. [Photo by Daria Obymaha from Pexels.]

- All media messages are constructed (even "objective" news stories are filmed, edited, and introduced in ways that frame and influence their meaning).
- Media structures and policies affect message construction (which means we need to also learn about how media ownership and distribution function in our society).
- Each medium has different characteristics and affects messages differently (e.g., a video on TikTok will likely be less complete than a story presented on a blog focused on that topic).
- Media messages are constructed for particular purposes (many messages are constructed to gain profit or power, some messages promote change, and some try to maintain the status quo).
- All media messages are embedded with values and beliefs (the myth of objectivity helps mask the underlying bias or misrepresentation in some messages).
- Media messages influence our beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors, including how we perceive and interact with others and how we participate in larger society.

We learn much through the media that we do not have direct experience with, and communication and media scholars theorize that we tend to believe media portrayals are accurate representations of life. However, the media represents race, gender, sexuality, ability, and other cultural identities in biased and stereotypical ways that often favor dominant identities (Allen, 2011). Since the media influences our beliefs, attitudes, and expectations about difference, it is important to be able to critically evaluate the mediated messages that we receive. The goal of media literacy is not to teach you what to think but to teach you how you can engage with, interpret, and evaluate media in a more informed manner. Media literacy is also reflective in that we are asked to be accountable for those choices we make in regards to media by reflecting on and being prepared to articulate how those choices fit in with our own belief and value systems.

There are some standard questions that you can ask yourself to help you get started in your media criticism and analysis. There are no "true" or "right/wrong" answers to many of the questions we ask during the critical thinking process. Engaging in media literacy is more about expanding our understanding and perspective rather than arriving at definitive answers. The following questions will help you hone your media literacy skills (Allen, 2011):

1. Who created this message? What did they hope to accomplish? What are their primary belief systems?
2. What is my interpretation of this message? How and why might different people understand this

message differently than me? What can I learn about myself based on my interpretation and how it may differ from others'?

3. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented or omitted in this message? What does this tell me about how other people live and believe? Does this message leave anything or anyone out?
4. Why was this message sent? Who sent it? Is it trying to tell me something? To sell me something?

After asking these questions, media literate people should be able to use well-reasoned arguments and evidence (not just opinion) to support their evaluations. People with media literacy skills also know that their evaluations may not be definitive. Although this may seem like a place of uncertainty, media literate people actually have more control over how they interact with media messages, which allows them to use media to their advantage, whether that is to become better informed or to just enjoy their media experience.

Key Concepts: Media Literacy

Media literacy skills allow us to critique and analyze the potential effects of media. Media literate people ask critical questions about all the media messages they receive, not just the ones with which they disagree. Doing so leads people to be more accountable for their media choices and to have more control over the role that media plays in their lives.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think about a media channel that you use often (e.g., a streaming platform, television channel, or social media site). Look up who owns that channel. How do you think the issues of ownership and control influence how that channel is run?
2. Think about a recent film or TV show that you've watched. Is the show's cast of characters diverse in terms of gender, race, and other cultural factors? Are any characters portrayed in stereotypical or narrow ways? Why or why not? How much do you think diversity matters in the media?
3. Some critics believe that efforts to be more media literate make consuming media less enjoyable. What are some strategies we can use to be ethical, critical consumers of media while still allowing ourselves to "escape" and be entertained?

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