

## Chapter Two

# Communication and Meaning

### Chapter Objectives

By the end of this chapter you should be able to do the following:

- Define communication.
- Explain what it means to say that communication is a socially constructed process.
- Describe how fault and blame are linked to the message transmission view of communication.
- Identify seven features of your world of meaning.
- Reflect on the ethical standards that influence your communication choices.
- Discuss the role of culture in collaborative meaning making.
- Define the term “nexting.”

### Chapter Preview

**S**o here you are in the first “regular” chapter of this interpersonal communication text. The fact that you are reading these pages means that you have decided—or someone has decided for you—to learn more about communicating interpersonally. If you are enrolled as a full-time student, you may also be studying chemistry, English, political science, or psychology. The content of some of those courses may seem obvious by their titles, but most every one begins by orienting you to the subject matter through definitions. This text does, too. So what is interpersonal communication?

Our response to this question is likely to be more involved than you might expect. And before we are done, some of you might even be asking yourselves, “When are they going to get to the part I should memorize for the test?” Others might be thinking that you know what com-

munication is because you've been doing it in one form or another since the day you were born, so what's the point of some elaborate definition?

Our answer is, first, that this whole book essentially develops the two definitions that are explained in this chapter and the next, "communication" and "interpersonal communication." And second, we don't want to take the risk of assuming that everybody starts with the same understanding when our experiences tell us that students come to this course with different cultural and individual experiences of communication that shape all their contacts with others. So definitions matter.

Fundamentally, *communication* is a general term used to label the processes through which humans collaboratively construct meaning. Meaning is what makes the human world different from the spaces inhabited by other living beings—worms, dogs and cats, and even, so far as we now know, dolphins and chimpanzees. Since humans live in worlds of meaning—rather than worlds made up only of objects, or "things"—the process of constructing and modifying these worlds goes on literally *all* the time. This is why communication is such a major part of human living.

To understand what we mean when we say that humans live in worlds of meaning, consider the part of your world that's your "home." What's most important about it is not how many square feet it has, how tall it is, where it's located, or the color of the bedroom walls (objective features), but what it *means* to live in a place this small or this big, how the wall color affects you, and what it *means* to live where your home is located. Similarly, the transportation part of your world is significant not simply because you travel by bike or on a bus, in your own old or new car, on foot or on a motorcycle, but because of what it *means* in your family, neighborhood, and culture to get around this way. And the meanings of all these parts of our worlds get established and changed in communication—the written and oral, verbal and nonverbal contact people have with each other.

When each human being is born, this process of collaborative meaning-making is already going on around us. Even before we have developed our abilities to be articulate in our family's language, we enter a number of ongoing conversations. In some ways, we enter our world kind of like a chunk of potato is plopped into a pot of simmering soup. The soup of human meaning-making will be simmering all the time we are alive, and communication processes will continue after we die. Of course, individuals and groups affect their worlds a lot more than a chunk of potato affects a pot of soup. In fact, much of this book is about the ethical choices and cultural responses communicators make, and how these affect their worlds. But although the element of choice is present in every communication event, it is also important to keep in mind that the communication process is not one that any indi-

vidual can completely control. Communication is something that we do collectively, *together*, as the title of this book suggests. All the time, everywhere, in all the contacts that make us social animals, humans are constructing meaning together, and *communication* is the name given to this ongoing process.

*Interpersonal communication* is a subset of this broader process, a particular quality or type of communication. We develop our definition of interpersonal communicating in the next chapter. But before we do, there are enough important points about the process of communication in general to fill the rest of this chapter.

As we noted, our goal in this chapter is to lay the foundation for the rest of the book. We provide you with an up-to-date, research-anchored, and experientially relevant understanding of what human communication is and how it works. This will prepare you for the similarly important definition of interpersonal communication in Chapter Three.

## Views of Communication

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Most people don't go around asking themselves or each other, "What is communication anyway?" or "How do you define human communication?" This activity is generally reserved for those of us who write textbooks. But every day, all of us do say and do things that *indirectly* indicate how we would answer these questions if asked. In other words, definitions of communication "leak out" in the ways people engage in or avoid communication with others. The way you understand communication—your definition—leaks out in your communicating too.

For example, when your parent or supervisor at work tells you that you made a mistake, you might think—or say—"You never told me to do that!" Your parent or supervisor might respond, "You weren't listening!" Here you understand communication as the primary responsibility of the "sender," and they are defining it as a process that depends most on the "receiver." In addition, both of you are defining communication as a cause-effect process, because the problem is caused by one person's actions/inactions or the other's.

Each of you has a way of understanding communication, a lens that you look through as you plan how to communicate and respond to communication problems. It's possible that the view of communication we present in this text may be different from other views you've learned about or experienced in your own life. Our definition or lens is anchored in a contemporary scholarly tradition. Social construction is its name, and we are convinced that it is both theoretically sound and practically useful. We are also convinced that learning to use a social construction lens will empower you to understand some things about

interpersonal communication that you may not have recognized before. So let's start by briefly reviewing a common—and incomplete—way of understanding communication.

## Communication as Message Transmission

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One commonly held definition of communication is that it is the process in which ideas are formulated by one person and then conveyed to another. This view has been labeled the *message transmission* view of communication. From this perspective the success of a communicative exchange is judged by how well the message in one person's head is transmitted into the other person's head. The word *fidelity* is the term used to label how well message sent equals message received. You can tell that this view exists in your culture when people say to one another "That's not what I meant!" or "Perhaps I wasn't clear, let me try again." Deborah Tannen's (1990) book about communication between men and women, *You Just Don't Understand!*, reinforces several aspects of this perspective, including the assumption that understanding is an individualistic process and that one of the partners can be blamed if mutual understanding is not achieved.

The message transmission view of communication is grounded in the practices of public speech, radio, television, and film. People who look at communication through this lens contend that, to be an effective communicator, one must construct a message in such a way that it can be clearly and easily conveyed to an awaiting audience or listener. The bulk of the responsibility for communicative "success" lies with the person who sends the message. It is her responsibility to analyze her audience and determine the most appropriate channel for sending her message. Some people call this the "hypodermic" view because it assumes that one person "injects" her ideas into the other person's head like a hypodermic needle injects drugs into a vein or muscle.

There are advantages to viewing communication through this lens. First, it encourages communicators to think about their messages and meanings ahead of time, and to adapt them to the needs and concerns of their audiences. This view of communication also draws attention to the variety of different message elements and modes, including verbal cues, nonverbal cues, e-mail, face-to-face, telephone, and broadcast. It is a tidy way of conceptualizing communication. Participants can assess "where things went wrong" and then make choices about how they might change their patterns of communicating to "fix" the problem.

One significant disadvantage of this view of communication, however, is embedded in this very talk about "communication breakdowns" and "fixing things." Communication is much more complicated than the message transmission view suggests. Human interaction does not consist of mechanistic parts that can simply be replaced



*In the message-transmission view, this kind of event becomes the model for interpersonal communicating. What are some problems with this move?*

when something doesn't seem to be running smoothly. Communication happens between unique individuals who constantly make choices influenced by their cultural experiences and individual value systems. These choices, sometimes reflective and more often reactive, help to shape the course of a conversation with other choice making, culturally influenced persons. In other words, the two problems with the message transmission view are that it is oversimplified and that it treats communication as a linear and causal process. *Linear* means in-a-line (from one person's head into the other's), and *causal* means that the process obeys the laws of cause and effect like a rocket engine or lever.

When people define communication as message transmission, they tend to believe that communication challenges are the fault of, or can be blamed on, one of the participants, just as you might blame your parent or supervisor for being unclear, and they say that it is your fault that you didn't "get it" because you weren't listening. To say that a problem is somebody's "fault" is to say that they *caused* it, like the wind causing a door to slam shut. This view assumes that human communicating is governed by the laws of cause and effect.

Children of all ages invoke the message transmission view of communication when they assign blame as a way of relieving themselves of responsibility for what happens. You can hear them say, "It's not my fault—he started it!" The pattered response is often something like, "Uh-uh! She hit me first." And then, "But you looked at me funny!" The

problem then is to figure out where a misunderstanding *started* so the “cause” can be determined and the “effect” evaluated.

The resulting circle of fault and blame is almost never very productive or satisfying for the people involved—except, possibly, for the child who “wins.” The reason is that, as we said, human communication is much more complicated than the message transmission view says it is. We will say more about the fault and blame problem in a few more pages. At this point, you can hopefully see that definitions make a difference, and that oversimplified definitions create problems.

The definition of communication we develop in this chapter includes six main points:

1. **Meaning:** Humans live in worlds of meaning, and communication is the process of collaboratively making these meanings.

*Implication 1:* No one person can completely control a communication event, and no single person or action causes—or can be blamed for—a communication outcome.

2. **Choice:** All communication involves choices, some of which we actively consider and others that follow cultural norms and seem almost automatic.

*Implication 2:* The choices communicators make reveal their ethical standards and commitments.

3. **Culture:** Culture and communication are intertwined. Ethnicity, gender, age, social class, sexual orientation, and other cultural features always affect communication and are affected by it.

*Implication 3:* Your cultures, and ours, affect what we say about communication in this book and how you respond to it.

4. **Identities:** Some of the most important meanings people collaboratively construct are identities. All communicating involves negotiating identities or selves.

*Implication 4:* Identity messages are always in play.

5. **Conversation:** The most influential communication events are conversations.

*Implication 5:* The most ordinary communication events are generally the most significant.

6. **Nexting:** The most important single communication skill is “nexting.”

*Implication 6:* Whenever you face a communication challenge or problem, the most useful question you can ask yourself is, “What can I help to happen next?”

## Communication as Collaborative Meaning-Making

We understand communication to be the continuous, complex, collaborative process of verbal and nonverbal meaning-making. This is our definition of communication. It's continuous because humans are always making meaning—figuring out, making sense of, or interpreting what's happening—even when we're asleep. It's complex because it involves not just words and ideas but also intonation, facial expression, eye contact, touch, and several other nonverbal elements, and it always includes identity and relationship messages, culture and gender cues, more or less hidden agendas, unspoken expectations, and literally dozens of other features that usually become apparent only when they create problems. It's collaborative because we do it with other people. This definitely isn't to say that people always *agree*, but only that we don't communicate alone.<sup>1</sup> Even prizefighters collaborate, because they show up at the same time and abide by the rules. Co-labor-ating just means engaging an issue together, and collaboration can be as anonymous as obeying traffic laws and speaking the local language or as intimate as attending to your partner's lovemaking preferences.

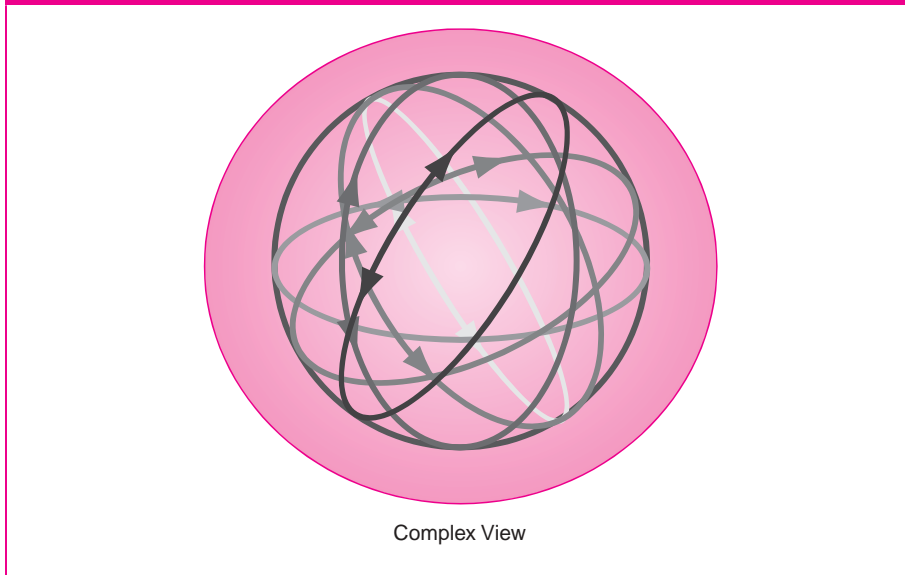
1. Meaning: Humans live in worlds of meaning, and communication is the process of collaboratively making these meanings.

### Worlds of Meaning

By *worlds of meaning* we mean the more-or-less coherent spheres of sense, significance, or interpretation that each human inhabits. You might want to think about your world of meaning as your “reality,” or your overall view of the way things are. Each of us has his or her own world of meaning that has been, and continues to be, collaboratively constructed in relation to others. May people notice that their worlds of meaning overlap in many ways, *and* each is as unique as the individual who inhabits it. We use the term *world of meaning* to indicate that there is a wholeness to the sphere of our understanding. The geographical world (that is, the earth) is roughly shaped like a sphere, and the sphere is an ancient symbol for wholeness. Even though the human's world of meaning changes, potentially with each new communication encounter, people experience their worlds of meaning as relatively whole.

The following image (Figure 2.1) illustrates the complexity of our worlds of meaning. You'll note that, like models of the physical world, it is also shaped like a sphere. In our model, the sphere has seven overlapping, intertwining ellipses that represent each of the seven dimensions of the worlds of meaning construct: physical environment, time, relationships, spirituality, vocation, language, and technology. Each el-

Figure 2.1 Worlds of Meaning



clipse is a different shade, and each is always in flux. We'll show you a less complex version of the model in a bit that may help you focus on the common characteristics of each dimension, but for now, let's focus on the model as a whole. The purple field surrounding the sphere in this model indicates that the dimensions of one's world of meaning are not floating free, but suspended within, and influenced by, the cosmos in which it develops. We'd like to make the case that two of the primary elements of the cosmic "stuff" that surrounds and imbues worlds of meaning are ethics and culture. The purple overlay here can be understood as the intermingling of ethics (red) and culture (blue).

Whether we simply inherit or actively choose the ethical standards that guide our lives, the choices we make about right and wrong, good and bad, what's appropriate and inappropriate all shape our world of meaning. We interpret our experiences through the lens of our ethical standards. The meaning-making process is also embedded in and influenced by our cultural identities. Together, ethics and culture influence an individual's world of meaning and each person's world. For example, the cultural norms and ethical standards for someone raised in the heart of the Bible Belt of the southern United States are almost certainly different from the cultural and ethical norms of someone raised in the rainforests of New Guinea. Even when ethical and cultural elements are shared in common, each person's individual world of meaning will be as unique as their life experiences.

What difference does it make if you understand that people have uniquely constructed worlds of meaning? Each person's world of

meaning influences the way he or she communicates with others. As two people communicate, their worlds of meaning are present in the conversation, shaping their interpretations of one another. Imagine if you will a conversation between two classmates about whether the death penalty should be imposed on teenagers convicted of first degree murder. If the classmates assume that their worlds of meaning overlap significantly—that their worldviews generally align—it is likely that they will spend less time explaining the details of their perspectives to one another. If their worlds of meaning are assumed to be less in sync, they may have to spend more time and energy coming to understand one another.

The degree of alignment of our worlds of meaning can both help and hinder our ability to communicate effectively. Sometimes, when you assume that your communication partner views the world in the same way as you do, you can be surprised when you don't see eye to eye. Actual similarity can be helpful, but assuming similarity is present can hinder your quest for understanding and being understood. In the same way, differences in worlds of meaning can both hinder and help communication between people. If we have different ethical standards and come from dramatically different cultures, we may have challenges finding common ground. On the other hand, acknowledging differences in perspective provides the opportunity to learn a new way of seeing and to collaborate in creating new understanding. Whatever the initial alignment between worlds of meaning, each person's world is molded and shaped in by each communication encounter.

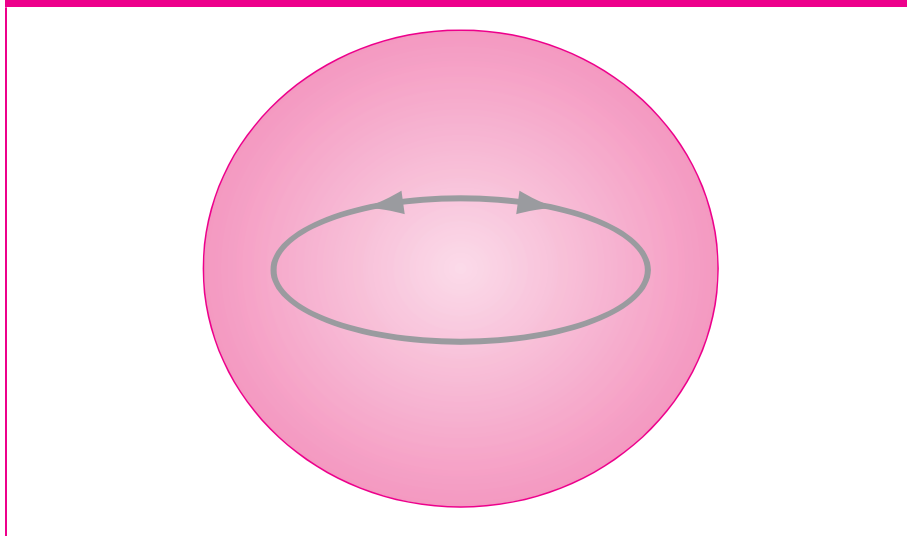
You may find that some dimensions of your world of meaning align with your communicative partner better than others. That's why we believe it is helpful to look at each dimension individually and in relation to one another. But before we break the model down into smaller pieces, keep in mind that, while a smaller piece of the model allows you to understand aspects of each of the seven dimensions in more detail, we don't want you to let go of the complexity of the world of meaning. You can, productively, view each dimension independently or explore the ways in which two or more dimensions are shaped in relation to one another—and they are always part of a dynamic and interrelated whole.

### Applying What You Know

Think for a moment about someone in your class who you think views the world in similar ways as you. Then identify someone else who you imagine has a really different perspective.

After you have read through the seven dimensions that follow, take the opportunity to talk to at least one of them and compare at least three of the seven dimensions. Make note of your similarities and differences.

Figure 2.2 Single Dimension

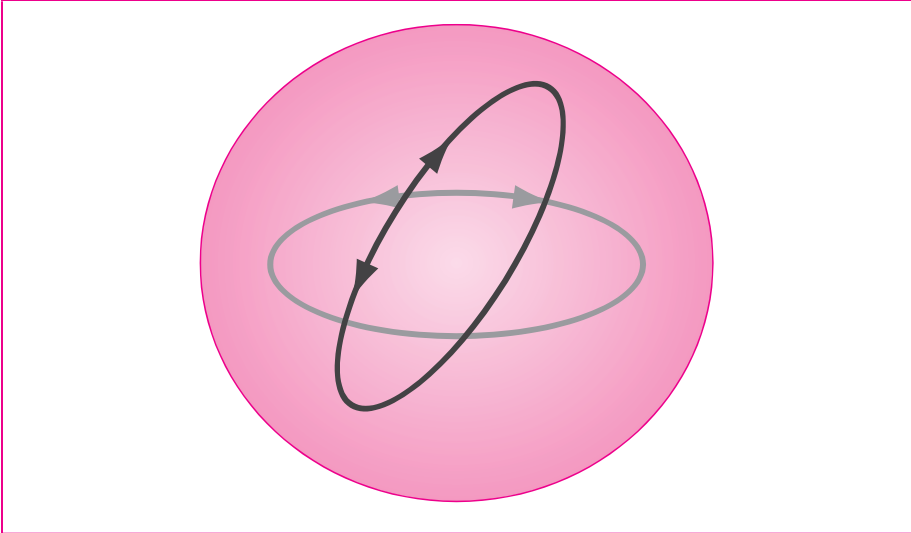


In the next few pages, we develop each of the seven dimensions of the worlds of meaning that are included in the previous complex image (Figure 2.1): physical environment, time, relationships, spirituality, vocation, language(s), and technology. Remember that each dimension is present in an individual's world of meaning, but the relative significance of each dimension can differ from person to person. And keep in mind that similarities and differences in ethical standards and cultural norms influence each dimension and the world of meaning as whole.

Earlier we noted that each dimension of your world of meaning can be viewed as an ellipse. You'll see that in the illustration above (Figure 2.2) of a single dimension there are two arrows pointing in opposite directions. Those arrows are meant to indicate tensionality. We'll get back to that concept in a moment. First, we'd like you to imagine that the ellipse on the page is elastic. Imagine that you could stretch it like a rubber band, making the ellipse larger or smaller, sometimes even distorting its shape. Each dimension of your world of meaning is individually in flux, if not fluid, then at least elastic. Your understanding of each dimension has developed and changed over your life time and will continue to be stretched and shaped by your interactions with others. No one dimension of your world of meaning is static.

And each dimension is tensional which takes us back to those arrows in the model of the single dimension. It is reasonable for you to be asking about now, "What do you mean by tensionality?" We're not talking about the pain of a tension headache, or the pressure of a tension rod to hold your shower curtain in place. Both these images do offer in-

Figure 2.3 Two Dimensions



sight into what we are getting at, though. For most people, a tension headache consists of the sensation of pain pulling between the base of their neck and the top of their forehead. The tension rod in your bathroom stays on the walls because it simultaneously pushes out in opposite directions. What we're getting at with the word *tension* is that each dimension of your world of meaning is dynamic or in flux, and that understanding the whole requires paying attention to both ends at once. People who study humans agree, for example, that although each of us is born with primary sex characteristics, we are a blend of male and female. The most feminine woman has some male features and the most macho guy has some female features. Male and female are *in tension* in each of us.

Once you have a sense of one dimension as tensional, things get more complicated as additional dimensions come into play. For example, your understanding of your physical environment can be influenced by your relationships. If you live in a dorm room with someone you enjoy and respect, the space you share may seem more than enough. But, on the other hand, if you and your roommate don't get along, your room may feel cramped or even stifling. As you read about each of the seven dimensions in the next several pages, take some time to think about the ways that they are interconnected in your world of meaning.

**Physical Environment.** The first dimension (ellipse) we discuss is physical environment. Think for a minute about your world's physical environment. How big is your living space or your bedroom? How big would you *like* it to be? How cold or warm is it? How light or dark?

These are parts of the physical environment of your world, and there are many others. The meanings you have for hot and cold, light and dark are tensional in nature. Hot is understood in relation to cold, and this understanding is different for different people. For example, Karen's friends recently returned to Washington State from a trip to Arizona. They were amazed to hear people in Seattle complaining about the unbearable heat of 90 degrees. For them, 90 felt cool, since they were used to temperatures averaging 110 degrees. Light is also understood in relation to dark. If you live in Alaska, the land of the midnight sun, the meaning of dark differs dramatically between summer and winter. How crowded or roomy is the campus, neighborhood, or community where you're currently living? Do you think that everybody in this campus, neighborhood, or community believes it's as crowded or roomy as you do? This may well be one of the ways your world of meaning differs from those of others. When you think of a relative or family member who lives "a long way from here," how many kilometers or miles separate the two of you? (In other words, what does a long way from here *mean* to you?) Does everyone you know think of this distance in the same way? What are some communication events where the spatial parts of your world are particularly relevant? Looking for a place to live? Interviewing for a job? Negotiating with a roommate? Each of us inhabits a world that's partly spatial, and its meaning is built in communication.

There is also more to your environment than physical space. If you live in a war zone or in a part of the country with a large number of military installations and public venues that may be targets of terrorist attacks, your communicative world will be affected. If you live in a rural community with mountains and rivers in sight, the physical parts of your world of meaning are likely to be very different from that of someone who lives in a many-storied apartment building with hundreds of other people, views of other buildings, and elevated transit, as well as being surrounded by the sounds of the city.

**Time.** Time is another dimension of every person's world of meaning. Different individuals and cultures view time differently, and these differences are significant in shaping collaborative meaning. While a friend of ours was in the Peace Corps, she experienced dramatic differences in what it meant to meet someone "after lunch." Lisa made arrangements to meet a student enrolled in her English-language class after lunch on a Saturday. He had invited her to meet his family and she was eager to do so. She arrived at the place where they agreed to meet at 11:30 in the morning, so that she would not be late. Then she waited for several hours, growing more and more frustrated. She felt she was wasting her day off and that the student was very inconsiderate for not even leaving a message that he would be late. When he finally showed up, happy to see her and ready to take her to meet his family, he was surprised that she was annoyed. He had finished the

midday meal with his family before rapidly walking several miles to town. He felt as if he had rushed to meet her. Obviously, their meanings for “after lunch” were very different.

What about your meaning of time? When you’re put on hold on the telephone, how long are you willing to wait? How quickly do you feel it is necessary to respond to an e-mail message? How fast do you walk and talk, and does everybody walk and talk at the same speed you do? What time is “really early” in the morning for you, and what time is “really late” at night? What are some of the meanings of time in your culture? For example, if your boss at work asks to meet with you at 9 A.M., how late can you arrive before you have to apologize—9:03? 9:10? 9:20? How close in age do you believe intimate partners or spouses should ideally be? As you’ve matured, how has your sense of time changed? Is it easier to wait for something exciting than it used to be? What communicating has most affected these time-related parts of your world? When are the time dimensions of your world most relevant? When you plan a weekend with a friend? When you register for classes? When you make a commitment at work?

**Relationships.** It’s easy to understand how important relationships are to creating meaning in a human’s world. Each of us has been molded most of all by our relationships in our family of origin—the people we lived with in our early years. People’s senses of themselves as women and men emerge in relationships with parents, as do our definitions of what it means to be a husband, mother, wife, and father. Children with many siblings inhabit a world that’s different from the world of an only child. Family relationships are where we learn how to act—how to express (or hide) anger, deal with money, be polite, tell the truth and lie, work, and relax.

What is the difference in importance and intimacy between your relationship with your mom and the relationship with your dad? How are you affected by relationships with sisters or brothers? With grandparents? Godparents? What nonfamily relationship affected you most when you were growing up? How about in your life now? In what ways does your relationship with your roommate influence your relationships with others? If you’re married or intimately partnered with someone, how does this relationship reflect the way you got along with your mom or dad?

**Spirituality.** For many people, spiritual or religious principles and practices also help shape their world. Identities, both individual and collective, are nurtured in relation to others who share your spiritual values and beliefs. They are also molded in contrast to others with different belief structures. Growing up Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or atheist will have an impact on your world of meaning. So will discovering and developing a spiritual journey as an adult. For many, the spiritual or religious dimension of their world influences the activities they engage in and the range of relationships in their lives. Are you



*Logan's relationships with 'grammy and papa' help shape his world of meaning—and theirs.*

likely to date or marry someone who does not share your spiritual views? What difference does it make if members of your family do not share your beliefs? What communicative practices—such as designated times for prayer, confession, and attending religious services—are encouraged and which are discouraged—dancing, drinking alcohol, premarital sex? How does your belief system influence your communication with others in your classes? Living groups? Work life?

**Vocation.** Most adults also inhabit a world of work, at least part of the time, and the worlds of these people can be strongly influenced by the tasks that occupy a major part of their day-to-day efforts. Not all people receive monetary compensation for their employment, however. Interns often work for the opportunity to learn about an interesting field and to make contacts for future employment. Some people volunteer their time to work in the public school system or for charitable organizations. Still others work one job so they can afford to live out their sense of vocational calling. Paid or unpaid, many people think of their work as a major part of who they *are* rather than simply something they *do*. So they introduce themselves with “I’m a stay-at-home mom,” “I’m in real estate,” “I work in construction,” or “I’m at Microsoft.” Family members’ worlds are also affected by the work of primary breadwinners. Consider the differences between the worlds of the spouses and children of doctors, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals, on the one hand, and those of laborers, on the other.

Work affects our worlds in other ways, too. For example, the people who hire and supervise us in our first part-time and full-time jobs significantly affect our definitions of ourselves as competent, trustworthy, creative, and intelligent—or their opposites. In addition, work helps determine whom we spend time with. Some police officers complain that their work forces them into constant contact with people who are at their worst, nurses spend most of their time with people who are sick and needy, and summer jobs can require college students with grand intellectual ambitions to get along with career truck drivers.

**Language(s).** The language or set of languages you learn throughout your life has a profound effect on your world of meaning. The rules for grammar, words, and meaning of utterances differ from language to language and culture to culture. For example, German speakers understand the sun to be female and the moon male. In Spanish, though, the sun is *el sol* (masculine). To Saskia, whose first language was German, the sun means warmth and strength, two characteristics that are culturally attributed to women. Karen and John do not share Saskia's perception of the moon as male, but both relate to the fictionalized image of the "man in the moon." As you learn a second or third language, you learn another way of viewing and valuing the world you live in. Your language also influences the relationships you are likely to form and maintain. Although it is not impossible to communicate with someone who does not share linguistic and grammatical rules, it is challenging. This is because each organization and academic community has linguistic characteristics that are understood by members of the community and serve as boundaries to include some and exclude others.

**Technology.** Another dimension of each human's world of meaning is the technology that affects him or her. As the three of us work together on this edition of the book, we recognize how our own differences in technological proficiency influence our collaborative understanding of goals and ideas. For instance, Saskia is the most comfortable using what John and Karen would call *new media*. She has tried to coax John and Karen into the world of online editing and document sharing. Karen has recently mastered attaching and exchanging documents through e-mail and is improving her ability to edit at the computer. John still prefers to have hard copy of texts in front of him and to edit with pen in hand.

Think for a few minutes about how your world of meaning is shaped by technology. You may communicate with friends and family through e-mail on a regular basis. Does this mean that you don't write or receive letters through conventional mail? How many of you find that your course syllabus requires students to turn off cell phones and pagers? For many of you, surfing the Web was easier to learn than riding a bike. But for others, the idea of using a search engine to find in-

formation is as foreign as dialing 411 on a cell phone to find out times and locations of current movies or the closest Thai restaurant.

### 'But . . . ! A Student Responds

*If you say that we co-construct our worlds, then how come I have different worlds of meaning than the person sitting next to me in class—or even from other members of my family?*

Your world of meaning is shaped by the interactions you have had with others and by your ethical commitments and cultural experiences. The person next to you may share some of these experiences, so it is likely that you have overlapping understanding. But each of you also has life experiences and responses to your environment that are unique. Growing up in the same family does not guarantee that your patterns of communication will match those of your sibling or your cousin. Living in the same community or going to the same school or synagogue cannot ensure that all the ways you collaborate with others to co-construct your worlds of meaning will be the same.

As you can tell from our description of these seven dimensions, human worlds are not objectively given but interpreted; they're not made up of objects but of peoples' *responses* to objects, which we're calling meanings.<sup>2</sup> And these meanings are negotiated in communication. Each of us develops a relatively whole sense of "reality" that we call our "world," and it can be thought of as made up of the physical environment, time, relationships, spirituality, vocation, language, and technology.

Rashad Versey, an African-American friend of John's from a rough urban neighborhood, applied this idea when, as a high-school peer counselor, he talked to friends about the power of what he calls their "mindset." When he was arrested for armed robbery, Rashad was shocked into seeing the difference between a mindset that gave him a world of hopelessness, hostility, and aggression, and a mindset that gave him a world marked by hope and ambition. He also recognized how he'd built his aggressive mindset (world) in his communication with hostile, hopeless, and aggressive friends. The most important parts of Rashad's mindset at the time were the physical environment (disrepair, litter, and crowding), relationships (older boys dared him to commit the robbery), and vocation (he couldn't figure out what to do with his life).

After Rashad's arrest and jail time, the objective features of his neighborhood and situation didn't change much. He still lived in a rough part of the community and continued to suffer from the racism of U.S. culture. But the way he *interpreted* these objective features—their *meaning*—did change. While he was out on bail, on trial, and even in jail, he spent time with people with hope and ambition, and this communicating helped change his world. He returned to school, and in

his communication as a peer counselor, Rashad tried to be one of these people with hope and ambition so he could help change the mindset of others.

As with all of us, significant parts of Rashad's world were and are beyond his control. Each of us is born into a family, culture, language, physical setting, and set of gender patterns and power relationships that can be limiting and even abusive. Television, movies, computer games, and other media also affect how we see ourselves, define others, and interpret our experiences. But the responses we make that grow out of our communication with others also significantly determine the shape of our world. Rashad's message to high schoolers is that they can change the people they communicate with, and what and how they communicate, and this process can change what we are calling their "world."

Rashad's experience also highlights one more feature of each person's world—namely, that human worlds are *both partly stable and always changing*. Each dimension—space, time, relationships, etc.—has some solid features, *and* each is always in transition. For example, as we've already suggested, our senses of time and space change as we grow up. Patience is part of maturity (our sense of time changes as we get older), and spaces that looked huge when we were 5 or 6 years old seem smaller now. In addition, people pay attention to and learn various physical laws at different times of their lives, cultural identities shift, relationships grow and deteriorate, and our world of work is also continually in flux. We use the term *tensional* to label this feature. Our sense of space is both stable and changing; relationships are both predictable and frustratingly surprising; technology is both familiar in many ways and always new. Each dimension of your world of meaning is in tension between stability and change.

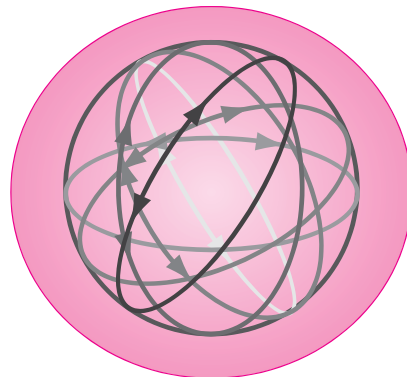
### In Summary So Far

Humans live in worlds of meaning that are made up of at least seven dimensions: physical environment, time, relationships, spirituality, vocation, language(s), and technology.

Each human's world of meaning looks something like the figure to the right.

*Communication is the process of collaboratively making these meanings.*

Figure 2.1 Worlds of Meaning (Revisited)



### Implication 1: No One Person Can Completely Control a Communication Event, and No Single Person or Action Causes—or Can Be Blamed for—a Communication Outcome

This is the main implication of our first point, that humans live in tensional worlds of meaning that are collaboratively made in communication. Many people who take classes like the one you are enrolled in believe that it is their instructor's responsibility to teach them to "do it right." Understandably, they want to know how to *solve* the communication problems they experience—to get their parents off their backs; eliminate misunderstandings with roommates, coworkers, or dating partners; deal with a critical and complaining boss; end a painful relationship; or become a masterful salesperson. In the training workshops we lead it is not unusual for participants to want us to teach them the surefire techniques that will give them control over their communication lives. These people are disappointed, and some are even angry, when we tell them, "It isn't that simple" and "There's more to it than that." They are even more uncomfortable when we explain that it's an illusion to believe that such surefire techniques even exist! As philosopher William Barrett (1978) put it over 30 years ago in his book *The Illusion of Technique*, "Technical thinking cannot deal with our human problems."

We're obviously not saying that technical thinking is hopeless. We've developed the ideas in this book out of our own and others' research, teaching, and everyday experience, and they continually help us in the practicalities of our personal and professional lives. But one direct implication of the recognition that communication is a *collaborative* process is that no one person can completely control any communication event, and that no technique or set of communication moves can determine its outcome.

Regardless of how clearly I write or speak, you may still interpret me in a variety of different ways. Regardless of how carefully I plan a meeting, one or more people are likely to have agendas very different from mine. Even if I'm a successful dictator whose orders are consistently followed, I can't control how people respond verbally and non-verbally to my demands. And as we—Saskia, Karen, and John—know, even though we're relatively well-informed and skillful communicators, we still experience problems in our relationships with family members, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances, difficulties that we cannot completely predict or control.

We believe that your development as a communicator will be enhanced if you try to manage your expectations about control and perfection. The more you understand how communication works and the more communication skills you develop, the more effective and competent you will be. It is possible to learn how to give and take criticism gracefully, to manage conflict effectively, and to develop relationships

smoothly. But not 100 percent of the time. Hugh Prather put it very well when he wrote these lines:

*Ideas are clean.  
They soar in the serene supernal.  
I can take them out and look at them,  
they fit in books, they lead me down that narrow way.  
And in the morning they are  
there. Ideas are straight—  
But the world is round, and a  
messy mortal is my friend.  
Come walk with me in the mud.*

(Prather 1970)

As we have already mentioned, cause-effect, fault-blame thinking is one of the oversimplifications people often fall into. One implication of the view of communication developed and applied in this book is that, when thinking and communicating about communication, we need to give up our comfortable reliance on linear causality and the accompanying constructs of “fault” and “blame.”

Problems obviously happen in communication, and the choices and actions of the people involved help create, maintain, worsen, and solve these problems. But when you understand that communication is *continuous, complex, and collaborative*, you cannot coherently blame one person or one set of actions for the problem. For one thing, fault and blame ignore the continuousness of communication. In order to say someone is “at fault,” you need to assume that whatever happened began with the guilty person’s action. But all the people involved have been engaged in communication literally since before they were born and have developed and reinforced each other’s ways of speaking, listening, and interpreting since at least the time they met. In order to assign fault, you have to ignore or set aside all this history of continuous communicating. So the person who you say is at fault because he didn’t call you back to confirm the meeting may be remembering your complaints about “getting all those annoying calls” and your insistence that it’s only necessary to call if meeting plans change.

Fault and blame also ignore the fact that communication is collaborative. When directions are unclear, for example, it’s due to both the direction-giver and the direction-receiver. Did the receiver ask about what confused her? Did the giver check the receiver’s understanding? It may have seemed perfectly legitimate to one person to assume that everybody understood that the meeting was at 8 P.M. and not 8 A.M., for example, or that the entire work team should be told about the policy change, or that the family would gather for the holiday dinner just like they had in the past. But others might have radically different assumptions that lead to significantly different interpretations.

Does this mean that when there are problems, “nobody’s responsible”? Have we given up any possibility of accountability? No, not at all.

Individual responses still make a difference, and some are definitely more ethical, culturally appropriate, and humane than others. But we are trying to replace the oversimplified and distorted notions of fault and blame with a broader focus on both or all sides of the communication process. We do not mean to replace “It’s his fault” with “It’s her fault,” “It’s both of their faults,” or “It’s nobody’s fault.” Instead, we encourage you to give up the notion of fault altogether, at least when you’re thinking or talking about human communication.

### ‘But . . .’ A Student Responds

*If we give up fault and blame as you suggest, how are we supposed to hold anyone accountable for their actions? People need to be able to know who’s to blame so that the guilty can be punished, and so we can ensure that bad stuff won’t happen again.*

This is another question that we could discuss for a long time! We are not suggesting that people are not accountable for their actions, but that fault and blame are generally unproductive communication strategies in relationships. Also, since communication is an ongoing and responsive process, it is difficult if not impossible to figure out how far back to go when assessing blame or determining who is at fault.

Even our legal system assesses partial responsibility to a variety of sources when something illegal or tragic happens. Take the Enron collapse as one example. While there are a lot of people blaming one another, it is difficult to determine who is most responsible for the corporate wrongdoings. Is the blame to be placed on the CEO? On the accounting firm? On Congress for creating laws with so many loopholes? On the individuals who didn’t monitor their investments? On the companies and lenders who negotiated deals with Enron? And how about a plane crash resulting from a broken part? Who is at fault? The pilot? The maintenance crew? The airline? The company that built the airline? While the legal system does help assess degrees of accountability and impose punishment for choices that break the law or result in tragedy, and victims may feel that a sense of justice has prevailed, placing fault and blame does nothing to restore relationships or ensure that these practices will not happen again.

### Applying What You Know

#### Your Picture of Communication

Think about your last disagreement with someone. Did either of you treat it as somebody’s fault? Whose?

Did the two of you agree about whose fault it was?

Here’s the most important question: *How did the assignment of fault contribute to resolving the disagreement?*

What, if anything, does this experience tell you about fault and blame?

Our point is, since communication is a collaborative activity, no one person can be held individually accountable for the meanings that are co-constructed. If you choose to reframe your accounts of interactions in such a way that fault and blame are not part of the equation, we believe that your communication with others will be less contentious and more productive.

2. **Choice:** All communication involves choices, some of which people actively consider, and others that follow cultural norms and seem almost automatic.

Human worlds are inherently ethical because they involve choices. Individually and collectively, humans create and abide by guidelines for evaluating actions as right or wrong, good or bad, and appropriate or inappropriate. These ethical standards influence people's actions but do not always determine them. In the next chapter we develop the idea that interpersonal communication involves reflective and responsive choices. At this point, we want to emphasize that, because humans are ethical beings, they are capable of making choices and that these choices reflect and affect their worlds of meaning.

Some of the choices people make each day don't feel much like choices. For example, shaking hands and bowing are two culturally influenced actions that one may choose to engage in when meeting another person for a business lunch. Although decisions about how long or firmly to shake a hand or how deep a bow is appropriate for this particular person's status, may be a choice you actively consider, the initial behavior of shaking or bowing may not. You may not actively choose the tone you use with your sibling in the same way you may consider how to talk with your best friend, because the norms for interaction in your family culture may be taken for granted but not in your friendship. If you are a member of the Deaf culture, you may not think anything about communicating in sign language, but if you are a hearing person who encounters a group of hearing-impaired tourists, you might actively consider your mode of communicating.

### **Implication 2: The Choices Communicators Make Reveal Their Ethical Standards and Commitments**

Take the issue of stealing food from the local grocery store, for example. Many people admit to shoplifting a candy bar as a kid—a choice made for the thrill, as a response to peer pressure, or just because they wanted one and didn't have any money at the time. They might have had an ethical standard that stealing was wrong and another competing standard that said that adrenaline rushes, fitting in with friends, or

immediate gratification was good. They had to make a choice between competing standards, and in this case the “stealing is wrong” ethic carried less weight. Other people cannot understand how anyone could ever decide to steal. They have never considered swiping anything—ever! For these people, the stealing-is-wrong ethical standard is more heavily weighted, perhaps in response to explicit lessons from family, teachers, or a religious community. But whether you would or would not have stolen something from a grocery store, how would you evaluate an individual who had been unemployed for months, exhausted the limited resources of the local food bank, and decided that the only way members of her family would eat today would be if she took a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter without paying for them? In this case, is stealing right or wrong? A good or bad choice? An appropriate or inappropriate action?

Our point is that there are always competing forces in our lives, and that part of what it means to be human is to make meaningful choices between them. If communication is a collaboratively constructed activity, no one individual has complete control over its outcome. All of our choices are made within the context of our personal experience and are evaluated in accordance with cultural norms and expectations. And, standards for evaluation (assessment of our values) can differ from person to person, family to family, and culture to culture over time.

- 3. Culture: Culture and communication are intertwined. Ethnicity, gender, age, social class, sexual orientation, and other cultural features always affect communication and are affected by it.**

When many people think about culture, they envision a group’s customs, cooking, and clothing, but there’s much more to it than that. In a very general sense, culture provides you with means to make meaning in your life worlds. One way to talk about culture is to say that *culture means shared norms, values, and beliefs related to how people live and how people communicate verbally and nonverbally with each other*. These shared values, norms, and beliefs influence how people communicate in their relationships, how people talk about time and their work, or how they view communication technology. As we said earlier, culture is a central element of the cosmos in which our worlds of meaning are socially constructed. Dating, for example, is one context in which the ways culture and communication are intertwined can be observed. In some cultures, dating is a means to an end—a way to select a life partner. And who you date is your business—you don’t need

parental or community permission or approval. In other cultures, however, it would be inappropriate to bring someone home to meet the folks. The “folks”—parents, community members, or tribal leaders will have already made arrangements for marriage and the concept of dating to determine compatibility is not part of the broader picture. In either case, cultural norms influence the kinds of communication possible and preferable with both family members and dating partners.

When you think about culture as a way of meaning making, you’ll realize that culture is much more than just national identity, that is, being U.S. American or French or German. *People who share ways of living and speaking* can belong to different ethnic groups (Arabs, African Americans, Latinas or Asian Americans) and also be part of the same national group (citizen of the United States). Likewise, people can belong to cultural groups associated with religion and/or groups defined by members’ sexual orientation. Contemporary communication theory underscores that studies of culture should not focus on just one feature—like ethnicity—but should consider “interlocking and overlapping modes of identity” (Moon, 1996). Such an understanding of culture helps to illustrate how two members of the same family (a heterosexual brother and his lesbian sister) inhabit different cultures, and thus different worlds of meaning.

What we want you to understand is that culture becomes manifest or concrete mainly in a group’s *ways of communicating*. Cultures are marked primarily by special ways of speaking, verbal and nonverbal, including terms for important things and people, ways of being polite or resolve conflicts, use of formal or informal terms of address, use of silence, specific attire and adornments, gestures, ways of touching, and so on. Silence, for example, is important in Apache culture. Many Apache ridicule white men because they talk so often, so loudly, and so much (Basso 1992).

Which cultural groups do you identify with? Ethnic groups? Groups with particular sexual orientations? Groups that are characterized by their physical abilities? Social class? Gender? Religious groups? The three of us share cultural identities as teacher-scholars, middle-class, gendered heterosexuals. John and Karen share identities of English-speaking, married, parents, raised in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, while Saskia is multilingual and was raised in East Germany. We span three different generations, and one of us is a grandparent, one a preacher’s kid, and one was socialized in a musician’s family. Our cultural experiences and identities, along with the values cultivated within each of our cultural groupings, are continually being worked out in the way we live. And as we negotiate these tensions we constitute and re-constitute our worlds of meanings. Each cultural feature has emerged and taken on its meaning for us as we have communicated with the people who’ve helped define us. Sometimes these as-



*What might it mean to belong to this culture and to engage in these activities together? Notice, among other things, dress, gender, and seating arrangement.*

pects of our world stay in the background, but they are none-the-less central parts of our communicating.

Especially today, with the increasing globalization of sports, music, media, business, education, and religion; with the explosion of international communication via the internet and the World Wide Web; and with the growing recognition among managers that diversity in organizations is a strength rather than a threat, culture is on almost everybody's mind. This is partly why we make the point that culture figures prominently in communication.

But there is a more basic reason: As we've already said, culture becomes concrete in communication. The shared ways of living can be observed in a group's way of relating to each other—that is, in their communicating. What it *means* to belong to a culture is to communicate in certain ways—as we said, to use certain expressions that members of other cultures don't use, to honor certain styles of speaking, to maintain certain distances, to touch certain ways, and so on (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Chua 1988).

### **Implication 3: Your Cultures—and Ours—Affect What We Say About Communication in This Book and How You Respond to It**

Throughout this book, we'll be describing implications of this point. For example, when we discuss the verbal and nonverbal features of talk, we'll identify some ways cultures differ in their vocabulary, gestures, vocal inflections, and touching patterns. When we describe how

identities are constructed in conversation, we'll be noting differences between male and female gender identities. When we discuss conflict, we'll identify some cultural differences in conflict management styles.

Importantly for us as textbook writers—and for you as our readers—our culture is present in our communicating, too. And this is especially true because this textbook is not about calculus, chemistry, or biology but about communication, through which cultures are socially constructed.

We've already identified several of our cultural identities. We did that in part to help you think of some of your cultural identities but also to help you understand that our communication content and style in this book will embody these cultural features (and potentially others we may not be aware of). If you identify yourself culturally as different from us in any one or more of these ways, you may legitimately ask, "How's this book relevant to me? If culture and communication are so intertwined, what can I—an African American, perhaps, or Latino, 20-year-old, gay or lesbian, engineering or chemistry student—learn from this book?"

Enough, we hope, to keep you reading. We're going to offer some knowledge and skills about communication that are supported by evidence from a variety of cultures, and we're going to speak from our position in some cultures with fairly large memberships and wide ranges of influence. If you are not a member of one or more of the cultures we belong to, this text can still be useful to you in at least two ways: (1) You can test the generalizations we make against your experience in your own cultures to determine which apply both here and there, and (2) when the points we make *don't* apply in one or more of your cultures, you can use them to enhance your ability to communicate with people in the cultures we inhabit.

For example, our first three claims about human communication are that humans live in worlds of meaning that are constructed in communicating, that ethical choices matter, and that culture figures prominently in all communication. We believe that there is ample evidence to demonstrate that these points are true about all people in all cultures. Do you? We encourage you to test them against your own experience and to discuss the results with your instructor and classmates. At various points in the book we will make similarly broad generalizations about communication, and we encourage you to test them, too.

On the other hand, when we discuss nonverbal communication, we will say that in *our* cultures (Karen's, John's, and Saskia's), there are no positive meanings for too little eye contact. The meaning of too little may vary, but whenever people notice that someone is not looking them in the eye "enough," they will infer something negative—that the person is lying, frightened, distracted, shy, or something else. This may not be exactly the way it works in one or more of the cultures you belong to. You may have learned that it is disrespectful to look a superior in the eye, or that direct eye contact is reserved for intimates. If so,

combine your understanding of your own culture with what we say about ours and use this knowledge about eye contact in our cultures to enhance your ability to communicate outside your own culture with people in some of the cultures we inhabit.

And notice that you can do this without being coopted. If you feel culturally different from us, you don't have to give up your distinctiveness to profit from what's here. You can operate like a global businessperson. People who have to serve customers or work with producers outside their own cultures routinely learn how to adapt to these other cultures, but from their own position of strength—as a representative of their business. These people want to do business in another culture, so their adaptation is based on that foundation; it doesn't mean that their values or morals are coopted. Regardless of the culture you enter or the adaptations you may choose to make, you can do so from a position of confidence and strength.

**4. Identities: Some of the most important meanings people collaboratively construct are identities. All communicating involves negotiating identities or selves.**

As worlds of meaning are collaboratively constructed in communication, so are identities. Communication theorist and teacher John Shotter emphasizes how our

ways of being, our “selves,” are produced in our . . . ways of interrelating ourselves to each other—these are the terms in which we are socially accountable in our society—and these “traditional” or “basic” (dominant) ways of talking are productive of our “traditional” or “basic” psychological and social [identities]. (Shotter 1993, 180)

In other words, who people are—their identities—gets built in communicating. We come to each encounter with an identifiable “self,” but it has been developed in communication and, *as we talk*, we adapt ourselves to fit the topic we're discussing and the people we're talking with, and we are changed by what happens to us as we communicate.

The way communication and identity are closely related became especially apparent in a conversation John had with a friend who was going through a painful divorce. “Mary Kay is not the person she used to be,” Dale said. “Sometimes I hardly know her. I wish we could communicate and enjoy each other like we did when we were first married.”

The times Dale was remembering were before Mary Kay was a mother, before she completed medical school, before she suffered through her residency in an urban hospital 2,000 miles from home, be-

fore she joined a prestigious medical clinic, and before she became a full-fledged practicing physician. They were also before Dale was a dad, before he started his import-export business, before he became active in his state professional association, and before he began attending church regularly. Dale was forgetting that Mary Kay could not possibly still be “the person she used to be.” Neither could he. Both of them have experienced many relationships that have changed them decisively. Mary Kay has been treated like a medical student—required to cram scientific information into her head and spout it on command—and like a first-year resident—forced to go without sleep, stand up to authoritarian doctors, and cope with hospital administrators. Now nurses obey her, many patients admire her for her skills, and prestigious doctors treat her like an equal. Plus she’s treated as a mom by her son. Dale has also experienced many different relationships, and he’s changed, too. He’s treated as a boss by his employees and as “a respected American businessman” by his Japanese customers. Because of the contacts both have experienced, each is a different person. And the process continues as both Mary Kay and Dale continue to be changed by their communication.

Obviously, these identity changes are limited. Most people don’t change their gender or ethnicity. But some changes are inevitable over time, and others can happen in the short term. For example, a woman can communicate in ways that say she is more feminine—or more masculine—than her conversation partner, and as a person with greater or less authority or power than her conversation partner has. The other person’s responses will contribute to the identity as it’s negotiated verbally and nonverbally.

Consider the difference, for example, between “Shut the door, stupid!” and “Please close the door.” The command implies the identity of a superior speaking to a subordinate. On the other hand, the request identifies the speaker as an equal to the person being addressed. The person who’s told to “Shut the door, stupid!” may silently comply, in which case he or she is reinforcing part of the speaker’s identity. Or the person may respond, “Shut it yourself!” which is a different negotiation move. This response says, in effect, “I don’t agree with or accept the identity you’re claiming. You’re not my superior; we’re equals.”

Many treatments of communication have missed or underemphasized the identity-construction part of human communication. These books and articles treated the process of communication as if it mainly consisted of transmitting ideas, content, or information. When “selves” were discussed, they were treated as static entities that communicators brought with them into their contacts, where they were hid or revealed. Many communication researchers now see selves as primarily constructed in communicating (Davies and Harré 1992). We say more about this in Chapter Four.

### Implication 4: Identity Issues Are Always in Play

The practical implication of the fourth point is that whenever you communicate—on the telephone, via e-mail, face-to-face, in meetings, even in front of the television—part of what is happening is identity negotiation. In other words, *identity-negotiation or the collaborative construction of selves is going on whenever people communicate*. It isn't the *only* thing that's happening, but it's one of the very important processes, and it often gets overlooked. When it does, as we'll explain in later chapters, troubles usually result. By contrast, people who are aware of relationship messages and identity-negotiation processes can communicate more effectively and successfully in many different situations.

Communication content is important too, and sometimes problems can be solved only when the parties involved have more or better information. Policies may be out of date, data may be incomplete, and people may have misread or misheard key instructions. In these cases, the people involved may need to complete, refine, or recalibrate the information they're working with.

But as we noted, effective communicators understand and manage what they're verbally and nonverbally "saying" about *who they are* to the people they're communicating with. Grooming and dress obviously contribute to this process, as people offer definitions of themselves using nose rings and other body piercing, colorful tattoos, starched white shirts or blouses, and conservative business suits. Tone of voice and facial expressions are also identity-defining. Some people foster misunderstanding by unknowingly sounding like they're skeptical, hostile, or bored, and facial expressions can help define a person as attentive, careful, positive, or their opposites.

Especially when you're troubleshooting—or just trying to live through—a disagreement or conflict, it usually works best to start by understanding the identities that are in play. By the time you've worked through this book, you should have a wealth of ideas and practical skills for constructively managing how you define yourself and how others define you.

**5. Conversation: The most influential communication events are conversations.**

If you had to identify one event that humans all over the world engage in characteristically—because they're humans—routinely, naturally, and almost constantly, what would it be? We all breathe, but so do other animals. We eat and drink, but not constantly, and again, other animals do too. The one activity that marks us as human and that occupies, in one form or another, a large part of our personal and occupa-

tional lives is conversation, verbal and nonverbal exchange in real time, either face-to-face or mediated by some electronic medium (e.g., the telephone).

For a long time, people who studied communication and language tended to overlook this point. Language scholars focused on rules of grammar and syntax, dictionary definitions, and other features of writing, and speech research and teaching paid primary attention to public speaking and deliberation in law courts and legislatures. But in the last half of the twentieth century, an increasing number of scholars and teachers have shown how written and formal kinds of communicating are derived from the most basic human activity, informal conversation. Recently, for example, two well-known psychologists from Stanford University began a report of their National Science Foundation-supported research with the following words:

Conversation is the fundamental site of language use. For many people, even for whole societies, it is the only site, and it is the primary one for children acquiring language. From this perspective other arenas of language use—novels, newspapers, lectures, street signs, rituals—are derivative or secondary. (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986, 1)

Another respected scholar puts it more simply. “Conversation,” he writes, “is sociological bedrock” (Schegloff 1995, 186–187), the absolute foundation or base for everything humans do as social beings. This explains the sense of the title of one of communication theorist John Shotter’s (1993) books, *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life Through Language*. Shotter’s book explains in detail how human realities get constructed in communication—our point 1, above—and emphasizes that the most characteristic form of this communication is *conversation*. Some of the largest companies in the United States have also profited from the services of Susan Scott, author of the best-selling book, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Scott 2002). Scott emphasizes that “Business is fundamentally an extended conversation . . . What gets talked about in a company and how it gets talked about determines what will happen.” And if you’re tempted to think that conversations at work are just “small talk,” realize this: “While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a company, a relationship or a life, any single conversation can” (Scott 2003, C2).

### **Implication 5: The Most Ordinary Communication Events Are the Most Significant**

The reason we highlight this idea as one of the six main points we make about human communication is that it justifies paying close attention to something common and ordinary. The fact that humans engage in conversation so constantly, and so often almost without think-

ing, is part of what makes the process so important. Along with Susan Scott, organizational theorist and trainer Peter Senge and his coauthors argue that effective conversation is “the single greatest learning tool in your organization—more important than computers or sophisticated research” (1994, 14). Whether in a living group, a family-run shop, a small work team, or a multinational corporation, the real organizational structure and rules—as contrasted with what’s on the organizational chart—get defined in the subtleties of verbal and nonverbal conversation. Superior and subordinate status get negotiated in face-to-face contacts. Key decisions are heavily influenced by brief informal contacts in the bathrooms and halls as much as they are by formal presentations in meetings. And when the organization needs to change and there are feelings about rights or two worthwhile principles in conflict, the only options available are some form of authoritarianism or some form of problem-solving conversation. Similarly, conversation is the primary way families have of making decisions and negotiating differences. And children become effective participants in play groups, classrooms, sports teams, and their own families by learning how to converse well.

We believe, in short, that one very important way to improve your communication competence is to pay close attention to the most common, everyday kind of communicating—conversation. When you do, you’ll discover that you already have a great deal of experience with many of the concepts and skills this book discusses. This means that you have a solid foundation to build on. Even if you don’t believe you’re very good at conversation, you’ve done it often and well enough, and it’s going on around you so much, that you can build on the experiences you have.

**6. Nexting: The most important single communication skill is ‘nexting.’**

*Nexting* is a strange term, we admit. But it’s the best one we’ve come up with for the skill we have in mind. If, as you read this book, you come up with a better one, please let us know.

By “*nexting*” we mean *doing something helpful next, responding fruitfully to what’s just happened, taking an additional useful step in the communication process*. If you’ve grasped how we’ve described communication in this chapter, this is the most important single skill you can build on this understanding. Here’s why:

Since you realize that communication is complex, continuous, and collaborative, you’ll always recognize that, no matter what’s happened

before and no matter how bad things currently look, you always have the option to take a fruitful *next* step. No matter how many times the same insult has been repeated, the next response can be creative rather than retaliatory. No matter how long the parties have not been speaking to each other, the next time they meet, one of them could speak. No matter how ingrained and toxic the pattern is that two groups are caught in, the next move one side makes could be positive. No matter how much you feel “thrown” by what the other person just said and did, if you give yourself a little time to regroup, you can make a next move that could help get the relationship back on track. No matter how little power the system gives you, your next communication choice can maximize the power you have. Even when it is very difficult not to strike back, your next comment could conceivably be encouraging rather than abusive. Conversely, no matter how well things are going, the next communication move can introduce a problem. No matter how smooth the water, people’s next responses can help make it rough.

When you understand that communication is continuous and collaborative, you’ll recognize the potential value of what you do next. Why? Because since no one person determines all the outcomes of a communication event, you can help determine some outcomes, even if you feel almost powerless. Since no one person is 100 percent to blame or at fault, and all parties share accountability, your next contribution can affect what’s happening. Since all communication is collaborative—remember, even prizefighters are co-labor-ating—your next communication move can make a change in the situation.

As our friend John Angus Campbell puts it, this understanding of communication can help you carry around the constant recognition that “history isn’t over yet.” You and the people you’re communicating with are continually constructing (modifying, adding to, deconstructing) your worlds, and this means that the *next* actions can be as influential and powerful as the best and worst of the previous actions. Just as no playing of the World Series or the Super Bowl finishes the games of baseball or football, no communication move permanently defines a situation or a relationship.

### **Implication 6: Whenever You Face a Communication Challenge or Problem, the Most Useful Question You Can Ask Yourself Is, ‘What Can I Help to Happen Next?’**

You can apply the skill of nexting by refusing to believe that any human system is ever cast in stone. Regardless of how well things are going between you and someone else, remember that what you do next will help maintain or destroy the relationship. Regardless of how badly things are going between your group and another, you can look for something positive to do next.



If you were the state police officer, what would be your most likely next response? Can you imagine a nexting move that could shift this contact from confrontation to conversation?

It almost goes without saying that in some cases you may not *want* to try to improve a bad situation or to maintain a good one. You may have tried to make positive contributions and have been continually rebuffed, and you may be out of patience, resources, or caring. You may in this particular case decide not to make a positive, supportive, or conciliatory move. You may also decide to let silence remain, to keep your distance, or to let the hostility fester. These are examples of nexting, too. But if you remember how communication works to construct human worlds, you can understand these options for what they are—*responses*, choices, decisions about what you are going to do *next*. They have their benefits and their consequences, just as other responses do.

To put it simply, people who understand communication to be the kind of process we've outlined in this chapter are not generally thrown off balance by communication difficulties. They understand that the most important thing to consider is what they are going to do *next*.

### 'But . . .' A Student Responds

*The idea of going directly to "nexting" when you are in the middle of difficult communication seems kind of weird to me. And I'm sure that my friends and family would think I was a little crazy if I asked them to stop for a minute while I think about what to do next. Shouldn't I just think about the situation and make a plan or develop a strategy beforehand?*

It is important to be thoughtful and to plan ahead. On the other hand, in a real-time situation (face-to-face or on the telephone, for example), time marches on whether we do or not. A long pause will be perceived as your “next” move, even if you’re using the pause to plan or strategize. In order to clarify what’s happening, you might want to frame the pause with something like, “Okay, let’s figure out together what we can do next.” In this chapter, our main point about nexting is that you adopt the attitude or perspective that, no matter what’s happened up to this point, something different can still happen next, and you can help it to happen.

Another way to put this point is to say that this view of communication redefines what “responsibility” means. Traditionally, being responsible means that you *caused* something to happen, that it was your “fault.” But from this book’s perspective, responsibility means *ability to respond*, not taking fault, blame, or credit. It means *response-ability*. You are response-able when you have the willingness and the ability to contribute in some way to how things are unfolding, rather than ignoring what’s going on or dropping out of the event. “Irresponsible” people are not responsive; they act without taking into account what else is going on or how their actions may affect others. Responsible (response-able) actions consider the larger wholes that they help make up. As you will see in the next chapter, the notion of response-ability is related to the basic skill of nexting.

## Chapter Summary

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This chapter describes the general process of communicating. We start by noting that communication is a general term used to label the process through which humans collaboratively construct meaning. We make the point that humans don’t live in worlds of objects but in worlds of meaning, more or less coherent spheres of understanding or sense that develop throughout our lives. Then we further define communication as the continuous, complex, collaborative process of verbal and nonverbal meaning-making, the process humans use to construct and modify our worlds.

We describe seven dimensions of the worlds of meaning that humans construct in communication—physical environment, time, relationships, spirituality, vocation, language(s), and technology. We note that each of these dimensions is tensional, which means that each is both stable and changing. We offer a figure of a sphere made up of seven ellipses with arrows on them to model, or graphically represent, these ideas. This model emphasizes the points that human worlds of sense can be thought of as made up of at least seven dimensions; that these are worlds of meaning; that the meanings are tensional; that

these worlds are inherited, constructed, modified, and molded in communication; and that ethics and culture overlay the whole picture. One main implication of this set of ideas is that no one person can completely control any communication event and that the causal notions of fault and blame can't accurately be applied to humans communicating.

Our second point is that all communication involves choices between competing ethical standards. Some of the choices are made after reflection and others seem more instinctive or automatic. In either case, there are always competing forces in play, and part of being human is making meaningful choices between them.

Our next point is that culture figures prominently in all communicating. We explain that culture means much more than ethnicity and that each of us can have multiple cultural identities. We also discuss how you might respond to what's here if you experience yourself as culturally different from us. The implication we emphasize is that culture is affecting what we write in this book and how you read and respond to it.

The fourth main point we make about communication is that it always involves co-constructing identities or selves. Every time people communicate, they are verbally and nonverbally offering definitions of themselves and responding to the ways others define them. This isn't the *only* thing that's going on when humans communicate, but it's a very important process that many discussions of communication overlook. You'll hear much more about it in Chapter Four.

We also say that the most influential communication events are conversations. Our point is that this everyday, common experience we all have—of exchanging ideas with others face-to-face or on the telephone or e-mail—is what one author called sociological bedrock and can thus be the anchor experience for a study of interpersonal communication. Even though it's common, it's important and can be taken seriously—thought about and studied. There's lots to learn *from* and *about* everyday conversation.

Finally, we say that if you think of communication in the ways we talk about in this chapter, you can see that the single most important communication skill is what we call nexting. Since communication is complex, continuous, and collaborative, the most useful response to any difficult or problematic communication situation is the question "What can I do next?"

### In Other Words

**I**n the next couple of pages, you will be introduced to Lia Lee and her family. Lia is the child of a Hmong father and Hmong mother who lived in Merced, California, at the time when the text was written. They came to the United States from Laos in 1980 as refugees. Historically, Hmong people have popu-

lated the mountainous regions of southeastern China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Many Hmong, like the Lee family, escaped from Laos after 1975 when the country became controlled by communist forces and lived in a Thai refugee camp before coming to the United States. Lia Lee was born in the United States and diagnosed with epilepsy when she was a baby. This excerpt talks about Lia's first episode of epilepsy and introduces you to some of the beliefs and values of Hmong culture, such as the meanings attached to epilepsy, shamanism or child rearing practices. We can only show you a brief excerpt here but if you are interested in more, we suggest that you read the whole fascinating book. The author, Anne Fadiman, spent many months in the late 1980's with the Lee family. In the rest of the book she describes some of the conflicts between the worldviews of the Hmong family and those of the US doctors, particularly as these worldviews affect decisions about how to treat Lia's epilepsy.

After reading this excerpt, you should have a better idea what we mean when we say that people live in "worlds of meanings." You should be able to respond to the following questions:

1. What are some dimensions of worlds of meanings of the Hmong family that strike you most? Pick at least two.
2. How are the meanings that these dimensions have for the Hmong family similar to or different from the meanings that they have for you?
3. What are some of your cultural assumptions about such illnesses as epilepsy that contrast with assumptions that the Hmong family make about this illness?

\* \* \*

### The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down

*Anne Fadiman*

When Lia was about three months old, her older sister Yer slammed the front door of the Lees' apartment. A few moments later, Lia's eyes rolled up, her arms jerked over her head, and she fainted. The Lees had little doubt what had happened. Despite the careful installation of Lia's soul during the *hu plig* ceremony, the noise of the door had been so profoundly frightening that her soul had fled her body and become lost. They recognized the resulting symptoms as *qaug dab peg*, which means "the spirit catches you and you fall down." The spirit referred to in this phrase is a soul-stealing *dab*; *peg* means to catch or hit; and *qaug* means to fall over with one's roots still in the ground, as grain might be beaten down by wind or rain.

In Hmong-English dictionaries, *qaug dab peg* is generally translated as epilepsy. It is an illness well known to the Hmong, who regard it with ambivalence. On the one hand, it is acknowledged to be a serious and potentially dangerous condition. Tony Coelho, who was Merced's congressman from 1979 to 1989, is an epileptic. Coelho is a popular figure among the Hmong, and a few years ago, some local Hmong men were sufficiently concerned when they learned he suffered from *qaug dab peg* that they volunteered the services of a shaman, a *txiv*

*neeb*, to perform a ceremony that would retrieve Coelho's errant soul. The Hmong leader to whom they made this proposition politely discouraged them, suspecting that Coelho, who is a Catholic of Portuguese descent, might not appreciate having chickens, and maybe a pig as well, sacrificed on his behalf.

On the other hand, the Hmong consider *qaug dab peg* to be an illness of some distinction. This fact might have surprised Tony Coelho no less than the dead chickens would have. Before he entered politics, Coelho planned to become a Jesuit priest, but was barred by a canon forbidding the ordination of epileptics. What was considered a disqualifying impairment by Coelho's church might have been seen by the Hmong as a sign that he was particularly fit for divine office. Hmong epileptics often become shamans. Their seizures are thought to be evidence that they have the power to perceive things other people cannot see, as well as facilitating their entry into trances, a prerequisite for their journeys into the realm of the unseen. The fact that they have been ill themselves gives them an intuitive sympathy for the suffering of others and lends them emotional credibility as healers. Becoming a *txiv neeb* is not a choice; it is a vocation. The calling is revealed when a person falls sick, either with *qaug dab peg* or with some other illness whose symptoms similarly include shivering and pain. An established *txiv neeb*, summoned to diagnose the problem, may conclude from these symptoms that the person (who is usually but not always male) has been chosen to be the host of a healing spirit, a *neeb*. (*Txiv neeb* means "person with a healing spirit.") It is an offer that the sick person cannot refuse, since if he rejects his vocation, he will die. In any case, few Hmong would choose to decline. Although shamanism is an arduous calling that requires years of training with a master in order to learn the ritual techniques and chants, it confers an enormous amount of social status in the community and publicly marks the *txiv neeb* as a person of high moral character, since a healing spirit would never choose a no-account host. Even if an epileptic turns out not to be elected to host a *neeb*, his illness, with its thrilling aura of the supramundane, singles him out as a person of consequence.

In their attitude toward Lia's seizures, the Lees reflected this mixture of concern and pride. The Hmong are known for the gentleness with which they treat their children. Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, a German ethnographer who lived with the Hmong of Thailand for several years during the 1930s, wrote that the Hmong he had studied regarded a child as "the most treasured possession a person can have." In Laos, a baby was never apart from its mother, sleeping in her arms all night and riding on her back all day. Small children were rarely abused; it was believed that a *dab* who witnessed mistreatment might take the child, assuming it was not wanted. The Hmong who live in the United States have continued to be unusually attentive parents. A study conducted at the University of Minnesota found Hmong infants in the first month of life to be less irritable and more securely attached to their mothers than Caucasian infants, a difference the researcher attributed to the fact that the Hmong mothers were, without exception, more sensitive, more accepting, and more responsive, as well as "exquisitely attuned" to their children's signals. Another study, conducted in Portland, Oregon, found that Hmong mothers held and touched their babies far more frequently than Caucasian mothers. In a third

study, conducted at the Hennepin County Medical Center in Minnesota, a group of Hmong mothers of toddlers surpassed a group of Caucasian mothers of similar socioeconomic status in every one of fourteen categories selected from the Egeland Mother-Child Rating Scale, ranging from "Speed of Responsiveness to Fussing and Crying" to "Delight."

Foua and Nao Kao had nurtured Lia in typical Hmong fashion (on the Egeland Scale, they would have scored especially high in Delight), and they were naturally distressed to think that anything might compromise her health and happiness. They therefore hoped, at least most of the time, that the *qaug dab peg* could be healed. Yet they also considered the illness an honor. Jeanine Hilt, a social worker who knew the Lees well, told me, "They felt Lia was kind of an anointed one, like a member of royalty. She was a very special person in their culture because she had these spirits in her and she might grow up to be a shaman, and so sometimes their thinking was that this was not so much a medical problem as it was a blessing." (Of the forty or so American doctors, nurses, and Merced County agency employees I spoke with who had dealt with Lia and her family, several had a vague idea that "spirits" were somehow involved, but Jeanine Hilt was the only one who had actually asked the Lees what they thought was the cause of their daughter's illness.)

Within the Lee family, in one of those unconscious processes of selection that are as mysterious as any other form of falling in love, it was obvious that Lia was her parents' favorite, the child they considered the most beautiful, the one who was most extravagantly hugged and kissed, the one who was dressed in the most exquisite garments (embroidered by Foua, wearing dime-store glasses to work her almost microscopic stitches). Whether Lia occupied this position from the moment of her birth, whether it was a result of her spiritually distinguished illness, or whether it came from the special tenderness any parent feels for a sick child, is not a matter Foua and Nao Kao wish, or are able, to analyze. One thing that is clear is that for many years the cost of that extra love was partially borne by her sister Yer. "They blamed Yer for slamming the door," said Jeanine Hilt. "I tried many times to explain that the door had nothing to do with it, but they didn't believe me. Lia's illness made them so sad that I think for a long time they treated Yer differently from their other children."

During the next few months of her life, Lia had at least twenty more seizures. On two occasions, Foua and Nao Kao were worried enough to carry her in their arms to the emergency room at Merced Community Medical Center, which was three blocks from their apartment. Like most Hmong refugees, they had their doubts about the efficacy of Western medical techniques. However, when they were living in the Mae Jarim refugee camp in Thailand, their only surviving son, Cheng, and three of their six surviving daughters, Ge, May, and True, had been seriously ill. Ge died. They took Cheng, May, and True to the camp hospital; Cheng and May recovered rapidly, and True was sent to another, larger hospital, where she eventually recovered as well. (The Lees also concurrently addressed the possible spiritual origins of their children's illnesses by moving to a new hut. A dead person had been buried beneath their old one, and his soul might have wished to harm the new residents.) This expe-

rience did nothing to shake their faith in traditional Hmong beliefs about the causes and cures of illness, but it did convince them that on some occasions Western doctors could be of additional help, and that it would do no harm to hedge their bets.

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## Endnotes

1. Some people call talking to yourself or thinking out loud “intrapersonal communication” or communication “within” one person. We prefer to reserve the term “communication” for what happens between two or more people. The main reason is that “common,” or “commune,” is the root of “communication,” and you can’t make something common that’s not divided or separated. Although any one person obviously has various “parts” or “sides,” we think it’s most useful to understand the human as a whole, a unity captured by such terms as “I,” “me,” or “the person.” Talking to yourself and thinking out loud are important processes, but they are fundamentally different from connecting with an *other*, someone who is not you. As we’ll explain later in this chapter, we also want to emphasize that humans are first and foremost “social animals,” relational beings. Humans become who we are in our contacts with others, not as a result of thinking and talking to ourselves.
2. Notice that when we emphasize how fundamental meanings are, we are not claiming that there are no such things as objects. Meanings emerge as people contact aspects of their worlds. Some of these aspects are concrete, material, solid. But, as we clarify in Chapter Five, humans constantly *interpret* these objects; we don’t perceive them directly. And the results of interpretation are meanings.

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