FOURTH EDITION

Introducing Communication Theory

ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION

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PART One

Setting the Stage

Communication, Theory, and Research

YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT THIS, BUT each day the decisions we make, the media we consume, and the relationships we experience can be enriched and explained by communication theory. Communication theory helps us to understand other people and their communities, the media, and our associations with families, friends, roommates, co-workers, and companions. Perhaps most important, communication theory makes it easier to understand ourselves.

We begin our discussion of communication theory by asking you to consider the experiences of Morgan and Alex. After randomly being assigned as roommates, the two met on "move-in day" at Scott Hall. They were both pretty nervous. They had checked out one another on Facebook, e-mailed each other, and talked on the phone a few times, so they knew-quite a bit about each other. Once they met, they started talking. They went out for coffee the first few weeks of school, getting to know each other better. They spent a lot of time telling stories about their families and friends, and talking about what they look for in a partner. They both loved television, especially the "reality shows," because they loved to see how other people dealt with their lives in times of stress. After several weeks, Morgan and Alex became closer. They were going to have to balance their desire to hang out with each other with their need to be alone. And it was going to be give-and-take because their schedules were completely opposite. Eventually, the two became great friends.

To illustrate the various ways in which communication theory functions in the lives of Morgan and Alex, let's identify important aspects of their story and see how theory

provides some understanding of Morgan's and Alex's behaviors. First, these roommates supported the research of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Chapter 9) through their need to reduce their uncertainty about each other. They also probably self-disclosed some personal information to each other, underscoring a central feature of Social Penetration Theory (Chapter 10). Next, they discovered that they both watch television and use it to see how others live their lives, highlighting the essence of Uses and Gratifications Theory (Chapter 23). Balancing the need to be together with the need to remain private encompasses Relational Dialectics Theory (Chapter 12). Morgan and Alex also told personal stories to each other; storytelling is at the heart of The Narrative Paradigm (Chapter 20). In sum, at least five communication theories could help explain the experiences of the two roommates.

The first four chapters provide an important foundation for discussing each communication theory that follows. These chapters give you a general introduction to communication and to theory. First, to provide you some insights into the communication field, in Chapter 1 we present our definition of communication, the prevailing models of communication, and other important issues including ethics and communication. Chapter 2 is dedicated to a discussion of the various traditions and contexts of communication, two important frameworks to consider as you read the remainder of the book. We prepare you directly for understanding the intersection of theory and research in Chapter 3. As you will learn, when scholars develop a theory, it is a result of a great deal of research. Finally, in Chapter 4 we provide an important referent point for you as you review each theory in the text. This chapter provides important criteria for evaluating a theory and also includes a model for you to examine. This "bridge chapter" is differentiated from the rest of the text so you can quickly refer to its contents as you are introduced to various theories.

CHAPTER 1

Thinking About Communication: Definitions, Models, and Ethics

The Bollens

Jimmy and Angie Bollen have been married for almost thirty years, and they are the parents of three children who have been out of the house for years. But a recent layoff at the company where their son Eddy worked has forced the 24-year-old to return home until he can get another job.

At first, Eddy's parents were glad that he was home. His father was proud of the fact that his son wasn't embarrassed about returning home, and his mom was happy to have him help her with some of the mundane chores at home. In fact, Eddy showed both Jimmy and Angie how to instant message their friends and also put together a family website. His parents were especially happy about having a family member who was "tech-savvy" hanging around the house.

But the good times surrounding Eddy's return soon ended. Eddy brought his laptop to the table each morning, marring the Bollens' once-serene breakfasts. Jimmy and Angie's walks at night were complicated because their son often wanted to join them. At night, when they went to bed, the parents heard Eddy talking on his cell phone, sometimes until 1:00 A.M. When Eddy's parents thought about communicating their frustration and disappointment, they quickly recalled the difficulty of their son's situation. They didn't want to upset him any further. The Bollens tried to figure out a way to communicate to their son that although they love him, they wished that he would get a job and leave the house. They simply wanted some peace, privacy, and freedom, and their son was getting in the way. It wasn't a feeling either one of them liked, but it was their reality.

They considered a number of different approaches. In order to get the conversation going, they even thought about giving Eddy a few website links related to local apartment rentals. Recently, the couple's frustration with the situation took a turn for the worse. Returning from one of their long walks, they discovered Eddy on the couch, hung over from a party held earlier at his friend's house. When Jimmy and Angie confronted him about his demeanor, Eddy shouted, "Don't start lecturing me now. Is it any wonder that none of your other kids call you? It's because you don't know when to stop! Look, I got a headache and I don't want to hear it from you guys!" Jimmy snapped, "Get out of my house. Now!" Eddy left the home, slamming the front door behind him. Angie stared out of the window, wondering whether they would ever hear from their son again.

In the most fundamental way, communication depends on our ability to understand one another. Although our communication can be ambiguous ("I never thought I'd get this gift from you"), one primary and essential goal in communicating is understanding. Our daily activities are wrapped in

conversations with others. Yet, as we see with the Bollen family, even those in close relationships can have difficulty expressing their thoughts.

Being able to communicate effectively is highly valued in the United States. Corporations have recognized the importance of communication. The National Safety Management Society (www.nsms.us/pages/opermishaps.html) reports that industrial safety is contingent on the ability of employees and management to communicate clearly and to avoid jargon when possible. Health care, too, is focusing more on the value of communication. In doctor–patient relationships, for instance, research shows that communication is essential for the recovery of patients and impacts the extent to which doctors offer medical advice to their patients (Blanquicett, Amsbary, Mills, & Powell, 2007; Jucks & Bromme, 2007). In the classroom, researchers (e.g., Goodboy & Myers, 2008) have concluded that affirming feedback positively affects student learning. And, with respect to social networking sites such as Facebook, individuals in romantic relationships report using communication (technology) as a way to check up on the status of their relationship—from commitment to fidelity (Stern & Taylor, 2007). Make no mistake about it: Abundant evidence underscores the fact that communication is an essential, pervasive, and consequential behavior in our society.

As a student of communication, you are uniquely positioned to determine your potential for effective communication. To do so, however, you must have a basic understanding of the communication process and of how communication theory, in particular, functions in your life. We need to be able to talk effectively to a number of very different types of people during an average day: teachers, ministers, salespeople, family members, friends, automobile mechanics, and health-care providers. Communication opportunities fill our lives each day. However, we need to understand the whys and hows of our conversations with others. For instance, why do two people in a relationship feel a simultaneous need for togetherness and independence? Why do some women feel ignored or devalued in conversations with men? Why does language often influence the thoughts of others? How do media influence people's behavior? These and many other questions are at the root of why communication theory is so important in our society and so critical to understand.

Defining Communication

Our first task is to create a common understanding for the term *communication*. Defining *communication* can be challenging. Katherine Miller (2005) underscores this dilemma, stating that "conceptualizations of communication have been abundant and have changed substantially over the years" (p. 3). Sarah Trenholm (1991) notes that although the study of communication has been around for centuries, it does not mean communication is well understood. In fact, Trenholm provocatively illustrates the dilemma when defining the term. She states "Communication has become a sort of 'portmanteau' term. Like a piece of luggage, it is overstuffed with all manner of odd ideas and

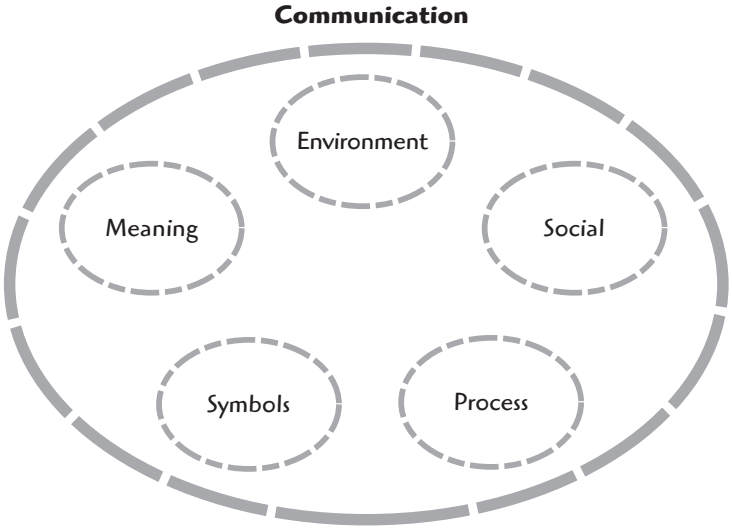


Figure 1.1
Key Terms in Defining Communication

meanings. The fact that some of these do fit, resulting in a conceptual suitcase much too heavy for anyone to carry, is often overlooked" (p. 4).

We should note that there are many ways to interpret and define *communication*—a result of the complexity and richness of the communication discipline. Imagine, for instance, taking this course from two different professors. Each would have his or her way of presenting the material, and each classroom of students would approach communication theory in a unique manner. The result would be two exciting and distinctive approaches to studying the same topic.

This uniqueness holds true with defining *communication*. Scholars tend to see human phenomena from their own perspectives, something we delve into further in the next chapter. In some ways, researchers establish boundaries when they try to explain phenomena to others. Communication scholars may approach the interpretation of communication differently because of differences in scholarly values. With these caveats in mind, we offer the following definition of *communication* to get us pointed in the same direction. **Communication** is a social process in which individuals employ symbols to establish and interpret meaning in their environment. We necessarily draw in elements of mediated communication as well in our discussion, given the importance that communication technology plays in contemporary society. With that in mind, let's define five key terms in our perspective: *social, process, symbols, meaning,* and *environment* (Figure 1.1).

communication
A social process in which individuals employ symbols to establish and interpret meaning in their environment

First, we believe that communication is a social process. When interpreting communication as **social,** we mean to suggest that it involves people and interactions, whether face-to-face or online. This necessarily includes two people, who act as senders and receivers. Both play an integral role in the communication process. When communication is social, it involves people who come to an interaction with various intentions, motivations, and abilities. To suggest that communication is a **process** means that it is ongoing and unending. Communication is also dynamic, complex, and continually changing. With this view of

social
the notion that people and interactions are part of the communication process

process
ongoing, dynamic, and unending occurrence

communication, we emphasize the dynamics of making meaning. Therefore, communication has no definable beginning and ending. For example, although Jimmy and Angie Bollen may tell their son that he must leave the house, their discussions with him and about him will continue well after he leaves. In fact, the conversation they have with Eddy today will most likely affect their communication with him tomorrow. Similarly, our past communications with people have been stored in their minds and have affected their conversations with us.

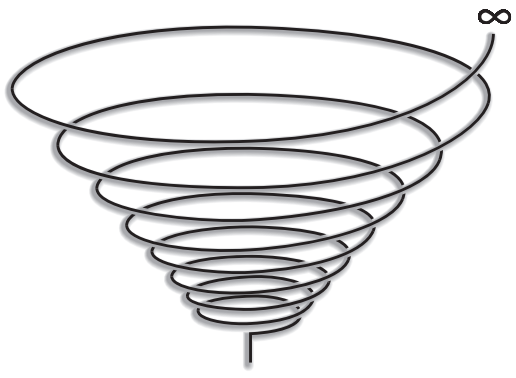
The process nature of communication also means that much can happen from the beginning of a conversation to the end. People may end up at a very different place once a discussion begins. This is exemplified by the frequent conflicts that roommates, spouses, and siblings experience. Although a conversation may begin with absolute and inflexible language, the conflict may be resolved with compromise. All of this can occur in a matter of minutes.

Individual and cultural changes affect communication. Conversations between siblings, for example, seem to have shifted from the 1950s to today. Years ago, siblings rarely discussed the impending death of a parent. Today, it's not uncommon to listen to children talking about nursing home care, home health care, and even funeral arrangements. The 1950s was a time of postwar euphoria; couples were reunited after World War II and the baby boom began. Today, with an ongoing U.S. troop presence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere around the world, Americans rarely experience the euphoria they once had. The tensions and uncertainties are too vivid. As you can see, perceptions and feelings can change and may remain in flux for quite some time.

Some of you may be thinking that because the communication process is dynamic and unique it is virtually impossible to study. However, C. Arthur VanLear (1996) argues that because the communication process is so dynamic, researchers and theorists can look for patterns over time. He concludes that "if we recognize a pattern across a large number of cases, it permits us to 'generalize' to other unobserved cases" (p. 36). Or, as communication pioneers Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson (1967) suggest, the interconnectedness of communication events is critical and pervasive. Thus, it *is* possible to study the dynamic communication process.

To help you visualize this process, imagine a continuum where the points are unrepeatable and irreversible. Frank Dance (1967) depicts the communication process by using a spiral, or helix (Figure 1.2). He believes that

Figure 1.2
Communication Process as a Helix
Source: Reprinted by permission of Frank E. X. Dance.



communication experiences are cumulative and are influenced by the past. He notes that present experiences inevitably influence a person's future, and so he emphasizes a nonlinear view of the process. Communication, therefore, can be considered a process that changes over time and among interactants.

A third term associated with our definition of communication is *symbols*. A **symbol** is an arbitrary label or representation of phenomena. Words are symbols for concepts and things—for example, the word *love* represents the idea of love; the word *chair* represents a thing we sit on. Labels may be ambiguous, may be both verbal and nonverbal, and may occur in face-to-face and mediated communication. Symbols are usually agreed on within a group but may not be understood outside of the group. In this way, their use is often arbitrary. For instance, most college students understand the phrase "this course has no prereqs"; those outside of college may not understand its meaning. Further, there are both **concrete symbols** (the symbol represents an object) and **abstract symbols** (the symbol stands for a thought or idea).

symbol
arbitrary label given to a phenomenon

concrete symbol
symbol representing an object

abstract symbol
symbol representing an idea or thought

Robin Toner (2008, May 4) of the *New York Times* underscored the importance of symbols during presidential elections. She states that in 1988, presidential candidate Michael Dukakis vetoed legislation that would have required students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. This veto was later used by George H.W. Bush to question the patriotism of Dukakis. In much the same way, as a 2008 presidential candidate, Barack Obama's earlier decision to campaign without wearing a lapel pin depicting the American flag drew questions about his patriotism. Despite Obama's assertion, that the "pins had become a substitute for true patriotism" (Rutenberg & Zeleny, 2008), he eventually wore the flag lapel pin. Clearly, symbolic meaning can be significant.

In addition to process and symbols, meaning is central to our definition of communication. **Meaning** is what people extract from a message. In communication episodes, messages can have more than one meaning and even multiple layers of meaning. Without sharing some meanings, we would all have a difficult time speaking the same language or interpreting the same event. Judith Martin and Tom Nakayama (2008) point out that meaning has cultural consequences:

meaning
what people extract from a message

> [W]hen President George W. Bush was about to go to war in Iraq, he referred to this war as a 'crusade.' The use of this term evoked strong negative reactions in the Islamic world, due to the history of the Crusades nearly 1,000 years ago . . . While President Bush may not have knowingly wanted to frame the Iraq invasion as a religious war against Muslims, the history of the Crusades may make others feel that it is (p. 70).

Clearly, not all meaning is shared, and people do not always know what others mean. In these situations, we must be able to explain, repeat, and clarify. For example, if the Bollens want to tell Eddy to move out, they will probably need to go beyond telling him that they just need their "space." Eddy may perceive "needing space" as simply staying out of the house two nights a week. Furthermore, his parents will have to figure out what communication "approach" is best. They might believe that being direct may be best to get their son out of the house. Or they might fear that such clear communication is not the most

effective strategy to change Eddy's behavior. Regardless of how Jimmy and Angie Bollen communicate their wishes, without sharing the same meaning, the family will have a challenging time getting their messages across to one another.

environment
situation or context in which communication occurs

The final key term in our definition of communication is *environment*. **Environment** is the situation or context in which communication occurs. The environment includes a number of elements, including time, place, historical period, relationship, and a speaker's and listener's cultural backgrounds. You can understand the influence of environments by thinking about your beliefs and values pertaining to socially significant topics such as same-sex marriage, physician-assisted suicide, and immigration into the United States. If you have had personal experience with any of these topics, it's likely your views are affected by your perceptions. Or, consider the time in history as another influential factor. Less than fifteen years ago, the idea that gay men and lesbians could marry was unthinkable. With the 2004 law in Massachusetts, the rights of gay and lesbian Americans to marry were affirmed in that state. Clearly, the environment and all of its components influence communication and behavior.

The environment can also be mediated. By that, we mean that communication can take place with technological assistance. It's highly likely that all of you have communicated in some sort of mediated environment; namely, through e-mail, chat rooms, or social networking sites. These mediated environments influence the communication between two people in that people in electronic relationships are not able to observe each other's eye behavior, listen to vocal characteristics, or watch body movement. This mediated environment has received a great deal of attention over the years as communication theory continues to develop (Aakhus, 2007).

T*I*P

Theory Into Practice

Genie

The discussion in class about environment made a lot of sense to me. I can't begin to tell you how many different types of physical environments I'm in every day. I work in a nonprofit, so I'm always in and out of the office. Our office is on the third floor of a five-story building. It's quite small but we have a lot of fun. Sometimes, though, I have to go to a corporate office where everything is new and looks very expensive. A lot of the workers, though, seem up-tight! Then, I have to visit some people's homes and I can say that there is so much difference in the way people have arranged their home environments. And I haven't even begun to talk about how I use e-mail and the different mediated environments. It's unbelievable!

The Intentionality Debate: Did You Mean That?

Before we close our discussion on defining *communication,* let's talk briefly about an academic debate that took place about sixty years ago, and which the field continues to discuss today. The debate centered on this question: Is all

behavior communication? For example, suppose that Eric and his landlady, Martha, are talking about renewing his lease for the upcoming year. Martha claims she has to raise the rent due to higher heating costs. As the two speak, Eric notices that Martha doesn't look him in the eye as she explains the $100 increase. He begins to wonder whether Martha is telling the truth, thinking that her shifting eyes and constant throat clearing must signify something deceptive. Can Martha's shifting eyes and throat clearing be considered communication? Are these behaviors within the boundaries of our definition of *communication*? Or is Eric's perception simply Eric's perception? What if Martha never intended to communicate anything other than that she needs the money to offset the cost of heating the apartment?

Some communication researchers have strongly favored the view that only intentional behaviors are communicative. For instance, Gerald Miller and Mark Steinberg (1975) interpret the communication process this way:

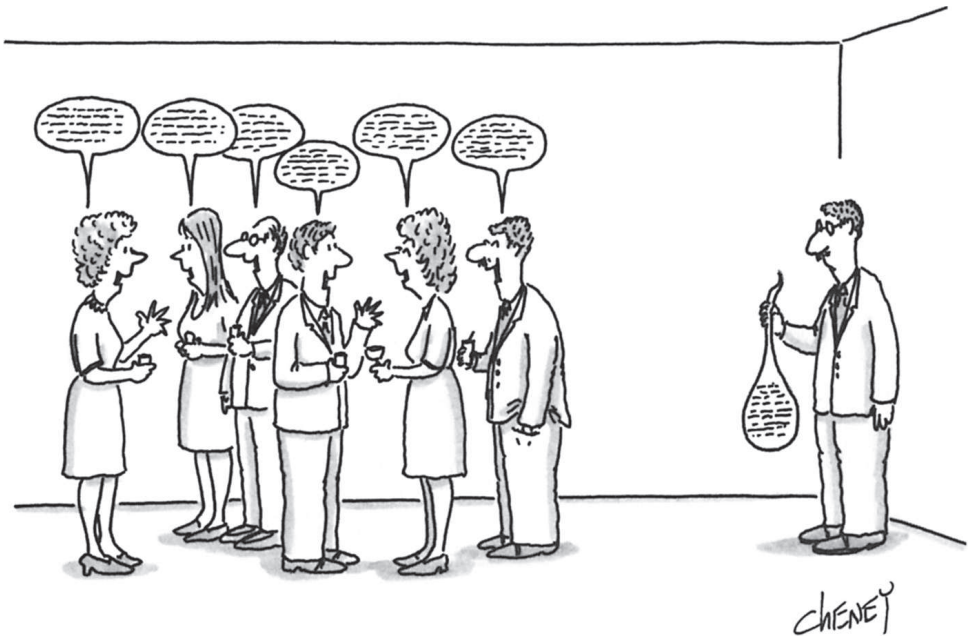
> We have chosen to restrict our discussion of communication to intentional symbolic transactions: those in which at least one of the parties transmits a message to another with the intent of modifying the other's behavior . . . . By our definition, intent to communicate and intent to influence are synonymous. If there is no intent, there is no message. (p. 15)

Despite this perspective, researchers have debated whether messages that are sent unintentionally—or mistaken meanings that people make ("I didn't mean *that*—you misunderstood me")—fit the definition of *communication*. Those who say that these sorts of messages are not communication (Miller and Steinberg) argue that only intentionally sent and accurately received messages can be called communication. However, other researchers believe that this approach narrows the definition too much.

This tension in interpreting what constitutes a communication event was a primary discussion point of researchers many years ago. In the early 1950s, a group of scholars from Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, collaborated on a new approach to human communication. These researchers represented a variety of disciplines, including psychiatry, anthropology, and communication. Among the many findings emanating from a series of scholarly papers was the assumption that "you cannot not communicate" (Watzlawick, et al., 1967). This thinking reflects the notion that all things can be considered communication. According to the **Palo Alto team,** when two people are together, they constantly communicate because they cannot escape behavior. Even silence and avoidance of eye contact are communicative. So, using our earlier example of Eric and Martha, Eric's perception of distrust would be legitimized under the Palo Alto rubric: One can say nothing and still say something. The Palo Alto group believed that anything we do, including ignoring or refusing to speak to another, is communication. This greatly broadens the definition of *communication,* making it virtually synonymous with *behavior*.

Palo Alto team
a group of scholars who believed that a person "cannot not communicate"

Although this line of thinking has enjoyed much popular support, it is potentially problematic for those of us interested in communication theory. In



fact, Michael Motley (1990) reasons that "not all behavior is communication, only interactive behavior is; so in noninteractive situations one can indeed 'not communicate,' but in interactive situations one indeed cannot not communicate" (p. 619). In other words, Motley believes that one *can* not communicate. To be fair, one of the original proponents of the "you cannot not communicate" argument later recanted her original thinking by concluding that "all behavior is not communicative, although it may be informative" (Beavin-Bavelas, 1990, p. 599).

If everything can be thought of as communication—our verbal and nonverbal unintended expressions—then studying communication in a systematic manner is not only challenging, but also nearly impossible. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, setting boundaries on behavior in conversations or relationships is necessary in theory building. By defining everything as communication, we inevitably undermine the field we wish to study. Defining communication requires both that we draw boundaries and that we still acknowledge some overlap. Definitions can be somewhat subjective, and you will soon discover as you review and understand communication theory that once you've defined *communication,* your understanding of communication and theory will necessarily guide your thinking. This happens with communication researchers and theorists as well. Each approaches his or her research with a personal way of looking at the communication process, and these views influence who and what is studied, and when and how the study is executed. We encourage you to consider the theories in this book and the theorists' views of communication before you make up your mind.

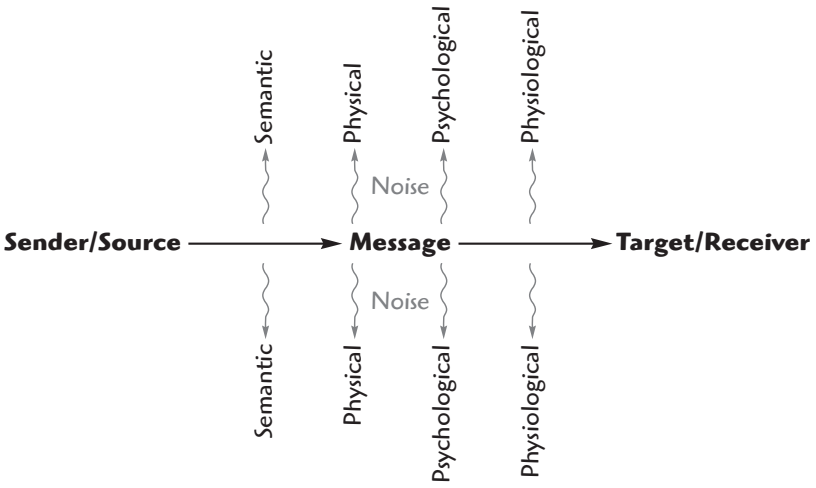


Figure 1.3
Linear Model of Communication
Source: Adapted from Shannon & Weaver, 1949.

Models of Understanding: Communication as Action, Interaction, and Transaction

Communication theorists create **models,** or simplified representations of complex interrelationships among elements in the communication process, which allow us to visually understand a sometimes complex process. Although there are many communication models, we discuss the three most prominent ones here. In discussing these models and their underlying approaches, we wish to demonstrate the manner in which communication has been conceptualized over the years.

models
simplified representations of the communication process

linear model of communication
one-way view of communication that assumes a message is sent by a source to a receiver through a channel

source
originator of a message

message
words, sounds, actions, or gestures in an interaction

receiver
recipient of a message

channel
pathway to communication

Communication as Action: The Linear Model

In 1949, Claude Shannon, a Bell Laboratories scientist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Warren Weaver, a consultant on projects at the Sloan Foundation, described communication as a linear process. They were concerned with radio and telephone technology and wanted to develop a model that could explain how information passed through various channels. The result was the conceptualization of the **linear model of communication.**

This approach to human communication comprises several key elements, as Figure 1.3 demonstrates. A **source,** or transmitter of a message, sends a **message** to a **receiver,** the recipient of the message. The receiver is the person who makes sense out of the message. All of this communication takes place in a **channel,** which is the pathway to communication. Channels frequently correspond to the visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory senses. Thus, you use the visual channel when you see your roommate, and you use the tactile channel when you hug your parent.

noise
distortion in channel not intended by the source

semantic noise
linguistic influences on reception of message

physical (external) noise
bodily influences on reception of message

psychological noise
cognitive influences on reception of message

physiological noise
biological influences on reception of message

Communication also involves **noise,** which is anything not intended by the informational source. There are four types of noise. First, **semantic noise** pertains to the slang, jargon, or specialized language used by individuals or groups. For instance, when Jennifer received a medical report from her ophthalmologist, the physician's words included phrases such as "ocular neuritis," "dilated funduscopic examination," and "papillary conjunctival changes." This is an example of semantic noise because outside of the medical community, these words have limited (or no) meaning. **Physical,** or **external, noise** exists outside of the receiver. **Psychological noise** refers to a communicator's prejudices, biases, and predispositions toward another or the message. To exemplify these two types, imagine listening to participants at a political rally. You may experience psychological noise listening to the views of a politician whom you do not support, and you may also experience physical noise from the people nearby who may be protesting the politician's presence. Finally, **physiological noise** refers to the biological influences on the communication process. Physiological noise, then, exists if you or a speaker is ill, fatigued, or hungry.

Although this view of the communication process was highly respected many years ago, the approach is very limited for several reasons. First, the model presumes that there is only one message in the communication process. Yet we all can point to a number of circumstances in which we send several messages at once. Second, as we have previously noted, communication does not have a definable beginning and ending. Shannon and Weaver's model presumes this mechanistic orientation. Furthermore, to suggest that communication is simply one person speaking to another oversimplifies the complex communication process. Listeners are not so passive, as we can all confirm when we are in heated arguments with others. Clearly, communication is more than a one-way effort and has no definable middle or end (Anderson & Ross, 2002).

Communication as Interaction: The Interactional Model

interactional model of communication
view of communication as the sharing of meaning with feedback that links source and receiver

feedback
communication given to the source by the receiver to indicate understanding (meaning)

The linear model suggests that a person is only a sender or a receiver. That is a narrow view of the participants in the communication process. Wilbur Schramm (1954), therefore, proposed that we also examine the relationship between a sender and a receiver. He conceptualized the **interactional model of communication,** which emphasizes the two-way communication process between communicators (Figure 1.4). In other words, communication goes in two directions: from sender to receiver and from receiver to sender. This circular process suggests that communication is ongoing. The interactional view illustrates that a person can perform the role of either sender or receiver during an interaction, but not both roles simultaneously.

One element essential to the interactional model of communication is **feedback,** or the response to a message. Feedback may be verbal or nonverbal, intentional or unintentional. Feedback helps communicators to know whether or not their message is being received and the extent to which meaning is achieved. In the interactional model, feedback takes place after a message is received, not during the message itself.

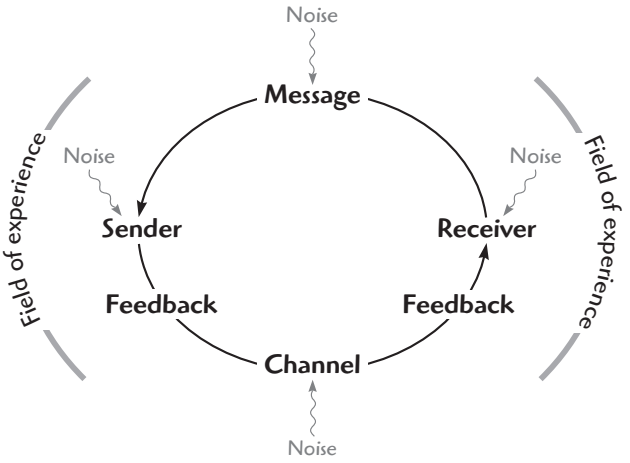


Figure 1.4
Interactional Model of Communication

To illustrate the critical nature of feedback and the interactional model of communication, consider our opening example of the Bollen family. When Eddy's parents find him on the couch drunk, they proceed to tell Eddy how they feel about his behavior. Their outcry prompts Eddy to argue with his parents, who in turn, tell him to leave their house immediately. This interactional sequence shows that there is an alternating nature in the communication between Eddy and his parents. They see his behavior and provide their feedback on it, Eddy listens to their message and responds, then his father sends the final message telling his son to leave. We can take this even further by noting the door slam as one additional feedback behavior in the interaction.

A final feature of the interactional model is a person's **field of experience,** or how a person's culture, experiences, and heredity influence his or her ability to communicate with another. Each person brings a unique field of experience to each communication episode, and these experiences frequently influence the communication between people. For instance, when two people come together and begin dating, the two inevitably bring their fields of experience into the relationship. One person in this couple may have been raised in a large family with several siblings, while the other may be an only child. These experiences (and others) will necessarily influence how the two come together and will most likely affect how they maintain their relationship.

field of experience overlap of sender's and receiver's culture, experiences, and heredity in communication

Like the linear view, the interactional model has been criticized. The interactional model suggests that one person acts as sender while the other acts as receiver in a communication encounter. As you have experienced, however, people communicate as both senders and receivers in a single encounter. But the prevailing criticism of the interactional model pertains to the issue of feedback. The interactional view assumes two people speaking and listening, but not at the same time. But what occurs when a person sends a nonverbal message during an interaction? Smiling, frowning, or simply moving away from the conversation during an interaction between two people happens all the time. For example, in an interaction between a mother and her daughter, the mother may be reprimanding her child while simultaneously "reading" the

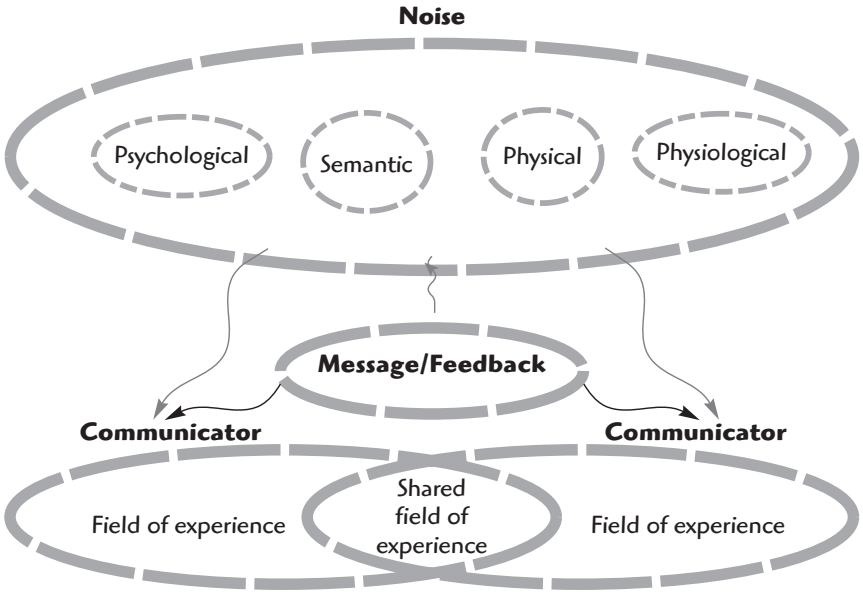


Figure 1.5
Transactional Model of Communication

child's nonverbal behavior. Is the girl laughing? Is she upset? Is she even listening to her mother? Each of these behaviors will inevitably prompt the mother to modify her message. These criticisms and contradictions inspired development of a third model of communication.

Communication as Transaction: The Transactional Model

transactional model of communication view of communication as the simultaneous sending and receiving of messages

The **transactional model of communication** (Barnlund, 1970; Frymier, 2005; Wilmot, 1987) underscores the simultaneous sending and receiving of messages in a communication episode, as Figure 1.5 shows. To say that communication is transactional means that the process is cooperative; the sender and the receiver are mutually responsible for the effect and the effectiveness of communication. In the linear model of communication, meaning is sent from one person to another. In the interactional model, meaning is achieved through the feedback of a sender and a receiver. In the transactional model, people build shared meaning. Furthermore, what people say during a transaction is greatly influenced by their past experience. So, for instance, at a college fair, it is likely that a college student will have a great deal to say to a high school senior because of the college student's experiences in class and around campus. A college senior will, no doubt, have a different view of college than, say, a college sophomore, due in large part to his or her past college experiences.

Transactional communication requires us to recognize the influence of one message on another. One message builds on the previous message; therefore, there is an interdependency between and among the components of communication. A change in one causes a change in others. Furthermore, the transactional model presumes that as we simultaneously send and receive messages, we attend to both verbal and nonverbal elements of a message. In a sense, communicators negotiate meaning. For instance, if a friend asks you about

your family background, you may use some private language that your friend doesn't understand. Your friend may make a face while you are presenting your message, indicating some sort of confusion with what you've said. As a result, you will most likely back up and define your terms and then continue with the conversation. This example highlights the degree to which two people are actively involved in a communication encounter. The nonverbal communication is just as important as the verbal message in such a transactional process.

Earlier we noted that the field of experience functions in the interactional model. In the transactional model, the fields of experience exist, but overlap occurs. That is, rather than person A and person B having separate fields of experience, eventually the two fields merge (see Figure 1.5). This was an important addition to the understanding of the communication process because it demonstrates an active process of understanding. That is, for communication to take place, individuals must build shared meaning. For instance, in our earlier example of two people with different childhoods, the interactional model suggests that they would come together with an understanding of their backgrounds. The transactional model, however, requires each of them to understand and incorporate the other's field of experience into his or her life. For example, it's not enough for Julianna to know that Paul has a prior prison record; the transactional view holds that she must figure out a way to put his past into perspective. Will it affect their current relationship? How? If not, how will Julianna discuss it with Paul? The transactional model takes the meaning-making process one step further than the interactional model. It assumes reciprocity, or shared meaning.

You now have a basic understanding of how we define communication, and we have outlined the basic elements and a few communication models. Recall this interpretation as you read the book and examine the various theories. It is likely that you will interpret communication differently from one theory to another. Remember that theorists set boundaries in their discussions about human behavior, and, consequently, they often define *communication* according to their own view. One of our goals in this book is to enable you to articulate the role that communication plays in a number of different theories.

Thus far, we have examined the communication process and unpacked the complexity associated with it. We have identified the primary models of communication, trying to demonstrate the evolution and maturation of the communication field. We now explore a component that is a necessary and vital part of every communication episode: ethics.

Ethics and Communication

In the movie *The Insider,* which was based on a true story, the lead character's name is Jeffrey Wigand, a former tobacco scientist who violated a contractual agreement and exposed a cigarette maker's efforts to include addictive ingredients in all cigarettes. The movie shows Wigand as a man of good conscience with the intention of telling the public about the company and its immoral

undertakings. Wigand clearly believed that saving lives was the right and only thing to do, and he made his actions fit his beliefs: He acted on his ethics.

ethics
perceived rightness or wrongness of an action or behavior

In this section, we examine **ethics,** or the perceived rightness or wrongness of action or behavior. Ethics is a type of moral decision making (Arnett, Harden-Fritz, & Bell, 2008), and determining what is right or wrong is influenced by society's rules and laws. For example, although some may believe Wigand's efforts were laudable, others may note that Wigand apparently knew what was going on when he signed a contract prohibiting him from disclosing company secrets. Furthermore, the murkiness of ethics is evidenced when one considers that Wigand made a lot of money before disclosing what was occurring.

The United States is built on standards of moral conduct, and these standards are central to a number of institutions and relationships (Alboher, 2008). Because ethical standards tend to shift according to historical period, the environment, the conversation, and the people involved (Englehardt, 2001), ethics can be difficult to understand. Let's briefly discuss ethical issues as they pertain to cultural institutions; a more comprehensive explanation of ethics can be found elsewhere (see Johanneson, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008). We begin by asking why we should understand ethics, next explain ethics as it relates to society, and finally, explain the intersection of ethics and communication theory. As you think about this information, keep in mind that ethical decision making is culturally based. That is, what we consider to be ethical and appropriate in one society is not necessarily a shared value in another society. For instance, though many in the United States can identify with the plight of the Bollen family, you should know that in many cultures, having a son return to his family-of-origin is revered and would not pose the problems that the Bollens are experiencing.

Why study ethics? The response to this question could easily be another question: Why not study it? Ethics permeates all walks of life and cuts across gender, race, class, sexual identity, and spiritual/religious affiliation. In other words, we cannot escape ethical principles in our lives. Ethics is part of virtually every decision we make. Moral development is part of human development, and as we grow older, our moral code undergoes changes well into adulthood. Ethics is what prompts a society toward higher levels of integrity and truth. Elaine Englehardt (2001) observes that "we don't get to 'invent' our own system of ethics" (p. 2), which means that we generally follow a given cultural code of morality. And Ken Andersen (2003) argues that without an understanding and an expression of ethical values, society will be disadvantaged: "Violating the norms of ethical communication is, I believe, a major factor in the malaise that has led many people to withdraw from the civic culture whether of their profession, their associations, their political arena" (p. 14).

From a communication perspective, ethical issues surface whenever messages potentially influence others. Consider, for instance, the ethics associated with telling your professor that you couldn't turn in a paper on time because a member of your family is ill, when such an illness doesn't exist. Think about the ethics involved if you take an idea of a co-worker and present it to your boss as if it were your own. Consider the ethical consequences of going out on

Table 1.1 Examples of Ethical Decision Making in the United States

INSTITUTION	EXAMPLES OF ETHICAL ISSUES
Business and industry	Should CEOs be given pay raises in companies that are not profitable?
Religion	Are same-sex marriages moral?
Entertainment	Does viewing violence in movies prompt violence in society? Should Hollywood develop a morality code?
Higher education	Should students be allowed credit for "life experiences" such as jobs? Should student fees go to political groups on campus?
Medicine	Can pharmaceutical companies be held responsible for sample medicines? Should medical professionals be given license to end the life of a patient?
Politics	Should political candidates make promises to citizens?
Technology	Should Internet sites be held accountable for their content? Who should monitor websites targeting children?

several dates with someone and choosing not to disclose a past felony for assault, or of posing as someone other than yourself in online communications. Television, too, carries ethical implications. For example, can television promote racial tolerance and harmony and simultaneously present portrayals of cultural groups in stereotypic and offensive ways? We continue our discussion of ethics by identifying some of the institutions whose ethical standards have been the subject of much conversation. Business and industry, religion, entertainment, education, medicine, politics, and technology are just a few of the many fields that have been prone to ethical lapses and have been challenged in communicating messages of integrity (Table 1.1).

Business and Industry

Perhaps no cultural institution has been under more ethical suspicions of late than "corporate America." Unethical behavior in corporations has reached proportions never before seen. Companies have tried to hide costs, use creative accounting practices, commit accounting fraud, and a plethora of other ethical breaches. The examples are plentiful: The former head of the World Bank engineers a job promotion and salary increase for his longtime companion; WorldCom declares bankruptcy after the discovery of an $11 billion accounting "error"; Enron inflates earnings reports and hides billions in debt, while increasing salaries of its executives; the founder of Adelphia Communications

and his two sons commit bank and securities fraud, leading to the company's demise; and Boeing's chief financial officer inappropriately recruits a retired government official with whom he previously negotiated contracts. Sadly, each of these situations occurred within a six-year period (2001–2007). The list of business scandals has been especially prominent. But with the advent of Corporate Ethics Statements, improved transparent accounting practices, and increased accountability to stockholders, businesses are starting to improve their ethical standing. Of course, much, much more needs to be done to eliminate lingering levels of distrust, especially after the 2008 federal bailout of financial institutions in the United States.

Religion

Both Eastern and Western civilizations have stressed ethics in their moral traditions. For instance, according to Taoism, no one exists in isolation, and, therefore, empathy and insight will lead to truth. For the Buddhist, being moral requires that one use words that elicit peace and avoid gossip, self-promotion, anger, argument, and lying. From a Western perspective, many ethical issues derive from early Greek civilization. Aristotle first articulated the principle of the Golden Mean. He believed that a person's moral virtue stands between two vices, with the middle, or the mean, being the foundation for a rational society. For instance, when the Bollens are deciding what to say to their son Eddy about overstaying his welcome, their Golden Mean might look like this:

EXTREME	GOLDEN MEAN	EXTREME
lying	truthful communication	reveal everything

The Judeo-Christian religions are centered as well on questions of ethics. In fact, there is an online publication devoted solely to Religion and Ethics (www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/current/headlines.html). Christianity is founded on the principle of good example—that is, live according to God's laws and set an example for others. However, some believe that such moral standards are not uniquely religious. For those not affiliated with organized religion, the secular values of fairness and justice and working toward better relationships are important as well. Affiliating with a religion may also pose some ethical difficulty if a person does not subscribe to a number of its philosophies or orientations. For instance, people who believe that gay men and lesbians should be able to marry may be challenged because most religions reject the legitimacy of such ceremonies.

Despite efforts to retain ethicality, religious institutions have had a number of ethical challenges over the years. Ministers frequenting prostitutes, pedophilic priests, drug abuse by church leaders, and sexual immorality among parishioners and pastors are just a few of the dozens of religious scandals that have caused outrage. Fortunately, many religious bodies are now developing clear ethical statements on appropriate behavior and clarifying the consequences of ethical violations.

Entertainment

The entertainment industry has also been intimately involved in dialogues about ethics and communication. Often, a circular argument surfaces with respect to Hollywood: Does Hollywood reflect society or does Hollywood shape society? Many viewpoints are raised in these arguments, but three seem to dominate. One belief is that Hollywood has a responsibility to show the moral side of an immoral society; movies should help people escape a difficult reality, not relive it. A second opinion is that Hollywood should create more nonviolent and nonsexual films so that all family members can watch a movie. Unfortunately, critics note, films like *Hostel, The Wicker Man, 300,* and *Gangs of New York* tend to exacerbate violent attitudes in young people. A third school of thought is that Hollywood is in show *business,* and therefore making money is what moviemaking is all about. Regardless of whether you agree with any of these orientations, the entertainment industry will continue to reflect *and* influence changing moral climates in the United States. Some might say that Hollywood leading the charge in any conversation on ethics is, in itself, a question of ethics.

Higher Education

A third cultural institution that has been charged with questionable ethics is higher education. Colleges and universities across the United States teach introductory courses in ethics, and these are required courses in many schools.

Despite this interest, many schools have lost their own moral compass. For instance, colleges and universities face an ethical choice about reporting crime statistics on their campus. Despite the fact that they are required to report campus crime via the "Jeanne Clery Act" (named after a Lehigh University student who was murdered in 1986), some campuses fear the bad publicity. As a result, crime is "contextualized" ("Our campus is in a large city; there's a lot of crime everywhere" or "Our campus is in a rural setting; we may have a few problems but we're still relatively safe"). Another ethical decision arises when schools are required to identify the enrollment patterns for legislative and financial support. Frequently, schools report statistical increases in enrollment over a number of years when in reality the school system has simply adopted a new way of counting heads. Although they are called institutions of "higher" learning, some campuses have reached new "lows" in ethical decision making.

Medicine

A fourth institution concerned with ethics and communication is the medical community. Specifically, with advances in science changing the cultural landscape, bioethical issues are topics of conversation around the dinner table. Physician-assisted suicide is one example of medicine at the center of ethical controversy. To some, the decision to prolong life should be a private one, made by the patient and his or her doctor. To others, society should have a say in such a decision.

Medical decisions can become publicly debated far from the hospital bedside. In 2004, for instance, the state of Florida and Governor Jeb Bush tried to prevent the spouse of a terminally ill woman (Terry Schiavo) from shutting down the ventilator system that kept her alive. Eventually, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to intervene in a lower court's ruling (allowing the spouse to terminate his wife's life). Although one can imagine the personal pain Mr. Schiavo felt about such a decision, the story played out in public, with a debate on euthanasia at the center of the outcry. Late-term abortions, human cloning, drug-enhanced athletes, medicinal marijuana, and physician-assisted suicide are all topics that demonstrate the interrelationship among ethics, politics, and medicine. This topic has resonated sufficiently in our society that there is now a publication devoted to the topic of ethics and medicine (www.ethicsandmedicine.com).

Politics

Discussing the belief that politics is ethically challenged is like telling an *American Idol* contestant that there will be teenagers watching the program: It's obvious! Ethics and politics are often viewed as incompatible. We are living in cynical times and opinion polls consistently show that the public's view of political leaders rates lower than their view of paying taxes. The scandals associated with politics relate to lobbyists, campaign financing, infidelity, deception, conflicts of interest, cover-ups, bribery, conspiracy, tax evasion . . . Watergate, Filegate, Travelgate, Troopergate . . . the list goes on and on.

The ethical problems associated with politics may never go away, despite efforts to establish ethics commissions and oversight advisory boards in state and national governments. Though many of us wish to be optimistic in thinking that we are cultivating a new generation of political leaders who are ethical beings, there are those who are not as hopeful. Still, with nonprofit organizations such as Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) and the Government Accountability Project—groups that expose ethical shortcomings in our government and its leaders—and with aptly named laws such as the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007, there may be cause for increased confidence in the future.

Technology

Technology is at the center of many ethical debates today. Armed with a copy of the First Amendment, proponents of free speech say the Internet, for example, should not be censored. Free speech advocates stress that what is considered inappropriate can vary tremendously from one person to another, and consequently, censorship is arbitrary. Consider, for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court decision protecting "virtual" child pornography on the Internet. Noting that the Child Pornography Protection Act was overly broad, the justices felt that banning computer-generated images of young people was unjustified. In addition, social networking sites (MySpace, myYearbook, and classmates.com) are fast becoming prone to ethical problems. How much information is too much? Teenagers letting others know where they live, blogs that divulge too

much information about a family's financial situation, and would-be employers looking over the shoulders of users are just a few of the many ethical challenges characterizing the online world.

As we become more and more reliant on technology in the United States, particularly on the Internet, ethical issues will continue to arise. Lying about one's identity online, downloading copyrighted material, inviting young people into violent and hate-filled websites, and watching executions on the Internet are all examples of potential technological ethics dilemmas.

Some Final Thoughts

The relationship between communication and ethics is intricate and complex. Public discourse requires responsibility. We presume that political leaders will tell the truth and that spiritual leaders will guide us by their example. Yet we know that not all elected officials are honest and that not all religious leaders set a spiritual standard. Organizations are especially prone to ethical dilemmas. For instance, whistle-blowing, or revealing ethically suspicious behavior in a company, can have lasting implications. Although some may view whistle-blowing as a courageous and morally sound act, others may view it as a violation of trust. This difference in perception usually rests on whether a whistle-blower is perceived as a disgruntled employee who may have been passed over for a promotion or as someone who is genuinely concerned about a company's ethical practices. Unethical practices do little to garner trust in people. As J. Michael Sproule (1980) concludes, "When people are misled they distrust the sources that have deceived them. If the majority of a society's information sources behave without concern for honest communication, then all communication is weakened" (p. 282).

There is an ethical dimension to listening as well. As listeners (or readers) we have a responsibility to give a fair hearing to the ideas of others. This responsibility extends to such ideas as the communication theories presented in this book. Rob Anderson and Veronica Ross (2002) point out six important ethical strategies to consider when reading communication theory:

1. Remain open to being persuaded by the statements of others.
2. Remain willing to try out new ideas that may be seen by others as mistakes, and invite others to experiment also.
3. Accept that multiple perspectives on reality are held as valid by different people, especially in different cultural contexts.
4. Attempt to test any tentatively held knowledge.
5. Live with ambiguity, but become less tolerant of contradiction.
6. Evaluate knowledge claims against personal experience and the everyday concrete pragmatics of what works. (p. 15)

In addition to these suggestions, we add one more: If a theory is a bit difficult to understand at first, don't gloss over it. Delve into the explanation once more to gain a clearer picture of the theorists' intentions. You may feel inexperienced or unprepared to challenge these theories. Yet we offer the theories for review, application, and comment and want you to ask questions about

T*I*P

Theory Into Practice

Mandy

I've always thought that ethics is the most important part of communicating with other people. I don't care whether I'm in an office or in the classroom, I think we have to live using ethical standards. We need to know that lying to other people rarely makes sense. We need to know that if we don't try to understand someone else from their point of view, we're probably never going to understand what they mean. The media have to be ethical, too. They just can't put out whatever they want and not be held accountable. I guess the bottom line is that if we try to be concerned about others, try to understand what they are feeling, and do what we can to be honest, we are on our way to being ethical.

them. Although we would like to think that all theorists are open and receptive to multiple ways of knowing, the reality remains that theory construction is bound by culture, personality, time, circumstance, and the availability of resources. As students of communication theory, you must be willing to ask some difficult questions and probe some confusing areas.

The Value of Understanding Communication Theory

Finally, although we've alluded to this throughout the chapter, we'd like to emphasize the importance of communication theory to all of our lives. We realize that many of you may not be immediately aware of the value of this topic. Therefore, we want to give you a glimpse into the significance of communication theory. As you read and understand each chapter, you will likely develop your own personal understanding of the importance of communication theory. We encourage you to be open as you explore this exciting area.

Understanding Communication Theory Cultivates Critical Thinking Skills

One important value you glean from studying communication theory relates to your critical thinking skills. Without doubt, as you read and reflect on the theories in this book, you will be required to think critically about several issues. Learning how to apply the theory to your own life, recognizing the research potential of the theory, and understanding how a particular theory evolved will be among your responsibilities in this course. In addition, understanding communication can aid in your skill set. The information in Chapter 18 (The *Rhetoric*), for instance, will be instrumental when you are required to deliver a public speech. Chapter 14 (Groupthink) contains content that will aid your undertanding of working in decision-making groups. These skills notwithstanding, as Craig and Muller (2007) notes, many theories have a Western cultural bias, so we need to be cautious in a universal application of the theory.

These activities require that you cultivate your critical thinking skills—skills that will help you on the job, in relationships, and as you are introduced to media.

Understanding Communication Theory Helps You to Recognize the Breadth and Depth of Research

In addition to fostering critical thinking skills, being a student of communication theory will help you appreciate the richness of research across various fields of study. Regardless of what your current academic major is, the theories contained in this book are based on the thinking, writing, and research of intellectually curious men and women who have drawn on the scholarship of numerous disciplines. For instance, as you read about the Relational Dialectics Theory (Chapter 12), you will note that many of its principles originate in philosophy. Groupthink (Chapter 14) originated in foreign policy decision making processes. Face-Negotiation Theory (Chapter 26) was influenced by research in sociology. As you pursue a particular degree, keep in mind that much of what you are learning is a result of theoretical thinking.

Understanding Communication Theory Helps to Make Sense of Personal Life Experiences

Understanding communication theory also helps you make sense of your life experiences. It's nearly impossible to find a theory in this book that does not in some way relate to your life or to the lives of people around you. Communication theory aids you in understanding people, media, and events and helps you answer important questions. Have you ever been confused about why some men speak differently from some women? Chances are that reading Muted Group Theory (Chapter 28) will help you understand why that may be the case. Do the media promote a violent society? The theory of Cultivation Analysis (Chapter 22) will likely help you answer that question. What role does technology play in society? Media Ecology Theory (Chapter 25) responds to that question. And what happens when someone stands too close while talking to you? Expectancy Violations Theory (Chapter 8) explores and explains this type of behavior. Some of you may have entered this course thinking that communication theory has limited value in your life. You will see that much of your life and your experiences in life will be better understood because of communication theory.

Communication Theory Fosters Self-Awareness

Thus far, we observed that learning about communication theory helps your critical thinking skills, informs you about the value of research across different fields of study, and aids you in understanding the world around you. One final reason to study theories of communication pertains to an area that is likely to be most important in your life—you. Learning about who you are, how you function in society, the influence you are able to have on others, the extent to which you are influenced by the media, how you behave in various

circumstances, and what motivates your decisions are just a handful of the possible areas that are either explicitly or implicitly discussed in the theories you will be introduced to in this book. Social Penetration Theory (Chapter 10) will help you consider the value of self-disclosing in your relationships. Chapter 5 (Symbolic Interaction Theory) will assist you in thinking about the meaning of the various symbols surrounding you. Yet these are not "self-help" communication theories; they do not provide easy answers to difficult questions. What you will encounter are theories that will help you as you try to understand yourself and your surroundings.

You are about to embark on an educational journey that may be new to you. We hope you persevere in unraveling the complexity of communication theory. The journey may be different, challenging, and tiring at times, but it will always be applicable to your life.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we introduced you to the communication process. We presented our definition of *communication* and reviewed the intentionality debate as a point of controversy in the communication field. In addition, we identified three prevailing models of communication: the linear model, the interactional model, and the transactional model. We discussed ethics and its relationship to communication theory. Finally, we provided several reasons why it is important for you to study communication theory.

You now have an understanding of the communication process and some sense of how complex it can be. As you read the many theories in this book, you will be able to view communication from a variety of perspectives. You will also gain valuable information that will help you understand human behavior and give you a new way to think about our society. We continue this examination in Chapter 2 when we present the traditions in communication study and important contexts in which communication takes place.

Discussion Starters

1. What led to the blowup between Eddy Bollen and his parents? Do you believe that Eddy and his parents were trying to handle his situation in an ethical way? Why or why not?

2. Do you believe that all slips of the tongue, conversational faux pas, and unintentional nonverbal behaviors should be considered communication? Why or why not? What examples can you provide to justify your thoughts?

3. Explain why the linear model of communication was so appealing years ago. Explain the appeal of the transactional model using current societal events.

4. Discuss the value of looking at communication theory from a variety of different disciplinary angles.

5. What are some recent ethical dilemmas related to communication? How was each dilemma resolved, if it was?

6. Comment on why so many definitions of communication exist.

7. Think of how you looked at communication before enrolling in this course. How has your perception changed after reading this chapter? How has your impression been verified by the content of this chapter?

Online Learning Center www. mhhe.com/west4e

Visit the Online Learning Center at www.mhhe.com/west4e for chapter-specific resources, such as story-into-theory and multiple-choice quizzes, as well as theory summaries and theory connection questions.