

Preface

In today's world, many people are reminded that "the one thing that you can count on is change." Each year that we teach interpersonal communication classes, our students force us to recognize that their life experiences are oftentimes drastically different than our own. Sometimes we are surprised to learn that issues, events, artifacts, and memories that are central to our lives are not familiar to most of our students. This presents challenges for us as educators because good pedagogical practice insists that we include relevant applications of concepts and theories—things that our students can easily relate to. Yet, while many of our traditionally aged students focus on the present, we continue to remind them that "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Consequently, this book was birthed out of the idea that the best textbooks value both the old and the new. As such, we bridge both perspectives: (1) Although particular circumstances may have changed, the core concepts and theories in the field of communication remain applicable to interpersonal communication in the twenty-first century; and (2) new circumstances call for a reexamination of old frameworks, or the creation of new concepts, models, and theories.

We have written an undergraduate textbook on interpersonal communication that introduces the foundational ideas and concepts of our field *and* applies them to issues, events, and concerns that are relevant for today's college-student population. We did not simply reiterate the standard set of core ideas and theories in the field of interpersonal communication; nor did we exclude the traditions and highlight only the most contemporary (emerging) schools of thought. On balance, this book utilizes an integrated approach—both traditional and contemporary—introducing the concepts, models, and theories of the field in a way that will engage and challenge today's most culturally sensitive, technologically savvy, and forward-thinking interpersonal communication students and professors.

In so many ways, *Contemporary Issues in Interpersonal Communication* will appeal to professors and students who desire a basic coverage of interpersonal communication concepts within the context of the key societal issues of today. Although there are any number of issues that we could have focused on, we chose to highlight those that seem to be the most challenging: culture, power, and technology. By focusing on these three, the book represents an introductory text that speaks to today's diverse and technologically savvy student population. *Contemporary Issues in Interpersonal Communication* connects knowledge of specific communication practices to issues of culture, power, and technology in all contexts of interpersonal communication. Becoming aware of, and having a complete understanding of, the breadth to which culture, power, and

technology influence all of our interpersonal interactions are essential for students who seek competence and effectiveness as interpersonal communicators.

Organization of the Book

Contemporary Issues in Interpersonal Communication has 12 chapters organized around three major sections. Part I represents “An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication” and covers the most basic concepts for students. Within this section, students will learn about basic principles, models, and theories of interpersonal communication generally, as well as those specifically associated with particular topics such as self and perception.

One unique feature of our foundation chapters is Chapter 2. This chapter focuses on introducing students to three contemporary issues—culture, power, and technology—and explaining how they represent challenges to our communication effectiveness. Unlike other interpersonal communication textbooks that may have separate chapters or sections on culture, power, and technology located throughout the book, *Contemporary Issues in Interpersonal Communication* introduces students to these topics in Chapter 2 and integrates them throughout the remaining chapters. This innovative strategy encourages students to understand how these three issues— independently or collectively—affect various aspects of interpersonal communication. Through this organizational feature, we hope to encourage beginning interpersonal communication students to recognize, and appreciate, the complex ways that our communication is affected by multiple factors.

Part II, “Interpersonal Messages,” extends the foundation provided in the first section. Specifically, it focuses on topics such as language, nonverbal communication, listening, communication climate, and conflict. “Communication Contexts,” the final section of the text, continues to build upon the framework of core concepts that was established in Parts I and II. However, it also provides different contexts in which this framework can be used to increase understanding. Within this section, students can focus on communicating effectively within personal relationships, the family, and the workplace.

Pedagogical Features

Each of the chapters in this book contains a set of pedagogical features designed to engage students as they learn about new communication concepts. Although various features appear throughout each chapter, many are used in consistent ways to enhance student learning. For instance, each chapter begins with *Contemporary Issues*, a feature that describes a real-life news story that demonstrates how culture, power, and/or technology issues affect interpersonal communication issues. These stories serve as thought-provoking introductory case studies for students, and we provide Web addresses so that students can learn more about the issues raised. Also provided at the beginning of each chapter is a list of *Myths About Interpersonal Communication* that relate to the topic at hand. Many students begin their study of interpersonal communication with several myths about the topic; often, such myths are based upon popular beliefs, distorted perceptions, or misunderstandings. This pedagogical feature encourages students to think through these various statements, and use the information provided in each chapter to ultimately understand and differentiate between statements that are true and those that represent

myths. To facilitate this process, we close each chapter with an explanation of each statement and why it is a myth or a truth.

Throughout each chapter, we use a number of different boxed features to help students extend the information that is included in the text. Toward this goal, four different types of boxes are included. *Practical Research* boxes share recent research findings concerning different topics of interest, and ask students to think critically about them. *Self-Reflection* boxes ask students to think through how different interpersonal communication concepts relate to their own life experiences. *Applied Concept* boxes and *Skill Builder* boxes both provide opportunities for students to use concepts in everyday settings.

At the close of each chapter, we also include several pedagogical features designed to maximize student learning. As described earlier, one of these is a *Summary* that highlights the truth behind each myth outlined at the beginning of the chapter. We also include a list of *Key Terms*. In addition, we provide a list of *Suggested Contemporary Readings*. These resources all reflect recent scholarship in various areas of interpersonal communication—ones that we would have loved to include in each chapter, but space limitations prohibited us from doing so. We hope that students and professors will utilize these resources and the other *Chapter Activities* to strengthen and/or extend student learning. Our experiences as interpersonal communication teachers have demonstrated the importance of including opportunities for students to use online databases, access various relevant Web sites, participate in structured small-group activities, and take advantage of suggested media texts for different points of analyses.

We wish you the best as you venture into *Contemporary Issues in Interpersonal Communication*. We invite all of your feedback, comments, and/or questions at any time throughout your course (from both professors and students alike)! You can reach us at orbe@wmich.edu and cjbruess@stthomas.edu. ♦

Part I

An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication

An Orientation to Interpersonal Communication

Contemporary Issues: Loving Across Cultural Lines

Tijuana and Michael have been in a long-term dating relationship and hope to marry in the next few years.¹ As Tijuana works to complete graduate school at Yale in the drama department, Michael works as a chiropractor. Although busy with their careers and school, they do the things that most dating couples do: dine out together, enjoy time with friends, e-mail each other notes and photos when they can catch a free moment at work, take advantage of their shared-minutes plan to talk frequently on their cell phones when away on business or simply going about their day, shop for clothes online at Banana Republic, and share a love of digital photography, pop culture, and cooking. Their relationship has faced many of the same challenges that many couples encounter during the dating years. Yet, Tijuana, who is African American, and Michael, who is European American, have faced a somewhat unique set of pressures and questions as one of a growing number of couples who are dating across racial lines.

According to recent studies, approximately four out of ten Americans have dated interracial;² five out of ten of those surveyed in one study expressed an openness to becoming involved in an interracial partnership.³ Researchers suggest that those most likely to date across racial boundaries are males, individuals who are adolescents or young adults, those who are politically liberal and highly educated, and those who attend diverse schools.⁴ Because dating is more informal in the United States, there is greater acceptance of interracial dating than there is of interracial marriage.⁵

Interpersonal communication in all of our relationships is shaped by the messages we receive about what is appropriate and acceptable in our culture. Because Tijuana and Michael's relationship exists within a network of peers, colleagues, friends, and family, their interpersonal communication and the relationships that result naturally affect and are affected by the messages they receive from others. As the research reviewed above highlights, couples who date across racial lines are challenged to face, often explicitly, some of the implicit assumptions in U.S. culture about which cultural identities are most powerful and what is right, best, and acceptable when it comes to dating, love, and family relationships. In what ways have your own interpersonal interactions been influenced or challenged by the cultural expectations or ideals of those around you? If you're having a hard time knowing how to answer that question, rest assured that after reading this text you will be very well prepared to examine the many ways that power and culture, and others' perceptions of such, play a role in all of your interpersonal interactions.

Tijuana and Michael's relationship is also influenced, as you saw in the description of their daily routines, by the increasingly technological world in which they live. Many of their daily mundane communication activities are dependent on the use of communication technologies such as e-mail, digital imagery, the Internet, and cellular phones. The impact of the Internet and other communication technologies on interpersonal communication and social relationships is currently under intense investigation. Although contradictory results are emerging, many studies are uncovering the fully integrated way that many of us in the United States are relying on e-mail, cell phones, and the Internet to develop, maintain, and even terminate our relationships.

What has your experience been using communication technologies to communicate interpersonally? Do you think the increase in Internet and e-mail use is enhancing personal relationships or negatively affecting them? Has the Internet, or other communication technologies, changed the way you communicate interpersonally? Although the jury is still out on precisely how individuals' use of the technologies to communicate affects their interpersonal communication, one thing is for sure: People use technology intensely for interpersonal communication. As such, it will be one of the many topics that we explore throughout this text.

Interpersonal communication and the development of personal relationships are the topics of this book. By definition, **interpersonal communication** is *the process of creating and sharing meaning between people who are interdependent, have a relationship between them, and have some knowledge about each other*. Later in this chapter we will fully explore this definition and the components of it. In the chapters that follow, we will be exploring a range of concepts and studies related to the ways that we communicate interpersonally and the ways that our interpersonal interactions affect and reflect the quality of our lives. For instance, we will explore how perception affects how we communicate, the way we use nonverbals to communicate much of the meaning in our messages, how to become a better listener, and even the ways our interpersonal communication directly affects our satisfaction in our personal relationships. As we introduce in Chapter 2 and as you saw in the opening case study in this chapter, we will explore the roles that culture, technology, and power play in all of our interpersonal interactions. By the end of this book and the course you are taking, you should be an effective communicator and better equipped to make informed choices about your own interpersonal communication in the twenty-first century.

Myths About Interpersonal Communication

Our goal in each chapter is for you to learn a great deal. We'll start by getting you to think a bit about what you already know, or think you know, about the ideas in this book. To do that, we'll list some common myths about interpersonal communication. **Myths** are ideas that people believe to be true but are not. In this list of myths, we'll also list one or two items that are actually true. Your job, as you read the chapter, is to figure out which are myths and which are not. You might begin each chapter by making a notation next to each statement on the lines provided below, indicating if you think the statement is in fact a myth (M) or if you think it is indeed true (T). Don't feel bad if you find you believed some myths; most of us do until they are pointed out to us. At the end of the chapter, we will provide the answers.

- ___ The success or failure of interpersonal communication usually depends on the actions of one person in the interaction.
- ___ Because we do it all the time, interpersonal communication is something each of us probably knows quite a bit about.
- ___ Interpersonal communication is limited to communication between two people.
- ___ When someone sends a message to another person, communication has occurred.
- ___ If I understand your meaning, I will be able to communicate effectively with you.
- ___ Communication cannot be reversed by “taking back” what you said.
- ___ Even if people don’t intend to communicate, they might still be communicating a message. (For example, if you think my face looks angry, but I don’t *intend* to communicate this to you, am I still communicating?)

Interpersonal communication is a central part of almost every aspect of our lives. We use it to make connections with others, establish and develop our identities, compare our ideas, check our perceptions, share news, solve problems, give and receive support from others, develop closer relationships, and grow personally. Take a moment to think about the number of times you interacted or communicated with someone today. Most of us spend the majority of our waking hours interacting with others. Many of these exchanges are what we call interpersonal, and they are most often what allows for meaningful relationships to develop.

Why Study Interpersonal Communication?

You come to this class with a lot of experience as an interpersonal communicator. In fact, you probably already know that interpersonal communication is important to study, and you might even have a specific reason for taking this course. For example, you might be taking this class with the goal of having more meaningful friendships. Or maybe you want to better understand your communication with your romantic partner, or manage conflict with friends and family members. Students of interpersonal communication are often delighted to find in the course answers to some of their questions about their own lives and relationships, such as: Why are some relationships joyful, and others difficult? Why do we like certain people and find others more challenging to be around? Why do some people interpret a message completely differently than others? Why do people from other cultures communicate so differently? Why is it that no matter what you do, sometimes you can’t change the way others interact with you? How can you have longer lasting relationships? How can you make your relationships happier? Is there a way to interpret others’ body language? How can you be a better friend, family member, or coworker? The principles and ideas presented in this text should give you information for developing your own answers to each of these questions, and more!

Let’s begin by examining some of the reasons why interpersonal communication is so important to our quality of life, relationships, and even physical health.

Quality of Life

Imagine your life without any interaction with others—no family, no friends, no intimate contacts, and no conversation. It's hard to imagine, isn't it? Humans are social beings who thrive on, and need, relationships and interaction with others. Although each of us differs in the amount and type of interaction we find satisfactory and necessary, one of the most basic human needs is the need for social connection.

Most interpersonal communication scholars agree that the quality of our communication and the quality of our lives are directly related. Communication is more than just something we use to entertain, persuade, or inform; it is a process that literally defines who we are. Through communication with others, we develop a sense of ourselves, reveal ourselves, educate ourselves, grow as humans, and change. To be completely fulfilled as humans, we need more than shelter, clothing, food, and water. Our lives are a direct reflection of the quality of the communication in them.

Quality of Relationships

One of the most important things interpersonal communication allows us to do is develop personal relationships. Without it, we would be socially isolated. Imagine not talking to, listening to, or interacting with anyone, in any capacity, for an entire day. No phone calls, e-mails, television viewing, nothing. Solitary confinement, in which social interaction is forbidden, is so abhorrent that it is a form of severe punishment, and its use is limited to short periods of time. We like social interaction, we need it, and we want it. Communication with others helps us meet very important social and psychological needs, particularly those we find in valued and satisfying interpersonal relationships.

Communication researchers provide volumes of evidence demonstrating how communication is responsible for the way we establish, maintain, and end our relationships. Many researchers in family communication, for instance, have identified good communication as the single best predictor of satisfaction in marriage.⁶ Other researchers suggest that the way we interact during conflict is perhaps the most powerful determinant of the satisfaction and quality of our relationships.⁷ These researchers propose that learning how to manage conflict—an important set of interpersonal communication skills—can lead us to form stronger, more satisfying relationships. As we will explore extensively through this text, and particularly in Chapter 10, communication is central to the quality of our relationships.

Quality of Physical Health

Although you probably don't think much about it, the quality of your communication and the relationships developed through it also greatly affects the quality of your physical health. Have



Communication with friends and others close to us is a basic human need. In what ways do you think interacting with friends and peers improves your quality of life?

you ever noticed that when you're really stressed out because you are having an intense fight with your spouse, or when you're feeling lonely because you have just had a falling-out with a dear friend, you tend to get sick more easily or experience signs of physical fatigue or illness? This is not necessarily all in your head. According to researchers who study the relationship between our social connections and our physical well-being, the quality of our relationships and interactions plays a significant role in the quality of our physical health at all ages. For instance, if you are widowed or divorced you are significantly more likely to experience medical problems like heart disease, cancer, and pneumonia, and suffer from clinical depression, than if you are married.⁸ Further, researchers report that people who are lonely (including middle-aged women who are childless) tend to die before others who enjoy a satisfying network of family and friends.⁹ Other researchers found that people who live with a romantic partner take fewer sick days and were overall less likely to have health problems than those who live alone.¹⁰ Researchers who study the connection between intimacy and health conclude that being isolated is as great a health risk as smoking, being obese, or having high blood pressure.¹¹ Even the survival rate for women with breast cancer has been shown to increase for women who receive social support from group therapy and friends and family.¹²

Simply put, the quality of our lives, our relationships, and even our health is intimately dependent on our abilities and experiences as communicators. Learning about the processes of interpersonal communication can lead you to a better and healthier life filled with more satisfying and long-term relationships.

The Interpersonal Communication Process

Our interest in this text is specific to one particular type of human communication: interpersonal communication. Before we explain what distinguishes interpersonal from other kinds of human communication, let us review the basic process of communication itself. This basic process serves as the foundation for all types of human communication, including interpersonal communication.

Human communication is the process by which people create and share meaning. When we want to communicate, we create a message we hope will be understood by others. Through the sending of that message and the feedback we receive from the other person or people (Was the message understood? Does the person need more detail? Do follow-up questions indicate interest in the conversation?), we are sharing meaning with others.

All communication begins with meaning. The **meaning** is the message or idea that one person is sharing with another as well as the interpretation of that message by the other person. We express meaning in many and varied ways. We can do it with words, with gestures, through eye contact, in writing, or by the way we dress or look. The process of creating and sharing meaning is ongoing and complex. The word *process* itself means “change,” or something that is not static. Communication is definitely a process that is dynamic, never-ending, and constantly changing.

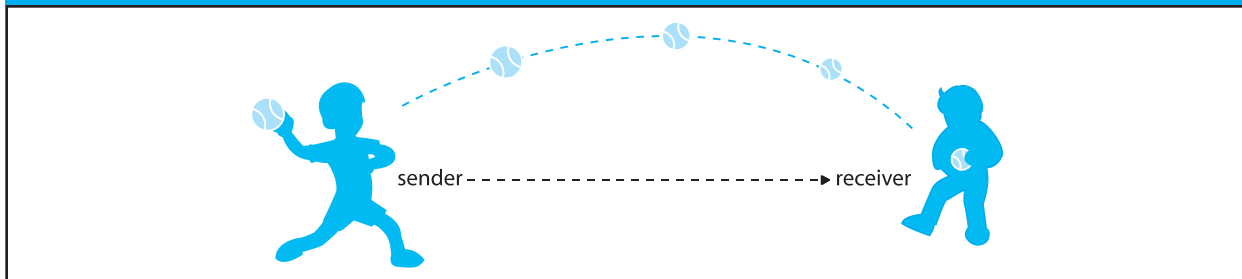
Models of the Communication Process

The way we think about the communication process has changed quite dramatically over the last 50 years.¹³ It is helpful to see how, because this evolution reveals a great deal about the nature of interpersonal communication in particular. As you read, think about how you would answer

the questions “What is communication?” and “What does communication look like?” Next, we explore how our understanding of communication has changed and improved by examining three models that have evolved over time in our field: from the action model, to the interaction model, to the current transaction model that best represents the communication process.

Communication as Action. The **communication as action model** views communication as a one-way process.¹⁴ One person creates a message and sends it to another. Think of throwing a ball to another person.¹⁵ The ball is the message and you are the source, throwing the ball and hoping the other person catches it. This model, often called the linear model, is very simple and looks like this:

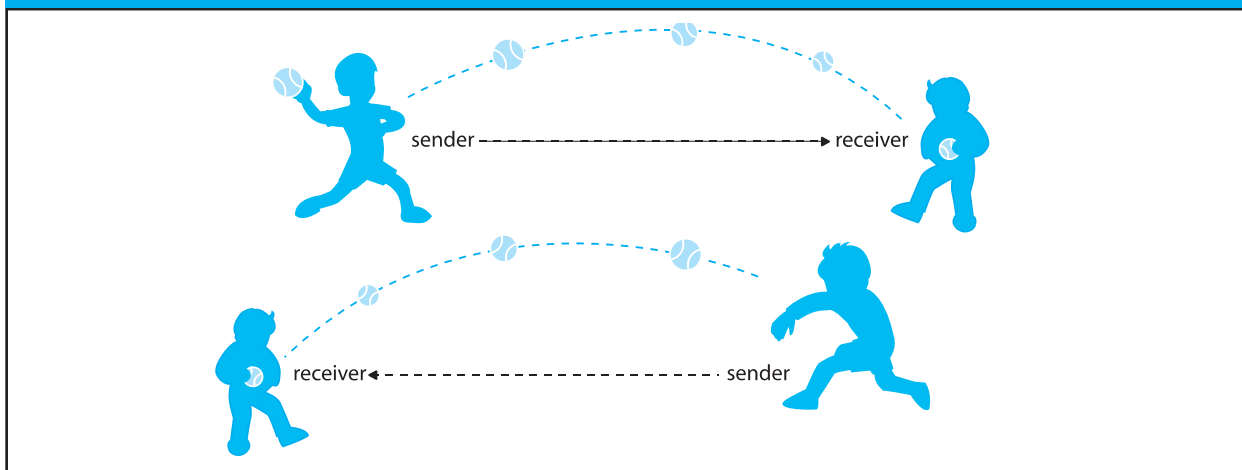
Figure 1.1 The Action Model



Later communication theorists realized that more is going on in communication than one person sending a message to another. What the other person does with the ball once he or she receives it is an important part of the process too. Thus, the interaction view of communication evolved next.

Communication as Interaction. The **communication as interaction model** adds to the action model described above.¹⁶ Viewing communication as interaction recognizes that the person receiving the message responds by sending another message back.¹⁷ Think of a game of catch, in which one person throws the ball, and the other person receives it and tosses it back. The interaction model looks like this:

Figure 1.2 The Interaction Model



You can see that both participants take turns being speaker and listener, or sender and receiver.

But what other activities occur in the communication process that the interaction model fails to depict? Take a moment right now and see whether you can sketch a model that amplifies the interaction model just a bit and takes into account more complexity in the communication process.

Communication as Transaction. You were right if you decided that the interaction model does not take into account the fact that people are often speaking and listening to multiple messages at one time! The **communication as transaction model** views communication as a transaction, or a process in which the sending and receiving of messages between multiple people is continuous, simultaneous, and unavoidable.¹⁸ In the transactional model, the elements of the communication process are all interdependent, never independent from one another. As an example, read this conversation between you and a friend, which might take place in the span of three minutes:

You see your friend approaching on what appears to be a new bike. As he nears, and at the very same time you are saying, "Hey, great bike," your friend smiles, indicating he's pleased to see you and pleased that you recognize his new bike. He says, "Cool, eh?" while he is looking at your new haircut and thinking about where he'll grab lunch. While he's doing all that, he nods a greeting to an acquaintance walking by and points down the street while saying, "Let's grab lunch down there at the bagel café." Noticing that you're holding a juice smoothie that he realizes is your lunch, he moves right along without waiting for an answer: "Oh, you're probably not going to lunch." As he finishes his sentence you nod your head in agreement and shrug your shoulders, then say as he finishes his sentence, "Darn. It would be great to get together for lunch. Maybe next time . . . ?" As you talk, you notice your professor coming down the street and quickly try to appear organized, shuffling to put the book for her class on top of those you're holding. As she walks by, you interrupt your conversation for a moment and smile while holding up the text with a funny grin and raised eyebrows. She gives a gesture of approval, a slight laugh, and a smile, saying, "Nice to see you, and your book, Jill. Happy studying!" Back to your friend, you say, "Yeah, maybe next time. . . ."

Viewing communication as a transaction recognizes that in every conversation people are simultaneously sending and receiving multiple messages and that all parts of the process are interdependent. *Interdependence* means that changes in one part of the process produce changes in others. Each part of the conversation above is connected to all others. For instance, the observation of the smoothie changes the invitation to lunch. The observation of the professor changes the nonverbal stance and the message being created by the student. The perception by the one friend about the new haircut of the other might generate other topics of conversation or affect the perception of one or both parties. The same is true for the friend who verbally acknowledged the "cool" new bike of the other. Each of these aspects of the interaction is interdependent. As a transactional process, there were also multiple messages being created continuously and simultaneously. How many messages were being created and shared in the interaction you just read? We should be able to count well over 25, all taking place in a matter of minutes. If we had actually been present for the conversation, we could have counted a couple of hundred sources of meaning and messages!

To continue our metaphor of the ball game, both people in a transaction are fielding many balls that are flying all over the room. We catch some balls, miss many that fly right by, maybe get

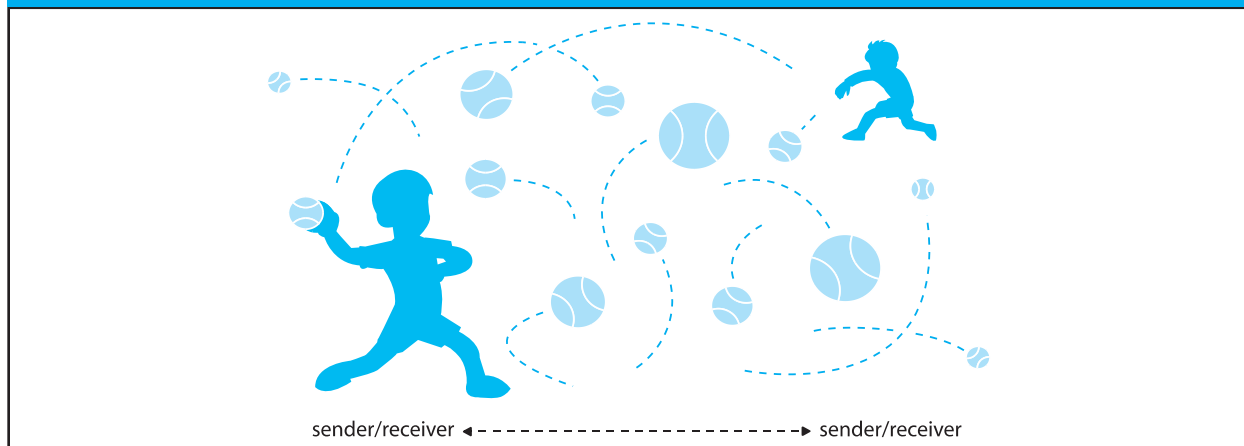
hit on the head by one or two, and return some to the other person immediately. We would be throwing a number of balls simultaneously as some are being tossed our way and even intercepting a number of balls unintentionally that were not being “sent” our way. We would have to reach to catch some, dive to field others, and by no means be aware of all the literally thousands of balls that are filling the room. Both people are throwing, catching, missing, dodging, and retrieving balls at the same time. Although no metaphor or model captures a complex process like that of human communication perfectly, the ball metaphor begins to give you the idea that as a transactional process, human communication is a complex process of interdependent parts where messages are being shared continuously and simultaneously.



In even the shortest communication exchanges, multiple messages are being created and exchanged. How many potential messages are being shared and created just in the nonverbal communication of this pair?

Messages are everywhere, and they are verbal and nonverbal. Everything is part of the transaction process, from what you are saying, wearing, carrying, and riding to where you are looking, what you are doing with your hands and eyes, and even what you *don't* say (silence communicates!). (See Figure 1.3.)

Figure 1.3 The Transactional Model



The transactional model is the one we will use as the basis for all our discussions of the interpersonal communication process in this text (see Figure 1.4 for a comparison of all three models). As you will see, there is much to discover about the seemingly simple yet very complex process of creating and sharing meaning.

Figure 1.4 Three Models of Communication

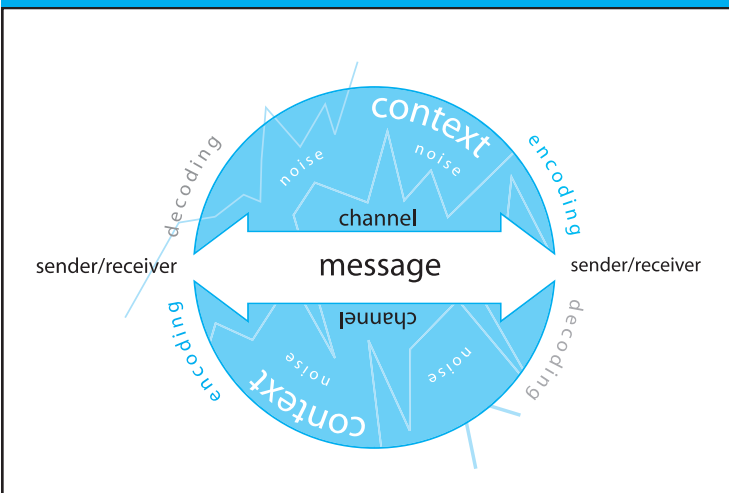
Action Model:	S → R	Communication is seen as a one-way process of sending messages. The message is like a ball thrown from one person and caught by the other.
Interaction Model:	S → R R ← R	Communication from this perspective is seen as a two-way process, wherein one person sends a message and, after receiving it, the other person provides feedback. The ball is thrown and caught, then tossed back to the first person.
Transaction Model:	S/R ↔ S/R	In the model advanced in this text, both people (each referred to as a sender/receiver) send and receive multiple messages simultaneously. Communication is a complex, simultaneous, and interactive process. Unlike a simple game of catch, multiple balls are being tossed back and forth and about the room, being missed, deflected, or caught.

The Interpersonal Communication Model

Now that you have an understanding of how communication is viewed from a transactional perspective, it is important to look further at the model and add the basic components that are present in all communication interactions. After we detail the components of a model of communication here, we can explain exactly what distinguishes interpersonal communication from other kinds of communication. Note before beginning that all the elements we mention are interdependent, never independent of each other.

Take a moment to look at the visual model (Figure 1.5) of the communication process, and try to come up with an example of each component. Then compare your examples with the explanations we offer below.

Figure 1.5 A Model of Communication



Participants. Participants in any communication exchange are simultaneously **senders**, those who create messages, and **receivers**, those who interpret messages. Their primary role is to encode and decode messages. **Encoding** is the process of creating a message to convey an idea, feeling, or thought. Typically, we encode a message with words, non-verbal behavior, or both. The other person then decodes the message.

Decoding is the process of interpreting the encoded message.

As you might guess, the difference between what one person is trying to explain, or encode, and what another person actually interprets, or decodes, is the source of much misunderstanding in the communication process. A simple statement encoded as “Let’s go out for lunch” might be decoded to mean “bagels and coffee at a local deli” by one person and “chicken and fettuccini with a glass of white wine at an upscale restaurant” by another. At many points in this text, we’ll discuss why meanings in interpersonal communication are often misunderstood and what we can do about it.

Messages. The **message** is the idea, feeling, or thought that is encoded and decoded. It can be the information you type in an e-mail to a family member:

See you on New Year’s Day for a rockin’ good time! :)

Or it can be the question you have for your instructor:

Did you say the test would be all essay, or does it include other types of questions as well?

Channel. The path through which a message travels from source to receiver is the **channel**. For instance, what is the channel of the information you are receiving from us? This book, or the visual printed word, is the channel. When you talk to a friend on the telephone, the phone serves as the channel for the auditory message your friend is sending you.

All messages must be transmitted through a channel, and many are exchanged using multiple channels. When we communicate face-to-face, for instance, there are many channels at work: the visual channel (facial expressions and body movements), the auditory channel (the voices and words of each person), the tactile or touch channel (the touch of the other person who grabs our arm in excitement), and the olfactory channel (the smell of shampoo from our child’s freshly washed hair).

With many new technologies available for communication, such as computers and wireless systems, the channels of communication have become quite diverse. E-mail, voice mail, videophone, instant messaging, and other media are channels that mediate our communication with others.

Feedback. **Feedback** is any response to a message. When you ask your friend how he likes your new haircut, you are asking for feedback on your message. When you turn in a report to your boss and she attaches a note to it saying, “Great work! Just make the few changes I’ve marked,” you have received feedback. When you look at your child with a smile and say, “I love you,” and immediately get a big hug in return, you have gotten feedback for your loving message.

Feedforward is information we provide about messages before they are sent, such as “This might sound a little confusing, but . . .” or “Get a load of this news!” Because senders and receivers are simultaneously both creating and receiving messages, it is often hard to determine whether



In what ways have new communication technologies changed the channels through which you communicate with others? How many different channels of communication have you used just today that rely on new or evolving communication technologies?

something is feedback (a response to a message) or a new message. However, for practical purposes, feedback tends to be connected in some way to another message and serves as a response to a previous message. Often we don't realize a message is feedback because it takes place a long time after our original message was encoded. Feedback can be intentional, such as the approval your mother seeks after she gives you your birthday gift, or unintentional, such as when you fall asleep during a boring class lecture.

Noise. Think for a moment of all the possible ways that the objects, ideas, and people in our world can interfere with receiving or sending a message: noise from an air conditioner, words or data in the message that you don't understand, the difficult accent or poor handwriting of the sender of the message, a detail you've forgotten from a phone conversation, or your own fatigue, hunger, or other physical distraction. Each of these is an example of what we call **noise**, or the elements in our environment that interfere with the accurate receiving or sending of a message.

All communication takes place amid noise. Early communication researchers realized that noise exists in all communication and takes many forms, including physical, psychological, physiological, and semantic.¹⁹ *Physical noise* includes the loud sounds of traffic, the visual barrier of a large centerpiece on the table between you and your guest, the offensive body odor of the person trying to sell you insurance, or the wheelchair your friend uses (many people tend to focus on the wheelchair instead of on the message). *Psychological noise* includes any kind of mental distraction interfering with the message, such as thinking about how busy you are when you are supposed to be listening to your friend, or making a mental note about an assignment you just remembered while talking on the phone to a friend. Many people even drive or check e-mail while talking on the phone. Each can be psychological noise. *Physiological noise* includes all those aspects of our physical self that might interfere with us fully paying attention to a message, such as the headache we have as a result of our spring allergies, our partial hearing loss, or the hunger that is causing us to not fully pay attention to the message. Finally, it is possible to be distracted by *semantic noise*, which is anything in the actual words that distracts us or interferes with the message. For instance, someone from another culture who uses a word incorrectly creates a kind of semantic noise.

As we will discuss in later chapters, noise can create a great deal of problems in interpersonal situations when it goes unnoticed, is misperceived, or is assumed not to interfere with the success of our exchanges. For now, keep in mind that it is always helpful to reduce the interference that noise can create in any communication interaction.

Context. Finally, all communication takes place in a context. **Context** includes all the physical and psychological elements of the environment in which communication takes place. Think about the difference between greeting friends at a party and greeting the same people at a funeral. You can immediately see that the context greatly influences the communication that will take place. Although most people think of context simply as the physical surroundings affecting the communication, context actually can be physical, cultural, social-psychological, or temporal. **Physical context** includes everything in the physical environment where communication takes place, including the number of people in an interaction. The funeral home in the above example is a type of physical context, as is an electronic bulletin board where thousands of people might read your message. The public context of the bulletin board is very different from the context of a private e-mail sent to a friend, and we communicate differently—or at least we should—depending on physical context.

The **cultural context** is the way the norms, rules, or beliefs of a culture influence communication. In some cultures, for instance, the less you say verbally, the more you are judged as

mature and wise. In such a cultural context, if you attempt to talk frequently or offer detailed verbal explanations of your thoughts and ideas in an effort to earn the respect of others, you will be confused and disappointed.

Another type of context is the **social-psychological context**, including such elements as the relationship between communicators and their thought processes. We must consider the status of others, their current thoughts and experiences, as well as our relationship to them when we communicate. For instance, would you use the same tone of voice and words when you talk with your supervisor versus a friend? Would you communicate in a similar way with your grandmother and a 13 year old? How would you monitor your words, choice of topic, and tone of voice when talking with a friend who recently suffered a great personal loss (the death of a child) versus a friend who recently experienced a great personal triumph (graduating with honors)? In each of these examples, the social-psychological context is an important consideration in the overall communication context.

The **temporal context** includes the sequence of events and the timing of an interaction. The temporal context includes, for example, how long it takes someone to provide you with feedback on your new outfit, or the length of time between when you apply for a job and receive a call of rejection or a call inviting you for an interview. The temporal context also takes into account when messages are sequenced in a larger set of events. For example, if your friend Myra discloses information about her health to you and then receives a call later that day from a mutual friend who is concerned about her health, Myra might be suspicious of your trustworthiness because of the timing of such messages. Further, you might choose to not share your own good health news with Myra immediately after she shares with you the bad news regarding her own health.

All communication exists in some kind of context; the context of our communication always affects our messages and the way our meanings are interpreted. When considering how context is affecting your interactions, be sure to consider all the possible factors that might be impacting the message (see Box 1.1).

Box 1.1

Skill Builder

Now that you are familiar with the basic process of communication, the model of communication, and all the components of the communication process, see whether you can apply this model to an interpersonal interaction you had within the last day.

1. Think about and identify an interpersonal interaction you had within the last day.
2. Write a brief paragraph in which you describe who was involved in the interaction, where the interaction took place, what was said, and anything else you perceive as important to the interaction.
3. Use the model of communication depicted in Figure 1.5 to diagram your own interpersonal communication interaction. Label all the parts of the model using your own interaction as the components. You will find that for many aspects of the model, there is a lot to write. For instance, when you think about your interaction, you probably are able to identify more than one kind of noise, many different aspects of the context, and a





variety of messages that were exchanged. If you selected an interaction with more than two people, the model will be very complex (don't worry if it looks a little messy).

4. Share your model with others in the class and discuss the following: Was drawing the model easy or difficult to do? What does diagramming one simple interpersonal interaction reveal to you about the communication process? Do you think you were able to identify all aspects of the interaction? If you asked the other person(s) in the interaction to diagram the same interaction, do you think your diagrams would be identical? Why, or why not?

Defining Interpersonal Communication

What distinguishes interpersonal communication from other communication? What does it mean to communicate interpersonally? In the past, some researchers identified interpersonal communication as happening only whenever *two* people interacted. If we accept this definition, then a conversation between you and two or three of your best friends would not be interpersonal. We do believe that most often interpersonal communication takes place between two people, but not always. Other scholars have suggested that interpersonal communication happens only in intimate contexts, such as between romantic couples. However, this too would exclude your conversation with a best friend, as well as conversations with many other significant people in your life.

Scholars in the area of interpersonal communication have defined interpersonal communication in a variety of ways. For instance, some scholars suggest that “Interpersonal Communication is a distinctive form of human communication that occurs when you interact with another person and mutually influence each other, usually for the purpose of managing relationships,”²⁰ or that “interpersonal communication is a selective, systemic, unique, and ongoing process of transaction between people who reflect and build personal knowledge of one another and create shared meanings.”²¹ Although these are two perfectly acceptable definitions of interpersonal communication, we believe our definition provides a richer and more complete understanding of what interpersonal communication is. As we highlighted at the opening of the chapter, we define interpersonal communication as *the process of creating and sharing meaning between people who are interdependent, have a relationship between them, and have some knowledge about each other*. Let's look in depth at the key features of this definition.

To be interdependent means that each person has an impact or influence on the other, to some degree. For instance, in an interpersonal communication context, what one person says influences what the other will say, even if not directly. If you are the clerk at a grocery store, a comment directed to you from a rude customer will impact you and how you respond not only to that person, but to other customers as well. You and that customer also have a relationship between you that is based on the social roles that each of you has: you as the clerk, he as the customer. You and your best friend probably engage in interpersonal communication all the time; you each influence the other each time you talk about the mundane aspects of your daily lives, and your relationship is obviously one of friends.

To be considered interpersonal communication, therefore, two or more people must be creating and sharing meaning and interacting in an interdependent way, with some relationship between them. The relationship need not be highly “personal” or “intimate” but does exist at least to some degree. For instance, consider the following very different kinds of relationships: between a boss and employee, between the mail carrier and homeowner, between the city

employee and the person applying for a driver's license, between you and your best friend, between you and your new baby, between a mother and her teenage son, between the abusive husband and his wife, between the nurse and the patient, between two individuals who work at the convenience store together, and between the student and professor. Each represents a "relationship" in which interpersonal communication takes place.

The last part of our definition suggests that to be considered interpersonal communication, the persons involved have a degree of knowledge about each other. We interact with people every day. But do we interact with all people in the same way? Of course not. Do you talk to the person from whom you are purchasing an airline ticket in the same way, or about the same topics, as when you talk to your spouse, partner, or other loved one? Do you talk to your mother and your teacher in the same way or about the same things? Do you talk to your friends the same way you talk with your soccer coach? Each of these questions represents a type of interaction that is based on a different kind of knowledge of another individual. Each is interpersonal communication, but not necessarily to the same degree.

We believe that an important aspect of defining communication as interpersonal is recognizing *how* we interact with people and the *information* we use to guide those interactions. Although many different kinds of interpersonal communication exist, they require and reflect different degrees of "personalness" depending on the kind of information we have about another person. According to communication scholars, we can interact with people based on social, cultural, or personal information about them.²² Imagine these three ideas on a continuum (see Box 1.2).²³

Box 1.2

Continuum of Communication—Levels of Knowledge

Social Knowledge ————— Cultural Knowledge ————— Interpersonal Knowledge

With the majority of the people we see on a daily basis, we interact solely on the most basic information, usually regarding the social roles they play. Think about your day today. A typical day for one of our students might be to get ready for class, stop by the local college café for some coffee, maybe grab a book from the library, purchase a new pen and a birthday card at the bookstore, go to class, head to work at a restaurant, and then take a bus back to campus for an evening class. For much of that student's day, he or she would be interacting with people based on what we call **social-level knowledge**, somewhere on the left side of the continuum. The people selling the coffee, serving breakfast, working at the bookstore, teaching the class, working in food service, and driving the bus are each fulfilling a social role. Although we recognize that each person is a human being, we don't care to know much about that person or interact with him or her beyond the role they play. Engaging in a lengthy or intimate conversation with the checkout clerk at the grocery store is not efficient for either party. Our communication is guided by our knowledge of the social role, but not much else. Hence, communication with such people might be interpersonal, but not to the same degree as would be interactions based on even more personal information about another person.

In the middle of the continuum, you see that the next level of information we have about others is what we call cultural. Although at one time information about one's cultural identity might have been less specific or personal than information based on one's social roles, in our global world today we believe that knowledge of one's cultural identity, background, and worldview is more personal and informative than that of one's social features or social roles. When we interact with people based on **cultural-level knowledge**, we tend to connect with others who have cultural identities we perceive as similar to our own. For instance, on the first day of class you might have carefully selected your seat in the room based on who you saw when you entered. Being a



We often communicate with others based only on knowledge of their social role. Have you noticed a difference in the quality and content of your communication when your interactions are based on social-level knowledge versus personal-level knowledge? For instance, how does the amount of knowledge you have about another affect how you would communicate with the clerk at the store versus your friend at your apartment?

a nontraditional student in your mid-50s, you noticed what you thought might be another person about your age and selected a seat next to that person. You used cultural-level information related to age to guide your connection. The social-level information would have been seeing the room full of people waiting for class to begin as students; using the sometimes noticeable cultural features of others—age, ethnicity, gender—moves us along the continuum to where we rely on cultural-level information. We tend to interact with those who appear to be most like us culturally. Communicating with others based on cultural-level information allows us to communicate in a more interpersonal way than that based on broader categories of social information.

Finally, communication becomes the most interpersonal when we have more personal information about a person, or have what we can call **personal-level knowledge**. When you know what your friend likes to eat, what topics will cause tension in your family, and what your spouse is thinking before she even says it, you have knowledge of another that is personal. These are the interactions that fall at the

far right of the continuum. You interact with one another *as people*, not merely based on cultural assumptions or social roles. Such knowledge most often develops over time and is constantly in process. When we interact with others using psychological or personal-level information, we are communicating in the most interpersonal way.

We should note that movement along the continuum from social to cultural to interpersonal can happen very rapidly, in a matter of one brief interaction, or might be relatively stable, never leaving one area. Also, our interactions might fall somewhere between points on the continuum or move between points during our exchanges. None of our interpersonal communication can fit neatly into any one category, so interpretation of the continuum is fluid and dynamic. It is important, however, to begin your study of interpersonal communication with an idea of what kinds of interpersonal communication exist and what distinguishes our conversations and interactions as more or less personal. The continuum reveals that interpersonal communication is a matter of degrees, and that interpersonal communication takes place based on varying levels of knowledge about other individuals. As you explore the many concepts in this text and discuss them in your class, keep this continuum and the definition of interpersonal communication in mind.

Key Principles of Interpersonal Communication

Now that you have some insight into what interpersonal communication is and the basic components of all communication situations, we can discuss some key principles for understanding the actual processes of interpersonal communication. These principles will serve as an introduction to many of the concepts we will cover in this book, as well as give you some immediately practical information about your own interpersonal experiences. We will briefly explain how and why interpersonal communication is (1) complex, (2) irreversible and inevitable, (3) rule-based, (4) always related to culture and power, and (5) changing with technology.

Interpersonal Communication Is Complex

Many students think that because we communicate every day, and because we've been doing it all our lives, the topic of interpersonal communication must be simple. However, in reality it is highly complex. The study of interpersonal communication seeks to understand the dynamics of conversations and the nature of meanings and symbols. It seeks to explain why every message in an interaction really has two kinds of meaning, and why there are actually six people in every two-person conversation. Let's explore a few of these complexities here, with more about each of these topics to follow in later chapters.

When we communicate with others, we rely on symbols to help us share meaning. A **symbol** is a representation of something else with many possible meanings and interpretations. Language, for instance, is a complex system of symbols. The word *book* is a symbol we have created to represent a set of pages and a cover with words printed on them providing some kind of information. *Book* has no direct relationship or resemblance to the object it represents; it simply refers to that object. In fact, most symbols do not resemble the objects they represent, and it is not necessary that they do.

The fact that we rely on symbols to communicate makes communication complex and the potential for misunderstanding great. You can probably think of many examples when someone misinterpreted a symbol or word you used. When you tell your friend she looks "phat" (a slang word for "looking good"), she might think you meant she looks "fat" (overweight) and be offended by your comment. One person who says, "I love you," might have a very different meaning for the symbol "love" than the person hearing the message. You tell your parents you will be home "early" only to discover that "early" means midnight to your parents and 2 a.m. to you. The nature of symbols is just one of the ways that interpersonal communication is complex.

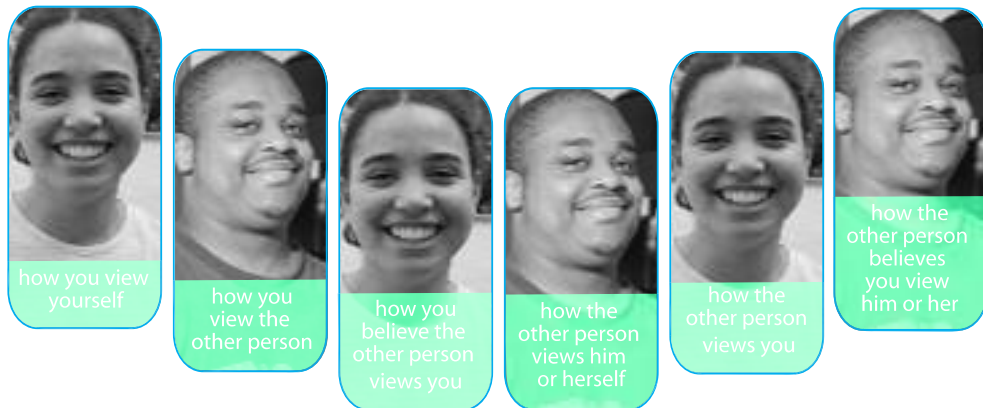
Interpersonal communication becomes even more complex when you consider what one communication theorist²⁴ suggests: In any two-person communication situation, six "people" (or perceptions) actually take part (see Box 1.3). They are:

1. The person you view yourself to be
2. The other person as you see him or her
3. The person that you believe the other person sees in you
4. The other person as he or she sees him or herself
5. The person the other party sees in you
6. The other person as he or she believes you see him or her

Box 1.3

Self-Reflection

Two people (or six?) in a conversation.



According to researchers, there are actually six “people” in every two-person interaction. Try to figure out how many “people” would be in a five-person conversation.

In any conversation, we construct multiple views, like the six above, of others and ourselves. Our interpersonal communication is greatly affected and often limited by the views we have of others and ourselves in a conversation. We will explore concepts of perception as they impact our interpersonal interactions more in Chapter 3.

Finally, interpersonal communication is complex because in every conversation, there are always two types of meaning.²⁵ For instance, instead of questioning the *meaning* of your father’s comments, you actually need to consider the *meanings* of his message. The first is the **content meaning**, or literal meaning. It is usually contained in the actual information communicated. When your father says, “Be home by 10 p.m.,” the content meaning is that you should arrive home at or before ten o’clock. Content-level meaning is most often verbal, and is usually easy to determine if you share the same language as the other person.

The second kind of meaning in every interaction is called the **relationship meaning**, or emotional meaning. Relationship meaning reveals the nature of the relationship between the people communicating and is the part of the message that tells us how to understand the content message. For instance, if a father says to his daughter, “Be home by 10 p.m.,” what does the relationship meaning say? It says the parent is in charge and has the right to tell his daughter what time he would like her home. Imagine your roommate saying to you, “Be home by 10 p.m.” You would understand the content meaning similarly but you would know that the comment must be a joke because, based on your relationship, your roommate does not have the right to tell you when to arrive home. The relationship meaning in this case, because the message is in jest, reveals your status as peers.

Imagine another example: Your friend calls to tell you all about her new kitchen plans and asks for your opinion about some of the features she's planning. The content of the message includes the actual questions and literal message about the kitchen. The relationship message might be that your friend values your opinion and looks to you to help her. It's amazing how much more you can understand interpersonal dilemmas and everyday conversations when you consider the multiple levels of meaning that exist in every single message. Box 1.4 contains examples of content messages. See if you can determine what the relationship meanings for each might be. See if you come up with the same answers as your classmates. If you don't, that's okay. As we'll discover, relationship meanings can be interpreted in many ways. That's one of the things that makes interpersonal communication so complex.

Box 1.4

Skill Builder

For each of the following statements, determine the potential relationship-level meaning.

Practice Example #1:

Content-level meaning:

A close friend says to you: "You sure have been going out a lot lately."

Relationship-level meaning(s) might be:

Practice Example #2:

Content-level meaning:

Your boss says to you: "You'll be at the meeting today, right?"

Relationship-level meaning is probably:

Practice Example #3:

Content-level meaning:

Your significant other says to you: "I learned something at work today that I want to share with you, but you can't tell anyone. It's highly confidential."

Relationship-level meaning(s) could be:

Practice Example #4:

Content-level meaning:

Your mother says to you: "Oh. I see you decided to wear the purple skirt for your big presentation today."

Possible relationship-level meanings:

Interpersonal Communication Is Irreversible and Inevitable

If you've ever baked a cake or some cookies, you know that the process is irreversible. Once you mix the eggs with the butter, flour, and sugar, and bake it in the oven, it is impossible to separate all the ingredients and get them back to their original form. The same is true of our interpersonal communication. *All communication is irreversible.*

Once a message has been communicated, even if we don't like it or wish we hadn't said it, we can't completely take it back. We might try to explain, apologize, clarify, restate, or detract our statement, but we can't fully reverse the process. Once a message is "out there," it cannot be taken back, only commented on further. When the judge instructs the jurors in a criminal trial, "Please disregard the comments of the witness," we know that they have indeed already heard what was said. When your child begins to tell you about getting in trouble at school, and then says, "Oh, forget that I mentioned that. It wasn't a big deal," you might try to forget, but what was said cannot be taken back.

Communication is also inevitable. *Communication is inevitable* because we are communicating all the time. Sometimes we communicate intentionally and mindfully: We yell out the window to ask our neighbor to turn the stereo down, smile at an acquaintance across the room to say "hello" during a lecture, or ask a question in class about the material being covered. These are messages we intend to send.

But even when we aren't intentionally sending messages, we are still communicating. As communication scholars say: We cannot *not* communicate.²⁶ You might not mean to, but when you fall asleep or choose not to participate in class, you are communicating something (boredom, lack of interest, disrespect) to your professor. Your luxury automobile is communicating something about your personal and/or socioeconomic situation to others, whether you intend to or not. Your silence in the presence of another individual communicates a message, whether it is shyness, anger, or lack of interest. We communicate all the time. It is inevitable. Being aware of this principle is important to learning more about interpersonal communication.

Interpersonal Communication Involves Rules

When you first sit down to play a game, you most likely ask, "What are the rules?" Rules also exist to guide our interpersonal interactions. Communication rules define the appropriate behaviors expected of ourselves and others. For example, you likely had many rules in your family about what, with whom, and how you could talk with others. You probably learned at an early age that you shouldn't interrupt when others are speaking, that expressing anger is not allowed, and that topics such as money or sex are taboo and should not be discussed. All of our interpersonal interactions are based on rules. Without rules to guide our interactions, most of them would feel random, unstructured, bothersome, and unpredictable. Instead, most of our interactions with others are rather easy, enjoyable, and somewhat predictable, and take a similar form.

Most communication rules are implicit, or not clearly stated. For many people in the United States, for instance, an implicit communication rule is to not stand so close to another individual while talking that you can smell his or her breath. Another implicit rule is to allow one person to finish talking before the other begins. Although you were probably never told these rules explicitly—there aren't signs in buildings or on sidewalks that tell you what distance to stand from others or to take turns while talking—you have learned these rules by observing others.

Some rules are explicitly stated. An example of an explicit communication rule might be one in your family such as “Don’t use swear words” or “Don’t talk back to your parents.” These rules have been stated clearly and explicitly, and have been repeatedly told to you. Explicitly stated rules are usually easier to follow simply because we know what they are.

All communication rules are heavily culture-bound, which means that they are specific to particular cultural or co-cultural groups. In many cultures, for example, a communication rule suggests that touching someone you don’t know is appropriate and expected; too much distance between communicators is offensive and a sign of disrespect. In other cultures and co-cultures, the use of verbal insults is not offensive, but rather is a form of verbal playfulness and friendship. When we consider communication rules, we must always consider their cultural context.

Rules govern all aspects of our relationships and interpersonal communication in ways that are not simple or obvious. For instance, a complex set of rules develops between two people in an interpersonal relationship, creating a private culture in the relationship. We will discuss the idea of relational cultures at length in Chapter 10. Over time, and based on shared history and experience, couples often develop their own private set of rules that guide everything they do. Their expectations for honesty on some subjects and secrecy on others reflect their jointly constructed rules (See Box 1.5). The private nicknames they use for each other reflect rules about how they will address each other in their relationship and rules about what their relationship should be like. Further, rules about intimacy or friendships outside the relationship are learned over time and jointly negotiated over the course of a relationship. In all ways, rules guide not only our interpersonal communication, but our interpersonal relationships as well.

Box 1.5

Practical Research

What types of information do you keep secret from others? What types of information does your family keep secret? Many people associate keeping secrets with something negative in a relationship. However, according to Anita Vangelisti, a leading researcher in the area of family and interpersonal communication, secrets are a natural and important part of any interpersonal relationship, especially in families.²⁷ In her research, Vangelisti found that secrets serve a variety of positive functions in the family, such as helping family members form bonds, protecting the family from disapproval and stress, ensuring privacy within the family, and preventing others from taking advantage of family members. According to her findings, family secrets tend to fall into three categories.

Types of Family Secrets

Taboo Topics: These are secrets about issues or activities often regarded as taboo. For example, “My aunt had an affair with her best friend’s husband many years ago,” or “It’s a secret from my grandmother that I’m gay.”

Rule Violations: These secrets hide activities that break family rules. For instance: “My sister lives with her boyfriend and my parents don’t want people to know,” and “I am not a virgin and haven’t been since age 16.”

Conventional Secrets: These secrets contain information that families do not necessarily view as “wrong” but feel is inappropriate to discuss with some people. For example: “My sister’s health problems were caused by a man she had been dating,” and “I kept my grades secret all the time because they were not great (unlike my brother’s, which were awesome).”

Family members quickly learn the rules that guide what secrets are kept and with whom one can share them. Do you have and keep secrets in some of your close personal relationships or in your family? After reading these findings, can you identify what kind of secrets they are and what functions they might serve in your relationship?

Interpersonal Communication Is Always Affected by Culture and Power

All interpersonal communication is affected by, and a reflection of, the cultural rules and experiences of the communicators. Further, all interpersonal communication is related to issues of power. You might be thinking that of course *some* interactions are affected by culture and issues of power, such as when two people come from different cultural or co-cultural groups (a person of Hmong origin talking with a friend who is African American), or when one person has a position of higher status than the other (a teacher interacting with her student). We contend that even when it is not obvious or explicit, every one of our interpersonal interactions involves power and culture, and being aware of how these structures work in our interactions is extremely important in becoming more effective interpersonal communicators. We have dedicated the next chapter entirely to showing how power and culture, as well as technology, represent defining elements of human existence and thus are central to interpersonal interactions.

Interpersonal Communication Is Changing With Technology

Chapter 2 deals with how cultural systems, power structures, and advancing technologies are changing the way we communicate interpersonally. In order to become the most effective and competent interpersonal communicators possible, we need to think broadly about the way our environment—everything from the way we do our grocery shopping to the way we maintain relationships—is being changed and affected by advances in technology.

You might be tempted to think that only certain communication technologies like e-mail, cellular phones, and the Internet affect our daily interactions.



The roles that culture, power, and technology play in all of our interactions are important to recognize. How has at least one of these variables played a role in a communication interaction you had today?

However, technologies of all kinds have the potential to alter not only the methods by which we communicate, but also the way we view relationships, the time we invest in our interactions, and the expectations we have of others and their interpersonal communication choices. For instance, in chat rooms or newsgroups, *flaming* is a negative or hostile response to what someone else has written. Would the same response be acceptable in a face-to-face conversation? How might we respond differently to flaming in writing and flaming in person?

What used to be a handwritten letter is now a quick e-mail; what used to be a long-distance phone call is now a voice message made via cell phone from the car; what used to be a birthday card sent through the mail is now an electronic message linking you to an Internet site where your birthday card sings, dances, and costs almost nothing. How are these changing our interpersonal communication? How are changes in technology changing the very nature of relationships? These are just a few of the questions facing all of us as interpersonal communicators in an age of rapidly growing and changing communication and other technologies. Throughout this book, we will explore these questions and issues further.

Preview of Remaining Chapters and Summary

We know that you're just beginning to explore the concepts of interpersonal communication, so we don't want to overwhelm you here in Chapter 1 with too many more concepts, models, or ideas. You'll have plenty of time to do that in the chapters to come! We do want to give you a quick idea of what you can expect as you read the rest of this text and explore the issues of interpersonal communication with your class. As mentioned, our next chapter will give you an in-depth look at how culture, power, and technology are issues central to all of our interpersonal communication and explain why we have chosen them as a framework for this text. You can expect to see us talk about these issues throughout every chapter in this text. As you will quickly see, each of these is related to all of the interpersonal concepts, from perception to nonverbal behavior, and from family relationships to professional relationships. We will also explore topics such as perception, listening, nonverbal communication, verbal communication and language, gender and communication, intimate and personal relationships, family relationships, relationships at work, and conflict in interpersonal relationships, just to name a few.

As you conclude this chapter, keep in mind the many points about interpersonal communication that we introduced here. We discussed what it means to engage in transactional communication—where each person affects and is affected by the others in the interaction, and where people interact in a complex, simultaneous process of creating and sharing meaning through the use of symbols. We also introduced the components of a model of interpersonal communication, including participants who engage in decoding and encoding, messages, the channels through which messages travel, feedback and feedforward, noise, and context. You should have a solid understanding of these concepts because each serves as a basis for many of the topics and concepts we will discuss in remaining chapters. As you read further in the book, keep in mind the definition of interpersonal communication we offer: *the process of creating and sharing meaning between people who are interdependent, have a relationship between them, and have some knowledge about each other*. Also, recall that interpersonal communication is complex, involves symbols and meanings, is irreversible and inevitable, is based on rules, is always affected by culture and power, and is changing with technology.

We close this chapter by offering explanations to the myths and truths that opened this chapter. Take a moment and look back to see if, after reading this chapter, your answers would be different. Hopefully you can not only easily identify the myths but you can also explain *why* each statement is true or not. Below are the answers and our brief explanations:

Myth: *The success or failure of interpersonal communication usually depends on the actions of one person in the interaction. Why is this a myth?*

Interpersonal communication is transactional and the result of the dynamic process between all people in the interaction.

Myth: *Because we do it all the time, interpersonal communication is something each of us probably knows quite a bit about.*

Interpersonal communication is complex, and understanding it does not occur automatically. Studying the theories and concepts of interpersonal communication can lead to greater awareness and competence as an interpersonal communicator.

Myth: *Interpersonal communication is limited to communication between any two people.*
Why is this a myth?

Although interpersonal communication frequently is thought of and indeed often does take place in dyads, we define interpersonal communication by the kind of knowledge that participants have about one another, not solely the number of people involved in the interaction.

Myth: *When someone sends a message to another person, communication has occurred.* Why is this not true?

Communication is a more than just sending a message; it is a complex process of simultaneous sending and receiving of messages and meanings.

Myth: *If I understand your meaning, I will be able to communicate effectively with you.*

There are two levels of meaning in every message exchanged: a content level of meaning and a relationship level of meaning. To communicate effectively, both types of meaning must be considered, but in this case only the content level has been considered.

Truth: *Communication cannot be reversed by “taking back” what you said.*

Communication is irreversible; you might try to clarify, apologize, or explain further what you have said, but you can never fully undo or “take back” any meaning that has been shared.

Truth: *Even if people don't intend to communicate, they might still be communicating a message. (For example, if you think my face looks angry, but I don't intend to communicate this to you, am I still communicating?)*

Communication is inevitable; we are communicating even when we don't realize it or don't intend to communicate to others.

Key Terms

Channel	Meaning
Communication as action model	Message
Communication as interaction model	Myth
Communication as transaction model	Noise
Content meaning	Personal-level knowledge
Context	Physical context
Cultural context	Receiver
Cultural-level knowledge	Relationship meaning
Decoding	Sender
Encoding	Social-level knowledge
Feedback	Social-psychological context
Feedforward	Symbols
Human communication	Temporal context
Interpersonal communication	

Suggested Contemporary Readings

- E. S. Caplan. "Challenging the mass-interpersonal communication dichotomy: Are we witnessing the emergence of an entirely new communication system?" *Electronic Journal of Communication* 11 (2001).
- T. A. Morton and J. M. Duck. "Communication and health beliefs: Mass and interpersonal influences on perceptions of risk to self and others." *Communication Research* 28 (2001): 602–626.
- M. E. Roloff and L. Anastasiou. "Interpersonal communication research: An overview." *Communication Yearbook* 24 (2001): 51–71.
- A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin. "Interface of personal and mediated communication: Fifteen years later." *Electronic Journal of Communication* 11 (2001).
- G. H. Stamp. "A qualitatively constructed interpersonal communication model: A grounded theory analysis." *Human Communication Research* 4 (1999): 531–547.
- H. R. Walen and M. E. Lachman. "Social support and strain from partner, family, and friends: Costs and benefits for men and women in adulthood." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 7 (2000): 5–30.

Chapter Activities

1. Use one of your college library's databases to locate articles related to health, communication, and relationships (use each as a keyword). What kind of articles did you find? How do they further your knowledge about the way interpersonal communication is related to the quality of your life and the quality of your health?
2. Reflect on the principle in this chapter that communication is inevitable. How often do you think we communicate without intending to? Have you ever experienced someone interpreting meaning from you that you did not intend to communicate? What happened? What are some of the messages you are unintentionally sending right now? Discuss this principle and your experiences of it with others in the class.
3. We rely on symbols to help us share meanings. Can you think of a time when someone used a slang word you didn't understand? Visit the Web site <http://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~wrader/slang/> for a look at a dictionary of slang. Included here are hundreds of examples of slang words as well as their origins and definitions. Browse the Web and see whether you can find other examples of slang dictionaries. How do words as symbols serve as the basic tools for sharing meaning in communication?
4. Use a database at your library such as Infotrac or CommAbstracts and type in the words *technology* and *relationships*. Select one article that helps you understand the way that new technologies are changing the way we interact within all kinds of interpersonal relationships—from family to work, and from marriage to friendship. Summarize in a paragraph the article you select, and share it with a small group of people in class.
5. Select any conversation you have had with one other person in the last day or two. Try to identify the various content and relationship meanings in the messages shared. What did the relationship messages reveal about the relationship between you and that

person? How does being mindful of the relationship-level meaning in an interaction enhance your skills as an interpersonal communicator?

6. We believe that community-based learning is an important way for you to extend and apply your learning in this class. Community-based learning, or service learning, is an opportunity for you to provide a meaningful service to a community group or individual while enhancing your learning about interpersonal communication. Think about a community-based organization, such as a school, community center, or faith-based program, and spend time volunteering for that organization over the semester. While you do so, observe and note the ways that communication is transactional. To do so, here is your assignment: Keep a journal in which you apply the concepts in each chapter to the communication you observe and participate in while volunteering. After each time you volunteer, write in your journal about how you can apply at least three concepts from this chapter. For example, in your first journal entry you might write about the processes of decoding/encoding, feedback, and cultural-level knowledge. After the second time you volunteer, you might write in your journal about the ways you observed meaning, noise, and symbols at work in the interactions you experienced and/or witnessed. Doing this activity will not only make a positive difference in your community, but will also help you better understand the way interpersonal communication works in the world around you. ♦