CHAPTER 1

FOUNDATIONS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this chapter, you will be able to

1–1 Identify the evolution and foundation of the communication field
1–2 Define and describe the interpersonal communication process
1–3 Explain three prevailing models of human communication
1–4 Paraphrase the principles of interpersonal communication
1–5 Describe the myths related to interpersonal communication
1–6 Compare and contrast three ethical systems of communication

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Each day, billions of people around the globe wake up and begin one of the most basic and ancient of all human behavior: interpersonal communication. Think about it. Some people head off to school and greet people on the bus. Some leave their apartments for work and chat with colleagues in a carpool. Others drink coffee or tea in the morning at the kitchen table, needling their roommates about the overdue rent. Some Skype their friends to see if they got home safely from a previous night. And still others rush to their laptops to see if they received any replies to their online dating profiles. Although each of these situations clearly differs, they all underscore the pervasiveness of interpersonal communication in our personal and professional lives. Human communication is clearly the essence of what it means to be alive.

Appropriate to this book and course, the word communication derives from two Latin words (“communis” and “communicare”), which mean “to share and to make common.” Communication is a word that most people feel they understand. And, yet, when you ask a dozen people to define the term, you’re going to hear a dozen different interpretations of the term! For our purposes, then, and in order for us to have a mutual foundation to draw upon, we define communication as the co-creation and interpretation of meaning. We are necessarily expansive in our view of the term because communication is quite layered. Throughout our conversations over the next several chapters, for example, we will examine scores of relationships, namely those that represent a cross-section of our lives, including teachers, painters, physicians, wait staff, child care providers, attorneys, college students, human resource directors, teenagers, among many others. In order to capture such a diverse list, we embrace a foundational definition that can be applied to multiple relationship types that experience a myriad of interpersonal experiences.

Despite our embrace of communication, not everyone is comfortable talking to others. In fact, some people are quite nervous about communicating. This fear or anxiety that people exhibit in the communication process is called communication apprehension (CA). This sort of fear is a legitimate and a very personal experience that researchers believe negatively impacts communication effectiveness. People with CA often go to great lengths to avoid certain situations because communicating can prompt embarrassment, shyness, frustration, and tension. Moreover, at times, some individuals find themselves fearful or anxious around people from different cultural groups. This intercultural communication apprehension not only impairs quality person-to-person conversations, but it can also affect whether or not we wish to communicate with someone at all. We will delve much further into the intersection of culture and communication in Chapter 2 (Complete the CAT: Interpersonal Communication Comfort Inventory to assess your views of communicating with others).

Even if we don’t experience or suffer from communication apprehension, we still may have difficulty getting our message across to others. We may feel unprepared to argue with a supervisor for a raise, to let our apartment manager know that the hot water is not hot enough, or to tell our partner “I love you.” At times throughout the day, we may struggle with what to say, how to say something, or when to say something. We may also grapple with listening to certain messages because of their content or the manner in which they are presented. In some cases, for
instance, someone's microaggressions, or the subtle insults, indignities, and denigrating messages delivered to marginalized communities, will often stump even the most articulate communicator. Such cultural challenges (several of which we detail in the next chapter) require skills that many people lack.

This book is an important beginning in addressing, understanding, and working through a great deal of the examples and episodes we just described. In each chapter and on each page, one goal remains clear: to inspire you to work on improving your communication skills with others. Enhancing the practices and skills related to interpersonal communication will assist you in becoming more effective in your relationships with a variety of people, including those with whom you are close (e.g., family members, friends) and those with whom you interact less frequently (e.g., contractors, baristas).

In addition to emphasizing a practical and skill-centered approach, throughout this book, you will see how interpersonal communication research and theory help us to understand everyday encounters. In the end, then, we believe that both practical and theoretical applications of interpersonal communication are intertwined to the extent that we cannot ignore the mutual influence of one upon the other. After all, theories inform practice, and practice grows out of theory.

Nonetheless, sustaining a scholarly thread is secondary to our commitment to a sensible framework of a grounded, hands-on conversation. We agree with other writers who maintain that the communication discipline can influence and enhance people's lives only by being practical. So, we adhere to a pragmatic approach with this book in the hope that you will be able to use what you learn to make informed communication choices with others.

Our first task is to map out a general understanding of interpersonal communication. We begin this journey by providing a brief history of how interpersonal communication came about in the field of communication.

## 1–1 THE EVOLUTION AND FOUNDATION OF THE COMMUNICATION FIELD

Let's look at an overview of the communication discipline to give you a sense of its development. To understand where we are, we first must understand where we've been. In this section, we are necessarily limited. For an expansive view of the communication field, we encourage you to look at additional sources that provide a more comprehensive presentation.

What we call communication studies today has its origins in ancient Greece and Rome, during the formation of what we now know as Western civilization. Being skilled at communication was expected of all Greek and Roman citizens. Citizens were asked to judge murder and adultery trials, travel as state emissaries, and defend their property against would-be land collectors. This sort of public communication was viewed primarily as a way to persuade other people, and writers such as Aristotle developed ways to improve a speaker's persuasive powers. In his book *Rhetoric*, Aristotle described a way of making speeches that encouraged speakers to incorporate logic, evidence, and emotions and to consider how the audience perceived the speaker's credibility and intelligence.
Aristotelian thinking dominated early approaches to communication for centuries. But as time went on, interest grew in providing speakers with practical ways to improve their communication skills in situations other than public persuasion. Being pragmatic was essential in order to reach the broadest possible audience. And, today, this pragmatism permeates much of communication studies.

A great deal of contemporary thinking about communication grows out of the National Communication Association (NCA). This organization is comprised of over 7,000 communication teachers, researchers, and practitioners who study dozens of different areas of communication. And, to be sure, one of the largest subfields of the communication discipline and of NCA is interpersonal communication. Still, interpersonal communication is not the only context in which communication exists. As you have experienced, we see the communication process in a number of environments. Although the following list is by no means exhaustive, it does show how the communication field has grown from a focus on speaking in front of an audience. In fact, you may notice that the communication department at your school is organized around some or all of these communication types. Many schools use these categories as an effective way to structure their curriculum and course offerings.

The following communication types build upon each other because they represent increasing numbers of people included in the process. In addition, keep in mind that although these communication categories differ from one another in some significant ways, they aren’t mutually exclusive. With that in mind, let’s take a closer look at the six types of communication:

- **Intrapersonal communication**: messages that are internal to communicators; communication with ourselves. For instance, intrapersonal communication takes place when you debate with yourself, mentally listing the pros and cons of a decision (e.g., choosing whether to lease or own a car) before taking action.

- **Interpersonal communication**: the strategic process of message transaction between people to create and sustain shared meaning. We will discuss this definition in more detail later in this chapter.
• **Small group communication**: communication between and among members of a task group who meet for a common purpose or goal. Small group communication occurs in classrooms, the workplace, and in more social environments (e.g., sports teams or book clubs).

• **Organizational communication**: communication within and among large, extended environments with a defined hierarchy. Scheduling challenges argued between a supervisor and employee exemplify one theme in this context.

• **Mass communication**: communication to a large audience via some mediated channel, such as television, radio, the Internet (e-mail, social media, etc.), or newspapers. Using Tinder or eHarmony to find a romantic partner demonstrates the intersection of mass communication and interpersonal communication.

• **Public communication**: communication in which one person presents a speech to a group of audience-listeners. Public communication is also often called public speaking. A presentation to your class, a nonprofit organization, or town council is a public speaking episode.

Each of these communication types is affected by two pervasive influences: culture and technology. As we move through the 21st century, acknowledging both of these is even more crucial to our understanding of interpersonal communication and human relationships. First, it’s nearly impossible to ignore the role that culture plays as we communicate with others. Over the past several decades, scores of immigrants have arrived in the United States, bringing with them various customs, values, and practices. As a result, we now live in a country where intercultural contact is both necessary and commonplace, making effective
communication with others even more critical than it would be ordinarily. Despite the anxiety that some may have, we’re sure to see even more cultural diversity as the years continue. This ever-increasing presence of intercultural relationships—including those between international exchange students and their host families, U.S. parents and their adopted children from other countries, working side-by-side in an office with people from different countries, among others—has prompted researchers to study the effects of these blended populations on communication effectiveness. We delve much deeper into the topic of culture, community, and communication in Chapter 2.

IPC Praxis

Suppose you were asked to explain why so many people are anxious and nervous communicating with members of cultures different from their own. How would you go about discussing this issue? Does it make a difference who your conversational partner is? Why or why not?

A second influence upon the various communication types is technology. As you know from your own online experiences, for some, face-to-face (f2f) contact is no longer the default communication approach. Years ago, efforts at interpersonal communication were limited to sending letters or talking with someone personally. But today, relationships are routinely initiated, cultivated, and even terminated via electronic technology, and people derive various perceptions of others through their online interactions. This phenomenon has stimulated research on technology, relationships, and interpersonal communication. Technology not only has influenced people’s interpretation of interpersonal communication, but also the digitized relationship has become the norm across a large number of generations. Further, our conversations have become abbreviated, such as when we look at our caller ID and answer the phone with “And when did you get home from vacation?” instead of “Hello?” We develop close relationships with others via Instagram, even though we have probably not met all of our “followers.” And, the notion of what it means to be a “friend” on Facebook has motivated social scientists to wonder about what qualities Facebookers use to define friendships. Throughout this book, we integrate technology’s effect on the different topics related to interpersonal communication, providing you a chance to understand its influence in your relationships with others.

1–2 DEFINING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Earlier, we defined communication, providing you a framework to consider as you review the topics in this book. However, because this text focuses on interpersonal communication, we begin our discussion by interpreting it for you. We define interpersonal communication as the strategic process of message transaction between two people to create and sustain shared meaning. Four critical components are embedded in this definition: strategy, process, message exchange, and shared meaning. Let’s look at each in turn.
When we state that interpersonal communication is a strategy, we mean to suggest that you are deliberative in your interpersonal efforts. That is, we don’t wish to have intimate communication with everyone with whom we interact; we are selective. In fact, it would be both exhausting and inappropriate to do so. Therefore, we retain an internal interpersonal barometer, exchanging personal messages with those whom we feel we need or want to communicate.

Stating that interpersonal communication is a **process** means that it is an ongoing, unending, vibrant activity that is always changing. When we enter into an interpersonal communication exchange, we are entering into an event with moments that continue to evolve. For example, consider the moments when you first meet and begin communicating with classmates during a small group activity in class. Chances are that for the first few minutes, everyone in the group feels a little awkward and uncertain. Yet, after you all introduce yourselves to one another, it’s highly likely that you all feel more comfortable. This shift from feeling uncertain to feeling comfortable is the ongoing interpersonal communication process in action.

The notion of process also suggests that it is not only individuals who change, but also the cultures in which they live. For instance, today’s U.S. society is very different than it was, say, in the 1960s. While there have been several important social movements taking place over the past several years (e.g., #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #neveragain), most who lived in the 1960s feel that the climate was quite different back then. In one Reddit survey, respondents identified several differences that demonstrate the 1960s as a time of extreme tumult and clearly defined lines of authority-related demarcation. Among the conclusions noted by Redditors were the following:

- There was an open encouragement of violence against protesters.
- Racism was practiced openly and without much consequence.
- Social class was much deeper and more troubling.
- The Vietnam War ushered in serious divergent points of view on war.
- There was little “peace and prosperity” as there is today.
- Television only had three channels to report events.
- Men clearly were the decision makers—both in the family and in the workplace.

So, process is more than one short period in a conversation. Process can be expanded to include the entire cultural era as well.

### IPC Praxis

Construct a brief survey that asks peers and classmates about their impressions of how they view their native country now and how they project it to be 20 years from now. Include at least two questions that ask about the good and the not-so-good changes that have occurred.
The third element of our definition of interpersonal communication highlights message exchange. In this regard, we mean the transaction of verbal and nonverbal messages, or information being sent simultaneously between people. Messages, both verbal and nonverbal, are the vehicles we use to interact with others. But messages are not enough to establish interpersonal communication. For example, consider an English-speaking communicator stating the message “I need to find the post office. Can you direct me there?” to a Spanish-speaking communicator. Although the message was stated clearly in English, no shared meaning results if the Spanish speaker is not bilingual.

Meaning is central to our definition of interpersonal communication because meaning is what people extract from a message. As we will learn in Chapter 4, words alone have no meaning; people attribute meaning to words. We (co)create the meaning of a message even as the message unfolds. Maybe it’s our history with someone who ends up helping us interpret a message. Perhaps a message is unclear to us and we ask questions for clarity. Or maybe the message has personal meaning to us and no one else understands the personal expressions used. Meaning directly affects our relational life. As one team of interpersonal communication researchers state, “We suspect that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ relational experiences are sometimes a matter of personal definition and personal meaning, but always intertwined, sometimes seamlessly, in the broader human enterprise of making sense of experience.” In other words, when we achieve meaning, we are also achieving sense-making in our relationships with others.

When we say that people work toward creating and sustaining meaning, we are suggesting that there must be some shared meaning for interpersonal communication to take place. Because meaning is affected by culture in more ways than language differences, we have to be careful not to assume that our meaning will automatically be clear to others and result in shared meaning. For instance, note that in the United States, many people tend to ask others, “What do you do?” In the Netherlands, however, this overture is viewed as offensive since the Dutch feel that this question is rooted in classism. Or, consider the ubiquitous “TGIF” (Thank God It’s Friday) in the United States. To most, this means the beginning of a weekend (of fun), and yet in Muslim countries, the first day of the week is Saturday, after Friday (the holy day). This translation, then, requires careful consideration if meaning is to be shared.

To underscore the importance of culture, we discuss various cultural groups and cultural identities throughout every chapter of this text. And we recognize that although there are many differences among various cultures, some similarities exist. In each chapter, we strive to present conclusions about cultural communities that reflect consistencies in research and work to honor the integrity of the various populations.

1–3 THREE MODELS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

To further comprehend the interpersonal communication process and to provide more information about the evolution of the communication field, we
draw upon what theorists call models of communication. Communication models are visual, simplified representations of complex relationships in the communication process. They help us to see how the communication field has evolved over the years and provide a foundation you can return to throughout the book as you unpack the issues and themes we introduce. The three prevailing models we discuss will give you insight into how we frame our definition of interpersonal communication. We close this section with a projection of how technology influences model development. Let’s start with the oldest model so you can discern the development of the interpersonal communication process.

**Mechanistic Thinking and the Action (Linear) Model**

More than 60 years ago, Claude E. Shannon, a Bell Telephone scientist, and Warren Weaver, a Sloan Cancer Research Foundation consultant, set out to understand radio and telephone technology by looking at how information passed through various channels. They viewed information transmission as a linear process, and their research resulted in the creation of the action, or Linear Model of Communication.

The linear approach frames communication as a one-way process that transmits a message to a destination. Think about when you were a child. You may have played “the telephone game,” which included punching a tiny hole in the bottoms of two plastic cups, and inserting kite string or thread through each hole. Using the cups to “talk into” and to “listen with” illustrates the one-way communication we’re discussing with the Linear Model. You talk and someone hears you; that’s the essence of the Linear Model. Many writers have succinctly presented the model with five questions:

- **Who?**
- **Says what?**
- **In what channel?**
- **To whom?**
- **With what effect?**

Several components comprise the Linear Model of Communication (see Figure 1.1). The *sender* is the source of the message, which may be spoken, written, or unspoken. (If American Sign Language is your primary form of interpersonal communication, your messages will necessarily be both linguistic and nonverbal.) The sender passes the message to the *receiver*, the intended target of the message. The *receiver*, in turn, assigns meaning to the message. All of this communication takes place in a *channel*, which is a pathway to communication. Typically, channels represent our senses (visual/sight, tactile/touch, olfactory/smell, and auditory/hearing). For instance, you use the tactile channel to hug a parent, and you use the auditory channel to listen to your roommate complain about a midterm exam.
In the Linear Model, communication also involves noise, which is anything that interferes with the message. Four types of noise can interrupt a message:

- **Physical noise** (also called *external noise*) involves any stimuli outside of the sender or receiver that makes the message difficult to hear. For example, it would be difficult to hear a message from your professor if someone were mowing the lawn outside the classroom. Physical noise can also take the form of something a person is wearing, such as “loud jewelry” or mirrored sunglasses, which may cause a receiver to focus on the object rather than the message.

- **Physiological noise** refers to biological influences on message reception. Examples of this type of noise are articulation problems, hearing or visual impairments, and the physical well-being of a speaker (i.e., whether they are able to deliver a message).

- **Psychological noise** (or *internal noise*) refers to a communicator’s biases, prejudices, and feelings toward a person or a message. For example, you may have heard another person use derogatory language about homeless people while you reflect upon your volunteer time in a homeless shelter.

- **Semantic noise** occurs when senders and receivers apply different meanings to the same message. Semantic noise may take the form of jargon, technical language, and other words and phrases that are familiar to the sender but that are not understood by the receiver. Think about the word *dope*. It has evolved from referring to a user of drugs to something that is viewed as cool, awesome, or great (recall how the communication process can change over time).

The linear view has been studied with context and surrounding in mind. Context is an environment and can be physical, cultural, psychological, or historical. The **physical context** is the tangible environment in which communication occurs.
Examples of physical contexts include the hotel van on the way to the airport, the dinner table, the apartment, or the church hall. Even environmental conditions such as temperature, lighting, and space are also part of the physical context. For example, consider trying to listen to your best friend talk about her financial problems in a crowded coffee shop. The environment does not seem conducive to receiving her message clearly and accurately.

The **cultural context** refers to the rules, roles, norms, and patterns of communication that are unique to particular cultures. Culture continually influences the communication taking place between and among people, requiring us to look at the backgrounds of communicators. Consider the millions of refugees we’ve witnessed, over the years, who have fled their homelands, only to be confronted in other cultures with hate, fear, violence, and hunger. Compounding these challenges are the difficulties assimilating into a culture where the newcomer language is not the language of the host culture. We will note later in this book that language serves as a primary factor affecting the quality of interpersonal communication. Therefore, the cultural context in which new immigrants arrive is typically fraught with anxiety, despair, and frustration.

The **social-emotional context** indicates the nature of the relationship that affects a communication encounter. For example, are the communicators in a particular interaction friendly or unfriendly, supportive or unsupportive? Or do they fall somewhere in between? These factors help explain why, for instance, you might feel completely anxious in one employment interview but very comfortable in another. At times you and an interviewer may hit it off, while at other times you may feel intimidated or awkward. The social-emotional context helps explain the nature of the interaction taking place.

In the **historical context**, messages are understood in relationship to previously sent messages. Thus, when Oliver tells Willa that he missed her while they were separated over spring break, Willa hears that as a turning point in their relationship. Oliver has never said that before; in fact, he has often mentioned that he rarely misses anyone when he is apart from them. Therefore, his comment is influenced by their history together. If Oliver regularly told Willa that he missed her, she would interpret the message differently.

We will return to the notion of context often in this book. For now, keep in mind that context has a significant influence on our relationships with others. Furthermore, context involves people and their conversations and relationships. If we don’t consider context in our interactions with others, we have no way to judge our interpersonal effectiveness.

Although the Linear Model was highly regarded when it was first conceptualized, it has been criticized because it presumes that communication has a definable beginning and ending. In fact, Shannon and Weaver later emphasized this aspect of their model by claiming that people receive information in organized and discrete ways. Yet, we know that communication can be messy. We have all interrupted someone or had someone interrupt us, for instance. The Linear Model also presumes that listeners are passive and that communication occurs only when speaking. But we know that listeners often affect speakers and are not simply passive receivers of a speaker’s message. With these criticisms in mind, researchers developed another way to represent the human communication process: the Interactional Model.
Feedback and the Interactional Model

To emphasize the two-way nature of communication between people, researchers conceptualized the Interactional Model of Communication. This model shows that communication goes in two directions: from sender to receiver and from receiver to sender. This circular, or interactional, process suggests that communication is ongoing rather than linear. In the Interactional Model, an individual in a conversation can be both sender and receiver, but not both simultaneously (see Figure 1.2).

The interactional approach is characterized primarily by feedback, which can be defined as responses to people, their messages, or both. Feedback may be verbal (meaning found in words) or nonverbal (meaning found in smiles, crossed arms, etc.). Feedback may also be internal or external. Internal feedback occurs when you assess your own communication (e.g., by thinking, “I never should have said that”). External feedback is the feedback you receive from other people (e.g., “Why did you say that? That was dumb!”).

People can provide external feedback that results in important internal feedback for themselves. For example, let’s say that Alexandra gives Dan the following advice about dealing with the death of his partner: “You feel sad as long as you need to. Don’t worry about what other people think. I’m sick of people telling others how they should feel about something. These are your feelings.” While providing Dan this external feedback, Alexandra may realize that her advice can also be applied to her own recent breakup. Although she may intend to send Dan

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![Figure 1.2 Interactional Model of Communication](image-url)
a comforting message, she may also provide herself internal feedback as she deals with her relational circumstances.

Like the Linear Model, the Interactional Model has been criticized primarily for its view of senders and receivers—that is, one person sends a message to another person. Neither model takes into consideration what happens when nonverbal messages are sent at the same time as verbal messages. For example, when a father disciplines his child and finds the child either looking the other way or staring directly into his eyes, the father may “read” the meaning of the child’s nonverbal communication as inattentive or disobedient. What happens if the child doesn’t say anything during the reprimand? The father may still make some meaning out of the child’s silence (“Don’t just stand there with that blank stare!”). The interactional view acknowledges that human communication involves both speaking and listening, but it asserts that speaking and listening are separate events and thus does little to address the effect of nonverbal communication as the message is sent. This criticism led to the development of a third model of communication: the Transactional Model.

**Shared Meaning and the Transactional Model**

Whereas the Linear Model of Communication assumes that communication is an action that moves from sender to receiver, and the Interactional Model suggests that the presence of feedback makes communication an interaction between people, the **Transactional Model** incorporates a mix of many elements. In this model, sending and receiving messages are simultaneous and mutual. In fact, the word *transactional* indicates that the communication process is cooperative. In other words, communicators (senders and receivers) are both responsible for the effect and effectiveness of communication. In a transactional encounter, people do not simply send meaning from one to the other and then back again; rather, they build shared meaning. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s words best underscore the Transactional Model: “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny.”

A unique feature of the Transactional Model is its recognition that messages build upon each other, underscoring an exchange of sorts. Furthermore, both verbal and nonverbal behaviors are necessarily part of the transactional process. For example, consider Alan’s conversation with his coworker Hurit. During a break, Hurit asks Alan about his family in Los Angeles. He begins to tell her that his three siblings all live in Los Angeles and that he has no idea when they will be able to “escape the prison” there. When he mentions “prison,” Hurit looks confused. Seeing Hurit’s puzzled facial expression, Alan clarifies that he hated Los Angeles because it was so hot, people lived too close to each other, and he felt that he was being watched all the time. In sum, he felt like he was in a prison. This example shows how much both Alan and Hurit are actively involved in this communication interaction. Hurit’s nonverbal response to Alan prompted him to clarify his original message. As this exchange shows, the nonverbal message works in conjunction with the verbal message, and the transactional process requires ongoing negotiation of meaning.
Note that the Transactional Model in Figure 1.3 is characterized by a common field of experience between communicator A and communicator B. The field of experience refers to a person's culture, past experiences, personal history, and heredity, and how these elements influence the communication process.

People's fields of experience overlap at times, meaning that people share things in common. Where two people's fields of experience overlap, they can communicate more effectively than if overlap was not present. And as they communicate, they create more overlap in their experiences. This process explains why initial encounters often consist of questions and answers between communicators, such as “Where are you from?” “What's your major?” “Do you ski?” The answers to these questions help establish the overlap in the communicators' experiences: “Oh, I was in Chicago over the holidays last year”; “Really, that's my major, too”; “Yeah, I don't ski, either.”

Fields of experience may change over time. For instance, in class, Alicia and Marcy have little in common and have little overlap in their fields of experience. They just met this term, have never taken a course together before, and Alicia is 18 years older than Marcy. It would appear, then, that their fields of experience would be limited to being women enrolled in the same course together. However, consider the difference if we discover that both Alicia and Marcy are single parents, have difficulty finding quality child care, and have received academic scholarships. The overlap in their fields of experience would be significantly greater. In addition, as the two continue in the class together, they will develop new common experiences, which, in turn, will increase the overlap in their fields of experience. This increased overlap may affect their interactions with each other in the future.
Interpersonal communication scholars have embraced the transactional process in their research, believing that human communication “is always tied to what came before and always anticipates what may come later.” Many misunderstandings occur in relationships because people are either unaware of or don’t attend to the transactional communication process.

In summary, early communication models showed that communication is linear and that senders and receivers have separate roles and functions. The interactional approach expanded that thinking and suggested less linearity and more involvement of feedback between communicators. The Transactional Model refined our understanding by noting the importance of a communicator’s background, by demonstrating the simultaneous sending and receiving of messages, and by focusing on the communicators’ mutual involvement in creating meaning.

**Technology, Social Information Processing, and the _____ Model**

Before we move on to the next discussion, let’s keep in mind that our conceptualizations of communication models are continually evolving. New technologies, for instance, necessarily influence the communication process between communicators, as noted earlier in the chapter. To this end, the newest communication model that infuses technology has yet to be named.

Consider, for example, e-mailing a close relative asking to borrow money. Next, your relative decides to Facetime you on the phone to talk to you further about your request. After your conversation, you decide to text back and forth to make sure you both understand the final protocols related to the financial episode. You then both decide to meet face to face to talk about the situation or request. How does this infusion of technology affect the meaning? Is meaning improved because of multiple channels? Is meaning confounded because of the multiple channels?

The Transactional Model may soon become a scholarly footnote as technology boldly shapes how we view, and enact, the communication process. In fact, some research has already begun to disentangle the complexity of communication as it relates to the complexity of technology. For instance, theorists have begun to investigate the extent to which meeting someone online differs from a face-to-face meeting. We call this Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory. This theory posits that information that is sent between communicators requires more time than traditional face-to-face (f2f). Because online communicators are motivated to develop favorable online impressions, we see a number of self-presentations that are carefully crafted on such platforms as Facebook, Google+, and Instagram. Rather than one impression as we have in a f2f encounter (“You can’t make a second first impression”), SIP scholars contend that we accrue impressions from the information we review online. And, they argue that online communicators generally think about what they post, how they post it, and for whom they are posting. According to SIP theorists, in f2f encounters, this preoccupation cannot be as thorough because we are inundated with so much stimuli surrounding us (e.g., people, noise, environmental conditions).

Let’s think of this theory this way: Let’s say you’re using WhatsApp or WeChat and you’re ready to text someone. Before sending the text, you generally reread the words and punctuation marks and may even insert emoticons. You may also “auto check spelling” in your message. Before texting, however, you decide to hold the text for any
number of reasons. In our face-to-face communication, however, most of us don't take the time to hold a message before delivering it, particularly if we're asked for a response or if we find ourselves emotionally charged. Consequently, we frequently stumble toward clarity and meaning, prompting all sorts of reactions (See the TIP below).

Theory-Into-Practice (TIP)

Social Information Processing

A primary assumption of Social Information Processing Theory is that interpersonal communication can move to higher levels of engagement between people because of how individuals manage their online images. Think about your own social media presence. What personal pieces of information have you presented that prompt others to draw conclusions about you? If you have more than one platform that you’re using, is your personal information (“About Me”) the same, slightly different, or completely different across platforms?

Communication scholars will likely continue to adjust and/or reconsider the Transactional Model as they take into account a number of important issues, namely technology, when they begin to rally around a new communication model. In the end, we need to recognize that the communication behaviors and roles described by the models are not absolute and can vary depending on the situation. With this foundation, let’s now discuss the nature of interpersonal communication and describe what it is and what it is not.

The Interpersonal Communication Continuum

With these models in place, we need to address one additional area that will help you understand the interpersonal communication process. More than four decades ago, researchers proposed looking at communication along a
It was a unique view at the time and remains significant today. Not all human communication is interpersonal (an issue we take up a bit later in this chapter). Our interactions with others can be placed on a continuum from impersonal to interpersonal (see Figure 1.4).

Think about the various conversations you have that could be considered impersonal or closer to the impersonal end of the continuum. You sit next to a person in the waiting room of your dentist and ask whether he watched *Fox News* the night before. You tell a woman hawking tickets to a sold-out basketball game that you're not interested. You tell the teenager sitting next to you at a wedding that you're a friend of the groom. Typically, these linear episodes remain on the impersonal end of the continuum because the conversations remain superficial. You do not acknowledge the people in these examples as unique individuals who are important in your life, despite the fact that they may be compelling in some ways.

Now, consider the many times you talk to people on a much deeper level. You share health-related confidences with a close friend with whom you have tea. You laugh with your grandfather about a treasured family story. You commiserate with a classmate who is disappointed about a grade. In these cases, your communication is not superficial. You share yourself and respond to the other person as a unique individual.

If you haven’t already, one very real episode that you all (will) experience is the job interview. At first glance, you may be inclined to place this conversation on the impersonal end; indeed, many job interviews begin superficially, with questions related to your major, your hometown, or even your favorite hobby. Yet, most interviews dig much deeper, asking job candidates about their motivation for applying for a particular job, views on workplace ethics, and other matters that require a personal interpretation of the information. So, in a brief job interview, the interaction can evolve from impersonal to interpersonal in a matter of minutes.
These two ends of the continuum—impersonal and interpersonal—are the extremes. But, we believe that most of our communication encounters with others aren’t so binary. Rather, most fall in between or along various points on the continuum. Your talks with a professor, coworker, or car mechanic may not be particularly emotionally fulfilling, but likely have a personal dimension to them. Your professor sometimes delicately asks what personal challenges might have caused a failing grade on an exam. A coworker may share family stories. And a car mechanic may ask if you have enough money for a new transmission. Each of these interactions entails some degree of closeness, but not a lot of emotional depth.

What will determine the extent to which an encounter is impersonal, interpersonal, or in between? Three issues are particularly important: relational history, relational rules, and relational uniqueness.

First, relational history pertains to the prior relationship experiences that two people share. For example, Rolanda and Maria have worked as servers in a restaurant for several years. Their relational history is apparent when you consider the amount of time they have spent together. This history may include working the same hours, sharing with each other their personal feelings about their boss, or having social times with each other’s friends. Their relational history, then, spans both their professional and personal lives. This rich history enables their conversations to be interpersonal rather than impersonal.

Relational rules indicate what the people in a relationship expect and allow when they talk to each other. Relational rules, often unstated, differ from social rules in that the two relational partners negotiate the rules themselves as opposed to having them set by an outside source. It is true that others may influence the interpersonal rules (e.g., a supervisor’s rules may have an impact on workplace relationships). Nonetheless, most relational rules are constructed by the relational partners, and at times, the two may have to consider external influences on those rules. Rules help relational partners negotiate how information is managed and stored. For example, one relational rule that Rolanda and Maria may share is the belief that all restaurant gossip should remain private. Another one of their relational rules may communicate the need to be professional while on the job and to avoid tasteless jokes about one another or other coworkers.

A final influence on the relationship continuum is relational uniqueness, which pertains to how communicators frame their relationship and compare it to others. In other words, how is their relationship unique? In the relationship between Rolanda and Maria, they know and treat each other as unique individuals, not as generic coworkers. Thus, Rolanda asks Maria for help in making a financial decision because she knows that Maria has a good head for business. And Maria refrains from teasing Rolanda when she drops a tray because she knows Rolanda is sensitive about being clumsy. Their relational history and rules help develop their sense of relational uniqueness.

Again, much of our communication isn’t purely impersonal or interpersonal; rather, it falls somewhere between the two ends of the continuum. Moreover, the relationship you have with someone doesn’t always indicate whether your communication is personal or not. At times, personal communication occurs in our impersonal relationships. For example, you may consider telling your dry cleaner about your
divorce or confiding to a fellow passenger that you are deathly afraid of flying. At other times, we may have impersonal communication in our close relationships. For instance, a couple with five children may be too exhausted to worry about being sensitive, loving, and compassionate with each other. Feeding the kids, bathing them, preparing their lunches, and getting them to the bus present enough challenges.

We have, thus far, given you a foundation to consider as you think about your communication with others. In order to differentiate this type of communication from other types, we now turn to a discussion of the principles of interpersonal communication in our lives.

**IPC Praxis**

Defend, criticize, and/or modify the following statement: “Technology is the most important issue facing relationships today.” Use examples to explain your viewpoint.

**IPC Careers**

The “People-Centered” Professions
Whether we want to call them jobs that require “social skills” or “people skills,” they are in high demand. Each professional pursuit requires both knowledge and skill in interpersonal communication. Analyzing results from a jobs outlook resource, one study finds that social/interpersonal communication skills rank as the No. 1 job skill in highest demand. In data from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Information Network (O*NET), research indicates some compelling information regarding professions that required skills in persuasion, mediation, negotiation, instruction/task management, and project coordination. O*NET found that information from occupations that necessitate interpersonal communication skills provided a relatively high salary and high earnings growth potential. Managers round out the top jobs involving quality interpersonal communication skills. Marketing, construction, administrative services, and social/community services managers were among the highest paid and highest in demand. Yet, they require a high degree of interpersonal adeptness because these positions deal directly with individuals daily. Furthermore, O*NET concludes that while technical skills frequently become outdated, interpersonal communication skills will resonate for years to come.

Reflection: Can you think of any occupation that does not require adeptness at interpersonal communication? If so, which one(s)? Forecast what kinds of job opportunities you believe will place an emphasis on interpersonal communication skills.

1–4 THE PRINCIPLES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

To better understand interpersonal communication, let’s explore some major principles that shape it. As you review each, keep in mind that we address these themes within a Westernized context because most of the research has adopted this view. Yet, as we will discuss in much more detail in the next chapter, we need to be culturally sensitive regarding being absolute in our conclusions. Nonetheless, we believe that interpersonal communication is unavoidable, symbolic, rule governed, learned, has both content and relationship levels, leads to self-actualization, and involves ethical choices. We now address each universal.

Interpersonal Communication Is Unavoidable

Interpersonal communication scholars repeatedly remind us that “one cannot not communicate.” Read that phrase again. Whether online or offline, this means that as hard as we try, we cannot prevent someone else from making meaning out of our behavior—it is inevitable and unavoidable. No matter what poker face we try to establish and no matter how we try to explain a text, we are still sending a message to others. Even our silence and avoidance of eye contact are communicative. It is this quality that makes interpersonal communication transactional. For instance, imagine that Kate and her wife, Chloe, are talking about the balance in their checking account. In this scenario, the two engage in a rather heated discussion because Kate has discovered that $300 cannot be accounted for in the balance.
Kate: “So, hon, I can’t figure out where the 300 bucks went. I didn’t take it. We didn’t use it on bills. So, there’s really only you left.”

Chloe: (sits in silence, looking at her nails)

Kate: “Hmm. Well, let’s see. You’re saying nothing. You’re not looking at me. You’re even clearing your throat. I think we’ve figured out where that $300 went!”

In this brief conversation, Chloe has said nothing and yet Kate drew conclusions from her behavior. We return to the impact that nonverbal communication has on creating meaning in Chapter 5.

Interpersonal Communication Is Symbolic

The study of the use of symbols and their form and content is part of Semiotics Theory. One important reason interpersonal communication occurs is because symbols are mutually agreed upon by the participants in the process. Symbols are arbitrary labels or representations for feelings, concepts, objects, or events. Words are symbols. For instance, the word table can represent a place to sit. Similarly, the word hate represents the idea of hate, which means strong negative feelings for someone or something.

The word fear suggests that symbols may be somewhat abstract, and with this abstraction, comes the potential for miscommunication. For instance, consider how hard it would be for someone who has never attended college to understand the following:

*I have no idea what the prereqs are. I know that the midterm is pretty much objective. And the prof doesn’t follow the syllabus too much. I wish that stuff was in the undergrad catalog. I’m sure I’d rather do an independent study than take that class.*

In the semiotic tradition, “communication is easiest when we share a common language, that words can mean different things to different people so miscommunication is a constant danger.” Ultimately, people are the interpreters of what constitutes meaning in language.

Interpersonal Communication Is Rule Governed

Consider the following examples of communication rules:

- As long as you live under my roof, you’ll do what I say.
- Always tell the truth.
- Don’t talk back.
- Always say “thank you” when someone gives you a present.
- Don’t interrupt while someone is talking.
We’re sure that you’ve probably heard at least one of these while growing up. We noted earlier that rules are important ingredients in our relationships. They help guide and structure our interpersonal communication. **Rules** essentially say that individuals in a relationship agree that there are appropriate ways to interact in their relationship. Like the rules in our childhood, most of the rules in our relationships today tell us what we can or can’t do. We define a rule as “a followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts.”

As this definition implies, we can choose whether or not we wish to follow a rule. Ultimately, we must decide whether the rule must be adhered to or can be ignored in our interpersonal exchanges.

To understand this principle, consider the Chandler family—a family of three who finds themselves homeless. The Chandlers live day to day in homeless shelters in a large city in the Southwest. The family members agree on a communication rule explicitly stating that they will not discuss their economic situation in public. This rule requires all family members to refrain from talking about what led to their homelessness. Each member of the family is obligated to keep this information private, an intrafamily secret of sorts. Whether or not people outside the Chandler family agree on the usefulness of such a rule is not important. Yet, one test of the rule’s effectiveness is whether family members can refrain from discussing their circumstances with others. If the rule is not followed, what will the consequences be? Rules, therefore, imply choice, and participants in a relationship may choose to ignore a particular rule.

**IPC Praxis**

Think of a time when you felt that your interpersonal communication failed. What surrounded this episode? What did you do, if anything, because of this transaction? How did it affect you or relationships with others?

**Interpersonal Communication Is Learned**

People obviously believe that interpersonal communication is a learned process. Otherwise, why would we be writing this book, and why would you be taking this course? Yet, as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we often take for granted our ability to communicate interpersonally. Still, we all need to refine and cultivate our skills to communicate with a wide assortment of people. You must be able to make informed communication choices in changing times.

You’re in this course to learn more about interpersonal communication. Yet, you’ve also been acquiring this information throughout your life. We learn how to communicate with one another from television, the Internet, our peer group, and our partners. Early in our lives, most of us learn from our family. Consider this dialogue between Amy Reid and her 9-year-old son, Luke, about his obsession with video games:
Luke: “So, better that I’m playing these games. You can see where I am. Why do I have to put it away?”

Amy: “Why? Because you’re playing video games almost three hours a day. And, because you’re not even 10. And because I’m your mom. And because these games teach you nothing important. And because I’m your mom.”

Luke: “You already told me that you’re my mom two times.”

Amy: “And, I’ll keep saying it.”

Clearly, Amy is teaching her child a communication rule that she believes leads to interpersonal effectiveness. She tells her son that he should listen to adults. She is also reinforcing the fact that she is the authority and that as his mom, she’s entitled to establish her own rules. Whether or not Luke likes it, he is learning that he cannot make his own decisions and he’s learning that adults control his life.

**Interpersonal Communication Has Both Content and Relational Meaning**

Each message that you communicate to another contains information on two levels—content and relationship. The content level refers to the literal information contained in the message. The words you speak to another person and how you say those words constitute the content of the message. Content, then, includes both verbal and nonverbal components. A message also contains a relationship level, which can be defined as how you want the receiver of a message to interpret your message. The relational dimension of a message gives us some idea how the speaker and the listener feel about each other. Content and relationship levels work simultaneously in a message, and it is difficult to think about sending a message that doesn’t, in some way, comment on the relationship between the sender
and receiver. In other words, we can’t really separate the two. We always express an idea or thought (content), but that thought is always presented within a relational framework. Consider the following example:

Father Felix is a Catholic priest who is the pastor of a large parish in the Rocky Mountains. Corrine Murphy is the parish administrative assistant. Both have been at the parish for more than 10 years and have been good friends throughout that time. One of the most stressful times in the church is during the Christmas season. The pastor is busy visiting home-bound parishioners, while Corrine is busy overseeing the annual holiday pageant. With this stress comes a lot of shouting between the two. On one occasion, several parishioners hear Father Felix yell, “Corrine, you forgot to tell me about the Lopez family! When do they need me to visit? Where is your mind these days? Get it together!” Corrine shoots back, “I’ve got it under control. Just quit your nagging and focus on your work!” The parishioners listening to the two are taken aback by the way they yell at each other.

In this example, the parishioners who heard the conversation were simply attuned to the content dimension and failed to understand that the 10-year relationship between Father Felix and Corrine was unique to the two of them. Such direct interpersonal exchanges during stressful times were not out of the ordinary. Father Felix and Corrine frequently raised their voices to each other, and neither gave it a second thought. In a case like this, the content should be understood with the relationship in mind.

Interpersonal Communication Involves Ethical Choices

Although we will address this topic in more detail a bit later in the chapter, we wish to point out that ethics remains instrumental in your interpersonal communication. Ethics is the perceived rightness or wrongness of an action or behavior. Researchers have identified ethics as a type of moral decision-making, determined in large part by society. In our conversations with those with whom we have a close relationship, nearly every encounter is guided by ethics. What you say, how you say it, the expectations you have of others’ communication abilities, the conversational topic, among others, can all function prominently in our interpersonal communication with our friends, families, coworkers, and others. If we apply a technological lens, the ethical effects do not diminish. For instance, if you’re on an electronic mailing list, what consequences exist for the communicator who chooses to use inflammatory language to insult you? Do you jump into the thread or do you choose to move on? Ethical choices confront all of us in a number of important and different ways.

Interpersonal Communication Can Lead to Self-Actualization

Learning about interpersonal communication can improve your life in that it can help you gain information about yourself, a process called self-actualization.
When we are self-actualized, we become the best person we can be. We are tapping our full potential in terms of our creativity, our spontaneity, and our talents. When we self-actualize, we try to cultivate our strengths and reduce our shortcomings. At times, others help us to self-actualize. For instance, in the movie As Good As It Gets, Melvin suffers from an obsessive-compulsive disorder. His love interest, Carol, has her own family problems but tries to help Melvin overcome some of his idiosyncrasies. In a poignant exchange that occurs during their first date, Carol becomes distressed and pleads, “Pay me a compliment, Melvin. I need one quick.” Melvin responds by saying, “You make me want to be a better man.” Although Melvin clearly frames the compliment from his vantage point, he still, nonetheless, manages to help Carol see her value through his eyes.

In this chapter so far, we have explored the definition of interpersonal communication in some detail and have described several principles associated with interpersonal communication. Now that you know what interpersonal communication is, let’s focus on some of the misconceptions about interpersonal communication.

1–5 DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Dr. Phil’s advice. The Internet. Old tales that never were proven true. Whatever the source, for one reason or another, people operate under several misconceptions about interpersonal communication. These five myths impede our understanding and enactment of effective interpersonal communication.

Interpersonal Communication Solves All Problems

We cannot stress enough that simply being skilled in interpersonal communication does not mean that you are prepared to work out all of your relational challenges and problems. Surely, as we noted earlier, communication will not work sometimes. You may communicate clearly about a problem but not necessarily be able to solve it. Also, keep in mind that communication involves both speaking and listening. In advising appointments, for instance, many students have revealed to us that they try to “talk out a problem” with their roommates. Although this may seem to be a great strategy, we hope that this talking is accompanied by listening. We are confident that you will leave this course with an understanding of how to communicate thoughtfully and skillfully with others in a variety of relationships. We also hope you realize that simply because you are talking does not mean that you will solve all of your relationship problems.

Interpersonal Communication Is Always a Good Thing

National best-selling self-help books and famous motivational gurus have made huge amounts of money promoting the idea that communication is the magic potion for all of life’s ailments. Most often, communication is a good thing in our relationships with others. We wouldn’t be writing this book if we didn’t think that! Yet, there are times when communication results in less-than-satisfying relationship experiences. To this end, researchers have investigated a more
provocative, yet useful, area of research in interpersonal communication called “the dark side.” We prefer to term this difficult communication as “destructive” communication.

Destructive interpersonal communication generally refers to negative communication exchanges between people. People can communicate in ways that are manipulative, deceitful, exploitive, homophobic, transphobic, racist, and emotionally abusive. In other words, we need to be aware that communication can be downright nasty at times and that interpersonal communication is not always satisfying and rewarding. Although most people approach interpersonal communication thoughtfully and with an open mind, others are less sincere. To contrast destructive communication, we also discuss constructive (or, the “bright side”) interpersonal communication, which focuses on the altruistic, supportive, and affirming reasons that people communicate with others. Look for discussions of destructive and constructive interpersonal communication throughout the chapters of this book.

Interpersonal Communication Is Common Sense

Consider the following question: If interpersonal communication is just a matter of common sense, why do we have so many problems communicating with others? We need to abandon the notion that communication is simply intuitive. Interpersonal communication is not “common” by any means and it clearly doesn’t make “sense” to adopt this belief.

It is true that we should be sure to use whatever common sense we have in our personal interactions, but this strategy will get us only so far. In some cases, a skilled interpersonal communicator may effectively rely on their common sense, but there are many situations where our common sense simply fails to “kick in” (think, for example, of those heated arguments, the euphoria we feel when we first start dating someone, and other highly emotional moments). In these and other cases, we need to make use of an extensive repertoire of skills to make informed choices in our relationships.

One problem with believing that interpersonal communication is merely common sense relates to the diversity of our population. As we discuss in Chapter 2, cultural variation continues to characterize U.S. society and places around the globe. Making the assumption that all people intuitively know how to communicate with everyone ignores the significant cultural differences in communication norms. Even males and females tend to look at the same event differently. To rid ourselves of the myth of common sense, take into account the complexity of culture and gender, for example.

Interpersonal Communication Is Always Face to Face

Although much of our discussion has centered on face-to-face encounters between people, we know that this is an outdated view. While it’s true that f2f communication remains the primary way to cultivate interpersonal skills with another, we also have noted that technology can and often necessarily influences that process. Massive numbers of people utilize the Internet in their communication with others and people are finding life partners online. This mediated interpersonal
communication requires us to expand our discussion of interpersonal communication beyond personal encounters. Discussing the intersection of technology and interpersonal communication is necessary to capture the complexity of our various relationships. Throughout this book, we have made a concerted effort to apply a technological lens to conclusions that may have their roots in face-to-face encounters. Failing to do so renders much of our information rather impractical.

More Interpersonal Communication Is Better

Everyone claims to be an expert in communication. In fact, a survey conducted by the National Communication Association notes that over 90% of people believe that their communication skills are “above average.”26 Is it any wonder, then, that when disagreements occur or when people don’t know what to say, the “experts” advise to communicate!

And yet, more interpersonal communication is not always the best strategy. In fact, determining when to talk and when to remain quiet is fast becoming commonplace in several professions. For example, some doctors and medical teams at various hospitals are beginning to employ “the Pause,” which is a 15- to 30-second period of silence to respect the death of a patient. This silence is intended to honor the life and efforts of both the human life and the effort of the team.27 It’s not the amount of interpersonal communication that matters. Rather, it’s learning how to be judicious, two experiences that require ongoing attention throughout our lifetimes.

The choices we make in our relationships are rooted in our ability to determine what is right and wrong. This carries even more importance as we think about those relationships that can have lasting consequences for us, whether they relate to our closest friend or our worst adversary. One framework should always guide us as we make our difficult decision. Therefore, we close our discussion by examining a feature of the interpersonal communication process that is not easily taught and is often difficult to comprehend: ethics.

1–6 INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION ETHICS

Communication ethicists have concluded that “ethical issues may arise in human behavior whenever that behavior could have significant impact on other persons, when the behavior involves conscious choice of means and ends, and when the behavior can be judged by standards of right and wrong.”28 In other words, ethics is the cornerstone of interpersonal communication.

Earlier, we noted that interpersonal communication involves ethical choices. And, a primary goal of ethics is to (re)gain constraints on our own behavior. Ethical decisions involve value judgments, and not everyone will agree with those values. For instance, do you tell racist jokes in front of others and think that they are harmless ways to make people laugh? What sort of value judgment is part of the decision to tell or not to tell a joke? In interpersonal communication, acting ethically is critical. When we act ethically, we are respecting the dignity of another, embracing their individuality, working to avoid hurtful messages, and treating others in ways we wish to be treated. If we’re not prepared to act in this way, one can conclude that we don’t consider ethics important. Overall, being ethical means having respect
### Table 1.1 // Ethical Systems of Interpersonal Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethical System</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Categorical imperative</td>
<td>To adhere to a moral absolute</td>
<td>Tell the truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden mean</td>
<td>To achieve rationality and balance</td>
<td>Create harmony and balance for the community and the individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethic of care</td>
<td>To establish connection</td>
<td>Establish caring relationships</td>
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### Table 1.2 // Ethics on the Job: Views of the Most Ethical Occupations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
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<th>High</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Very Low</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>49</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>27</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Day care providers</td>
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<tr>
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<td>27</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
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Source: Brenan, M. Gallup. “Nurses Keep Healthy Lead as Most Honest, Ethical Profession.” Adapted from https://news.gallup.com/poll/224639/nurses-keep-healthy-lead-honest-ethical-profession.aspx
for others, shouldering responsibility, acting thoughtfully with others, and being honest. The following section fleshes out these ethical behaviors more thoroughly.

Ethics is necessarily part of not only our personal relationships, but our work relationships as well. To get a sense of the interplay among ethics and various jobs, consider Table 1.1, which shows what the U.S. public views as being the most and least ethical occupations. See if you agree with how the country views ethical occupations and if your career choice is found among those listed. Try challenging others with their impressions of this list. What or who do you think influences someone's view of an ethical career?

We make value judgments in interpersonal communication in many ways. Researchers have discussed a number of different ethical systems of communication relevant to our interpersonal encounters. Here, we discuss three popular ones. In addition, because the field of communication has agreed on a code of ethical behavior, we have provided you ethical values as they relate to communicating with others (see Table 1.2). As we briefly overview each system, keep in mind that these systems attempt to let us know what it means to act morally.

### IPC Praxis

Discuss what typically happens when someone is not an ethical communicator in various situations (e.g., at school, on the job). Explore situations and consequences and how an ethical approach might have rectified those ethical lapses.

### Categorical Imperative

The first ethical system, the categorical imperative, is based on the work of philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant's *categorical imperative* refers to individuals following moral absolutes. This ethical system suggests that we should act as though we are an example to others. According to this system, the key question when making a moral decision is "What would happen if everyone did this?" Thus, you should not do something that you wouldn't feel is fine for everyone to do all the time. Kant also believed that the consequences of actions are not important; what matters is the ethical principle behind those actions.

### IPC Around Us

To illustrate the relationship between communication ethics and corporate social responsibility, Forbes magazine published the insights of Don Knauss, former CEO of Clorox, on the role of ethics in business–customer relationships. Knauss clearly embraces ethical business practices as he concludes: “We know that in order to build and maintain trust with our customers we have to first develop a company-wide reputation for integrity.” To accomplish this, Knauss
claims that all employees must take part in an online training course on ethics as well as enroll in “refresher” courses that cover different ethical practices. Furthermore, Clorox employees, vendors, and subsidiaries must also abide by a company code of conduct that covers a variety of subjects—from human rights to labor and safety. Knauss contends that when a company models ethical behavior, business relationships improve, allowing for, of course, an improvement in the “bottom line.”

**Reflection:** Comment on why you believe so many corporate cultures are both fearful and resistant to establishing a climate of ethical decision-making and trust. Explore the economic and demographic consequences when a company decides to dedicate itself to an ethical approach, as articulated by Clorox.

For example, suppose that Mark confides to Karla, a coworker, that he has the early stages of leukemia. Although the company has health benefits and although the type of leukemia is treatable, Karla, despite her belief that the supervisor should know so her coworker may benefit from further company assistance, decides to tell no one else. Elizabeth, the supervisor, asks Karla if she knows what’s happening with Mark because he misses work and is always tired. The categorical imperative suggests that Karla tell her boss the truth, despite the fact that telling the truth may affect Mark’s job, his future with the company, and his relationship with Karla. The categorical imperative requires us to tell the truth because Kant believed that enforcing the principle of truth-telling is more important than worrying about the short-term consequences of telling the truth.

**The Golden Mean**

The golden mean, a second ethical system, proposes that we should aim for harmony and balance in our lives. This principle, articulated more than 2,500 years ago by Aristotle, suggests that a person’s moral virtue stands between two vices, with the middle, or the mean, being the foundation for a rational society. The application
of the golden mean to communication is rooted in the ability to find a “middle ground” so that communicators are less inclined to honor the extremes of a discussion. Aristotle felt that thoughts or behaviors—when taken to excess—are neither productive nor especially valuable.

Let’s say that Cora, Jackie, and Lester are three employees who work for a small social media company. During a break one afternoon, someone asks what kind of childhood each had. Cora goes into specific detail, talking about her abusive father: “He really let me have it, and it all started when I was five,” she begins before launching into a long description. In contrast, Jackie only says, “My childhood was okay.” Lester tells the group that his was a pretty rough childhood: “It was tough financially. We didn’t have a lot of money. But we really all got along well.” In this example, Cora was on one extreme, revealing too much information. Jackie was at the other extreme, revealing very little, if anything. Lester’s decision to reveal a reasonable amount of information about his childhood was an ethical one; he practiced the golden mean by providing a sufficient amount of information but not too much. In other words, he presented a rational and balanced perspective. In this case, note that revealing too much and revealing too little may make another awkward or uncomfortable. Finding the “balance” in self-disclosure is especially difficult—a topic we discuss in greater detail in Chapter 8.

Ethic of Care

An ethic of care, a third ethical system, means being concerned with connection.33 When this ethical system was first conceptualized, it centered on looking at women’s ways of moral decision-making. It was assumed that because men have been the dominant voices in society, women’s commitment toward connection has gone unnoticed. Initially, an ethic of care was a result of how women were raised. Yet, the ethical premise applies to men as well. Clearly, some men adopt the ethic and some women do not adopt the ethic. In contrast to the categorical imperative, for instance, the ethic of care is concerned with consequences of decisions. Let’s exemplify this system with a cultural example.

Ben and Anthony are having a conversation about whether it’s right to go behind a person’s back and disclose that another guy is gay. Ben makes an argument that it’s a shame that guys won’t own up to being gay; they are who they are. If someone hides his sexuality, Ben believes that it’s fine to “out” that person. Anthony, expressing an ethic of care, tells his friend that no one should reveal another person’s sexual identity. That information should remain private unless an individual wishes to reveal it. Anthony explains that outing someone would have serious negative repercussions for the relationships of the person beingouted and as a result, shouldn't be done. In this example, Anthony exemplifies a symbolic connection to those who don’t want to discuss their sexual identity with others.

Understanding Ethics and Our Own Values

Ethics permeates interpersonal communication. We make ongoing ethical decisions in all of our interpersonal encounters, and these ethical choices are especially
important in our very close relationships. Questions of ethics are all around us: Should someone’s past sexual experiences be completely revealed to a partner? How do you treat an ex-friend or ex-partner in future encounters? Is it ever okay to lie to protect your friend? These kinds of questions challenge millions of interpersonal relationships.

When ethical issues confront us, we need to keep in mind society’s various traditions as rooted in culture, religion, literature, philosophy, among others. Values have emerged from and are deeply enmeshed in these traditions and they often teach important lessons about life’s challenging moments.

The three ethical systems can prompt you to develop strategies for making ethical decisions. However, making sense of the world and of our interpersonal relationships requires us to understand our own values. And, these values are apparent not only in our face-to-face conversations, but in our online conversations as well. Ethical behavior is particularly essential when we communicate with people whom we don’t see or with whom we have no shared physical space. We return to this topic throughout the book as we discuss the various themes and skills related to interpersonal communication. A sense of ethics should guide us on a daily basis. Being aware of and sensitive to our decisions and their consequences will help us make the right choices.

/// CHAPTER WRAP-UP

We began our conversation about interpersonal communication by providing you an important foundation. In this opening chapter, we provided you a brief snapshot of the evolution of the communication field, including an overview of the various contexts in which communication occurs. We also included a definition of interpersonal communication and employed a model approach by identifying three prevailing models and a fourth that is yet to be determined. The chapter also included a discussion of why interpersonal communication matters, the primary principles related to interpersonal communication, and various myths related to the interpersonal communication process. We closed the chapter by identifying three ethical systems to consider when communicating with others.

Now, more than ever, and especially because of the integration of technology in our lives, we live in changing times. Communication skills that were once viewed as appropriate now have to be revisited. Adapting to the cultures and individuals around us is paramount in a country where race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual identity, economic status, religion, and belief systems pervade contemporary conversations. As you learned earlier in this chapter, interacting effectively with others is a complex and unpredictable process, but one that is essential if we are to acquire understanding.

/// COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT TEST (CAT): INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COMFORT

Throughout this book, we make no assumptions about the extent to which you’re comfortable communicating with another person. In fact, people can vary tremendously in their interpersonal communication comfort levels, depending upon a number of issues (e.g., field of experience, apprehension). Complete the following 10 statements honestly and without self-judgment. Use more than one or two words to complete the thought. Be prepared to return to these questions and responses as you move through the book to assess the extent to which your comfort level has changed.
1. When someone I’ve never met starts to communicate with me, I ______.
2. When a romantic partner asks me to borrow money, I ______.
3. Emotionally charged interpersonal situations make me ______.
4. If I’m confused by the words of another in a conversation, I ______.
5. If I’m introduced to topics that are touchy or controversial in a conversation, I ______.
6. If I’m having a dialogue with someone who is not clear or often confusing, I find myself ______.
7. If someone confronts me because they disagree with my views, I will ______.
8. People from cultural backgrounds other than my own make me ______.
9. If I had a choice to communicate with a close friend either through social media or face-to-face, I choose ______.
10. Among the many personal challenges I have communicating with another person are ______.

/// KEY TERMS
communication apprehension (CA) 3
communication 3
intercultural communication apprehension 3
microaggressions 4
interpersonal communication 7
process 8
message exchange 9
meaning 9
communication models 10
Linear Model of Communication 10
sender 10
receiver 10
channel 10
noise 11
physical noise 11
physiological noise 11
psychological noise 11
semantic noise 11
context 11
physical context 11
cultural context 12
social-emotional context 12
historical context 12
Interactional Model of Communication 13
feedback 13
internal feedback 13
external feedback 13
Transactional Model 14
field of experience 15
Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory 16
relational history 19
relational rules 19
relational uniqueness 19
Semiotics Theory 22
symbols 22
rules 23
content level 24
relationship level 24
ethics 25
self-actualization 25
categorical imperative 30
golden mean 31
ethic of care 32

/// KEY QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION
1. **CQ/CultureQuest:** Explore the following claim: “Not all interpersonal conversations are influenced by culture.” Do you agree or disagree? Defend your view with examples.
2. **TQ/TechQuest:** Explore the following claim: “Social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr are often viewed as a more desirable way to communicate than face-to-face.” Do you agree or disagree? Defend your view with examples.
3. Let’s say you and Aristotle were having lunch together. What sort of conversation would you both have? What topics would you introduce that would be relevant to the evolution of the communication field?
4. We’ve reiterated that interpersonal communication is a valuable skill in your personal and professional lives. But, we’ve also noted that not all communication is necessarily a good thing. Identify and explain those times when being silent is more desirable than being talkative.

5. If you were talking to a group of tourists—all of whom are from countries outside of the United States—what three assumptions about interpersonal communication in the United States would you propose? Be sure to clarify each assumption with an example.

6. Being ethical in your communication with others is viewed as both necessary and critical in order to co-create meaning between you and another. Yet, being ethical may be one of those behaviors that is more difficult in practice. Identify at least three ethical challenges that communicators face when having conversations with a friend, family member, coworker, or roommate.

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