

# I.C.A.T

Interpersonal  
Communication  
Abridged  
Textbook



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# Chapter 1: Introduction to Communication

**A**bout 70% of our days are spent communicating (Alberts, Martin, & Nakayama, 2016), either face-to-face or through mediated platforms, such as email or text message. Yet, we often overestimate how well others understand us and how well we understand others. The purpose of this text is to provide knowledge and skills to help minimize miscommunication in interactions and increase communication competence. Even though we have been communicating our entire life, there are always ways to improve and techniques we can learn to be more effective and accomplish our goals, in both personal and professional contexts. In this chapter, we will begin our journey into communication by becoming familiar with the communication process, addressing contextual considerations, exploring the principles of communication, and discussing communication competence.

## Essential Questions

- How does the communication process work?
- What does it take to be a competent communicator? And why is it important in our lives?

## Successful students will be able to:

- define communication
- recognize components of the interpersonal communication process

- recognize how context can affect shared meaning
- explain seven principles of interpersonal communication
- explain three interrelated types of interpersonal competence
- identify three ways to grow interpersonal competence

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# 1.1.0: Communication: Definition and The Communication Process

In this section, we will define communication and discuss the components of the communication process.

## 1.1.1: Definition of Communication

In this text, we define communication as symbol using and meaning making. Communicators exchange two types of symbols, verbal and/or nonverbal, and attach meaning to said symbols. For example, the meaning attached to the verbal symbol “hello” is a greeting. You can also convey this greeting by using a nonverbal symbol, such as a hand wave. However, it is important note that the meanings we attach to symbols can vary from person to person. For example, another communicator might instead interpret a hand wave as trying to get their attention.



## 1.1.2: The Communication Process

In order to better understand how verbal and nonverbal symbols are produced, interpreted, and coordinated in interactions, it is necessary to understand the components of the communication process.

### **Communicators:**

Senders and receivers of messages in a communicative interaction. Because we are continuously sending and receiving verbal and/or nonverbal messages, we are simultaneously both a sender and receiver in interactions. For example, in a face-to-face interaction, the other communicator may be recounting an experience verbally with words and nonverbally with hand gestures, while we are sending our own nonverbal messages via eye contact, facial expressions, posture, etc.

### **Encoding:**

The process of turning our thoughts, ideas, and feelings into verbal and/or nonverbal messages.

### **Decoding:**

The process of interpreting and adding meaning to the verbal and/or nonverbal messages we receive.

### **Symbol:**

A thing that represents or stands for something else. In communication, symbols can be verbal, such as words, or nonverbal, such as the 'okay' hand symbol.

**Message:**

Verbal and nonverbal symbols that represent thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Messages can be both intentional (conscious) and unintentional (unconscious). For example, we may intentionally smile at a friend but unintentionally fidget with our hands when nervous.

**Channel:**

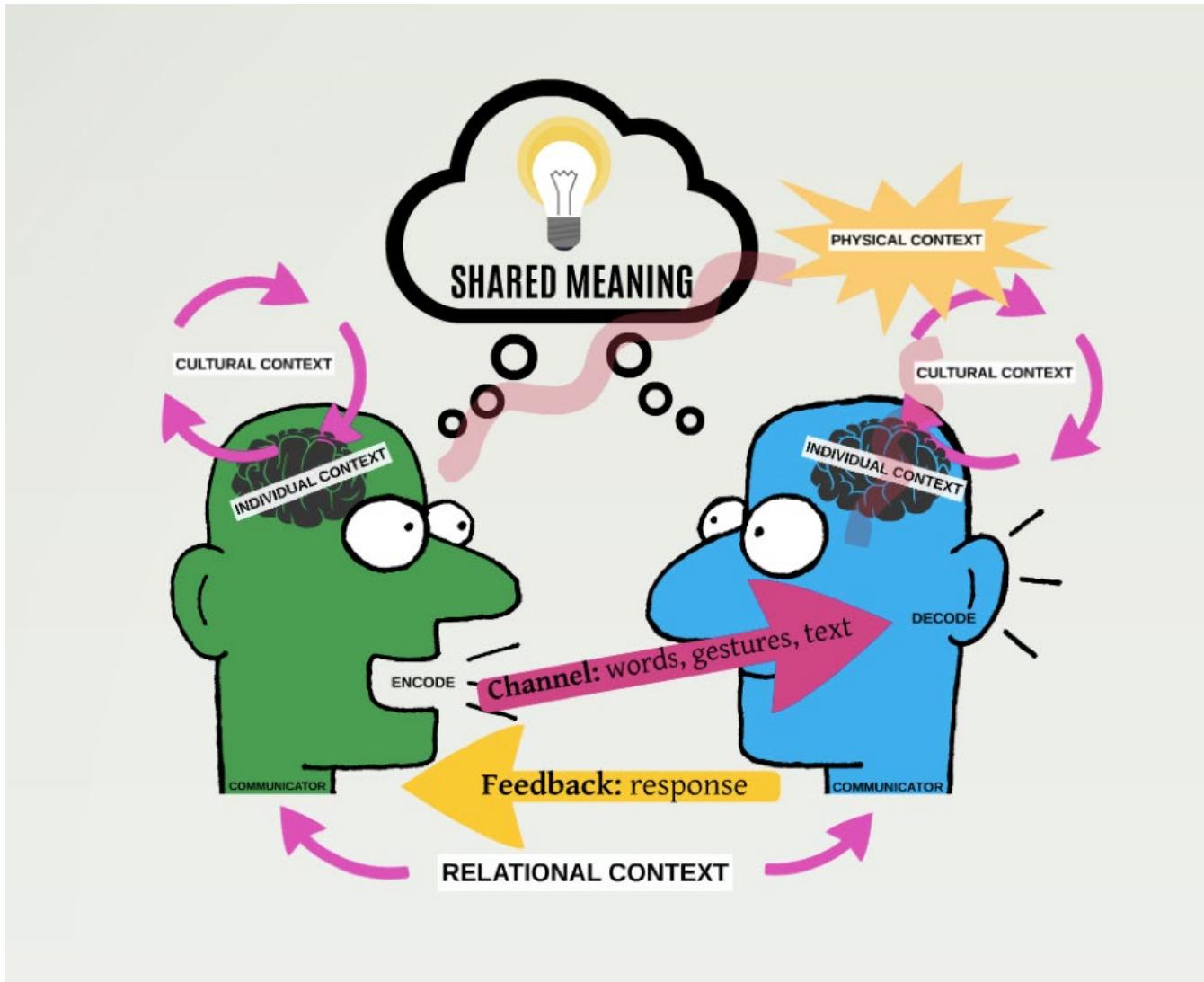
The means through which the message is sent from one communicator to the other, such spoken words, a text message, or our hands to make a gesture.

**Feedback:**

The verbal and nonverbal messages sent by one communicator in response to the other communicator's message(s). For example, if someone says a word we are unfamiliar with, we may frown in response or give them a confused look to let them know we do not understand.

**Noise:**

Noise is a type of interference in the communication process that results from the physical, relational, individual, and/or cultural context. Noise can occur in various places in the process, such as in the people, in the channel, in the message, and even outside the interaction.



(Image: The Communication Model. Pamela J. Gerber, CC BY NC SA 4.0)

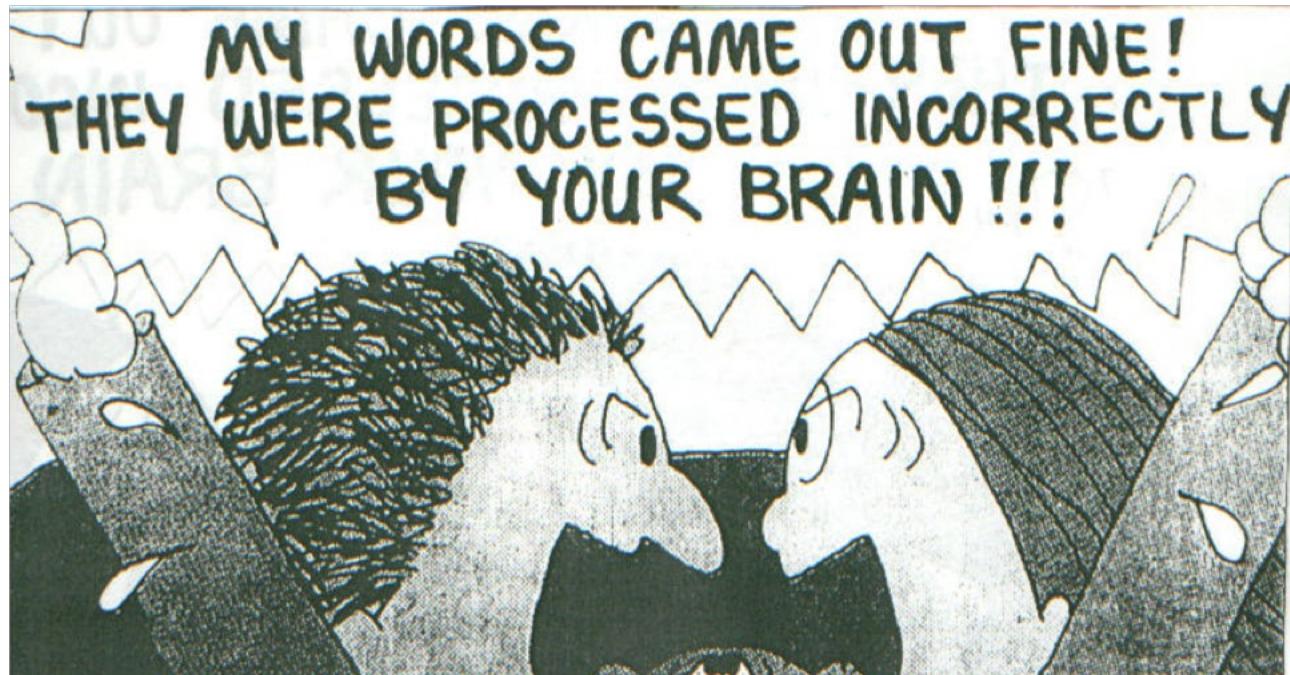
In any interpersonal interaction, there are at least two *communicators* and both communicators are generating and creating meaning by simultaneously sending and receiving *messages*. For example, in a face-to-face interaction, we may be telling a story about our horrible day and the other person may be listening. While we are telling our story, we are *encoding* our thoughts and feelings and considering which details to leave out and which ones to talk about. Think about the last time you recapped your experience at a social gathering for a friend and then again for a family member. Did you focus on different details with each person? That's encoding. While telling the story, we may use both verbal and nonverbal *symbols* to create the content of our

message. The *channel* we send our message through can be spoken words (for verbal symbols) or hand gestures (for nonverbal symbols). The other communicator, who is listening, *decodes* the message by interpreting and adding meaning to it. In addition, the listener is also simultaneously communicating messages back to us. This is called *feedback*. They may be nonverbally establishing eye contact (or not), yawning, or verbally interrupting or asking questions.

## 1.2.0: Shared Meaning and Context

In this section, we will discuss how we use communication to create shared meaning and how the meaning created is influenced by four types of context: physical, relational, individual, and cultural.

### 1.2.1: Shared Meaning



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**Shared Meaning:** While what we mean is usually very clear to us, others may decode/interpret our messages differently from what we intended resulting in a lack of shared meaning.

In communicative interactions, the goal is usually to create shared meaning.

Shared meaning is achieved when the receiver attaches a similar meaning to the message that the sender meant to convey. In other words, shared meaning occurs when what was intended by one was similarly interpreted by the other, and/or what was interpreted by one was what was intended by the other. For example, let's say we were at a bar and winked at someone to express interest in them. If they likewise interpreted our wink as interest, then shared meaning has been created. However, if they interpret our wink as an eye twitch, then shared meaning has not occurred. As we know from our experiences, shared meaning is not always achieved in interactions or may require additional clarification. That is because the various factors, or context, surrounding our messages can influence how those messages are produced, interpreted and coordinated. There are four main types of context to take into consideration in interpersonal interactions- physical, relational, individual, and cultural- which are discussed in the following subsections.

### 1.2.2: Physical Context

The physical context is the environment where the communication takes place, such as a bedroom, hallway, or bar. Within the environment, factors like the size of the space, the temperature, and number of other people present will shape the communication that occurs (DeVito, 2014). For example, a noisy, crowded-bar might limit communication or create external noise that interferes with your ability to hear the message. On the other hand, a quite coffee shop with a fire might encourage communication. Physical space even operates in what we typically think of as virtual spaces, like social media. For example, Twitter limits the amount of characters in a tweet, thus messages communicated via this platform are often concise and abbreviated (DeVito, 2014).



(Image: [Brooke Cagle, Unsplash](#))

**Physical Context:** The physical context is the environment where the communication takes place. Think about how a coffee shop or bar might encourage communication, whereas a loud concert might prevent it. Also, think about the objects present in the physical environment. Do you think technology, such as a phone or computer, could be a barrier or distraction?

### 1.2.3: Relational Context

The relational context pertains to both the type of relationship that we have with a person and our previous history of interactions with them.

Communication norms and rules vary based on the type of relationship people have, such as whether they are a friend, family member, supervisor, significant other, etc. For example, communication norms and rules that apply to a supervisor-supervisee relationship are different from a romantic relationship. In addition, we also share a communication history consisting of previous interactions we have had with a particular person and this will influence the meaning behind messages. For example, let's say we asked our partner to pick up milk on the way home from work. When they arrive home, we might say

“Did you get it?” While this might not make sense to another person viewing the interaction, “it” is understood as “the milk” based on our previous communications (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016).

## 1.2.4: Individual Context

The individual context refers to characteristics that are specifically related to us, such as our cognitive and physical abilities, personality, emotional state, internalized biases/prejudices, past experiences, and/or internal motivations. Individual characteristics are unique for every person and influence how we communicate with others (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016) and we interpret another communicator’s message. For example, if we are feeling stressed and angry from a long day at work (emotional state), we might interpret someone’s one-word replies as a form of intentional disrespect. When feeling calm and rested, though, we might interpret these same types of replies as a sign that they may be suffering from emotional upset.

The Individual context can also create noise that interferes with the production, reception, and interpretation of a message. For example, physiological processes, such as stuttering, can interfere with message production. Hearing problems may interfere with the reception of the message, as well as our mental state, such as being preoccupied or daydreaming. Individual conceptions of a word also create a type of semantic noise which will influence its interpretation. For example, while you innocently referred to your date’s spending habits as “frugal,” he was offended because he thought you meant he was “cheap.”

## 1.2.5: Cultural Context

“Culture refers to the learned patterns of perceptions, values, and behaviors

shared by a group of people” (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016). While culture is often used to refer to large groups of people by country (U.S. Mexico, China, etc.), we also belong to many overlapping co-cultures based on facets of our identity such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, generation, religion, etc. Communication is embedded in culture and co-culture because they dictate rules and norms for behavior in interactions. For example, take a co-cultural category such as gender identity, and think about norms for how females and males should (or should not) sit. Females will often try to take up as little space as possible when sitting and will cross their legs, whereas males will typically spread out- a phenomenon that has recently been dubbed ‘manspreading.’). The reason why females sit one way and males another is because we learn norms and rules for behaviors, like sitting, walking, etc. Growing up, females are often explicitly told “cross your legs” and “don’t sit with your legs open.”

Often times, behaviors we think are normal are actually not innate, rather we have learned them explicitly or implicitly via the culture and co-cultures we belong to. Culture and communication are inseparably intertwined as our various co-cultural identities influence how we communicate and how others communicate with us (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016). Culture and co-culture may also create semantic noise due to variations in a particular group’s use and understanding of a word or phrase. For example, take the word ‘cool’, one generation may use it in reference to temperature while another may use as a synonym for awesome. Co-cultures also attach experiences and emotions to particular words that another group may not, such as derogatory terms.

## 1.3.0: Principles of Communication

In this section, we will be discussing how communication is used to meet needs; exists on multiple levels; is a transactional process; is situated; can be either face-to-face, mediated, or both; is continuous, intentional, and unintentional; and is irreversible.

### 1.3.1: Communication Meets Needs

In addition to using communication to exchange messages and create shared meaning, we also use it to meet the various needs we have as human beings. Communication meets four needs: physical, instrumental, relational, and identity.

Physical needs include needs that keep our bodies and minds functioning. Communication, which we most often associate with our brain, mouth, eyes, and ears, actually has many more connections to and effects on our physical body and well-being. At the most basic level, communication can alert others that our physical needs are not being met. Human beings are social creatures, which makes communication important for our survival.

Instrumental needs include needs that help us ‘get things done’ in our day-to-day lives and achieve short- and long-term goals. We all work towards short- and long-term goals every day. Fulfilling these goals is an ongoing communicative task, which means we spend much of our time communicating for instrumental needs. Some common instrumental needs include influencing others, getting information we need, or getting support (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000).

Communication meets our relational needs because it is through communication that we begin, develop, maintain, and end relationships. In order to develop a relationship, we may use nonverbal communication to assess whether someone is interested in talking to us or not, then use verbal communication to strike up a conversation. Then, through the mutual process of self-disclosure, a relationship forms over time. Once formed, we need to maintain a relationship, so we use communication to express our continued liking of someone. We can verbally say things like “You’re such a great friend.” Finally, communication or the lack of it helps us end relationships. We may communicate our deteriorating commitment to a relationship by avoiding communication with someone, verbally criticizing him or her, or explicitly ending a relationship. From checking in with relational partners by text, social media, or face-to-face, to celebrating accomplishments, communication forms the building blocks of our relationships.

Identity needs include our need to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular ways. Our identity changes as we progress through life, but communication is the primary means of establishing our identity and fulfilling our identity needs. Communication allows us to present ourselves to others in particular ways. Just as many companies, celebrities, and politicians create a public image, we present different faces in different contexts. The influential scholar Erving Goffman compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts (Goffman, 1959). For example, you may perform the role of a parent when at home with your child, but the role of supervisor when at work.



(Image: [Timothy Paul Smith, Unsplash](#))

**Communicating Identity:** Communication allows us to express our identities, both verbally and nonverbally. Our physical appearance, such as clothing choices, grooming, accessories, and body art, enables us to present an image of ourselves to others.

### 1.3.2: Communication Exists on Multiple Levels

Communication operates on two distinct levels: there is a content dimension and a relational dimension. The content dimension is the meaning of the actual message itself, whereas the relational dimension expresses “how you feel about the other person: whether you like or dislike the other person, feel in control or subordinate, feel comfortable or anxious, and so on” (Adler, 2017, p. 18). For example, consider the difference between someone saying “I’m busy tonight” in

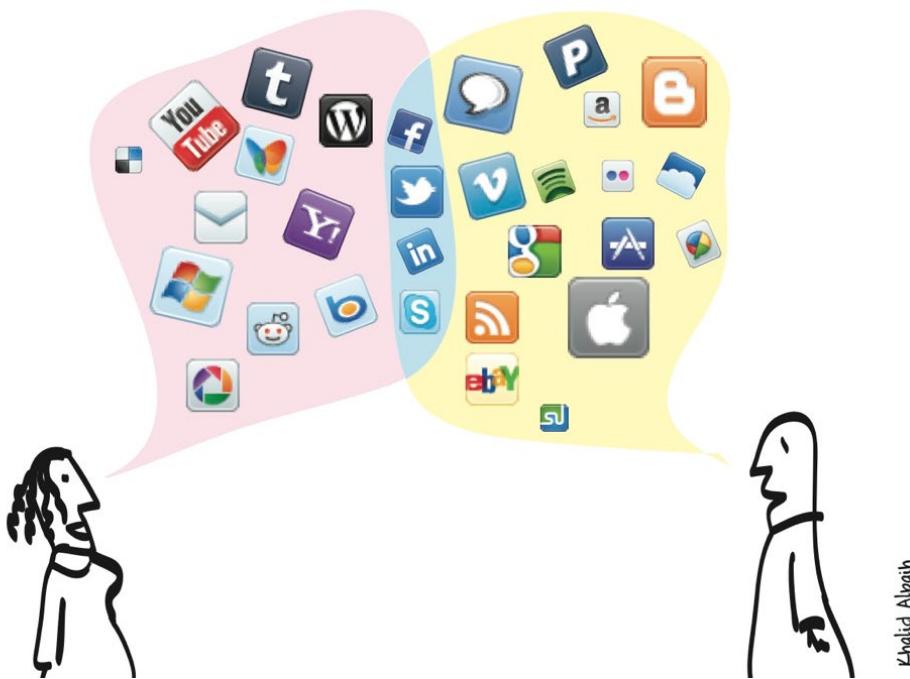
an annoyed tone versus “Sorry babe, I’m busy tonight” in an apologetic tone. Both messages mean the same thing on the content dimension, but express different feelings on the relational dimension. There may be times when the content dimension is all that matters; likewise, there are other times where more importance is placed on the relational dimension (Adler & Proctor, 2017).

### 1.3.3: **Communication is Transactional**

Communication is also a transactional process, this means that: 1) Each communicator is simultaneously a sender and receiver of messages. 2) Meaning is co-created in the interaction by both **communicators**. 3) Communication is an ongoing process and previous interactions between communicators influence current interactions. And since communication is ongoing, 4) current interactions likewise will influence future interactions and will either affirm or modify perceptions of the other and the relationship (Alberts, Nakayama, & Martin, 2016).

### 1.3.4: **Communication can be Face-to-Face, Mediated, or Both**

Communicative interactions can take place face-to-face using verbal symbols, such as words, and nonverbal symbols, such as gestures. They can also take place through a mediated platform, such as a smoke signal, email, or text message. Sometimes, it can even be a combination of face-to-face and mediated, such as when a speaker is presenting to an audience with a microphone. How the interaction takes place will affect how messages are produced, interpreted, and coordinated.



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**Communication Channel:** Our communicative interactions can take place face-to-face and through mediated-platforms, such as text message or social media. The channel we use to communicate is important as there are nuances that coincide with each which influence meaning.

### 1.3.5: Communication is Situated

All communication is situated, which means that communication occurs within a specific setting “that affects how the messages are produced, interpreted, and coordinated” (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016, p. 16). Not only do the contextual factors mentioned in Section 2 influence communication, but communication is also situated historically, economically, socially, and politically. For example, some current political rhetoric surrounding Mexican immigrants paints them as criminals and rapists; this can affect how others

perceive and communicate (or avoid communicating) with people that fall into this group.

### 1.3.6: Communication is Continuous, Intentional, & Unintentional

In all communicative interactions, we are continuously sending messages, whether they are verbal or nonverbal, and whether it is intentional (conscious), or unintentional (unconscious). Although communication may seem like a perceptible and deliberate process, we often send messages without conscious thought. In fact, there are so many messages being sent at one time that many of them may not even be received.

Additionally, not all behavior is consciously encoded. For example, we might have had a rough night with little sleep, which us yawn more often than we normally would. We are not deliberately and consciously encoding the yawn, rather our body does it without forethought. However, our yawn may unintentionally communicate “boredom” to the other person in the interaction. In contrast, we may consciously decide to communicate a particular message (encoding) to another person if their story has gone on a very long time and we have somewhere else to go. We may decide in our heads that we need a way out of the conversation and consider a yawn and a glance toward the door to be an effective way to hint that we have to leave.



*Mediated-Communication: In mediated communication interactions, such as those that take place through text message, we are still simultaneously senders and receivers of messages- even when we don't respond to a message. Through this channel, a lack of response still can be interpreted a variety of ways by the other communicator. They may think we are busy or intentionally ignoring their texts.*

### 1.3.7: Communication is Irreversible

Once something is communicated, it is irreversible and cannot be uncommunicated. While we “may try to qualify, negate, or somehow reduce the effects... once it has been sent and received, the message itself cannot be reversed” (DeVito, 2014, p. 25). Have you ever put your foot in your mouth and said something you wish you could take back? You may have even quickly said “I take it back,” but the impression created in the mind of the other cannot be erased. While we can apologize, there can still be consequences of the original message. This principle is also important to note in mediated-communication that takes place through platforms such as email or a text message, as your interactions can also be saved and shared with others.



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**Communication is Irreversible:** The principle communication is irreversible reminds us that there are no ‘take backs’ when it comes to what we say and do. This is important to keep in mind when communicating through technology, such as phones, as what we say can be saved and easily shared with others.

## 1.4.0: Communication Competence

**A**s stated in the introduction, the purpose of this text is to increase communication competence. Although the word ‘competent’ is somewhat subjective and the definition can vary from person to person, we conceptualize communication competence as being comprised of three interrelated components. In order to be a competent communicator, our communication needs to be effective, contextual, and reflective. In this section, we discuss each one of these components and how we can improve communication competence.

### 1.4.1: Effective Communication

Effective communication pertains to two things: achieving our goals and creating (or not creating) shared meaning in interactions. As communicators, we have a variety of goals in interactions, ranging from trivial to important. Goals may include things like passing time, entertainment, getting or giving information, persuading another person, etc. (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016). Usually, it can be pretty easy to measure whether or not we have effectively achieved our goal(s). For example, let's say our goal is to persuade our roommate to do the dishes. If they do the dishes, then we have achieved our goal. If they do not do the dishes, then we have not achieved our goal.

Effective communication also includes creating shared meaning in interactions by encoding our messages in a way that will enable them to be easily understood by the other communicator. For example, we may use concrete phrases such as “the blue book on the counter” versus “that thing over there.” Although, sometimes we may purposely choose to use messages that are

ambiguous. For example, if a friend were to ask us, “What do you think of this dress?” we may respond by saying “interesting” to avoid giving a direct answer. Because we are not always conscious of encoding and decoding, and because others can decode both our intentional and unintentional messages in a variety of ways (which we may not mean), in this text we will draw more attention to our cognitive processes in the interest of improving shared meaning and communication effectiveness.

## 1.4.2: Contextual Communication

Context and communication are inseparably intertwined. In order for our communication to be effective, it must take context into consideration. As previously mentioned, context plays an important role in how messages are produced, interpreted, and coordinated. Different contexts have different norms and rules for what is considered acceptable (or unacceptable) and appropriate (or inappropriate) behavior. In other words, norms and rules exist for what we should or can do, and what we shouldn’t or can’t do. A bar (physical context) has different norms and rules for communication than a classroom. The norms and rules for interacting with a stranger versus a close friend (relational context) are vastly different. Contexts overlap, so the norms and rules are dynamic, constantly shifting, and may be hard for us to discern at times. For example, it may be acceptable to kiss someone we are romantically involved with, but not a stranger (relational context). It may be acceptable to kiss we are dating at the park, but not in the workplace (physical context). And depending on our (co)culture (cultural context), it may not be considered acceptable to be affectionate with someone we are dating in any public place. Because communication contexts are intertwined, it is important for us to be aware of the ways contextual nuances influence and shape interactions.

In addition, contexts are also embedded with ethics, or what is considered right or wrong in terms of actions and behaviors. Ethics exists on individual, co-cultural, and cultural levels. For example, we may be part of a religion (co-

culture) that considers lying, regardless of the context, to be wrong. However, as an individual we may think it is okay to lie in certain situations, such as for safety reasons or to protect our privacy. As competent communicators, we must become adept at identifying contextual nuances and adapting our behavior to the context. We will cover the specifics of contextual influences throughout the book. Adding this knowledge to your understanding of interpersonal communication will help you make mindful choices that work for you and your relationships.

### 1.4.3: Reflective Communication

The final component of a communication competence is reflective communication, which means becoming more consciously aware and mindful. Being reflective means actively considering our own communication and analyzing the long and short-term effects of our behavior(s) on our identity, other people, and our relationships.

#### Identity:

Since communication meets identity needs, both verbal and nonverbal communication is used to manage our identity and present an image of ourselves based on how we want others to perceive us. Identity is contextual and fluid and can be communicated intentionally and unintentionally. For example, let's say in a professional context we want others to perceive us as being confident and intelligent. We might intentionally communicate this nonverbally by looking at people in the eye and verbally by using big words. However, we may also unintentionally engage in behaviors that communicate a different identity to others than the one we what. For example, a brief interaction in the workplace in which we yell angrily at a colleague may cause those who witness this interaction to perceive us as being immature or difficult to work with. Because of this, it is important to analyze how even small interactions contribute to other's perceptions of who they think we are.

## **Others:**

Since interpersonal communication involves at least two people, the way we communicate impacts those around us, whether it be a stranger, friend, or partner. Even a brief encounter with store clerk could have the potential to impact that person positively or negatively. For example, if we were to give a grocery cashier a compliment by saying that we like their haircut, that might make them feel good. Likewise, if we were to insult them by saying their haircut is unflattering, it could have the opposite effect. While some may argue that people are ultimately accountable for their own feelings and should take responsibility for them, competent communicators engage in perspective-taking and are cognizant of the potential interpretations of messages and the effects of these messages on others.

## **Relationships:**

Finally, the way we communicate can have both short-term and long-terms effects on our relationships, both personal and professional. Getting into a superficial argument in an intimate relationship may have the short-term effect that other person not talking to us for the rest of the day. However, if in that argument we said something extremely hurtful, even if we apologized later, that other person may never forget what we said, and it may come up over and over again and cause long-term issues in the relationship. In relationships, our immediate communication and how we communicate with others over periods of time can be key to building healthy and mutually satisfactory relationships or unhealthy relationships that eventually dissolve.

### **1.4.4: Improving Communication Competence**

Three key things can help improve communication competence: **knowledge**,

**skills, and motivation.**

## **Knowledge:**

We can improve our communication competence by learning communication concepts, principles, characteristics, and theories. This knowledge enables us to better understand ourselves and others. Specifically, knowledge of communication processes helps us develop self-awareness of our goals and abilities; investigate the whys behind the choices we make and the way we interact with others, consider how our experiences and expectations influence the meaning we assign to a given situation, event, person, comment, behavior, etc., and consider how others' experiences and expectations influence the meaning they assign to situations, events, person, comments, behaviors, etc.

## **Skills:**

In addition to increasing our knowledge of communication, in this text we will learn concrete skills and techniques to improve communication effectiveness. Stewart (2012) uses the metaphor of inhaling and exhaling to describe the interpersonal communication process. Skills such as listening will fall under the inhaling category. We can consciously improve our inner cognitive processing by taking in information from others and the outside world. Skills such as assertiveness will fall under the exhale category as we consciously strategize about what messages we want to put out in the world, paying attention to how they might be perceived.

The skills we learn can be thought of as 'communication tools.' Communication tools are a lot like carpenters' tools. We all have different levels of skill ability and a different range of tool usage. Some of us may have fairly full toolbox of tools that we already are able to skillfully use, while others don't. A skilled carpenter is able to purposefully select from a variety of different tools and use them skillfully to build, maintain and repair structures. A skilled communicator

is able to purposefully select from a variety of different tools and use them skillfully to build, maintain and repair relationships.

Note that both the carpenter and communicator are able to choose purposefully. Purposeful choices require a key cognitive skill—that of awareness. Improved awareness is the key to increasing any type of competence. Awareness involves being conscious of our own current strengths and limitations, bringing directed attention to the contextual knowledge we gain throughout through studying communication, and being mindful of our interpersonal communication goals. With such an awareness we can ultimately direct ourselves to make effective choices that benefit our lives.

The skill of awareness can be developed, practiced, and improved. Our journey to improve awareness can begin with a better understanding of motivation.



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Communication skills are a lot like carpenter's tools. We can select which ones we want to use, depending on the situation and our goals.

## Motivation:

Finally, in order to increase our communication competence, we have to want to become a better communicator. It is not enough to learn knowledge and skills, we have to see a reason to apply them as well. Seeing this reason requires not only awareness but a certain type of mindset. This mindset requires a couple of considerations. First, it is helpful for us to realize that things such as our emotional intelligence and communication abilities are not fixed. Dweck (2007) reminds us that people who have a “growth” mindset (rather than a “fixed” mindset) believe they can learn, change, and grow. Neuroscience studies

show that if we believe we can improve, motivation is likely to follow, as well as increased achievement.

A similar concept is called locus of control. Your locus of control is the extent to which you believe you have power over the events in your life. Those people with an internal locus of control believe that success or failure is related to their own doing. Those with an external locus of control are less clear about their own role in the way their lives play out, and are more likely to chalk outcomes up to luck or chance. You can work to shape your internal locus in a way that affects your motivation. We don't need to stay stuck in automatic scripts, routine patterns, and the same old outcomes. We are humans and thus have "agency," which is the ability to act with free will. We have the capacity to exercise control over our own thought processes, emotions and behaviors, an understanding of which will likely increase our motivation to improve competence.

Sometimes reflecting on who we are, how we communicate, and why we engage in certain behaviors can make us feel uncomfortable. Other times, because certain new skills may differ from how we normally communicate, they can seem disingenuous or feel awkward to use. We may also fear how the new communication patterns will be interpreted by others. However, learning knowledge and skills will enable us to better understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. We can maintain and increase our motivation by considering this potential and periodically reflecting on positive effects that result from improved communication. For example, by improving our communication we may increase our relationship satisfaction, become more successful in the workplace, and better accomplish our goals across a variety of contexts.

# Chapter 2: Culture and Communication

Culture and communication are inseparably intertwined as “language and culture are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate, and understand reality” (Vygostky, 1968, p.39). Culture influences our worldview, beliefs, and what we consider normal. However, as we all know from experience, many differences among cultures exist, which can often cause miscommunication and conflict. In this chapter, we will define culture and intercultural communication, explore 10 ways in which cultural groups differ, discuss how a dialectical approach can be applied to intercultural communication, and address ways to improve communication competence.

## Essential Questions

- How do cultures differ? And how do those differences affect intercultural interactions?
- How can we improve intercultural communication competence? And for what reasons?

## Successful students will be able to:

- identify the definitions of culture and intercultural communication
- recognize 10 cultural variables
- explain four aspects of a dialectical approach to intercultural communication

- explain three aspects of intercultural competence

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## 2.1.0: Defining Culture and Intercultural Communication

In this section, we will define culture and explain what culture, co-culture, and intercultural communication is.

### 2.1.1: Definition of Culture



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**Performance:** In many ways, culture is like a theater performance: there are parts we see and parts we don't see. On-stage, we can see the actors, hear their words, and watch the action. But backstage there is a lot going on that we never see and are not aware of. What we can see, hear,

*smell, taste and touch is only a small part of what is actually happening. This is why it is often so difficult to say what is specifically making us feel uncomfortable or frustrated when we are in a foreign culture. Another way to think about culture is like an iceberg: one-third visible (on-stage) and two-thirds below the water (backstage).*

For the purposes of exploring the communicative aspects of culture, we will define culture as the ongoing negotiation of learned and patterned beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors among members of a group. Unpacking the definition, we can see that culture shouldn't be conceptualized as stable and unchanging. Culture is "negotiated," because it is dynamic, and cultural changes can be traced and analyzed to better understand why our society is the way it is. The definition also points out that culture is learned, which accounts for the importance of socializing institutions like family, school, peers, and the media.

Culture is patterned in that there are recognizable widespread similarities among people within a cultural group. There is also deviation from and resistance to those patterns by individuals and subgroups within a culture, which is why cultural patterns change over time. Lastly, this definition acknowledges that culture influences our beliefs about what is true and false, our attitudes including our likes and dislikes, our values regarding what is right and wrong, and our behaviors.



(Image: Laura B, [Pixabay license](#))

Culture is often invisible to us and we tend to take it for granted. As the saying goes, ‘fish don’t necessarily know they are in water because they are completely immersed in it.’ Our cultural environment is difficult to perceive until we are exposed to something different. Just as a fish out of water is suddenly aware of what it normally lives inside of, we gain awareness of our own culture when we are exposed to situations and people that are unfamiliar and different.

## 2.1.2: Culture, Co-culture, and Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication occurs when people with different cultural and

co-cultural groups interact with each other. Most people tend to think of intercultural communication in terms of communicating with someone from a different country. However, even within one geographic location, both a dominant culture and multiple co-cultural groups exist. The dominant culture is created by the group who is in power, runs the country, and makes laws and policies. The attitudes, beliefs, values, patterns of thinking, and communicative behaviors of the dominant group are the ones that have become normalized and are often viewed as ‘ideal’ or superior. For example, what is considered ‘proper’ English, acceptable hairstyles, and business attire have all been defined by the dominant group.

Historically, in the U.S., this dominant group has been comprised of wealthy, white, heterosexual, Christian, males. However, other co-cultural groups exist based on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, ableness, generation etc. Because of this, intercultural communication actually exists on a continuum. On the low end, we might be communicating with someone of the same race and social class, but they may be a different gender. On the high end, we may be communicating with someone who is from a completely different geographic location, gender, race, generation, etc.

Culture and co-culture(s) influence our behaviors, values, beliefs, patterns of thinking, and perception of our environment. Cultural and co-cultural identities distinguish groups of people from one another. This is important because group differences are often what make us feel uncomfortable in interactions and can lead to miscommunication and conflict. Moreover, in all cultures, co-cultural membership based on factors like gender or race can work to either privilege or disadvantage members of that particular group. Being part of the dominant group generates certain privileges that members of the nondominant group do not get and create unequal power dynamics in our communicative interactions. However, by recognizing privilege and studying the common differences that exist across cultures in terms of beliefs, values, attitudes, and patterns of thinking, we can better reflect on our own culture and co-culture, view it through a different lens, and improve our intercultural communication competence.



(Image: [Piers NYE, CC BY NC ND 2.0](#))

**Intercultural Communication:** Intercultural communication exists on a continuum. On the low end, we might be communicating with someone of the same race and social class, but they may be a different gender. On the high end, we may be communicating with someone who is from a completely different geographic location, gender, race, generation, etc.

## 2.2.0: Ten Cultural Variables

In this section, we will address ten cultural variables: control, time, action, communication, space, power, individualism/collectivism, competitiveness/cooperativeness, structure, and thinking. These major variables offer a simple frame of reference for examining culture and understanding its major characteristics.

### 2.2.1: Control

Different cultures approach nature, which includes both the environment and human nature, from varied perspectives. Cultures hold one of three beliefs about the physical world and our environment. The first belief is that humans have control over their environment and it is right of humans to engineer and change the environment to achieve goals. The second belief is that humans should live in harmony with nature and thus decision making should help to create harmonious relationships. The final belief is that we are controlled by their environment. Members of the latter cultures believe that is crazy to think that we have direct control over plans, schedules, goals.

Cultures may also hold one of three beliefs pertaining to human nature. The first is the belief that people are basically "good." In these cultures, people will generally believe that you can put the right person in the right position and empower him / her to perform. The second belief is that people are basically "bad." These types of cultures put an emphasis on control and monitoring of people. The final belief is that people are a mixture of "good" and "bad." In these cultures, people believe personal development is possible, and investment in training and professional development is highly desirable.

## 2.2.2: Time

A culture's use of time can communicate differences more profoundly than words. Three orientations to time can be seen across cultures. The first is past-orientation, where high value is placed on continuance of traditions. In these cultures, changes and plans are judged according to their fit with history and customs. The second is present-orientation, which is a short-term orientation aimed at quick results. In these cultures, changes and plans are judged on fast pay-off. Finally, future-orientation includes a willingness to trade short-term gains for long-term results. In these cultures, changes and plans are judged on expected future benefit.

In addition, we also see differences in terms of single-focused and multi-focused views of how time is used and adhered to. Single-focused, also referred to monochronic, uses of time place high concentration on one task or issue and people are committed to schedules. Multiple-focused, or polychronic, uses of time emphasize on multiple tasks, with a priority on relationship building rather than on meeting deadlines.

## 2.2.3: Action

Cultures, like individuals, can be oriented towards activity or passivity. The first type is a doing culture, where value is placed on action, accomplishments, achieving personal goals and improving one's standard of living. These cultures follow external standards of measurement and are motivated by promotions, raises, bonuses and recognition.

Conversely, in being cultures, value is placed on working for the moment, release from stress, and experience rather than accomplishment. These cultures put emphasis on job satisfaction and are not motivated by promises of future

rewards.

## 2.2.4: Context, Formality, and Directness

There are three variables that exist across cultures- high-context/low-context, formal/informal, and direct/indirect- that deal more directly with the way we send messages back and forth when we interact. The first variable pertains to how much meaning is conveyed through the context surrounding verbal communication. In low-context cultures, information is given primarily in words and meaning is expressed explicitly. In other words, you are expected to say what you mean and mean what you say. Conversely in high-context cultures, information is transmitted not just in words but also through a variety of contexts, such as voice tone, body language, facial expressions, eye contact, speech patterns, use of silence, past interactions, status, common friends, etc. Members of high-context cultures might not say something directly as they may assume other group members will understand the indirect meaning.

The second pertains to how important it is to formally or informally follow rules for self-presentation and for behavior in organizations and social situations. In formal-communication cultures, importance is given to following protocol and social customs. In informal-communication cultures, people feel more comfortable doing business in a more casual way without lots of rituals and ceremonies.

The final variable pertains to the level of directness people use when handling conflict and tension in interactions: Direct cultures value open handling and resolution of conflict and tension. Conflict can be handled top-down (one-way) or top-down and bottom-up (two-way). Indirect cultures value conflict avoidance and are careful not to bring contentious issues out into the open especially when the relationship is not well – established.

## HIGH-CONTEXT AND LOW CONTEXT:

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### LOW-CONTEXT

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- Communications are direct and seen as a means of exchanging information.
- Conflicts are depersonalized and work can proceed despite disagreement.
- Business relationships start and end more quickly and depend less on personal trust between individuals.
- One's identity is more rooted in oneself and one's accomplishments.
- Thought patterns are more compartmentalized and inductive.

### HIGH-CONTEXT

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- High use of non-verbal signals.
- Communications are indirect and seen as an art form.
- Conflict must be resolved before work can progress.
- Business relationships depend on trust and build slowly.
- One's identity is rooted more in groups.
- Thought patterns are holistic and deductive.

## DIRECT AND INDIRECT

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### DIRECT

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- Tend to view conflict, tension and frank feedback as constructive and important.
- Conflict is handled through discussion, debate or negotiation.
- Appreciates honesty and trustworthiness.

### INDIRECT

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- Avoid giving the impression of disrespect or causing embarrassment.
- Preserve honor and dignity and avoid shame (or loss of face).
- Higher tolerance for ambiguity.

## 2.2.5: Space

Cultures also differ in regard to how they perceive and use physical spaces,

specifically private and public space. In private-space cultures, personal space is valued, and clear borders and boundaries exist between one space and another. Ownership of space is important. Doors are to be closed, and knocking before entering is expected. In public-space cultures, the boundaries between personal and public spaces are weaker and more flexible. Space is shared rather than owned. Doors are to be kept open, and access is free.

## 2.2.6: Power Distance

The power variable pertains to how much the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. In high-power distance cultures, also referred to as hierarchy cultures, inequality is accepted. Structures are defined and differences in status are seen as normal. This type of culture satisfies a need for dependence and security. In professional settings, members of high-power distance cultures usually prefer groups where clear roles are assigned and there is a designated leader.

In low-power distance cultures, also referred to as equality cultures, inequality is thought to be unsatisfactory. While it may be unavoidable, it is considered correct to minimize it through legal, political, and economic means. In professional settings, members of low-power distance cultures do not accept that a manager has a given right to greater power and all member can participate in decision making.

## 2.2.7: Individualism and Collectivism

# **IF MY SMOKING BOthers YOU...**



## **DON'T BREATHE!**

(Image: [CCO 1.0](#))

*Individualism vs Collectivism:* The slogan “If my smoking bothers you- don’t breathe” highlights the difference between individualistic and collectivist orientations. Individualistic cultures place a high concern on the self, whereas collectivist cultures are concerned about the group. In a collectivist cultures, people usually do not engage in behaviors that would bother others, such as smoking or playing loud disruptive music.

Individualism and collectivism pertain to the extent to which countries elevate the role of the individual over the group. In individualistic cultures, the bonds between individual members are relatively loose. People are independent and expected to take care of themselves, or at most, the nuclear family. Guilt and fear of loss of self-respect are central to social control. The "I" predominates over the "We." Individual identity is key, and speaking one's mind is a sign of honesty. Individualist cultures emphasize individual expression and personal responsibility.

In collectivist cultures, individual interests are placed second to group interests.

Groups protect their members in exchange for loyalty and obedience. Social control is based on the fear of losing face and the possibility of shame. Identity is therefore based on the social network to which a person belongs. Harmony, rather than speaking one's mind, is a key value. Laws and rights differ from group to group, and political power is held by interest groups.

#### INDIVIDUALIST AND COLLECTIVIST

##### INDIVIDUALISTIC

- Motivation tends towards achievement and power.
- Tasks are valued over relationships.
- Conflict is seen as inevitable.
- Management means the management of individuals.
- Hiring and promoting are based on skills and roles.
- Employer-employees relationship is based on mutual advance.

##### COLLECTIVIST

- Motivation tends towards belonging.
- Relationships are valued over tasks.
- Conflict is seen as a negative force.
- Management means the management of groups.
- Hiring and promotion tasks into account belonging to a group.
- Employer-employee relationship is like a family connection.

## 2.2.8: Competitiveness and Cooperativeness

Competitiveness pertains to how much achievement and success dominate over caring for others and quality of life. In competitive cultures, achievement, assertiveness and competition are reinforced. In these cultures, social and gender roles also tend to be distinct. Men are expected to be assertive, tough, and driven by material success. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be modest, nurturing, and concerned mainly with the quality of life. When competitiveness is valued, the culture is predominantly materialistic, with an emphasis on assertiveness and acquisition of money, property, goods, etc. High

value is placed on ambition, decisiveness, performance, speed and size.

Cooperativeness characterizes cultures in which social and gender roles overlap. Everyone is expected to demonstrate modesty, nurturing, and a concern for the quality of life. Being sympathetic to one's fellow human beings is important with an emphasis on relationships. High value is placed on consensus and intuition. In a competitive culture, people live to work. In a cooperative culture, people work to live.

## 2.2.9: Structure

Structure tells us how much the members of a culture experience threat or discomfort by uncertainty or unknown situations. In high-structure cultures (low tolerance for ambiguity) there is a need for predictability and rules – both written and unwritten. These cultures try to reduce ambiguity and make everything as clear and understandable as possible. Conflict is threatening and there is a need for rules and regulations. Without these, anxiety and stress are high.

Cultures that are low-structure (high tolerance for ambiguity) are more tolerant of unknown situations, people and ideas. There are looser definitions of roles and responsibility and people are more willing to take risks. Anxiety levels are lower, tolerance of difference and deviance is higher, and dissent is acceptable.

## 2.2.10: Thinking

Thinking is a variable that shows how a culture conceptualizes things. It explains differences between the way arguments are made, events are analyzed, and plans are conducted. Specifically, there are two distinct variables in

Deductive-oriented cultures emphasize abstract thinking. Priority is given to the conceptual world and symbolic thinking rather than to collecting facts. Appeal is made to theories principles or examples that have produced results in the past. Inductive-oriented cultures derive principles and theories from the analysis of data. Models and hypotheses are based on empirical observation. The amassing of facts and statistics is valued, and a lot of faith is placed in methodologies and measurement.

Linear-oriented cultures tend to dissect a problem or an issue into small chunks that can be linked in chains of cause and effect. Systemic-oriented cultures stress an integrated or holistic approach, and emphasize the whole and its relationships.

#### LINEAR-ORIENTED AND SYSTEMIC-ORIENTED

##### LINEAR

- Try to make complex tasks and subjects manageable by breaking them down.
- Follow a step-by-step analytical approach to problem solving.
- Highly pragmatic, emphasizing detail and precision.

##### SYSTEMIC

- There often is a reliance on analogy, metaphor and simile for explanation.
- Focus on the whole and the interrelationships among the parts.
- Tend to take a cross-functional perspective.

## 2.3.0: Culture and Communication: A Dialectical Approach and Five Dialectics

In this section, we will discuss what a dialectical approach entails and examine five dialectics to help us better understand the link between culture and communication: Cultural-Individual, Personal-Contextual, Differences-Similarities, Static-Dynamic, and Privileges/Disadvantages.

### 2.3.1: A Dialectical Approach

Communication across cultures and co-cultures is complicated, messy, and at times contradictory. Therefore, it is not always easy to conceptualize or study. Taking a dialectical approach allows us to capture the dynamism of intercultural communication. A dialectic is a relationship between two opposing concepts that constantly push and pull one another (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). To put it another way, thinking dialectically helps us realize that our experiences often occur in between two different phenomena. This perspective is especially useful for communication because—when we think dialectically—we think relationally. This means we look at the relationship between aspects of communication rather than viewing them in isolation. Intercultural communication occurs as a dynamic in-betweenness that, while connected to the individuals in an encounter, goes beyond the individuals, creating something unique.

Holding a dialectical perspective may be challenging for some Westerners, as it asks us to hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously, which goes against much of what we are taught in our formal education. Thinking dialectically

helps us see the complexity in culture and identity because it doesn't allow for dichotomies. Dichotomies are dualistic ways of thinking that highlight opposites, reducing the ability to see gradations that exist in between concepts. Dichotomies such as good/evil, wrong/right, objective/subjective, male/female, in-group/out-group, black/white, and so on form the basis of much of our thoughts on ethics, culture, and general philosophy, but this isn't the only way of thinking (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Many Eastern cultures acknowledge that the world isn't dualistic. Rather, they accept as part of their reality that things that seem opposite are actually interdependent and complement each other.

A dialectical approach is useful in studying communication because it gets us out of our comfortable and familiar ways of thinking. Since so much of understanding culture and identity is understanding ourselves, having an unfamiliar lens through which to view culture can offer us insights that our familiar lenses will not. Also, as these dialectics will iterate, culture and communication are complex systems that intersect with and diverge from many contexts. A better understanding of all these dialectics helps us think more critically and communicate more competently in and with the world around us.

### 2.3.2: Cultural-Individual Dialectic

The cultural-individual dialectic captures the interplay between patterned behaviors learned from a cultural group and individual behaviors that may be variations on or counter to those of the larger culture. This dialectic is useful because it helps us account for exceptions to cultural norms. For example, the United States is said to be a low-context culture, which means that we value verbal communication as our primary, meaning-rich form of communication. Conversely, Japan is said to be a high-context culture, which means they often look for nonverbal clues like tone, silence, or what is not said for meaning.

However, you can find people in the United States who intentionally put more

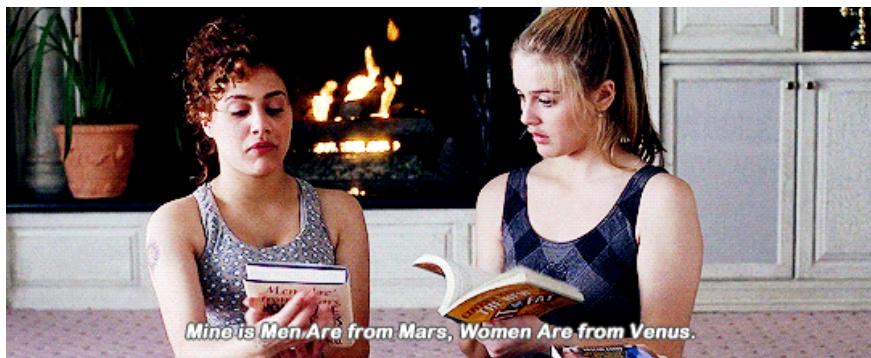
meaning into how they say things rather than what they say, perhaps because they are not as comfortable speaking directly what's on their mind. We often do this in situations where we may hurt someone's feelings or damage a relationship. Does that mean we come from a high-context culture? Does the Japanese man who speaks more than is socially acceptable come from a low-context culture? The answer to both questions is no. Neither the behaviors of a small percentage of individuals nor occasional situational choices constitute a cultural pattern.

### 2.3.3: Personal-Contextual Dialectic

The personal-contextual dialectic highlights the connection between our personal patterns of and preferences for communicating and how various contexts influence the personal. In some cases, our communication patterns and preferences will stay the same across many contexts. In other cases, a context shift may lead us to alter our communication and adapt. For example, an American businessperson may prefer to communicate with their employees in an informal and laid-back manner. When they are promoted to manage a department in their company's office in Malaysia, they may again prefer to communicate with their new Malaysian employees the same way they did with those in the United States.

In the United States, the accepted norm is that communication in work contexts is more formal than in personal contexts. However, we also know that individual managers often adapt these expectations to suit their own personal tastes. This type of managerial discretion would likely not go over as well in Malaysia where there is a greater emphasis put on power distance (Hofstede, 1991). So, while the American manager may not know to adapt to the new context unless they have a high degree of intercultural communication competence, Malaysian managers would realize that this is an instance where the context likely influences communication more than personal preferences.

## 2.3.4: Differences-Similarities Dialectic



*Differences/Similarities:* Statements like “men are from Mars and women are from Venus” create group differences by stereotyping. In addition, these socially and culturally constructed categories ignore and silence those whose body, identity, and/or performance do not align with their assigned gender.

The differences-similarities dialectic allows us to examine how we are simultaneously similar to and different from others. It’s easy to fall into a view of intercultural communication as “other oriented” and set up dichotomies between “us” and “them.” When we over focus on

differences, we can end up polarizing groups that actually have commonalities. When we over focus on similarities, we essentialize, or reduce/ overlook important variations within a group. This tendency is evident in most of the popular, and some of the academic, conversations regarding “gender differences.” The book *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus* makes it seem like men and women aren’t even species that hail from the same planet. The media is quick to include a blurb from a research study indicating again how men and women are “wired” to communicate differently. However, gender is a social and cultural construction in which groups of people are categorized as either being a man or women. This essentializes and stereotypes people by focusing on the ways in which they are different, rather than similar, and ignores and silences those whose body, identity, and/or performance do not align with their assigned gender.

## 2.3.5: Static-Dynamic Dialectic

The static-dynamic dialectic suggests that culture and communication change over time yet often appear to be and are experienced as stable. Although it is true that our cultural beliefs and practices are rooted in the past, cultural categories that most of us assume to be stable, like race and gender, have changed dramatically in just the past fifty years. Some cultural values remain relatively consistent over time, which allows us to make some generalizations about a culture. For example, cultures have different orientations to time. The Chinese have a longer-term orientation to time than do Europeans (Lustig & Koester, 2006). This is evidenced in something that dates back as far as astrology. The Chinese zodiac is done annually (The Year of the Monkey, etc.), while European astrology was organized by month (Taurus, etc.). While this cultural orientation to time has been around for generations, as China becomes more Westernized in terms of technology, business, and commerce, it could also adopt some views on time that are more short term.

## 2.3.6: Privileges-Disadvantages Dialectic

The privileges-disadvantages dialectic captures the complex interrelation of unearned, systemic advantages and disadvantages that operate among our various co-cultural identities. As was discussed earlier, there exists both the dominant culture and co-cultures; our co-cultural groups and identities have certain privileges and/or disadvantages. To understand this dialectic, we must view these identities through a lens of intersectionality, which asks us to acknowledge that we each have multiple cultural and co-cultural identities that intersect with each other. Because our co-cultural identities are complex, no one is completely privileged and no one is completely disadvantaged. For example, while we may think of a white, heterosexual man as being very privileged, they may also have a disability that leaves them without the able-bodied privilege that a Latina woman has. This is often a difficult dialectic for

many to understand, because we are quick to point out exceptions that we think challenge this notion. For example, many people like to point out Oprah Winfrey as a powerful black woman. While she is definitely now quite privileged despite her disadvantaged identities, her trajectory isn't the norm. When we view privilege and disadvantage at the cultural level, we cannot let individual exceptions distract from the systemic and institutionalized ways in which some people are disadvantaged while others are privileged.

## Group Privilege:

Depending on the co-culture you belong to, you may benefit from certain privileges or advantages. According to Peggy McIntosh, privilege is like an invisible knapsack of advantages that some people carry around. They are invisible because they are often not recognized, seen as normative (i.e., “that's just the way things are”), seen as universal (i.e., “everyone has them”), or used unconsciously. Below is a list of some of the privileges McIntosh identifies associated with white skin color. Can you think of others that are associated with other positions of privilege (such as gender, sexual orientation, or ableness)?

- When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color, who constitute the world’s majority, without feeling in my culture any

penalty for such oblivion.

- If a traffic cop pulls me over, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race
- I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color that more or less match my skin.

Full article: Peggy McIntosh's "[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.](#)"

## 2.4.0: Communication Competence

In this section, we address how to improve intercultural communication competence, discuss the value of switching your communication code based on context, and reflect on intercultural relationships.

### 2.4.1: Effective Communication: Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) pertains to your ability to appropriately and effectively communicate in cultural and co-cultural contexts. Below are five key guidelines for improving your ICC.

1. Observe the situation without making judgments. When communicating with other (co)cultures, our first judgment about "those people" is often mistaken and/or based on stereotypes. Observing, non-judgmentally, can help us to understand others' mindset and minimize biases and preconceptions.
2. Tolerate ambiguity. When communicating across (co)cultures, there are many situations that are ambiguous and make us feel uncomfortable. Patience and perseverance are very important qualities of the competent communicator.
3. Practice perception-flipping. All of us behave as we do because we believe our ways are valid and, often, superior. Before criticizing someone else's behavior, we should try flipping our perception to see the other person's point of view. In other words, put yourself in their shoes.
4. Reframe our questions. If we ask ourselves "How can they be so rude?" or

"Why are they so insensitive?!" we are expressing a negative assumption about the other person. Reframing these questions to, "What is the reason behind their behavior?" prevents us from getting trapped in our own assumptions and allows us to explore the other's frame of reference without bias.

5. Cultivate motivation and view communication as an opportunity for personal growth and development. This is especially important for members of dominant groups who often have more power and privilege in situations. This power creates an imbalance and it is often the members of nondominant groups who are expected to conform and adapt to the behaviors of the dominant group. Regardless of our co-cultural groups and identities, we should all develop motivation to be more competent **communicators.**

## 2.4.2: Contextual Communication: Communication Codes



(Image: [rawpixel](#), [Pixabay license](#))

**Communication Codes:** Communication codes are guidelines, rules, and norms for how to interact and behave in communicative interactions, based on context. For example, think about what is considered the ‘norm’ in U.S. America for greeting someone. A handshake? A hug? How does the type of greeting change based on context? For example, if you are greeting a friend you might hug them or do a fist bump. But if you were at a business meeting, you would likely give someone a handshake. Think about all of the ‘rules’ for handshakes: How long do you shake someone’s hand? How far apart should you stand? Where should look? Does the picture above seem to be following these rules- why or why not?

Remember that communication is contextual, and the cultural context is an important aspect of communicative interactions. Differences in culture and co-culture inform beliefs, values, attitudes, and thinking, and likewise inform behaviors and ‘norms’ in our communicative interactions. Because of this, it is important to understand that there are communication codes operating in any given interaction. A code is a socially constructed, historically transmitted,

system of symbols, premises, rules, and meanings pertaining to communicative conduct (Covarrubias, 2002). In other words, a code is a set of rules associated with conduct, a guideline for what is acceptable (or not acceptable) in particular situations, and for what a person should (or should not) do.

The purpose of a code is for members and individuals in a cultural/co-cultural group to communicate effectively so that they understand one another and behave in appropriate ways. Culture and co-culture inform the communicative system—or communication code—that is operating in a given interaction. Since one group may have a set of shared symbols that differs from another group, the groups may attribute different meanings to the codes. To be a competent communicator, we need to observe the cultural and co-cultural context to determine what codes should be employed to create shared meaning in an interaction.

### **2.4.3: Reflective Communication: Intercultural Relationships**

Relationships are frequently formed between people with different cultural identities, and may include friends, romantic partners, family, and coworkers. These relationships have both benefits and challenges. For example, some of the benefits include increasing cultural knowledge, challenging previously held stereotypes, and learning new skills (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Intercultural relationships also present challenges, however. The dialectics discussed earlier affect our relationships. The similarities-differences dialectic in particular may present challenges to relationship formation (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). While differences between people's cultural identities may be obvious, it takes some effort and reflection to uncover commonalities that can form the basis of a relationship. Perceived differences in general also create anxiety and uncertainty. Negative stereotypes may also hinder progress toward relational development, especially if the individuals are not open to adjusting their

preexisting beliefs. However, by reflecting on similarities and differences, and understanding the values and dialectics mentioned in this chapter, tensions can begin to balance out, and uncertainty and anxiety can lessen.

## Ethnocentrism:

When engaging in intercultural communication, it is important to avoid ethnocentrism, which is the belief that your culture and your way of doing things is superior. When we do this, we view our position as normal and right and evaluate all other cultural systems against our own. Ethnocentrism shows up in small and large ways: the WWII Nazi's elevation of the Aryan race and the corresponding killing of Jews, Gypsies, gays and lesbians, and other non-Aryan groups is one of the most horrific ethnocentric acts in history. However, ethnocentrism shows up in small and seemingly unconscious ways as well. In U.S. American culture, if you decided to serve dog meat as an appetizer at your cocktail party you would probable disgust your guests and the police might even arrest you because the consumption of dog meat is not culturally acceptable. However, in China "it is neither rare nor unusual" to consume dog meat (Wingfield-Hayes). In the Czech Republic, the traditional Christmas dinner is carp and potato salad. Imagine how your U.S. family might react if you told them you were serving carp and potato salad for Christmas. In the Czech Republic, it is a beautiful tradition, but in America, it might not receive a warm welcome. Our cultural background influences every aspect of our lives from the food we consume to which classroom curriculum is emphasized over others.

# Chapter 3: The Perception Process & Perception of Others

**T**ake a moment do a quick inventory of your senses: What do you see? Smell? Hear? Feel? Every second of every minute of every hour of every day, we are exposed to stimuli. Yet, what we choose to attend to and how we interpret it varies greatly from person to person. In this chapter, we will learn about the perception process and how we interpret a wide range of stimuli, from objects to people to behaviors. We will also address cultural and personality differences, and we will discuss how to improve communication competence.

## Essential Questions

- How does the perception process work?
- How and why can we improve the role of perception in interpersonal communication?

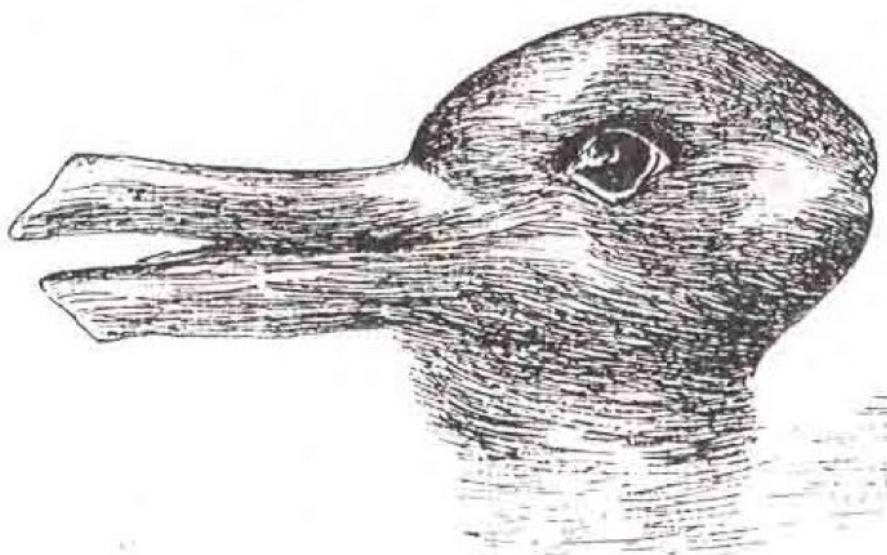
## Successful students will be able to:

- explain three parts of the perception process
- describe how we form impressions of people and make attributions for behaviors
- recognize ways that culture and personality may affect perception
- demonstrate the skill of perception checking
- explain the roles of context and reflection in improving perception

- Sections: 3.0, 3.4.2, 3.4.3: Interpersonal Communication Abridged Textbook (I.C.A.T.); Central New Mexico Community College; 2019; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](#)
- Sections: 3.1.1 – 3.1.3, 3.2.1- 3.3.2, 3.4.1: adapted from Communication in the Real World: An Introduction to Communication Studies; University of Minnesota; 2016; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](#)

## 3.1.0: The Perception Process

**P**erception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This process includes the perception of select stimuli that pass through our perceptual filters, are organized into our existing structures and patterns, and are then interpreted based on previous experiences. Although perception is a largely cognitive and psychological process, how we perceive the people and objects around has an effect on our communication. We respond differently to an object or person that we perceive favorably than we do to something we find unfavorable. In this section, we discuss how we filter through the mass amounts of incoming stimuli we receive, organize it, and make meaning from it.



(Image: [CC0 1.0](#))

*When you look at this image do you see a rabbit or a duck? The way we*

*view our environment and the world around us varies from person to person; sometimes quite significantly. However, even if someone sees something differently than you, it doesn't mean their perception is incorrect or not as valid as yours.*

### 3.1.1: Selecting Information

We take in information through our senses, but our perceptual field (the world around us) includes so many stimuli that it is impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all. So, as information comes in through our senses, various factors influence what actually continues on through the perception process (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Selecting is the first part of the perception process, in which we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information. We tend to pay attention to information that is salient. Salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. The thing attracting our attention can be abstract, like a concept, or concrete, like an object. The degree of salience depends on three factors: visual and aural stimulation, needs and interests, and expectations (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

- **Visual and Aural Stimulation:** It is probably not surprising to learn that visually and/or aurally stimulating things become salient in our perceptual field and get our attention. Stimuli can be attention-getting in a productive or distracting way. Creatures ranging from fish to hummingbirds are attracted to things like silver spinners on fishing poles or red and yellow bird feeders. Having our senses stimulated isn't always a positive thing though. Think about the couple that won't stop talking during the movie or the upstairs neighbor whose subwoofer shakes your ceiling at night.
- **Needs and Interests:** We select and attend to information that meets our needs- whether a sign helps us find the nearest gas station, the sound of a ringtone helps us find our missing cell phone, or a speaker tells us how avoiding processed foods will improve our health. We also find salient

information that interests us. Of course, many times, stimuli that meet our needs are also interesting, but it's worth discussing these two items separately because sometimes we find things interesting that don't necessarily meet our needs. I'm sure we've all gotten sucked into a television show or random project and paid attention to that at the expense of something that actually meets our needs like cleaning. In many cases we know what interests us and we automatically gravitate toward stimuli that match up with that. For example, as you filter through radio stations, you likely already have an idea of what kind of music interests you and will stop on a station playing something in that genre while skipping right past stations playing something you aren't interested in.

- **Expectations:** The relationship between salience and expectations is a little more complex. Basically, we can find both expected and unexpected things salient. While this may sound confusing, a couple examples should illustrate this point. If you are expecting a package to be delivered, you might pick up on the slightest noise of a truck engine or someone's footsteps approaching your front door. Since we expect something to happen, we may be extra tuned in to clues that it is coming. In terms of the unexpected, if you have a shy and soft-spoken friend who you overhear raising the volume and pitch of his voice while talking to another friend, you may pick up on that and assume that something out of the ordinary is going on. For something unexpected to become salient, it has to reach a certain threshold of difference. If you walked into your regular class and there were one or two more students there than usual, you may not even notice. If you walked into your class and there was someone dressed up as a wizard, you would probably notice. Now that we know how we select stimuli, let's turn our attention to how we organize the information we receive.



(Image: [N.A. Naseer, CC BY-SA 2.5 IN](#))

*When we take in information through our senses, visually and aurally attractive stimuli tend to get our attention and become more salient in our perceptual field.*

### 3.1.2: Organizing Information

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

- **Proximity:** In terms of proximity, we tend to think that things that are

close together go together. For example, have you ever been waiting to be helped in a business and the clerk assumes that you and the person standing beside you are together? Even though you may have never met that other person in your life, the clerk used a basic perceptual organizing cue to group you together because you were standing in proximity to one another.

- **Similarity:** We also group things together based on similarity. We tend to think similar-looking or similar-acting things belong together. For example, if you were out with a friend who was around the same height, had the same skin color, and same hair color, people might assume you are related.
- **Difference:** We also organize information that we take in based on difference. In this case, we assume that the item that looks or acts different from the rest doesn't belong with the group. For example, let's say a group of five people were standing in line at the movies and four of the people were wearing casual jeans and t-shirts, and the fifth person a business suit. You might assume the person dressed in the suit was not in the same group as those dressed in jeans and t-shirts.



(Image: [CC0 1.0](#))

*One way we organize information is by difference, which means that when something looks different from what is around it, we assume it doesn't go together*

We simplify information and look for patterns to help us more efficiently communicate and get through life. Simplification and categorizing based on patterns isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, without this capability we would likely not have the ability to speak, read, or engage in other complex cognitive/behavioral functions. Our brain innately categorizes and files information and experiences away for later retrieval, and different parts of the brain are responsible for different sensory experiences. In short, it is natural for

things to group together and looking for patterns helps us in many practical ways.

However, it is important to note that the judgments we place on various patterns and categories are not natural; they are learned and culturally and contextually relative. For example, a famous study conducted by Liang-Hwang Chiu (1972), presented Chinese and U.S. American children with three objects- a chicken, cow, and grass- and asked them to group the two objects that went together. Most of the U.S. American children chose the chicken and cow, citing they were both animals. However, most of the Chinese children choose cow and grass, stating that cows eat grass. The reasons for this have been explained by differences in cultural backgrounds which cultivate different cognitive styles. White explains that “East Asians are typically oriented toward interdependence, harmony, and relatedness. Westerners are typically oriented toward independence. Interdependent persons think about objects in relation to context, whereas independent persons tend to focus on categories that share properties such as ‘animal-ness.’” (2011, para 5).



*Which two items go together? Most of the U.S. Americans tend to choose the chicken and cow, because they are both animals. However, Chinese people might say the cow and grass, since cows eat grass. How we categorize information can be influenced by our culture.*

### 3.1.3: Interpreting Information

Although selecting and organizing incoming stimuli happens very quickly, and sometimes without much conscious thought, interpretation can be a much more deliberate and conscious step in the perception process. Interpretation is the third part of the perception process, in which we assign meaning to our experiences using mental structures known as schemata. Schemata are like databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences. We all have fairly complicated schemata that have developed over time as small units of information combine to make more meaningful complexes of information. We have an overall schema about education and how to interpret experiences with teachers and classmates. This schema started developing before we even went to preschool based on things that parents, peers, and the media told us about school. For example, you learned that certain symbols and objects and concepts like a calculator, notebook, recess, and grades are associated with being a student or school. As you progressed through your education, your schema adapted to the changing environment.

How smooth or troubling schema reevaluation and revision is varies from situation to situation and person to person. For example, some students adapt their schema relatively easily as they move from elementary, to middle, to high school, and on to college and are faced with new expectations for behavior and academic engagement. Other students don't adapt as easily, and holding onto their old schema creates problems as they try to interpret new information through old, incompatible schema.

Schemata guide our interactions, providing a script for our behaviors. We know, in general, how to act and communicate in a waiting room, in a classroom, or on a first date. It's important to be aware of schemata because our interpretations also affect our behavior towards others. For example, if you are doing a group project for class and you perceive a group member to be shy based on your schema of how shy people communicate, you may avoid giving him presentation responsibilities in your group project because you do not

think shy people make good public speakers.

Schemata are also used to interpret others' behavior and form impressions about who they are as a person. To help this process along, we often solicit information from people to help us place them into a preexisting schema. In the United States and many other Western cultures, people's identities are often closely tied to what they do for a living. When we introduce others, or ourselves, occupation is usually one of the first things we mention. Think about how your communication with someone might differ if he or she were introduced to you as an artist versus a doctor. We make similar interpretations based on where people are from, their age, their race, and other social and cultural factors.



*Your schema for what is associated with school might include a bus, notebook, calculator, books, etc.*

**Schema is plural for**

## schemata

In summary, we have schemata about individuals, groups, places, and things, and these schemata filter our perceptions before, during, and after interactions. As schemata are retrieved from memory, they are executed, like computer programs or apps on your smartphone, to help us interpret the world around us. Just like computer programs and apps must be regularly updated to improve their functioning, competent communicators update and adapt their schemata as they have new experience; being able to adapt our schemata is a sign of cognitive complexity, which is an important part of communication competence.

## 3.2.0: Perceiving Others

**N**ow that we have an understanding of how we select, organize, and interpret the various stimuli we encounter every day, let's apply these principles to how we perceive other people and their behaviors. In this section, we will address how we form impressions of other people and make attributions for their behavior(s).

### 3.2.1: Impression Formation

We form impressions of others based on physical appearance and our interactions with them. Have you ever heard the phrase 'Don't judge a book by its cover?' When applied to people, it is meant to caution us against judging others based on physical appearance. However, forming impressions of people based on physical appearance is a natural thing that we do. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger, 1975) states that our social worlds are ambiguous, and this ambiguity can make us feel anxious. To lessen this anxiety, we monitor our environments and make interpretations. So, based on things like skin color, gender, attractiveness, grooming, clothes, weight, etc. we make judgements and have stereotypes of other people that are positive, neutral, and negative. However, although this is a natural process, it is important to be aware of how our impressions will influence our communication with people. The Communication Competence section of this chapter discusses the importance of reflecting on our judgments and stereotypes and how they may shape interactions in problematic ways.

In addition to making impressions based on physical appearance, we make impressions based off of behaviors we observe and our interactions with others.

These impressions can be about their personality, likeability, attractiveness, and other characteristics. For example, if we meet someone for the first time and they are smiling and making eye contact with us, our impression may be that they are friendly. Although much of our impressions are personal, what forms them is sometimes based more on circumstances than personal characteristics. All the information we take in isn't treated equally- the timing of information and the content of the messages we receive can influence our perception.

For many people, first impressions matter and if we interpret the first information we receive from or about a person as positive, then a positive first impression will form and influence how we respond to that person as the interaction continues. Likewise, negative interpretations of information can lead us to form negative first impressions. For example, if you sit down at a restaurant and servers walk by for several minutes and no one greets you, then you will likely interpret that negatively and not have a good impression of your server when they finally show up. This may lead you to be short with the server, which may lead them to not be as attentive as they normally would. At this point, a series of negative interactions has set into motion a cycle that will be very difficult to reverse and make positive.

### 3.2.2: **Attributions**

In most interactions, we are constantly running an attribution script in our minds, which essentially tries to come up with explanations for what is happening. Why did my neighbor slam the door when they saw me walking down the hall? Why is my partner being extra nice to me today? Why did my officemate miss our project team meeting this morning? In general, we seek to attribute the cause of others' behaviors to internal or external factors.

Internal attributions connect the cause of behaviors to personal aspects such as personality traits. External attributions connect the cause of behaviors to

situational factors. Attributions are important to consider because our reactions to others' behaviors are strongly influenced by the explanations we reach. For example, imagine that Avery and Kennedy are dating. One day, Kennedy gets frustrated and raises their voice to Avery. Avery may find that behavior more offensive and even consider breaking up with Kennedy if they attributes the cause of the blow up to Kennedy's personality. Conversely, Avery may be more forgiving if they attributes the cause of Kennedy's behavior to situational factors beyond Kennedy's control. If Avery makes an internal attribution, they may think, "Wow, this person is really a loose cannon. Who knows when they'll will lose it again?" If Avery makes an external attribution, they may think, "Kennedy has been under a lot of pressure to meet deadlines at work and hasn't been getting much sleep. Once this project is over, I'm sure they'll be more relaxed." This process of attribution is ongoing, and, as with many aspects of perception, we are sometimes aware of the attributions we make, and sometimes they are automatic and/or unconscious.

Attribution has received much scholarly attention because it is in this part of the perception process that some of the most common perceptual errors or biases occur. One of the most common perceptual errors is the fundamental attribution error, which refers to our tendency to explain others' behaviors using internal rather than external attributions (Sillars, 1980). For example, if you get a speeding ticket, you may attribute the cause of the ticket to the malevolence of the police officer, essentially saying you got a ticket because the officer was a mean/bad person, which is an internal attribution. You may be much less likely to acknowledge that the officer was just doing their job (an external attribution) and the ticket was a result of your decision to speed.

Just as we tend to attribute others' behaviors to internal rather than external causes, we do the same for ourselves, especially when our behaviors have led to something successful or positive. When our behaviors lead to failure or something negative, we tend to attribute the cause to external factors. For example, if a student gets a poor grade on a test, they may attribute their poor grade to their busy schedule or other external, situational factors rather than their lack of motivation, interest, or preparation (internal attributions). On the other hand, when a student gets a good grade on a paper, they will likely

attribute that cause to their intelligence or hard work rather than an easy assignment or an “easy grading” professor.

These psychological processes have implications for our communication because when we attribute causality to another person’s personality, we tend to have a stronger emotional reaction and tend to assume that this personality characteristic is stable, which may lead us to avoid communication with the person or to react negatively. Now that you are aware of these common errors, you can monitor them more actively and verify your attributions by checking your perceptions. Perception checking and other skills will be covered in the communication competence section.

## 3.3.0: Perception: (Co)Culture and Personality

Our co-cultural identities and our personalities affect our perceptions. Sometimes we are conscious of these effects and sometimes we are not. In either case, we have a tendency to favor others who exhibit cultural or personality traits that match up with our own. Since knowing more about these forces can help us become more aware, in this section, we will explore how culture/co-culture and personality influence our perceptions.

### 3.3.1: Culture and Co-culture

As we mentioned in chapter 2, culture and co-culture(s) influence our behaviors, values, beliefs, patterns of thinking, and perception of our environment. Therefore cultural and co-cultural membership based on nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, and age all affect the perceptions that we make. The schemata through which we interpret what we perceive are influenced by these memberships and identities. As we are socialized, we internalize beliefs, attitudes, and values shared by others within the dominant culture and our co-cultural groups. Schemata held by members of a group may have similarities or vary greatly.

Perception starts with information that comes in through our senses. How we perceive even basic sensory information is influenced by the dominant culture in which we reside. For example, many U.S. Americans, regardless of co-cultural membership, spend considerable effort to mask natural body odor, which they typically find unpleasant, with soaps, sprays, and lotions. However, some other cultures would not find this unpleasant or even notice what other cultures might consider “b.o.” Those same cultures may find a U.S. American’s “clean” (soapy,

perfumed, deodorized) smell unpleasant. Aside from differences in reactions to basic information we take in through our senses, there is also variations in how we perceive more complicated constructs, like marriage, politics, and privacy. For example, some groups frown on unmarried couples living together, while others do not.

As we've already learned, our brain processes information by putting it into categories and looking for predictability and patterns. The previous examples have covered how we do this with sensory information like smell and with more abstract concepts like marriage, but we also do this with people. When we categorize people, we generally view them as "like us" or "not like us." This simple us/them split affects subsequent interaction, including impressions and attributions. For example, we tend to view people we perceive to be like us as more trustworthy, friendly, and honest than people we perceive to be not like us (Brewer, 1999). We are also more likely to use internal attribution to explain negative behavior of people we perceive to be different from us. If a person of a different race cuts another driver off in traffic, the driver is even more likely to attribute that action to the other driver's internal qualities (thinking, for example, "He or she is inconsiderate and reckless!") than they would someone of their own race. Having such inflexible categories can have negative consequences, and later we will discuss how forcing people into rigid categories leads to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

Of course, race isn't the only marker of difference that influences our perceptions, and the problem with our rough categorization of people into "like us" and "not like us" categories is that these differences aren't really as easy to perceive as we think. We cannot always tell whether or not someone is culturally like us through visual cues. For some co-cultural identities, like sexual orientation and ability, our awareness of any differences may only come when the other person discloses their identity to us. You no doubt frequently hear people talking and writing about the "vast differences" between men and women. Whether it's communication, athletic ability, or expressing emotions, people will line up to say that women are one way and men are the other way. While it is true that gender affects our perception, the reason for this difference

stems more from social norms than genetic, physical, or psychological differences between men and women. We are socialized to perceive differences between men and women, which leads us to exaggerate and amplify what the differences actually are (McCornack, 2007). We basically see the stereotypes and differences we are told to see, which helps to create a reality in which gender differences are “obvious.” In addition, by placing groups into binaries (such as man/woman or heterosexual/homosexual), nonbinary experiences and perceptions are often silenced and ignored.

In summary, various (co)cultural identities shape how we perceive others because beliefs, attitudes, and values of the groups to which we belong are incorporated into our schema. Our personalities also present interesting perceptual advantages and challenges that we will now discuss.

### 3.3.2: Personality

Our personalities greatly influence how we see ourselves in the world and how we perceive and interact with others. Personality refers to a person’s general way of thinking, feeling, and behaving based on underlying motivations and impulses (McCornack, 2007). These underlying motivations and impulses form our personality traits. Personality traits are “underlying,” but they are fairly enduring once a person reaches adulthood. That is not to say that people’s personalities do not change, but major changes in personality are not common unless they result from some form of trauma.



(Image: [Stavros Markopoulos, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

*Our personalities influence our perception. For example- would you say this glass is half empty or half full? It is said that those who see the glass as half empty are pessimists, where those who view it as half full are optimists. Do you agree or disagree with such an assessment?*

Although personality scholars believe there are thousands of personalities, they all comprise some combination of the same few traits and appear to be representative of personalities across cultures. Much research has been done on personality traits, and the “Big Five” that are most commonly discussed are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (McCrae, 2001).

# The Big Five Personality Traits

- **Extraversion:** Refers to a person's interest in interacting with others and how they "recharge" their energy. Extroverts "recharge" through interactions with others, while introverts "recharge" by being alone. This may cause extroverts to be more social and introverts to be less social, however this is not always the case. While many tend to conflate introversion with being shy, introverts can also be social and/or outgoing.
- **Agreeableness:** Refers to a person's level of trustworthiness and friendliness. People with high agreeableness are cooperative and likable. People with low agreeableness are suspicious of others and sometimes aggressive, which makes it more difficult for people to find them pleasant to be around.
- **Conscientiousness:** Refers to a person's level of self-organization and motivation. People with high conscientiousness are methodical, motivated, and dependable. People with low conscientiousness are less focused, less careful, and less dependable.
- **Neuroticism:** Refers to a person's level of negative thoughts regarding himself or herself. People high in neuroticism are insecure and experience emotional distress and may be perceived as unstable. People low in neuroticism are more relaxed, have less emotional swings, and are perceived as more stable.
- **Openness:** Refers to a person's willingness to consider new ideas and perspectives. People high in openness are creative and are perceived as open minded. People low in openness are more rigid and set in their thinking and are perceived as "set in their ways."

Scholarship related to personality serves many purposes, and some of them tie directly to perception. We tend to focus on personality traits in others that we feel are important to our own personality. What we like in ourselves, we like in others, and what we dislike in ourselves, we dislike in others (McCornack, 2007). If you admire a person's loyalty, then loyalty is probably a trait that you think you possess as well. If you work hard to be positive and motivated and suppress negative and unproductive urges within yourself, you will likely think

harshly about what you've perceived as negative traits in someone else. After all, if you can suppress your negativity, why can't they do the same? This way of thinking isn't always accurate or logical, but it is common, and it impacts the way we communicate with one another.

### Personality Test:

If you are interested in how you rank in terms of personality traits, there are many online tests you can take. A Big Five test can be taken at the following website: <http://www.outofservice.com/bigfive>.)

## 3.4.0: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover the skill of perception checking, address contextual nuances that influence perception(s), and discuss the need for self-reflecting on our own perceptions.

### 3.4.1: Effective Communication: Perception Checking

## Perception Checking

Sharing your perception of another's behavior to confirm or clarify your interpretation.

### Observe

Observe the other person's behavior.

STEP  
**01**





## STEP 02

### Interpret

Think about how you interpret that behavior. Try to think of some alternative interpretations

### Share

Share your interpretation(s) with the other person and seek their clarification. Here it might be helpful to describe the behavior

## STEP 03



### Behavior:

Pat comes home and slams the door

### Share:

Jamie Says, "hey, Pat. I noticed when you came home you slammed the door. Are you upset about something that happened at work or were you just in a

The skill of perception checking is useful for managing our impressions. Perception checking is a strategy to help us monitor our reactions to and perceptions about people and communication. Perception Checking helps us slow down perception and communication processes and allows us to have more control over both. There are some internal and external strategies we can use to engage in perception checking. In terms of internal strategies, review the various influences on perception that we have learned about in this chapter and always be willing to ask yourself, “What is influencing the perceptions I am making right now?” Even being aware of what influences are acting on our perceptions makes us more aware of what is happening in the perception process. In terms of external strategies, we can use other people to help verify our perceptions. The cautionary adage “Things aren’t always as they appear” is useful when evaluating your own perceptions of another’s behavior.

You can also share your interpretation(s) of that behavior with the other person in order to check the accuracy of your perceptions. Perception checking involves being able to describe what is happening in a given situation, provide multiple interpretations of events or behaviors, and ask yourself and others questions for clarification. Some of this process happens inside our heads, and some happens through interaction.

Let’s take an interpersonal conflict as an example. Miguel and Edgardo are roommates. Miguel is in the living room playing a video game when they see Edgardo walk through the room with a suitcase and walk out the front door. Since Edgardo didn’t say or wave good-bye, Miguel has to make sense of this encounter, and perception checking can help with that. First, Miguel needs to try to describe (not evaluate yet) what just happened. This can be done by asking yourself, “What is going on?” In this case, Edgardo left without speaking or waving good-bye. Next, Miguel needs to think of some possible interpretations of what just happened. One interpretation could be that

Edgardo is mad about something (at Miguel or someone else). Others could be that Edgardo was in a hurry and simply forgot or that they didn't want to interrupt the video game. In this step of perception checking, it is good to be aware of the attributions you are making. You might try to determine if you are over attributing internal or external causes. Lastly, you will want to verify and clarify. So Miguel may want to call, text, or speak to Edgardo. During this step, it's important to be aware of that the other person likely experienced the event differently than you. Even though Miguel has already been thinking about this incident, and is experiencing some conflict, Patrick may have no idea that their actions caused Miguel to worry. If Miguel texts and asks why Edgardo's mad (which wouldn't be a good idea because it's expressed as an assumption) Edgardo may become defensive, which could escalate the conflict. Miguel could just describe the behavior (without judging Edgardo) and ask for clarification by saying, "When you left today you didn't say bye or let me know where you were going. I just wanted to check to see if things are OK."

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

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

### **3.4.2: Contextual Communication: Contextual Nuances that Influence**

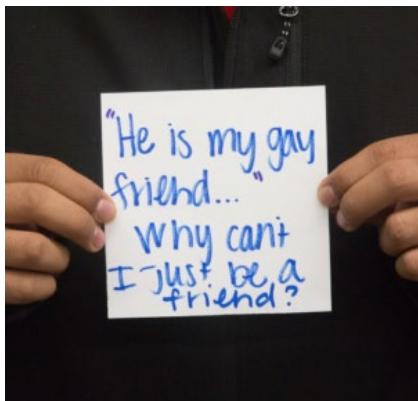
# Perception

Since all communication is contextual, we must be mindful of the role that context plays in our interpretations. As contextual factors change, so might our interpretations of a specific behavior. For example, the physical context (where the communicative interaction is physically taking place) could change the meaning we attribute to a behavior, such as fidgeting. If our partner was fidgeting while watching T.V. one night, we might interpret their behavior to mean they were nervous because they had something serious they want to discuss with us. However, if they were fidgeting at a party, we might think instead they were trying to avoid someone or feeling anxious about being around too many people.

The relational context (the relationship we have with another), will also influence our perceptions. If our supervisor speaks to us in short, clipped sentences then we may think they are having a bad day or in a hurry. But if our best friend were to do the same, we might instead think are mad at us. Cultural and individual frames, such as our personalities and previous experiences, also play a key role in our interpretations and perceptions. When communicating with others and decoding/interpreting their messages and behaviors, we need to be cognizant of not just the physical and relational contexts, but also of cultural and individual nuances.

## 3.4.3: Reflective Communication: Reflecting on Perceptions, Stereotypes, and Biases

Finally, another way to increase communication competence is to be self-reflective of our own perceptions. Specifically, it is important to reflect on how we perceive others and how these perceptions may be influenced by stereotypes and biases.



(Image: [Texas Tech University Student Housing, CC BY 2.0](#))

*Often times, we may not realize that the things that we say can be actually microaggressions.*

Stereotypes are sets of beliefs that people have about a group of people, based on factors like race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, ableness, physical appearance, speech, beliefs, etc. They serve to essentialize people based on group membership, rather than looking at individual and multiple facets of their identities. Stereotypes can make us biased and prejudiced towards a certain group, especially if we perceive them as being “not like us” or inferior in some way.

Note that stereotypes can be negative, positive or neutral. For example Mexicans have historically been stereotyped negatively as “lazy” whereas some Asians have been stereotyped positively as “smart” or “good at math.” While negative stereotypes devalue and often render people who fall into a particular group inferior or deficient, even positive stereotypes can be harmful in that they objectify people and place unfair expectations on them. Moreover, stereotypes surrounding our co-cultural group memberships and identities, such as those related to gender, can lead to double standards. Think about all the double standards between women and men. The words used to characterize a sexually active person are typically negative for women and positive for men. For example, a female who has had multiple sexual partners may be called a ‘slut,’ ‘thot’ or a ‘ho,’ whereas a male may be called a ‘pimp,’ ‘player’ or ‘stud.’

The final way to increase your communication competence when it comes to perception is through self-reflection. Specifically, it is important to reflect on how we perceive others and how these perceptions may be influenced by stereotypes and biases. Stereotypes are sets of beliefs that people have about a group of people, based on factors like race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age,

ableness, physical appearance, speech, beliefs, etc. They serve to essentialize people based on group membership, rather than looking at the individual and multiple facets of their identities. Stereotypes can make us biased and prejudiced towards a certain group, especially if we perceive them as being “not like us” or inferior in some way.

When it comes to stereotypes, it is important to note that they can be negative, positive or neutral. For example, Mexicans have historically been stereotyped negatively as “lazy” whereas some Asians have been stereotyped positively as “smart” or “good at math.” While negative stereotypes devalue and often render people who fall into a particular group inferior or deficient, even positive stereotypes can be harmful in that they objectify people and place unfair expectations on them. Moreover, stereotypes surrounding our co-cultural group memberships and identities, such as those related to gender, can lead to double standards. Think about all the double standards between women and men. The interpretations of a behavior, such as being sexually active, and the words used to describe it are typically negative for women, whereas the words used to describe sexually active men are positive. For example, a female who has had multiple sexual partners may be called a ‘slut,’ ‘thot’ or a ‘ho’ whereas a male may be called a ‘pimp,’ ‘player’ or ‘stud.’

## Double Standards:

When it comes to terms used to describe sexually active women and men, there is a double standard. Terms used to describe women are usually negative, while those used to describe men are positive to neutral. Here are some definitions of common slang terms, according to dictionary.com (2019):

- **“THOT (that-hoe-over-there):** Slang: Disparaging and Offensive. a woman considered to be sexually provocative or promiscuous; a slut or whore.”
- **“Slut:** Disparaging and Offensive. a sexually promiscuous woman, or a woman who behaves or dresses in an overtly sexual way.”

- “**Stud**:a virile or sexually active man.”

Stereotypes can influence our interactions in both blatant and subtle ways, and often times we may not even realize our communication is influenced by stereotypes. We may even engage in a variety of unconscious macroaggressions in our everyday interactions without ever realizing it until they are pointed out to us. Microaggressions are verbal and nonverbal behaviors, intentional and unintentional, that communicate some sort of stereotype, bias, prejudice, and/or others another person based off of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ableness, and/or immigration status. For example, a woman walking down the street might unconsciously clutch her purse closer when she sees a large black man because of the prevalent stereotype of black males as ‘thugs.’ An Asian person may be complemented on their English or asked “Where are you really from?” (even if they were born in the U.S) reinforcing the stereotype that they are not ‘real’ Americans.



(Image: Kiyun Kim, used according to [license](#))

*Microaggressions are verbal and nonverbal behaviors, intentional and unintentional, that communicate some sort of stereotype, bias, prejudice, and/or others another person based off of race, ethnicity, gender identity,*

*sexual orientation, religion, ableness, and/or immigration status. The photos above were taken as part of a Racial Microaggressions photo series; you can view more on [Kiyun Kim's tumblr](#).*

While we may not be aware that we are enacting microaggressions or think they are harmless behaviors and questions, they can take a serious psychological toll on the people who receive them. Consider how Graciella might feel after being admitted to Harvard, only to have a classmate exclaim “That’s great! Affirmative action really helped you- you’re so lucky that you get to benefit from it!”, rather than attributing Graciella’s acceptance to intelligence and hard work. Or how While most people like to think they are fair-minded and judge everyone equally, we all hold stereotypes and biases. Even though it can make us feel uncomfortable, guilty, or even ashamed to reflect on our own biases and stereotypes, it important to examine how they creep into our communication and affect our interactions with others.

# Chapter 4: Identity and Perception of Self

**A**sk yourself the following questions: “Who am I?” and “What defines me?” We may think these are easy questions to answer and that we have a good grasp on our identity and what comprises it. However, our identities are not inherent and fixed. Who we are and what defines us changes throughout our lives. In addition, the way we communicate with others and vice-versa creates, shapes, and reshapes our identity in significant ways. While some people may assert “This is just who I am” or “I was born this way,” our identities are actually formed through a variety of processes and interactions, and, as such, are dynamic and never fully complete. In this chapter, we will examine factors that shape our self-perception, learn about various types of identities, explore the relationship between identity and communication, address the principles of identity, and discuss how to improve communication competence.



theawkwardyeti.com

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## Essential Questions

- How does self-perception and identity shape communication, and vice-versa?
- Why is an understanding of identity and self-perception important for interpersonal communication competence?

### Successful students will be able to:

- explain three types of identities
- recognize six principles of identity

- describe how self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy shape our self-perception
- describe how family and media influence self-perception
- explain how self-perception, identity and communication are interrelated
- recognize how awareness of self-presentation, cultural context and self-fulfilling prophecy can help us build communication competence

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- Sections 4.1.0–4.1.2, 4.3.0-4.4.2, & 4.6.3: adapted from Communication in the Real World: An Introduction to Communication Studies; University of Minnesota; 2016; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](#)
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  - Sections 4.0, 4.2.6, 4.5.0-4.5.1, 4.6.1, & 4.6.2: Interpersonal Communication Abridged Textbook (I.C.A.T.); Central New Mexico Community College; 2019; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](#)

## 4.1.0: Types of Identities

Three related but distinct components of our self-perception are our personal and social identities (Spreckels, J. & Kotthoff, H., 2009), and our co-cultural identities. In this section, we will discuss personal, social, and co-cultural identities.

### 4.1.1: Personal and Social Identities



(Image: [CCO 1.0](#))

*Social Identities:* Our social identities are derived from the social groups that we belong to, both voluntarily or involuntarily, such as a sports team, art club, band, or family.

example, we may derive aspects of our social identity from our family or from a community of sports team fans. Our membership may be voluntary (such as being a member of a sports team) or involuntary (family). There are innumerable options for personal and social identities. While our personal identity choices express who we are, our social identities align us with

Personal identities include the components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences. For example, you may consider yourself a puzzle lover or identify as a fan of hip-hop music. Our social identities are the components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed.

Social identities differ from personal identities because they are externally organized through membership. For

particular groups. Through our social identities, we make statements about who we are and who we are not.

Personal identities may change often as people have new experiences and develop new interests and hobbies. Social identities do not change as often because they take more time to develop, as you must become interpersonally invested. For example, if an interest in online video games leads someone to become a member of a MMORPG, or a massively multiplayer online role-playing game community, that personal identity has led to a social identity that is now interpersonal and more entrenched.

### 4.1.2: Co-Cultural Identities

As a reminder, culture is defined as a set of learned behaviors, values, beliefs, and patterns of thinking that we learn as we grow and develop. However, as we know from our own experiences and observations, there are many different sets of behaviors, values, beliefs, and patterns of thinking around us. Within any geographic location, both the dominant culture and various co-cultures exist. Devito (2014) defines the dominant culture as “the learned system of values, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of thinking held by the people who are in power in a society” (p. 73). However, co-cultures also “exist side by side with the dominant culture and are comprised of smaller numbers of less powerful people who hold common values, attitudes, beliefs, and orientations that differ from those of the dominant culture” (p 73). The co-cultures we belong to are based on factors like race, gender, and social class, and they form part of our identity.

Our co-cultural identities are based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being, and include expectations for social behavior, ways of acting, and norms (Yep, G. A., 2002). The ways of being and the social expectations for behavior within co-cultural identities can and do change over time. For example, think of how ways of being and acting have changed for African Americans since the civil rights movement or norms of behavior for

women today versus 50-years ago.

These common ways of being and acting, and norms within a co-cultural identity group are expressed through communication. In order to be accepted as a member of a co-cultural group, members must be acculturated, essentially learning and using a code that other group members will be able to recognize. A code is a socially-constructed, historically transmitted system of rules, beliefs, and premises pertaining to communicative behavior. Basically, communication codes tell us how to behave and interact with others, and tell us what is considered ‘normal’ and acceptable behavior.

We are acculturated into our various co-cultural identities and learn communication codes in obvious and less obvious ways. We may have a parent or friend tell us what it means to be a man or a woman. We may also unconsciously consume messages from popular culture that offer representations of gender. Because co-cultural identities are learned via communication, they are also socially constructed. Social constructionism is a view that argues the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relationship to social, cultural, and political contexts (Allen, 2011). The sub-sections below discuss how co-cultural identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been constructed in the United States, and how communication relates to those identities. Other important identities could be discussed, such as religion, generation, nationality, class, etc. Although they are not given their own subsection, consider how those identities may intersect with the identities discussed next.

## Race:

Would it surprise you to know that human beings, regardless of how they are racially classified, share 99.9 percent of their DNA? This finding by the Human Genome Project asserts that race is a social construct, not a biological one. The American Anthropological Association agrees, stating that race is the product of “historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances” (Allen, 2011). Therefore, we’ll define race as a socially constructed category based on differences in appearance that has been used to

create hierarchies that privilege some and disadvantage others. Racial distinctions have been based largely on phenotypes, or physiological features such as skin color, hair texture, and body/facial features. Unfortunately, Western “scientists” used these differences as “proof” that native populations were less evolved than the Europeans, which helped justify colonial expansion, enslavement, genocide, and exploitation on massive scales (Allen, 2011). Even though there is a consensus among experts that race is social rather than biological, we can’t deny that race still has meaning in our society and affects people.

## Colorblindness?

Think back to the previous chapter on perception and to our discussion of microaggressions. Race is one of the first things we notice about someone. Whether we are conscious of it or not, certain stereotypes and perceptions that are associated with skin color may manifest themselves, often unconsciously, in our communication. Perhaps you have heard or even made the assertion that “I don’t see race” and/or “I am colorblind”? Unless you truly can’t see color because of a physiological deficiency, this statement is incorrect. Usually, it is made because we feel uncomfortable talking about race or acknowledging its impact, as many of us have been told that in the U.S. we value equality and should judge others based on merit, not race. However, it is important to be critical and self-reflective of the ways in which skin color influences our communication with others.

## Gender:

When we first meet a newborn baby, we ask whether it’s a boy or a girl. This

question illustrates the importance of gender in organizing our social lives and our interpersonal relationships. Many parents consciously or unconsciously “code” their newborns in gendered ways based on our society’s associations of pink clothing and accessories with girls and blue with boys. While it’s obvious to most people that colors aren’t gendered, they take on new meaning when we assign gendered characteristics of masculinity and femininity to them. Just like race, gender is a socially constructed category.

You may have noticed that use of the word gender instead of sex. Sex is based on biological characteristics, including external genitalia, internal sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones (Wood, 2005). While the biological characteristics between men and women are obviously different, it’s the meaning we create and attach to those characteristics that makes them significant. The cultural differences in how that significance is ascribed are proof that “our way of doing things” is arbitrary. For example, cross-cultural research has found that boys and girls in most cultures show both aggressive and nurturing tendencies, but cultures vary in terms of how they encourage these characteristics between genders. In a group in Africa, young boys are responsible for taking care of babies and are encouraged to be nurturing (Wood, 2005). This example shows that although we think gender is a natural, normal, stable way of classifying things, it is actually not.

Gender is an identity based on internalized cultural notions of masculinity and femininity that is constructed through communication and interaction. There are two important parts of this definition to unpack. First, we internalize notions of gender based on socializing institutions, which helps us form what we think it means to be male or female. For example, when you think of a man, what characteristics come to mind to describe him? What do men like to do? How does a man behave? Think of a female. What characteristics describe the normal female, what they like to do, and how do they behave? Socialization and internalization of societal norms for gender differences accounts for much more of our perceived differences than do innate or natural differences between genders. Gender norms may be explicitly stated—for example, a mother may

say to her son, “Boys don’t play with dolls”—or they may be more implicit, with girls being encouraged to pursue historically feminine professions like teaching or nursing without others actually stating the expectation.

Second, we attempt to construct that gendered identity through our interactions with others, which is our gender performance. If we identify as female and want others to perceive us as female, we will attempt to behave and communicate as we think a female is supposed to. For example, if you identify as female you may communicate this identity nonverbally by wearing dresses and make-up.

## Sexuality:

Although many people hold a view that a person’s sexuality should be kept private, this isn’t a reality for our society. One only needs to observe popular culture and media for a short time to see that sexuality permeates much of our public discourse. Sexuality relates to culture and identity in important ways that extend beyond sexual orientation, just as race is more than the color of one’s skin and gender is more than one’s biological and physiological manifestations of masculinity and femininity. Sexuality isn’t just physical; it is social in that we communicate with others about sexuality (Allen, 2011). Sexuality is also biological in that it connects to physiological functions that carry significant social and political meaning like puberty, menstruation, and pregnancy. Sexuality is at the center of political issues like abortion, sex education, and gay and lesbian rights.

The most obvious way sexuality relates to identity is through sexual orientation. Sexual orientation refers to a person’s primary physical and emotional sexual attraction and activity. The terms we most often use to categorize sexual orientation are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are sometimes referred to as sexual minorities. While the term sexual preference has been used previously, sexual orientation is more appropriate, since preference implies a simple choice. Although someone’s preference for a restaurant or actor may change frequently, sexuality is not as simple.

## **Hidden Identities:**

Certain identities, such as sexuality or mental health conditions, are not easily discernible to the eye. These can make these types of identities ‘hidden’ to the general population, unless the choice is made to disclose them.

While these communities are often grouped together within one acronym, LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual- the + symbol stands for other sexualities, sexes, and genders that are not included in these letters), they are different. Gays and lesbians constitute the most visible of the groups and receive the most attention and funding. Transgender issues have received much more attention in recent years, but

transgender identity connects to gender more than it does to sexuality, and a person who identifies as transgender may also be straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. Last, queer is a reclaimed term often used to describe a group that is diverse in terms of identities, but usually takes a more activist and at times radical stance that critiques sexual categories. However, it should be noted that even though the term is considered ‘reclaimed’ by many, it was once used as a derogatory slur meant to oppress anyone who did not present as a typical ‘male’ or ‘female,’ and, as such, some may still think of it as being negative. As with other cultural identities, notions of sexuality have been socially constructed in different ways throughout human history.

## **Ability:**

There is resistance to classifying ability as a cultural identity, because we follow a medical model of disability that places disability as an individual and medical rather than social and cultural issue. While much of what distinguishes able-bodied and cognitively able from disabled is rooted in science, biology, and physiology, there are important sociocultural dimensions. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines an individual with a disability as “a person who

has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (Allen, 2011). This definition is important because it notes the social aspect of disability, in that people’s life activities are limited, and the relational aspect of disability, in that the perception of a disability by others can lead someone to be classified as such.

Ascribing an identity of disabled to a person can be problematic as this label carries social and cultural significance. People are tracked into various educational programs based on their physical and cognitive abilities, and there are many cases of people being mistakenly labeled disabled who were treated differently despite their protest of the ascribed label. Students who did not speak English as a first language are more likely to be placed in special education classes or put into a lower track.

Ability, just as the other cultural identities discussed, has institutionalized privileges and disadvantages associated with it. Ableism is the system of beliefs and practices that produces a physical and mental standard that is projected as normal for a human being and labels deviations from it as abnormal, resulting in unequal treatment and access to resources. There is also a lot of stigma that surrounds mental conditions such as depression or anxiety, and some people falsely claim that these are “made up” or “not real” conditions. However, these conditions do exist and invalidating them can and has had serious emotional consequences for those who suffer from them.

Unlike other cultural identities that are typically stable over a lifetime, ability fluctuates for most people. We have all experienced times when we are more or less able. Perhaps you broke your leg and had to use crutches or a wheelchair for a while. Whether you’ve experienced a short-term disability or not, the majority of us will become less physically and cognitively able as we get older.

## 4.2.0: Principles of Identity

In this section, we will address the six principles of identity: how identities are plural, dynamic, have different and changing meanings, are contextual and intersectional, negotiated, and can be privileged, marginalized, silenced, or ignored.

### 4.2.1: Identities are Plural

Every person has a range of identities, according to how they see themselves (and how others see them) in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and so on. This means that seeing an individual in terms of one aspect of their identity – as a black person, for example, rather than as (say) a black working-class woman who is also a social worker, a mother and a school governor – is inevitably reductive and misleading.

### 4.2.2: Identities are Dynamic

The identities people assume, and the relative importance they attach to them, change over time because of both personal change in their lives and change in the external world (for example, as a result of changing ideas about being differently abled). Consequently, identity should not be seen as something ‘fixed’ within people.

## 4.2.3: Identities Have Different and Changing Meanings



*Identities Have Changing Meanings: A particular faucet of your identity, such as your gender, will have different meanings and associates throughout your life. For example, think about what it means to be a ‘boy’ versus a ‘teenage boy’, ‘man’, or ‘older man.’*

Aspects of identity may have different meanings at different times in people's lives, and the meanings that they attribute to aspects of their identity (for example, ethnicity) may be different from the meaning it has for others. For example, being black may be a source of pride for you, but the basis of someone else's negative stereotyping.

## 4.2.4: Identities are Contextual and Interactional

Different identities assume greater or less importance, and play different roles in different contexts and settings, and in interactions with different people. Different aspects of people's identity may come to the fore in the workplace and in the home. For example, people might emphasize different aspects of themselves to different people (and different people may see different identities when they meet them).

#### **4.2.5: Identities are Negotiated**

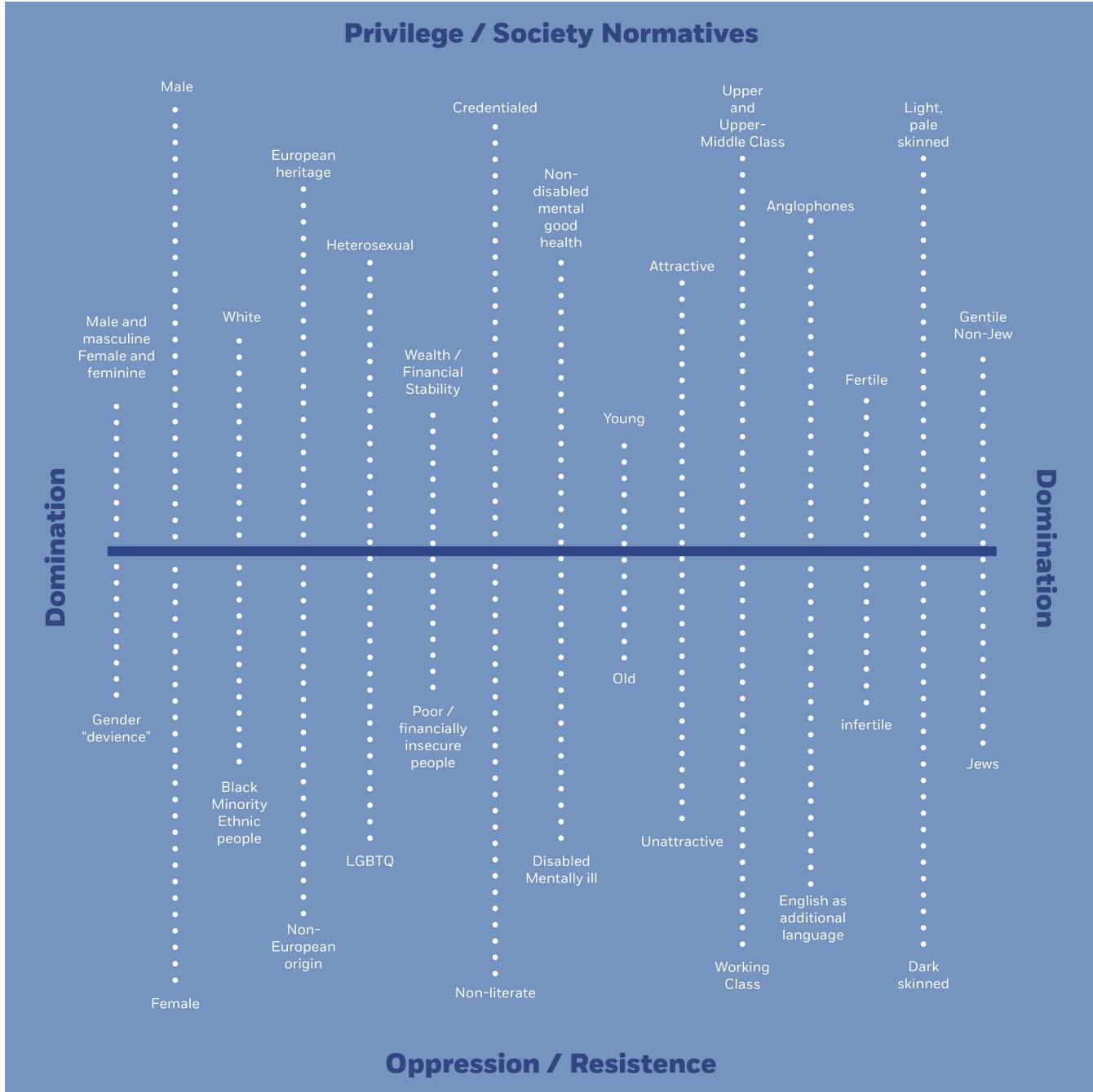
In constructing their identities, people can only draw on terms that are available in society at that time, which have meanings and associations attached. However, people may attribute different meanings and importance to those labels. This means people always negotiate their identities in the context of the different meanings attached to them. Taking this contextual view of identity- as a social process that people engage in, rather than as a fixed essence inside them- is not to deny that particular identities are extremely important for certain groups and individuals. Being a Sikh, or a woman, or gay, may feel like the most important and 'deepest' part of you. However, a contextual and social model of identity is useful because it makes it difficult to reduce people to any one aspect of their identity, or to use one particular social identity (such as gender, race, sexual orientation, etc) as a way of explaining every aspect of their behavior and needs.

#### **4.2.6: Identities can be Privileged, Marginalized, Silenced, or Ignored**

The various cultural and co-cultural groups we belong to may work to advantage or disadvantage us, and, as such, our identities can be privileged or

marginalized. For example, the co-cultural identity of race may grant some people with lighter skin colors advantages/privileges over those with darker skin color. Those who do have darker skin color have historically been rendered lesser than/inferior, or ‘othered’ in our culture. This is highlighted by the use of the common terminology white and non-white, which situates white as the norm and others and marginalizes. In addition, because humans are often grouped into binary categories, identities that are non-binary get silenced or ignored. For example, humans are usually placed into categories such as man or woman, straight or gay/lesbian. This ignores identities that fall outside of these categories or do not fit neatly into them, such as people who identify as pan or omni sexual. Conversely, those who identify as a cisgender man or woman have always had their identities embraced, acknowledged, and rendered the norm.

In addition, because our identities are plural and we are not just one thing or another, the intersectionality of our identities can work to both privilege and oppress us. For example, a white man who is of a lower economic status may experience privileges associated with skin color and maleness while simultaneously experiencing class oppression. It’s usually pretty easy to identify ways in which we feel we are oppressed or disadvantaged in some way, but a lot harder for most people to acknowledge ways in which they are privileged.



(Image: Adapted from Natalya D. From Morgan, K. P. (1996). Describing the Emperor's New Clothes: Three Myths of Education (In)Equality. In A. Diller (ed). The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy & Politics. Boulder, CO: Westview)

**Intersectionality:** Our identities are intersectional, which means that they are plural and we are not just one thing or another based off factors such as gender, race, class, etc; instead the components of our identities intersect with each other to create our unique positionalities. These various aspects of our identities and our positionality may simultaneously work to privilege or oppress us, based on the context.

## 4.3.0: Self-Perception

**N**ow that we have an understanding of identity, we will explore the concept of self-perception and the various factors that create our understanding of ourselves. Specifically, in this section, we will explain how self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy shape our self-perception.

### 4.3.1: Self-Concept



(Image: mirror-cat, used according to [pngtree.com license](#))

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

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

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons to other people. Social comparison theory states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people. Social comparisons are based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference (Hargie, 2011). In terms of superiority and inferiority, we evaluate characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn't appropriate. Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If someone wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, they may be discouraged by the difficulty keeping up with the aerobics instructor and judge themselves as inferior, which could negatively affect their self-concept.

We also engage in social comparison based on similarity and difference. Since self-concept is context specific, similarity may be desirable in some situations and difference more desirable in others. Factors like age and personality may influence whether or not we want to fit in or stand out. Although we compare ourselves to others throughout our lives, adolescent and teen years usually

bring new pressure to be similar to or different from particular reference groups. Think of all the cliques in high school and how people voluntarily and involuntarily broke off into groups based on popularity, interest, culture, or grade level. Some kids in your high school probably wanted to fit in with and be similar to other people in the marching band but be different from the football players. Conversely, athletes were probably more apt to compare themselves, in terms of similar athletic ability, to other athletes rather than kids in show choir.

As with other aspects of perception, there are positive and negative consequences of social comparison. We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won't stop until they get the highest grade or set a new school record in a track-and-field event. Social comparison that isn't reasoned can have negative effects and result in negative thoughts like "Look at how bad I did on that test. Man, I'm stupid!" These negative thoughts can lead to negative behaviors and may affect our self-esteem.

### 4.3.2: Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is a more specifically an evaluation of the self (Byrne, 1996). If I again prompted you to "Tell me who you are," and then asked you to evaluate (label as good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable) each of the things you listed about yourself, I would get clues about your self-esteem. Like self-concept, self-esteem has general and specific elements. Generally, some people are more likely to evaluate themselves positively while others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively (Brockner, 1988). More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our life span and across contexts.

How we judge ourselves affects our communication and our behaviors, but not every negative or positive judgment carries the same weight. The negative evaluation of a trait that isn't very important for our self-concept will likely not result in a loss of self-esteem. For example, if you were a person who doesn't consider drawing abilities to be a big part of your self-concept, your self-esteem would not take a big hit if someone critiqued a picture you drew. However, if you considered yourself an artist and someone negatively commented on a picture you drew, your self-esteem would be impacted.

### 4.3.3: Self-Efficacy

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

The following example also illustrates these interconnections. Aki did a good job on their first college speech. During a meeting with their professor, Aki indicates that they are confident going into the next speech and thinks that they will do well. This skill-based assessment is an indication that Aki has a high level of self-efficacy related to public speaking. If Aki does well on the speech, the praise from classmates and professor will reinforce Aki's self-efficacy and lead Aki to positively evaluate their speaking skills, which will contribute to Aki's self-esteem. By the end of the class, Aki likely thinks that they are a good public speaker, which may then become an important part of their self-concept. Throughout these points of connection, it's important to remember that self-perception affects how we communicate, behave, and perceive other things. Aki's increased feeling of self-efficacy may give them more confidence in delivering speeches, which will likely result in positive feedback that reinforces Aki's self-perception. Over time, Aki may even start to think about changing their major to communication or pursuing career options that incorporate

public speaking, which would further integrate being “a good public speaker” into Aki’s self-concept.

You can hopefully see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles. While some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives. The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affect our feelings of self-efficacy and our self-esteem. As we saw in Aki’s example, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future (Hargie, 2011). Obviously, negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves and negative feedback does the opposite, which ultimately affects behaviors and creates the cycle.

## 4.4.0: Influences on Self-Perception

**R**ecall from our earlier discussion of self-concept that we develop a sense of who we are based on what is reflected back on us from other people. While interactions we have with individuals and groups are definitely important to consider, we must also note the other influences on our self-perception. In this section, we will examine how family and the media play a role in shaping who we think we are and how we feel about ourselves.

### 4.4.1: Family Influences

Various forces help socialize us into our respective social and cultural groups and play a powerful role in presenting us with options about who we can be. While we may like to think that our self-perception starts with a blank canvas, our perceptions are limited by our experiences and various cultural identities. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can shape our self-perception and self-esteem in significant ways and lead to either positive or negative views of self (Hargie, 2011). For example, a parent who constantly criticizes their child about their weight or looks may cause the child to internalize a negative self-perception. On the other hand, a parent who praises their child will more likely have a child with a positive self-perception. However, it is important to note that too much praise can lead people to have a misguided sense of their abilities.

### 4.4.2: Media

Although most people recognize that media have an effect on others, people

often mistakenly believe they are not personally influenced. However, the representations we see in the media do affect our self-perception. The vast majority of media images include idealized representations of attractiveness and physical abilities. Despite the fact that the images of people we see in glossy magazines and on T.V. shows are not typically what we see when we look at the people around us in a classroom, at work, or at the grocery store, many of us continue to hold ourselves to an unrealistic standard of beauty and attractiveness. Movies, magazines, and television shows are filled with beautiful people, and less attractive actors, when they are present in the media, are typically portrayed as the butt of jokes, villains, or only as background extras (Patzer, 2008). Aside from overall attractiveness, the media also offers narrow representations of acceptable body weight. Researchers have found that only 12 percent of prime-time characters are overweight, which is dramatically less than the national statistics for obesity among the actual US population (Patzer, 2008).

In terms of self-concept, media representations offer us guidance on what is acceptable or unacceptable and valued or not valued in our society. Mediated messages, in general, reinforce cultural stereotypes related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class. People from historically marginalized groups must look much harder than those in the dominant groups to find positive representations of their identities in media. As a critical thinker, it is important to question media messages and to examine who is included and who is excluded. Advertising in particular encourages people to engage in social comparison, regularly communicating to us that we are inferior because we lack a certain product or that we need to change some aspect of our life to keep up with and be similar to others. For example, advertising targeted to women instills in them a fear of becoming old or unattractive, selling products to keep skin tight and clear, which will in turn will make them happy.

## 4.5.0: Self-Perception, Identity, and Communication

**I**n this section, we will discuss how our identity influences communication with ourselves and other people, and, in turn, how others communicate with us.

### 4.5.1: Self-Perception, Identity, and Communication

A simple way to think of identity is that it is comprised of three main facets: who we think we are, who we want others to think we are, and who others think we are (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016). The first facet, who we think we are, pertains to our self-perception, and this informs how we communicate with ourselves. For example, let's say you think you are a smart individual. When you go to approach a difficult problem you might say to yourself "I'm smart- I can do this!" On the other hand, if you don't think of yourself as very smart, when you go to approach a difficult problem you instead may say to yourself "Oh, this is too difficult. I'll never get it, so it's not worth trying."

The second facet, who we want others to think we are, influences our communication in that we use communication to try to get others to perceive us a particular way. For example, if you want others to think you are cool, you might communicate this nonverbally by dressing in particular style or buying certain brands and accessories.

The final facet, who others think we are, influences the types of messages we receive from other people. For example, let's say others don't think you are very intelligent. This will likely cause them talk to you using small words or in a

condescending matter (or not talk to you all.)

In addition, identity and communication are mutually reinforcing. This means that messages we receive from others (who they think we are) influence who we think we are. For example, if others think we are intelligent and constantly tell us that we are smart, we will likely also think we are smart. This thinking about ourselves, in turn, is likely to influence how we communicate with others around us. For example, we may use big words or assert our expert opinions.

### **Identity and the Internet:**

One of the advantages to technology is that we can carefully craft and edit our online personas and the messages that are sent through mediated-communication channels. This means we have the power to shape how others perceive us. We may only post our best pictures on Facebook or tweet about exciting things we are doing so other perceive us positively. In addition, we can explore identities that we may not be able to explore in our face-to-face interactions. Online we can be anyone we want to be. For example, someone may craft an online persona and interact with others using a different gender identity, which can be much harder to achieve in face-to-face interactions.

## 4.6.0: Communication Competence

In this section, we will discuss self-presentation, ways in which identities are contextual, and the importance of reflecting on your self-concept.

### 4.6.1: Effective Communication: Self-Presentation

Consciously and competently engaging in self-presentation can have benefits because we can provide others with a more positive and accurate picture of who we are and in doing so better achieve our communication goals. People who are skilled at impression management are typically more engaging and confident, which allows others to pick up on more cues from which to form impressions (Human et al., 2012).

There are two main types of self-presentation: prosocial and self-serving (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002). Prosocial self-presentation entails behaviors that present a person as a role model and make a person more likable and attractive. For example, a supervisor may call on her employees to uphold high standards for business ethics, model that behavior in her own actions, and compliment others when they exemplify those standards. Self-serving self-presentation entails behaviors that present a person as highly skilled, willing to challenge others, and someone not to be messed with. For example, a supervisor may publicly take credit for the accomplishments of others or publicly critique an employee who failed to meet a particular standard. In summary, prosocial strategies are aimed at benefiting others, while self-serving strategies benefit the self at the expense of others.

In general, we strive to present a public image that matches up with our self-concept, but we can also use self-presentation strategies to enhance our self-concept (Hargie, 2011). When we present ourselves in order to evoke a positive evaluative response, we are engaging in self-enhancement. In the pursuit of self-enhancement, a person might try to be as appealing as possible in a particular area or with a particular person to gain feedback that will enhance one's self-esteem. Self-enhancement can be productive and achieved competently, or it can be used inappropriately. Using self-enhancement behaviors just to gain the approval of others or out of self-centeredness may lead people to communicate in ways that are perceived as phony or overbearing and end up making an unfavorable impression (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002).

## 4.6.2: Contextual Communication: Identity and Context



(Image: [CCO 1.0](#))

*Identities:* Our primary identities are said to be comprised based off of components that are not changeable, such as race or gender. However this is not always the case as people can and do change their gender identities.

the only woman in a room full of men.

We all have what is called our primary and secondary identities. Our primary identities are said to be consistent and are comprised of factors that we usually cannot change, such as ethnicity, race, and gender. While these identities are usually permanent, our awareness of them and the degree to which we acknowledge or align with them changes based on the context. For example, a woman may not really focus on this identity when in a room full of other women, but it may suddenly become salient when she is

Secondary identities, on the other hand, are more fluid, dependent, and dynamic. Factors that make up our secondary identities include occupation, relationship status, and the various roles we occupy. For example, you may be a student, office manager, janitor, mother, brother, wife, husband, single, etc. As with our primary identities, the salience of secondary identities also changes based on context. Right now, as you are reading this and when you are in the classroom, you are enacting your identity of student, learner, or scholar. However, once you leave the classroom you may switch to another identity, such as a parent. While you are still a student (and vice versa still a parent while in the classroom), this identity is placed on the ‘back burner’ and another comes to forefront.

Based on the context, we should be flexible in what identity we enact and may need to shift or highlight one particular identity versus another. This, in turn, will influence your communication and interactions. For example, when you are a student in the classroom you may sit at your desk, answer questions when asked, and discuss communication-related topics. However, if you are a parent, when you get home you might instruct your child or chastise them for not doing their homework. Issues may occur if we do not adapt our identity to the situation. For example, we may enact a particular identity with a group of friends that manifests itself in dressing and speaking a particular way, but enacting this identity in the workplace could have negative repercussions. While it’s important to feel authentic and ‘true to ourselves’, it is also important to realize that who we are is dynamic and changes based on the context. In order to better meet your goals, consider communicating aspects of your identities that are appropriate to the context.

### 4.6.3: Reflective Communication: Reflecting on your Identity

As we learned earlier in this chapter, our self-concept and self-esteem influence

how we communicate and interact with the world around us. Because of this, it is necessary to reflect on these aspects of our self-perception and how they influence our thoughts, actions, and relationships in both positive and negative ways. In particular, it is important to be aware of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are thought and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behavior that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true (Guyl et al., 2010). The concept of self-fulfilling prophecies was originally developed to be applied to social inequality and discrimination, but it has since been applied in many other contexts, including interpersonal communication. This research has found that some people are chronically insecure, meaning they are very concerned about being accepted by others but constantly feel that other people will dislike them. This can manifest in relational insecurity, which is based on feelings of inferiority resulting from social comparison with others perceived to be more secure and superior. Such people often end up reinforcing their belief that others will dislike them because of the behaviors triggered by their irrational belief. Take the following scenario as an example: An insecure person assumes that their date will not like them. During the date they don't engage in much conversation, discloses negative information about themselves, and exhibits anxious behaviors. Because of these behaviors, their date forms a negative impression and suggests they not see each other again, reinforcing the original belief that the date wouldn't like them.

The example shows how a pattern of thinking can lead to a pattern of behavior that reinforces the thinking, and so on. Luckily, experimental research shows that self-affirmation techniques can be successfully used to intervene in such self-fulfilling prophecies. Thinking positive thoughts and focusing on personality strengths can stop this negative cycle of thinking and has been shown to have positive effects on academic performance, weight loss, and interpersonal relationships (Stinston et al., 2011).

# Chapter 5: Verbal Communication

“**S**ticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”

Most of us have heard these lyrics from the old children’s rhyme, yet assertions such as these are problematic because names and words have tremendous influence on our lives. Words are not just used to communicate content, but feelings, attitudes, judgments, values, and perspectives. In this chapter, we will explore the verbal symbols, words and language, that we use to communicate with others. Specifically, we will cover what verbal communication is, its functions and characteristics, and how to improve verbal communication competence.



Toothpaste For Dinner.com

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## Essential Questions

- How is meaning conveyed through verbal messages?
- How can we improve communication competence with verbal strategies?

### Successful students will be able to:

- define verbal communication
- explain how meaning is convey through verbal messages
- describe the characteristics and functions of verbal communication
- apply strategies to improve message clarity
- analyze verbal messages and describe how meaning depends on the context (physical, relational, individual, and/or cultural)
- recognize the biases words can communicate and the power of words in communicative interactions

- 
- Sections 5.0, 5.4.1, & 5.4.2: Interpersonal Communication Abridged Textbook (I.C.A.T.); Central New Mexico Community College; 2019; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](#)
  - Sections 5.1.1, 5.2.2, 5.2.3, & 5.4.3: adapted from Communication in the Real World: An Introduction to Communication Studies; University of Minnesota; 2016; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](#)
  - Sections 5.2.1, 5.2.4, & 5.3.1- 5.3.4: adapted from Survey of Communication Studies; 2018; [CC BY SA 3.0](#)

## 5.1.0: Defining Verbal Communication

### 5.1.1: Definition of Verbal Communication

Simply put, verbal communication consists of messages that are sent using words, both written and spoken. Nonverbal communication refers to communication that occurs through means other than words, such as body language, gestures, tone of voice, and silence. Because both verbal and nonverbal communication can be spoken and written, the two can often be confused. For example, let's say we tell a friend a joke and they laugh in response. Is the laughter verbal or nonverbal communication? Since laughter is not a word, we would consider this vocal act as a form of nonverbal communication. Box 1 highlights the types of communication that fall into the various categories.

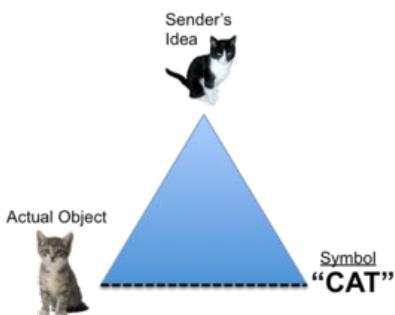
#### Verbal versus Nonverbal Communication

	<b>Verbal Communication</b>	<b>Nonverbal Communication</b>
<b>Oral</b>	Spoken Language	Laughing, Crying, Coughing, Etc...
<b>Non Oral</b>	Written Language/ Sign Language	Gestures, Body Language, Etc...

## 5.2.0: Characteristics of Verbal Communication

In order to understand how we use verbal communication to create shared meaning in interactions, we first must become familiar with its characteristics. In this section, we will discuss how verbal messages are made up of a system of symbols, are learned, are rule-governed, and have both denotative and connotative meanings.

### 5.2.1: Verbal Messages are a System of Symbols



(Image: [Wikimedia Commons](#), [CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

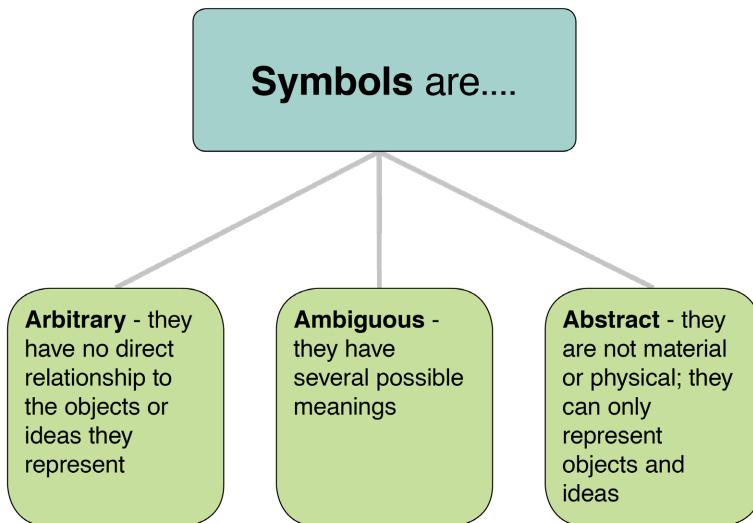
Our language system is primarily made up of symbols. A symbol is something that stands in for or represents something else. Symbols can be communicated verbally (speaking the word hello), in writing (putting the letters H-E-L-L-O together), or nonverbally (waving your hand back and forth). In any case, the symbols we use stand in for something else, like a physical object or an idea; they do not actually correspond to the thing being referenced in any direct way.

For example, there is nothing inherent about calling a cat a cat. Rather, English speakers have agreed that these symbols (words), whose components (letters) are used in a particular order each time, stand for both the actual object, as well as our interpretation of that object. This idea is illustrated by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richard's triangle of meaning. The word “cat” is not the actual cat. Nor does it have any direct connection to an actual cat. Instead, it is a symbolic representation of our idea of a cat, as indicated by the line going

from the word “cat” to the speaker’s idea of “cat” to the actual object.

The verbal symbols that we use to communicate have three distinct qualities: they are arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract. Notice that the picture of the cat on the left side of the triangle more closely represents a real cat than the word “cat.” However, we do not use pictures as language, or verbal communication. Instead, we use words to represent our ideas. This example demonstrates our agreement that the word “cat” represents or stands for a real cat AND our idea of a cat. The symbols we use are arbitrary and have no direct relationship to the objects or ideas they represent. We generally consider communication successful when we reach agreement on the meanings of the symbols we use.

Not only are symbols arbitrary, they are ambiguous- that is, they have several possible meanings. For example, when the word “cat” is uttered alone and without context, most people might envision a small, house cat. However, “cat” has other possible meanings. Lion? Nickname for Catherine? Cool person? Heavy construction machinery? Imagine your friend tells you they have an apple on their desk. Are they referring to a piece of fruit or their computer? If a friend says that a person they met is cool, do they mean that person is cold or awesome? The meanings of symbols change over time due to changes in social norms, values, and advances in technology. We are able to communicate because there are a finite number of possible meanings for our symbols, a range of meanings which the members of a given language system agree upon. Without an agreed-upon system of symbols, we could share relatively little meaning with one another.



*Symbols are Arbitrary, Ambiguous, & Abstract*

The verbal symbols we use are also abstract, meaning that, words are not material or physical. A certain level of abstraction is inherent in the fact that symbols can only represent objects and ideas. This abstraction allows us to use a phrase like “the public” in a broad way to mean all the people in the United States rather than having to distinguish among all the diverse groups that make up the U.S. population. Similarly, in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter book series, wizards and witches call the non-magical population on earth “muggles” rather than having to define all the separate cultures of muggles. Abstraction is helpful when you want to communicate complex concepts in a simple way. However, the more abstract the language, the greater potential there is for confusion. Saying “cat” is not as abstract as saying “animal,” but also will not necessarily bring an image of a much more specific white cat named “Calliope” to the mind of your listener, if that is your intention.

## 5.2.2: Verbal Messages are Learned

As we just learned, the relationship between the symbols that make up our language and their referents is arbitrary, which means they have no meaning

until we assign it to them. In order to effectively use a language system, we have to learn, over time, which symbols go with which referents, since we can't just tell by looking at the symbol. Like me, you probably learned what the word apple meant by looking at the letters A-P-P-L-E and a picture of an apple and having a teacher or caregiver help you sound out the letters until you said the whole word. Over time, we associated that combination of letters with an apple. Similarly, in a Spanish-speaking community, students assigned meaning to a different symbol for this fruity referent. The symbol is M-A-N-Z-A-N-A. Same referent, different symbol.

### 5.2.3: Verbal Messages are Rule-Governed



(Image: [CCO 1.0](#))

*When using written channels to communicate verbally, spelling and punctuation can be an important part of creating shared understanding.*

Verbal communication is rule-governed. We must follow agreed-upon rules to make sense of the symbols we share. Let's take another look at our example of the word cat. What would happen if there were no rules for using the symbols (letters) that make up this word? If placing these symbols in a proper order was

not important, then cta, tac, tca, act, or atc could all mean cat. Any language system has to have rules to make it learnable and usable. Grammar refers to the rules that govern how words are used to make phrases and sentences. Someone would likely know what you mean by the question “Where’s the remote control?” But “The control remote where’s?” is likely to be unintelligible or at least confusing (Crystal, 2005). Knowing the rules of grammar is important in order to be able to write and speak to be understood. However, those rules are also open and flexible, allowing a person to make choices to determine meaning (Eco, 1976).

In addition, the rules that guide our verbal messages can differ through different communication channels, such as academic papers, face-to-face interactions, text messages, or social media. When writing an academic paper, grammatical rules are important to follow, and spelling and punctuation play an important role in conveying meaning. For example, “Let’s eat Grandma” is different in meaning from “Let’s eat, Grandma.” However, when communicating through a text message, the rules are usually more relaxed, flexible, and dynamic; communicators will often use abbreviations, acronyms, and slang to convey meaning, and may forgo punctuation or use it strategically to modify word meaning.

#### **5.2.4: Verbal Messages Have Both Denotative and Connotative Meanings**

We attach meanings to words; meanings are not inherent in words themselves. As you’ve been reading, words (symbols) are arbitrary and attain meaning only when people give them meaning. While we can always look to a dictionary to find a standardized definition of a word, or its denotative meaning, meanings do not always follow standard, agreed-upon definitions when used in various contexts. For example, think of the word “sick”. The denotative definition of the word is ill or unwell. However, connotative meanings, the meanings we assign based on our experiences and beliefs, are quite varied. For example, take the word ‘hippie’, the denotative meaning or dictionary definition is “a usually

young person who rejects the mores of established society (as by dressing unconventionally or favoring communal living) and advocates a nonviolent ethic" (Webster, 2019). However, what comes to mind when you think of the word hippie? Long hair? Tye-dye shirts? Drugs? This is the connotative meaning, the things you associate with that particular world. Connotative meanings can be positive, negative, and/or neutral and what WE associate with word may change over time and vary based on individual experiences. For example, a person who liked road trips as child may have a positive association with that phrase, while a person who disliked them may have a negative association.

## 5.3.0: Functions of Verbal Communication

**S**ince our existence is intimately tied to the communication we use, in this section we will address how verbal communication serves many functions in our daily lives. Specifically, we use verbal communication to define reality, organize, think, and shape attitudes.

### 5.3.1: Verbal Communication Helps Us Define Reality

We use verbal communication to define everything from ideas, emotions, experiences, thoughts, objects, and people (Blumer). Think about how you define yourself. You may define yourself as a student, employee, son/daughter, parent, advocate, etc. You might also define yourself as moral, ethical, a night-owl, or a procrastinator. Verbal communication is how we label and define what we experience in our lives. These definitions are not only descriptive, but evaluative. Imagine you are at the beach with a few of your friends. The day starts out sunny and beautiful, but the tides quickly turn when rain clouds appeared overhead. Because of the unexpected rain, you define the day as disappointing and ugly. Suddenly, your friend comments, “What are you talking about, man? Today is beautiful!” Instead of focusing on the weather, he might be referring to the fact that he was having a good day by spending quality time with his buddies on the beach, rain or shine. This statement reflects that we have choices for how we use verbal communication to define our realities. We make choices about what to focus on and how to define what we experience and its impact on how we understand and live in our world.

## **5.3.2: Verbal Communication Helps Us Organize**

Consider the number of things you experience with your primary senses every day. It is impossible to comprehend everything we encounter. We use verbal communication to organize seemingly random events into understandable categories to make sense of our experiences. For example, we all organize the people in our lives into categories. We label these people with terms like friends, acquaintances, romantic partners, family, peers, colleagues, and strangers. We highlight certain qualities, traits, or scripts to organize outwardly haphazard events into meaningful categories to establish meaning for the world we live in.

## **5.3.3: Verbal Communication Helps Us Think**

Without verbal communication, we would not function as thinking beings. The ability to reason and communicate is what distinguishes humans from other animals. In the 2011 Scientific American article “How Language Shapes Thought,” author Lera Boroditsky claims that people “rely on language even when doing simple things like distinguishing patches of color, counting dots on a screen or orienting in a small room...” In addition, with language, we are able to reflect on the past, consider the present, and ponder the future. We develop our memories using language. Try recalling your first conscious memories. Chances are, your first conscious memories formed around the time you started using verbal communication.

## 5.3.4: Verbal Communication Helps Us Shape Our Attitudes About Our World

The way you use language shapes your attitude about the world around you. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf developed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to explain that language determines thought. People who speak different languages, or use language differently, actually think differently (Whorf; Sapir; Mandelbaum; Maxwell; Perlovsky; Lucy; Simpson; Hussein). The argument suggests that if a native English speaker had the exact same experiences in their life, but grew up speaking Chinese instead of English, their worldview would be different because of the different symbols used to make sense of the world. When you label, describe, or evaluate events in your life, you use the symbols of the language you speak. Your use of these symbols to represent your reality influences your perspective and attitude about the world. So, it makes sense then that the more sophisticated your repertoire of symbols is, the more sophisticated your world view can be for you.

### Additional Resources:

[https://www.youtube.com/embed/RKK7wGAYP6k?  
enablejsapi=1&origin=https%3A%2F%2Fmytext.cnm.edu](https://www.youtube.com/embed/RKK7wGAYP6k?enablejsapi=1&origin=https%3A%2F%2Fmytext.cnm.edu)

## 5.4.0: Communication Competence

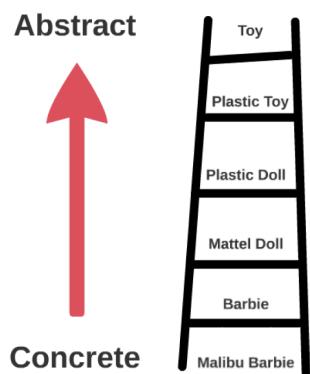
In this section, we will cover techniques for sending more effective verbal messages, address contextual nuances surrounding the meaning of verbal messages, and discuss the importance of reflecting on our own verbal messages.



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[www.speedbump.com](http://www.speedbump.com), printed with permission for use in I.C.A.T.)

## 5.4.1: Effective Communication: Improving Verbal Message Clarity

In order to increase shared meaning in interactions, it's important to focus on message clarity. The level of clarity we need to provide in a communicative interaction can vary based on context, who we are talking to, and our communication goal. The language and words we use can range from abstract to concrete. Abstract language covers a broader range of objects, events, and phenomenon without providing much detail, whereas concrete language refers to specific objects, events, and phenomenon that can be observed. For example, 'fruit' is abstract as it can refer to a wide range of different fruits, from an apple to an orange. On the other hand, 'Granny Smith apple' would be concrete in that it refers to a specific type and color of fruit. The abstraction ladder illustrates how objects, events, phenomenon, and ideas can be described on a scale ranging from abstract to concrete. The bottom rung of the ladder refers to something specific/concrete, and as you move up the ladder the phrasing gets more abstract. When language is more abstract, it leaves more room interpretation; this likewise increases the chances of a miscommunication or shared meaning not be achieved. However, abstracting is beneficial in certain instances as it enables us to communicate more efficiently without using dozens of words to refer to one particular idea or concept. For example, if your partner stopped by the grocery store, picked up the dry cleaning, and dropped off the mail, we might simply say "thanks for doing the errands" versus noting every specific thing.



When producing and interpreting abstract messages, context is key to expressing and discerning what one means and creating shared meaning. While certain situations lend themselves to abstract messages, others lend themselves to more concrete messages. Concrete messages can be useful when it is important that the message be understood, such as in a professional context, when

(Image: [CCO 1.0](#))

*Objects, events, phenomenon, and ideas can be described on a scale ranging from abstract to concrete. When language is more abstract, it leaves more room interpretation and this likewise increases the chances of a miscommunication.*

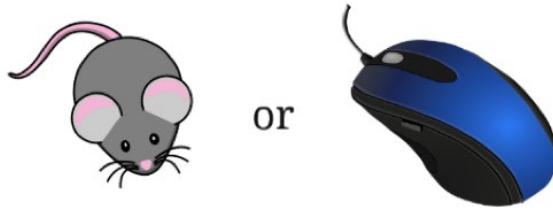
we are interacting with others who we are less familiar with, or with children who are still developing the meaning of certain words and concepts. Parents sometimes expect kids to “behave” before giving kids a concrete sense of what that actually looks or sounds like to them (e.g., “sit still and don’t talk during the movie”). Using concrete language is also helpful when giving feedback designed to improve performance, and when addressing complaints and/or making requests.

How many of us have received feedback such as “good job” or “needs improvement?” What that means might be very clear to the feedback giver, but those phrases could have many possible interpretations in the mind of the recipient. A better form of feedback might look like “The evidence you gave clearly supported your claims” or “Work to provide evidence that clearly supports your claims.” Additionally, when complaining about someone’s behavior or asking for a change, clarity is usually an important goal. Saying “You’re ignoring me” is not as clear as saying “I haven’t heard from you in two days” or “I get worried when you don’t return my calls.” The more abstract the complaint, the more possibility there is for misunderstanding.

However, it’s important to note that sometimes we may intentionally use abstract language, depending on our communication goal. Vague and unclear language may be used as a way to avoid hurting another’s feelings, alluding to something we don’t want to say directly, hinting, or avoiding certain topics. For example, we may use the term “interesting” to describe a friend’s outfit when we really think it’s garish so as not to hurt their feelings.

## 5.4.2: Contextual Communication: Nuances in Verbal Meanings

Rules for communication guide our behaviors and interactions in a particular context and as the context changes, so do the rules and norms. When it comes to our verbal communication, what is considered ‘appropriate’ language and word choice will vary based on contextual nuances. For example, think of the types of words choices you might make when you are hanging out with your friends versus when you are in an interview. Would you speak to a small child differently and select different words than when you are speaking to an adult.



(Image: [CCO 1.0](#))

*Mouse?* Some words have multiple meanings, such as the word mouse. However, context can often help us determine whether someone is referring to a rodent or a computer mouse. If someone said ‘mouse’ in a computer lab, they would probably mean the latter.

race, ethnicity, gender identity, generation, etc) also play a key role in meaning making. For example, generations often have differences in what a particular word might mean. The word cool might be used by a younger generation to refer to awesome, where as an older generation might use it to refer to the temperature. So if you were to tell your grandmother something was cool, you may intend it to mean awesome, but she may think it means cold.

Because words can hold different meanings for different people and vary in what is considered acceptable and accepted, context and should always be kept in mind. As competent communicators, we should strive to use vocabulary the listener understands and only use slang in situations where it is considered

In addition, since language is ambiguous and can have multiple denotative and connotative meanings, we must rely on the context not only to determine what words to use, but how to decode the messages of others. For example, the word “mouse” can mean either a computer mouse or a rodent. If someone said the word mouse in a computer lab (physical context), it would likely mean the former, whereas if they said it in a pet store, it would likely mean the latter. Cultural context and your co-cultures (the various groups you may belong to based on

acceptable and accepted. For example, we might use slang terms with our friends, but should probably avoid them in professional situations.

### Word Choice:

Think of the words “bowel movements,” “poop,” “crap,” and “shit.” While all of these words have essentially the same denotative meaning, people make choices based on context and audience regarding which word they feel comfortable using. .

## 5.4.3: Reflective Communication: Understanding Biases in Language

Bias has a way of creeping into our daily language use, often without our awareness. Culturally biased language can make reference to one or more cultural identities, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability. Much biased language is based on stereotypes and myths, both culturally and individually, that influence the words we use. Bias is both intentional and unintentional; sometimes we don’t even realize our words communicate a particular bias, and we have no intention of offending others. However, because others may decode a message differently from what we intend, as competent communicators, we must be aware of how others may interpret (or misinterpret) our words, what biases we may be intentionally or unintentionally communicating, and how our word choice can affect others. While it is unlikely that we will ever completely eliminate bias from our verbal communication or never offend anyone, it is important to be aware and reflective of our communication. Below focuses on five types of biases inherent

in language people use: race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ableness.

## Race:

People sometimes use euphemisms for race that illustrate bias because the terms are usually implicitly compared to the dominant group (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). For example, referring to a person as “urban” or a neighborhood as “inner city” can be an accurate descriptor, but when such words are used as a substitute for racial identity, they illustrate cultural biases that equate certain races with cities and poverty. Using adjectives like articulate or well-dressed in statements like “My black coworker is articulate” reinforces negative stereotypes even though these words are typically viewed as positive. Terms like nonwhite set up whiteness as the norm, which implies that white people are the norm against which all other races should be compared.

Biased language also reduces the diversity within certain racial groups—for example, referring to anyone who looks like they are of Asian descent as Chinese or everyone who “looks” Latino/a as Mexicans. Some people with racial identities other than white, including people who are multiracial, use the label person/people of color to indicate solidarity among groups, but it is likely that they still prefer a more specific label when referring to an individual or referencing a specific racial group.

## Gender:

Language has a tendency to exaggerate perceived and stereotypical differences between men and women. For example, the use of the term opposite sex presumes that men and women are opposites. One key to avoiding gendered bias in language is to avoid the generic use of he or she when referring to something relevant to males and females. Instead, you can informally use a gender-neutral pronoun like they or their or you (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). Other words reflect the general masculine bias present in English. The following word pairs show the gender-

biased term followed by an unbiased term: waitress / server, chairman / chair or chairperson, mankind / people, cameraman / camera operator, mailman / postal worker, sportsmanship / fair play. Common language practices also tend to infantilize women but not men, when, for example, women are referred to as chicks, girls, or babes. Since there is no linguistic equivalent that indicates the marital status of men before their name, using Ms. instead of Miss or Mrs. helps reduce bias.

## **Age:**

Language that includes age bias can be directed toward older or younger people. Descriptions of younger people often presume recklessness or inexperience, while those of older people presume frailty or disconnection. The term elderly generally refers to people over sixty-five, but it has connotations of weakness, which isn't accurate because there are plenty of people over sixty-five who are stronger and more athletic than people in their twenties and thirties. Even though it's a generic phrase, older people doesn't really have negative implications, whereas referring to people over the age of eighteen as boys or girls isn't typically viewed as appropriate.

## **Sexual Orientation:**

Discussions of sexual orientation range from everyday conversations to contentious political and personal debates. The negative stereotypes that have been associated with homosexuality, including deviance, mental illness, and criminal behavior, continue to influence our language use (American Psychological Association, 2012). Terminology related to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people can be confusing, so let's spend some time to raise our awareness about preferred labels. First, sexual orientation is the term preferred to sexual preference. Preference suggests a voluntary choice, as in someone has a preference for cheddar or American cheese, which doesn't reflect the experience of most GLB people or research findings that show sexuality is more complex. Most people also prefer the labels gay, lesbian, or bisexual to homosexual, which is clinical and doesn't so much refer to an identity as a sex

act. Language regarding romantic relationships contains bias when heterosexuality is assumed. For example, asking a female if she has a boyfriend or a male if he has a girlfriend. Comments comparing GLB people to “normal” people, although possibly intended to be positive, reinforces the stereotype that GLB people are abnormal.

Don’t presume you can identify a person’s sexual orientation by looking at them or talking to them. Don’t assume that GLB people will “come out” to you. Given that many GLB people have faced and continue to face regular discrimination, they may be cautious about disclosing their identities. However, using gender neutral terminology like partner and avoiding other biased language mentioned previously may create a climate in which a GLB person feels comfortable disclosing his or her sexual orientation identity. Conversely, the casual use of phrases like “that’s gay” to mean “that’s stupid” may create an environment in which GLB people do not feel comfortable.

## **Ability:**

People who are differently-abled or have disabilities make up a diverse group that has increasingly come to be viewed as a cultural identity group. People without disabilities are often referred to as able-bodied. As with sexual orientation, comparing people with disabilities to “normal” people implies that there is an agreed-on definition of what “normal” is and that people with disabilities are “abnormal.” People who fall into the category may prefer the word differently abled or prefer disability to the word handicap.

It’s also important to keep in mind that just because someone is disabled doesn’t mean they are also handicapped. The environment around them rather than their disability often handicaps people with disabilities (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010). Ignoring the environment as the source of a handicap and placing it on the person fits into a pattern of reducing people with disabilities to their disability—for example, calling someone a paraplegic instead of a person with paraplegia. In many cases, as with sexual orientation, race, age, and gender, verbally marking a

person as different isn't relevant. Language used in conjunction with disabilities also tends to portray people as victims of their disability and paint pictures of their lives as gloomy, dreadful, or painful. Such descriptors are often generalizations or completely inaccurate.

## Politically Correct?

Since the terms and language we use in reference to people or groups has the power to reveal biases within our culture and ourselves, these messages may have a negative impact over time on the person or group of people who hear them, especially when derogatory terms related to gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, etc. are used. Reflecting on and addressing biases in words and using them in a respectful, ethical manner so as not to offend others is important part of being a competent communicator and should not be conflated with the pejorative term 'political correctness.' Misuse and the negative connotation of this term has created ill-feelings around respectful and ethical communication. However, holding empathy towards others and being aware of and sensitive to their reactions is not a bad thing, it should actually be something we all strive for in our interactions. Addressing biases means being reflective of our communication, taking responsibility for what we say, holding others accountable for they say, and modifying the language we use. This can be hard at first, as it can make us feel uncomfortable, guilty, or even defensive. It is natural to try to shift the blame to others, tell them they are being 'too sensitive,' that we didn't intend something a particular way, or that they need to 'toughen' up. However, a competent communicator is one who can reflect on their (and others') biases and holds themselves accountable for the effects of their messages on other, whether intentional or unintentional. Throughout history, words have had the power to motivate, elevate, transform, ridicule, and silence. Words have been used to incite violence against others. Some people have very strong reactions to words and phrases, leading them to hurt others or even

themselves. Words have been used to incite violence against groups of people and cause others to take their own lives. Words are not just words; words matter.

# Chapter 6: Nonverbal Communication

Scholars suggest that up to 60-90% of the meaning we get from communicative interactions comes to us nonverbally (DeVito, 2014; Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016). Whether it's facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, vocal characteristics, or clothing, we use nonverbal communication to send messages to others, and others interpret both our intentional and unintentional nonverbal messages. In this chapter, we will cover what nonverbal communication is and the nonverbal communication channels we use to communicate information. Specifically, we will explain what nonverbal communication is and its functions, types, and principles. Last, we will discuss strategies for improving and reflecting on your own nonverbal communication competence.



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- Sections 6.0, 6.1.0, 6.1.1, 6.2.0, 6.2.6, 6.3.0, 6.4.0 – 6.4.2, 6.4.5, & 6.5.0: Interpersonal Communication Abridged Textbook (I.C.A.T.); Central New Mexico Community College; 2019; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)
- Sections 6.2.3, 6.3.1, 6.3.2, 6.3.4, 6.4.4, 6.5.1 & 6.5.2: adapted from Survey of Communication Studies; 2018; [CC BY SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)
- Sections 6.2.1, 6.2.2, 6.2.4, 6.2.5, & 6.4.3: adapted from Communication in the Real

World: An Introduction to Communication Studies; University of Minnesota;  
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## 6.1.0: Defining Nonverbal Communication

**I**n this section, we will define what nonverbal communication is.

### 6.1.1: Definition of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication consists of meaning that is conveyed through behaviors, sounds, spatial use, and artifacts such as clothing and accessories. While nonverbal messages may substitute for verbal messages, they often work together to help aid in understanding and create shared meaning by enhancing, modifying, or contradicting an accompanying verbal message. For example, take the word ‘yes’. We may nod our head up and down to substitute for saying it verbally. However, we can also simultaneously nod and verbally say ‘yes’ to emphasize the message or modify it by changing our tone of voice to convey an excited or begrudging yes. Finally, we may unintentionally contradict our verbal message by subtly shaking our head no while we say it.

## 6.2.0: Functions of Nonverbal Communication

In this section, we will address six important functions that our nonverbal communication serves in interactions: we use it to convey meaning and provide information, regulate interactions, express our identities, indicate relational standing, communicate emotions, and express status and power.

### 6.2.1: We Use Nonverbal Communication To Convey Meaning and Provide Information

We use nonverbal communication to complement, substitute for, modify, or contradict verbal messages.

#### **Complement:**

We can use nonverbal communication to complement the accompanying verbal message. Obvious examples include a head-nod or a head-shake to complement the verbal messages of “yes” or “no.” If a friend tells us that they recently received a promotion and a pay raise, we can show our enthusiasm in a number of verbal and nonverbal ways. We can exclaim, “Wow, that’s great! I’m so happy for you!” while at the same time using our nonverbal communication to complement what we are saying by smiling and hugging them.

#### **Substitute:**

We can also use nonverbal communication to substitute for a verbal message. If someone asks you a question, instead of a verbal reply “yes”, you may choose to

simply nod your head without the accompanying verbal message. When we replace verbal communication with nonverbal communication, we use nonverbal behaviors that are easily recognized by others such as a wave, head-nod, or head-shake.

### **Modify:**

While nonverbal communication can complement verbal communication, we also use it to modify the meaning of verbal communication by emphasizing certain parts of the verbal message. For instance, you may be upset with a family member and state, “I’m very angry with you.” To accent this statement nonverbally you might say it, “I’m VERY angry with you,” placing your emphasis on the word “very” to demonstrate the magnitude of your anger. In this example, it is your tone of voice (called paralanguage) that serves as the nonverbal communication accenting the message

### **Contradict:**

Finally, our nonverbal messages can contradict our verbal message. Imagine that you are greeting a friend in passing and say, “How are you?” They might say, “Fine” but have a sad tone to their voice. In this example, their nonverbal behaviors go against their verbal response and sends a mixed message to you. Research suggests that when verbal and nonverbal messages contradict one another, receivers often place greater value on the nonverbal communication as the more accurate message (Argyle, Alkema & Gilmour).

## **6.2.2: We Use Nonverbal Communication To Regulate Interactions**



(Image: [Jacksoncolvett](#), CC BY-SA 3.0)

We can use our nonverbal communication to regulate interactions. For example, if we are talking to someone and we want to show them we are interested in what they are saying and that they should continue, we can make eye contact, lean forward, and/or nod our heads. However, if we are trying to get the other person to stop talking so that we can exit from the interaction, we might look at our phones or angle our bodies away from theirs. Based on the above body language, what message do you think the person on the left is trying convey to the person on the right?

Generally, it is pretty easy for us to enter, maintain, and exit our interactions with others nonverbally. Rarely, if ever, would we approach a person and say, “I’m going to start a conversation with you now. Okay, let’s begin.” Instead, we might make eye contact, move closer to the person, or face the person directly, which are all nonverbal behaviors that indicate our desire to interact. Likewise, we do not generally end conversations by stating, “I’m done talking to you now” unless there is a breakdown in the communication process. We are generally proficient enacting nonverbal communication such as looking at our watch,

looking in the direction we wish to go, or being silent to indicate an impending end in the conversation. However, there are times where someone may not pick up on the nonverbal cues and we have to explicitly state something verbally instead.

### **6.2.3: We Use Nonverbal Communication To Express Our Identities**

Nonverbal communication expresses who we are. Our identities are conveyed nonverbally through the way we set up our living and working spaces, the clothes we wear, the way we carry ourselves, and the way we talk. Our physical bodies even give others impressions about who we are. We have control over some aspects of our nonverbal communication in terms of how we communicate our identities. For example, the way we carry and present ourselves through posture, eye contact, and tone of voice can be altered to present ourselves as warm or distant depending on the context. Aside from our physical body, artifacts, which are the objects and possessions that surround us, also communicate our identities. Examples of artifacts include our clothes, jewelry, and space decorations.

### **6.2.4: We Use Nonverbal Communication To Indicate Relational Standing**



(Image: [Elvert Barnes](#), CC BY-SA 2.0)

*Nonverbal communication can indicate relationship standing. Holding hands, sitting close to another person, or wearing wedding rings can be used to express that you are in an intimate relationship.*

Take a few moments today to observe the nonverbal communication of people you see in public areas. What can you determine about their relational standing from their nonverbal communication? For example, romantic partners tend to stand close to one another and touch one another frequently. On the other hand, acquaintances generally maintain greater distances and touch less than romantic partners. Those who hold higher social status often use more space when they interact with others. We make many inferences about relational standing based on the nonverbal communication of those with whom we interact and observe. Imagine seeing a couple talking to each other across a small table. They both have faces that look upset, red eyes from crying, closed body positions, leaning into each other, and are whispering emphatically. Upon seeing this, would you think they were having a “breakup conversation”? It is important to note, however, that nonverbals don’t always mean what we think

they mean. Later on, we will cover the ambiguity of nonverbal communication.

## 6.2.5: We Use Nonverbal Communication To Communicate Emotions



(Image: [Robin Higgens, Pixabay License](#))

*Facial expressions are one way that we express emotion. What emotions do you think this person is trying to convey?*

it is important to use and interpret nonverbal communication for emotional expression as it leads to relational attachment and satisfaction (Schachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer). For example, if you acknowledge that your friend is sad, ask what is wrong, and try to help them this can heighten or increase intimacy. However, if a friend is visibly upset and you choose to ignore them, they may perceive that you don't care about their feelings and become dissatisfied with the relationship.

While we can certainly tell people how we feel, we more frequently use nonverbal communication to express our emotions. Conversely, we tend to interpret emotions by examining nonverbal communication. For example, it is probably easy to tell by their nonverbal communication that a friend may be feeling sad. Not only may they be less talkative but their shoulders may be slumped and they may not smile. One study suggests that

## 6.2.6: We Use Nonverbal Communication To Express Social Status And Power

Nonverbal communication can be used to express social status in a variety of ways. (Verderber, MacGeorge, & Verderber, 2016). For example, think of how a high-level manager may convey status to employees. Nonverbal communication can be used to express social status in a variety of ways, such as by dressing or speaking a particular way. For example, think of how a high-level manager may convey status to employees. They may choose to wear a formal suit or speak with an authoritative tone. Likewise, employees may also use their nonverbals to show respect to their managers, as by making eye contact and listening to what they have to say. Some nonverbals are also associated with power, while others are associated with powerlessness or vulnerability. For example, standing up tall and taking up a lot of space shows dominance, while hunched shoulders, folding your body inward to take up as little space as possible, and touching your neck indicate the opposite. Recent research has even demonstrated that forming expansive “power poses” with our bodies can actually increase emotional feelings of power, which may be helpful to us prior to job interviews and other anxiety-provoking situations (Cuddy, Schultz and Fosse, 2017).

## 6.3.0: Types of Nonverbal Communication

**A**s you'll recall from chapter one, a channel is the means through which the message is sent from one communicator to the other. The channels used for communication coincide with our senses of sound, sight, smell, taste, and touch. While verbal messages can only travel via the sensory routes of sound (spoken words) or sight (written words), nonverbal communication can take place through all five of our senses. In this section, we will describe the various types of non-verbal communication, which we break into four distinct categories to aid in comprehension: body language, paralanguage, space and time use, and personal and environmental presentation.

### 6.3.1: Body Language

Body language refers to nonverbal communication that is expressed through the use of gestures, head movements and posture, eye contact, facial expressions, and touch.

#### Gestures:

There are three main types of gestures: adaptors, emblems, and illustrators (Andersen, 1999). Adaptors are touching behaviors and movements that indicate internal states typically related to arousal or anxiety. Adaptors can be targeted toward the self, objects, or others. In regular social situations, adaptors result from uneasiness, anxiety, or a general sense that we are not in control of our surroundings. Many of us subconsciously click pens, shake our legs, or engage in other adaptors during classes, meetings, or while waiting as a way to do something with our excess energy. Use of object adaptors can also signal

boredom as people play with the straw in their drink or peel the label off a bottle of beer.

Emblems are gestures that have a specific agreed-on meaning. A hitchhiker's raised thumb, the "OK" sign with thumb and index finger connected in a circle with the other three fingers sticking up, and the raised middle finger are all examples of emblems that have an agreed-upon meaning or meanings within a specific culture. Later in the chapter, you will see how different those agree-upon meanings can be among different cultures.

Illustrators are the most common type of gesture and are used to illustrate the verbal message they accompany. For example, you might use hand gestures to indicate the size or shape of an object. Unlike emblems, illustrators do not typically have meaning on their own and are used more subconsciously than emblems.

## **Head Movements and Posture:**

Head movements and posture are grouped together because they are often both used to acknowledge others and communicate interest or attentiveness. For example, a head up typically indicates an engaged or neutral attitude, a head tilt indicates interest and is an innate submission gesture that exposes the neck and subconsciously makes people feel more trusting of us, and a head down signals a negative or aggressive attitude (Pease & Pease, 2004). One interesting standing posture involves putting our hands on our hips, and is a nonverbal cue that we use subconsciously to make us look bigger and show assertiveness.

## **Eye Contact:**



(Image: [Robert Couse-Baker](#), CC BY 2.0)

**Eye Contact:** Eye contact can have a variety of meanings, based on culture, co-culture, and context. It can be used to show interest, respect, aggression, or even dislike. For example, what do you think it means when someone “mad dogs” another person or gives them the “stink eye”?

We also communicate through eye behaviors, primarily eye contact. Eye contact serves several communicative functions: regulating interaction, monitoring interaction, conveying information, or establishing interpersonal connections. In terms of regulating communication, we use eye contact to signal to others that we are ready to speak or to indicate that we are finishing up. Eye contact is also used to monitor interaction by taking in feedback and other nonverbal

cues. A communicator can use eye contact to determine if others are engaged, confused, or bored and then adapt their message accordingly. Our eyes also send information to others. Making eye contact with others also communicates that we are paying attention and are interested in what another person is saying. Eye contact can also be used to intimidate others. Staring at another person in some contexts could communicate intimidation, while in other contexts it could communicate flirtation.

## **Facial Expressions:**

Our faces are the most expressive part of our bodies. Facial expressions communicate a range of emotions and can be used to infer personality traits and make judgments about others. Facial expressions can communicate that someone is tired, excited, angry, confused, frustrated, sad, confident, smug, shy, or bored. A few basic facial expressions are recognizable by humans all over the world; research has supported the universality of a core group of facial expressions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust. The first four are especially identifiable across cultures (Andersen, 1999).

Although facial expressions are typically viewed as innate and several are universally recognizable, they are not always connected to an emotional or internal biological stimulus; they can actually serve a more social purpose. For example, most of the smiles we produce are primarily made for others and are not just an involuntary reflection of an internal emotional state (Andersen, 1999).

## **Haptics:**

Haptics refers to the study of communication by touch. Touch is necessary for human social development, and it can be welcoming, threatening, or persuasive. There are several types of touch, including functional-professional, social-polite, friendship-warmth, and love- intimacy (Heslin & Apler, 1983). At the functional-professional level, touch is related to a goal or part of a routine professional interaction, which makes it less threatening and more expected.

For example, we let barbers, hairstylists, doctors, nurses, tattoo artists, and security screeners touch us in ways that would otherwise be seen as intimate or inappropriate if not in a professional context.

At the social-polite level, socially sanctioned touching behaviors help initiate interactions and show that others are included and respected. A handshake, a pat on the arm, and a pat on the shoulder are examples of social-polite touching. At the friendship-warmth level, touch is more important and more ambiguous than at the social-polite level. At this level, touch interactions are important because they serve a relational maintenance purpose and communicate closeness, liking, care, and concern. At the love- intimacy level, touch is more personal and is typically only exchanged between significant others, such as best friends, close family members, and romantic partners. Touching faces, holding hands, and frontal embraces are examples of touch at this level.

### 6.3.2: Paralanguage & Silence



(Image: Natalie Cassidy/[www.nataliedee.com](http://www.nataliedee.com), printed with permission for use in I.C.A.T.)

*Silence: Silence can be a powerful form of nonverbal communication. What does it usually mean if someone is giving you the “silent*

Paralanguage, often referred to as vocalics, refers to the vocalized but nonverbal parts of a message such as pitch, volume, rate, vocal quality, and verbal fillers (Andersen, 1999). Pitch helps convey meaning, regulate conversational flow, and communicate the intensity of a message. We also learn that greetings have a rising emphasis and farewells have falling emphasis. Of course, no one ever tells us these things explicitly; we learn them through observation and practice. We do not pick up on some

*treatment”?*

more subtle and/or complex patterns of paralanguage involving pitch until we are older. Children, for example,

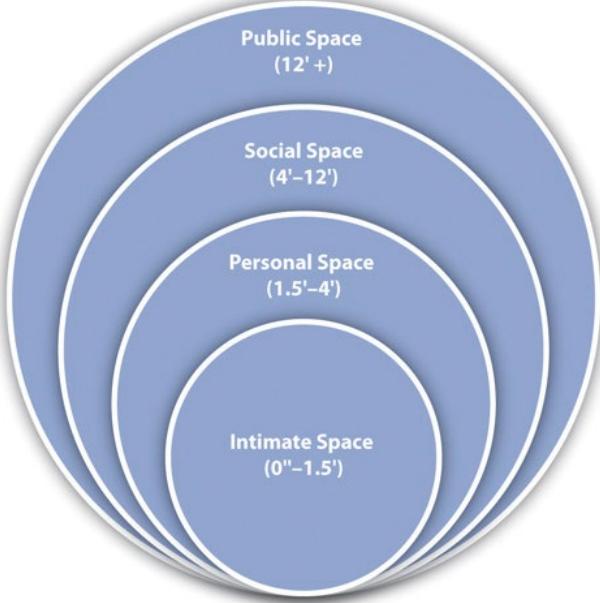
have a difficult time perceiving sarcasm, which is usually conveyed through paralinguistic characteristics like pitch and tone rather than the actual words being spoken. Paralanguage provides important context for the verbal content of a message. For example, volume helps communicate intensity. A louder voice is usually thought of as more intense, although a soft voice combined with a certain tone and facial expression can be just as intense. Our tone of voice can be controlled somewhat with pitch, volume, and emphasis, but each voice has a distinct quality known as a vocal signature. Voices vary in terms of resonance, pitch, and tone, and some voices are more pleasing than others.

In addition, the use of silence serves as a type of nonverbal communication when we do not use words or utterances to convey meanings. Have you ever experienced the “silent treatment” from someone? What meanings did you take from that person’s silence? Silence is powerful because the person using silence may be refusing to engage in communication with you. Silence can also be used strategically in conversations, such as silent pause for emphasis or a long period of silence in response to another’s message. Others may use silence as a form of resistance. For example, silent protests or ‘days of silence’ are often used to show disapproval or bring awareness to a particular issue. It’s important to be aware that silence has a variety of interpretations and misinterpretations. For example, we may interpret another’s silence as intentional, even when it wasn’t. Or some people may remain silent to convey disagreement with something, however, others may interpret that silence as agreement.

### 6.3.3: Space, Territory, and Time

Other types of nonverbal communication types are: the way we use space around us, the territories we claim, and how we use time.

## Spatial Use:



*People who live in U.S. America usually have very set notions on what is considered appropriate or inappropriate spatial distance between people, based on the relationship and context.*

Spatial use, also called proxemics, refers to the study of how space and distance influence communication. In general, space influences how people communicate and behave. Smaller spaces with a higher density of people often lead to breaches of our personal space bubbles. Unexpected breaches of personal space can lead to negative reactions, especially if we feel someone has violated our space voluntarily, meaning that a crowding situation didn't force them into our space. We all have varying definitions of what our "personal space" is, and these definitions are contextual and depend on the situation and the relationship.

Although our bubbles are invisible, people are socialized into the norms of personal space within their cultural group. Scholars have identified four zones for U.S. Americans, which are public, social, personal, and intimate distance (Hall, 1968). The zones are more elliptical than circular, taking up more space in our front, where our line of sight is, than at our side or back where we can't

monitor what people are doing. Even within a particular zone, interactions may differ depending on whether someone is in the outer or inner part of the zone.

## Territoriality:

In addition to various notions of personal space, we claim spaces as our own, such as a gang territory, a neighborhood claimed by a particular salesperson, your usual desk in the classroom, or the seat you've marked to save while getting concessions at a sporting event. Territoriality is an innate drive to take up and defend spaces. There are three main divisions for territory: primary, secondary, and public (Hargie, 2011). Sometimes our claim to a space is official. These spaces are known as our primary territories because they are marked or understood to be exclusively ours and under our control. A person's house, yard, room, desk, side of the bed, or shelf in the medicine cabinet could be considered primary territories. Secondary territories don't belong to us and aren't exclusively under our control. However, they are associated with us, which may lead us to assume that the space will be open and available to us when we need it without us taking any further steps to reserve it.

This happens in classrooms regularly. Students often sit in the same desk or at least same general area as they did on the first day of class. The expectation of this being "our space" could lead to a negative interpretation of the classmate you find sitting there one morning. Public territories are open to all people. People are allowed to mark public territory and use it for a limited period of time. This space is often up for grabs, though, which makes public space difficult to manage for some people, and can lead to conflict. To avoid this type of situation, people use a variety of objects that are typically recognized by others as nonverbal cues that mark a place as temporarily reserved—for example, jackets, bags, papers, or a drink.

## Time:

Chronemics refers to the study of how time affects communication. Time can be classified into several different categories, including personal, physical, and

cultural time (Andersen, 1999). Personal time refers to the ways in which individuals experience time. The way we experience time varies based on our mood, our interest level, and other factors. Think about how quickly time passes when you are interested in and therefore engaged in something. Physical time refers to the fixed cycles of days, years, and seasons. Physical time, especially seasons, can affect our mood and psychological states. Some people experience seasonal affective disorder that leads them to experience emotional distress and anxiety during the changes of seasons, primarily from warm and bright to dark and cold (summer to fall and winter). Cultural time refers to how a large group of people view time. Polychronic people do not view time as a linear progression that needs to be divided into small units and scheduled in advance. Polychronic people keep more flexible schedules and may engage in several activities at once. Monochronic people tend to schedule their time more rigidly and do one thing at a time. A polychronic or monochronic orientation to time influences our social realities and how we interact with others.

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

### **6.3.4: Personal and Environmental Presentation**

Personal Presentation involves two components: our physical characteristics and the artifacts with which we adorn and surround ourselves with. Physical characteristics include body shape, height, weight, attractiveness, and other physical features of our bodies. We do not have as much control over how these nonverbal cues are encoded as we do with many other aspects of nonverbal communication. However, these characteristics play a large role in initial impression formation even though we know we “shouldn’t judge a book by its

cover.” Although ideals of attractiveness vary among cultures and individuals, research consistently indicates that people who are deemed attractive based on physical characteristics have distinct advantages in many aspects of life.

While there are physical characteristics about ourselves that we cannot change, we do have control over our clothing choices, grooming behaviors, such as hair style, and the artifacts with which we adorn ourselves, such as clothes and accessories. Have you ever tried to consciously change your “look?” Changes in hairstyle and clothes can impact how you are perceived by others. In addition to artifacts such as clothes and hairstyles, other political, social, and cultural symbols send messages to others about who we are, such as piercings and tattoos. Jewelry can also send messages with varying degrees of direct meaning. A ring on the “ring finger” of a person’s left hand typically indicates that they are married or in an otherwise committed relationship. Expensive watches can serve as symbols that distinguish a CEO from an entry-level employee. People also adorn their clothes, body, or belongings with religious or cultural symbols, like a cross to indicate a person’s Christian faith or a rainbow flag to indicate that a person is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or an ally to one or more of those groups.

In addition, we can use artifacts in the spaces we occupy, such as our home, office, or bedroom, to communicate about ourselves. The books that we display on our coffee table, the magazines a doctor keeps in his or her waiting room, or the placement of fresh flowers in a foyer all convey meaning to others. For example, imagine a bedroom that has the wall painted pink, a ruffle bedspread, and dolls displayed on the self. What do these items say about the person who occupies that room? What age would you think they are? Gender? What types of activities might you think the occupant likes by the various toys on display? In summary, whether we know it or not, our physical characteristics and the artifacts that surround us communicate much about us.



(Left Image: [home space](#), CC BY-SA 2.0; Right Image: [Ben Babcock](#), CC BY 2.0)

**Artifacts:** The artifacts that we use to decorate the spaces we occupy, such as a bedroom or office, can be used to communicate aspects of ourselves. Look at the artifacts in the above rooms. What do they communicate? Who lives in these spaces? Can you guess their age, gender identity, or socioeconomic status? What do you think they like?

## **6.4.0: Principles of Nonverbal Communication**

**I**n this section, we will address the five principles of nonverbal communication: our nonverbal communication is continuous, multichanneled, conscious/intentional and unconscious/unintentional, ambiguous, and can occur both face-to-face and through mediated platforms.

### **6.4.1: Nonverbal Communication is Continuous**

In face-to-face interactions, nonverbal communication is continuous, ongoing, and in constant motion. While we can stop talking to end verbal communication, we can't turn off nonverbal communication. Our posture, eye contact (or lack of eye contact), facial expressions, and physical appearance are always communicating something about us, whether intentional or unintentional.

### **6.4.2: Nonverbal Communication is Multi-channeled**

A nonverbal message is rarely sent through just one channel in isolation, rather it accompanies multiple channels and occurs in clusters. For example, squinted

eyes might be accompanied with a furrowed brow and/of a pursing of the lips. Because of this, we need to be aware of the entire cluster when decoding a particular message and look for nonverbal congruence. Nonverbal congruence is the consistency among the cluster of nonverbals we are observing, which influences our understanding of what message is being conveyed. For example, someone crossing their arms usually has a negative interpretation. However, since nonverbal communication is multichanneled, this particular body language should not be read in isolation; instead, other nonverbal cues should be considered. If someone is standing with their arms crossed and their eyebrows are furrowed, you might assume they are angry or upset based on nonverbal congruence. However, if someone has their arms crossed but they are smiling, then they likely are not angry.

### **6.4.3: Nonverbal Communication is Conscious/Intentional and Unconscious/Unintentional**

Nonverbal communication is both conscious and unconscious, which means we use it both intentionally and unintentionally. Conscious communication means that we think about our communication before we communicate. Unconscious communication means that we do not think about every message we communicate. For example, when something funny happens, you probably do not think, “Okay, I’m going to smile and laugh right now.” Instead, you react unconsciously, displaying your emotions through nonverbal behaviors. Nonverbal communication can occur as unconscious reactions to situations. However, at times, we certainly make conscious choices to use or withhold nonverbal communication to share meaning. Angry drivers use many conscious nonverbal expressions to communicate to other drivers, and in a job interview you are making conscious decisions about your wardrobe, posture, and eye contact.

## **6.4.4: Nonverbal Communication is Ambiguous**

While the symbolic and abstract nature of verbal language can often lead to misunderstandings, nonverbal communication is even more ambiguous. As with verbal communication, most of our nonverbal signals can be linked to multiple meanings, but unlike words, many nonverbal signals do not have any one specific meaning. If you've ever had someone wink at you and didn't know why, you've probably experienced this uncertainty. Did they wink to express their affection for you, their pleasure with something you just did, or because you share some inside knowledge or joke? Just as we look at context clues in a sentence or paragraph to derive meaning from a particular word, we can look for context clues in various sources of information like the physical environment, other nonverbal signals, or verbal communication to make sense of a particular nonverbal cue. Unlike verbal communication, however, nonverbal communication doesn't have explicit rules of grammar that bring structure, order, and agreed on patterns of usage. Instead, we implicitly learn norms of nonverbal communication, which leads to greater variance. In general, we exhibit more idiosyncrasies in our usage of nonverbal communication than we do with verbal communication, which also increases the ambiguity of nonverbal communication.

## **6.4.5: Nonverbal communication occurs face-to-face and through mediated communication channels**

When most people think of nonverbal communication, they think of behaviors and actions directly connected to the body, such as gestures and facial

expressions. And when most people think of the type of communication that takes place through mediated platforms, like text messaging and social media posts, they usually think of it as verbal communication. However, technology has changed and reshaped our conceptualization and definitions of what communication is and looks like in a variety of contexts. Scholars have equated communication such as text messages to ‘fingered speech’ (McWhorter, 2013) and these types of communication have transcended past our traditional definitions as they exhibit characteristics of both verbal and nonverbal communication simultaneously.

Due to the dynamic and ambiguous nature of this type of communication, we may use a variety of strategies to emphasize, substitute for, modify, and/or contradict the accompanying verbal message, which aligns with the definition of nonverbal communication. For example, facial expressions, gestures, and movement can be relayed through emojis, emoticons, and gifs. We can change, modify, and contradict the meaning of verbal messages through punctuation, the spelling of a word, and word elongation. Consider how the following message sent through a text message might be interpreted a variety of different ways based on these strategies:



On the decoding end, mediated messages can present more opportunities for misunderstanding than do face-to-face messages. This form of communication is not only light on nonverbal information, but it lacks opportunity for immediate feedback that may help to clarify intentions in order to achieve shared meaning. Have you ever heard someone talk about the need for a

“sarcasm font?” Visuals can help, but the pitch and tone of intended sarcasm is difficult to convey through technology. Additionally, consider how lack of response to a text message can easily be misunderstood. We all have different norms and expectations for reply time. Consider how someone who checks their phone every few minutes might unintentionally misunderstand a less timely reply (a lengthy silence) from another person who only checks their phone every few hours.

## 6.5.0: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover techniques for sending more effective nonverbal messages, address cultural and co-cultural nuances surrounding nonverbal symbols, and discuss the importance of nonverbal behaviors in our relationships.

### 6.5.1: Effective Communication: Encoding Nonverbal Signals

While it is important to recognize that we send nonverbal signals through multiple channels simultaneously, we can also increase our nonverbal communication competence by becoming more aware of how it operates in specific channels. Although no one can truly offer you a rulebook on how to effectively send every type of nonverbal signal, there are some guidelines you can follow to help you become more effective at consciously encoding nonverbal signals that are meant to be intentional.

#### Gestures:

- Remember that adaptors can hurt your credibility in more formal or serious interactions. Figure out what your common adaptors are and monitor

#### Eye Contact:

- Eye contact is useful for initiating and regulating conversations. To make sure someone is available for interaction and to avoid being perceived as rude, it

them so you can avoid creating unfavorable impressions.

- Gestures send messages about your emotional state. Be aware that clenched hands may signal aggression or anger, nail biting or fidgeting may signal nervousness, and finger tapping may signal boredom.

is usually a good idea to “catch their eye” before you start talking to them.

- Avoiding eye contact or shifting your eye contact from place to place can lead others to think you are being deceptive or inattentive.

## Facial Expressions:

- You can use facial expressions to manage your expressions of emotions to intensify what you’re feeling, to diminish what you’re feeling, to cover up what you’re feeling, to express a different emotion than you’re feeling, or to simulate an emotion that you’re not feeling (Metts & Planlap, 2002).

- Smiles are especially powerful in interactions and can act as rapport-

## Haptics:

- Remember that culture, status, gender, age, and setting influence how we send and interpret touch messages.
- In professional and social settings, it is generally OK to touch others on the arm or shoulder. Although we touch others on the arm or shoulder with our hand, it is often too intimate to touch your hand to another person’s hand in a professional or social/casual setting.

building tool. Smiles can also help to disarm a potentially hostile person or deescalate conflict.

## Paralanguage:

- Verbal fillers such as uh and um are often used subconsciously and can negatively affect your credibility and reduce the clarity of your message when speaking in more formal situations.
- Vocal variety increases listener and speaker engagement, understanding, information recall, and motivation. Having a more expressive voice that varies appropriately in terms of rate, pitch, and volume can help you achieve communication goals related to maintaining attention, effectively conveying information, and getting others to act in a particular way.

## Spatial Use/Proxemics:

- When breaches of personal space occur, it is a social norm to make nonverbal adjustments such as lowering our level of immediacy, changing our body orientations, and using objects to separate ourselves from others. physically separate or block off the front of our bodies from others.

- Although pets and children are often granted more leeway to breach other people's space, since they are still learning social norms and rules, as a pet owner, parent, or temporary caretaker, be aware of this possibility and try to prevent such breaches or correct them when they occur.

## 6.5.2: Contextual Communication: Cultural and Co-Cultural Nuances



*Many people mistakenly believe that nonverbal communication, such as gestures, are universal. However, there can be many different meanings associated with a particular gesture. For example, take the thumbs up sign. In U.S. American it can mean ‘okay’ whereas in Japan it represents the number 5 and in Ghana is an insult. Even context changes the meaning, such as using the thumbs up sign for hitchhiking if by the road or to indicate you like something in mediated communication.*

As with other aspects of communication, norms for nonverbal communication vary from country to country and from co-culture to co-culture within a particular country. We've already learned that some nonverbal communication behaviors appear to be somewhat innate because they are universally recognized. Smiling is a universal nonverbal behavior, however, the triggers that lead a person to smile vary from culture to culture. In addition, the smile may not always equate to happiness. The expansion of media, particularly from the United States and other Western countries around the world, is leading to more nonverbal similarities among cultures, but the biggest cultural differences in nonverbal communication occur within the categories of gestures, eye contact, touch, volume, personal space, and time (Pease & Pease, 2004).

## Gestures:

If you'll recall from our discussion on gestures, emblems are gestures that correspond to a word and an agreed-upon meaning. However, the meaning attached to emblems and gestures vary from culture to culture. For example, the "thumbs up" gesture can mean the number "one" in mainland Europe, but it also means "up yours" in Greece (when thrust forward) and is recognized as a signal for hitchhiking or "good," "good job / way to go," or "OK" in many other cultures. So using a particular gesture to communicate in another country might actually end up causing a conflict.

## Eye Contact:

In the U.S., much importance is placed on making eye contact and it is often equated with confidence, interest, and honesty. Eye contact aversion, however, could be seen as a sign that the other person is being deceptive, is bored, or is being rude. However, in some cultures, avoiding eye contact is considered a sign of respect. Some Native American nations teach that people should avoid eye contact with elders, teachers, and other people with status. This can create issues when others view lack of eye contact as a sign of disrespect, lack of engagement, or lower intelligence.

## Touch, Volume, and Spatial Use:

Contact cultures are cultural groups in which people stand closer together, engage in more eye contact, touch more frequently, and speak more loudly. The volume at which we speak is influenced by specific contexts and is more generally influenced by our culture. In European countries like France, England, Sweden, and Germany, it is not uncommon to find restaurants that have small tables very close together. In many cases, two people dining together may be sitting at a table that is actually touching the table of another pair of diners. Most U.S. Americans would consider this a violation of personal space, and Europeans often perceive U.S. Americans to be rude in such contexts because they do not control the volume of their conversations more. Since

personal space is usually more plentiful in the U. S., Americans are used to speaking at a level that is considered loud to many cultures that are used to less personal space.

## Time:

The United States and many northern and western European countries have a monochronic orientation to time, meaning time is seen as a commodity that can be budgeted, saved, spent, and wasted. Events are to be scheduled in advance and have set beginning and ending times. Countries like Spain and Mexico have a polychronic orientation to time. Appointments may be scheduled at overlapping times, making an “orderly” schedule impossible. People may also miss appointments or deadlines without offering an apology, which would be considered very rude by a person with a monochronic orientation to time. People from cultures with a monochronic orientation to time are frustrated when people from polychromic cultures cancel appointments or close businesses for family obligations. Conversely, people from polychromic cultures feel that US Americans, for example, follow their schedules at the expense of personal relationships (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

On a global scale, we see many variations in nonverbal communication across cultures. However, even within one geographic location, there are also variations based on co-cultural factors such as race, gender, social class, etc. As an example of gender variation, it's obvious that males and females tend to have differences in physical appearances in regards to dress, grooming, and artifacts. But even the ways males and females walk and sit can be vastly different. Males tend to take up much more space than females, particular in public spaces. The phenomenon of ‘manspreading’ on subways is one that has gained a lot of recent attention.

In addition to co-cultural nuances, nonverbal encoding and decoding of messages is further complicated by other contextual nuances such as the physical context and relational context.

For example, if you are in a bar, someone making prolonged eye contact could be interpreted as romantic interest. However, someone making prolonged eye contact in a prison could be a sign of aggression. The relationship between two people can also influence the interpretation. Consider the differences between making prolonged eye contact with your sibling versus a romantic partner. Always keep in mind that nonverbal communication is ambiguous and just as you must consider nonverbal congruence for the channels, you must also pay attention to contextual nuances as all these things work together to generate meaning.

### Activity

#### Cross-cultural Awareness

**Quiz:** You can take a cross-cultural awareness quiz to learn some more interesting cultural variations in gestures at the following link:

[https://www.funtrivia.com/play\\_quiz/quiz31230423cod88.html](https://www.funtrivia.com/play_quiz/quiz31230423cod88.html).

## 6.5.3: Reflective Communication: Nonverbal Communication in Relationships

As we already discussed, nonverbal communication is important part of expressing identities. However, another central—if not primary—function of nonverbal communication is the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. As a competent communicator, it is important to reflect on nonverbal communication and recognize the role it plays in our various relationships. People who are skilled at consciously encoding nonverbal

messages have various interpersonal advantages, including being more popular, having larger social networks consisting of both acquaintances and close friends, and being less likely to be lonely or socially anxious (Riggio, 1992). Nonverbal communication increases our expressivity, and people generally find attractive and want to pay more attention to things that are expressive. This increases our chances of initiating interpersonal relationships.

Nonverbal communication also helps maintain relationships once they have moved beyond the initial stages by helping us communicate emotions, and seek and provide social and emotional support. In terms of communicating emotions, competent communicators know when it is appropriate to express emotions and when more self-regulation is needed. Expressing the need for support is also an important part of relational maintenance. People who lack nonverbal encoding skills may send unclear or subtle cues requesting support that are not picked up on by others, which can lead to increased feelings of loneliness. Skilled encoders of nonverbal messages, on the other hand, are able to appropriately communicate the need for support in recognizable ways.

### Decoding Nonverbal Messages:

When it comes to decoding, always keep in mind that our nonverbal messages are ambiguous and there is no set universal meaning. As such, it is important to be tentative when decoding messages and not ‘jump to conclusions’ in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings or hurt feelings. It is common to misinterpret the emotional expression of others, even when we are close to them, or to think an emotional expression is tied to something we did. For example, we may think our partner’s lack of responsiveness and irritable mood means they are upset with us, when they might have just had a stressful day at work and feel tired. When unsure about what another is expressing, you can use the skill of perception checking covered in Chapter 3 to aid in the clarity of your interpretations and avoid potentially harmful misunderstandings.

# Chapter 7: Listening

If you were to break up the various types of communication you use throughout your day, listening would make up about 42 – 60 percent. Problematically, many people engage in passive versus active listening, which can cause miscommunication and have a negative effect on relationships. Listening is an important skill to cultivate, both personally and professionally. In this chapter, we will explain the importance of listening, the stages of the listening process, listening styles, some common listening barriers, and ways to improve our listening skills.



- How does the listening process work?
- What are some of the challenges to effective listening?
- How can we improve our listening, and why might it be important to do so?

## Successful students will be able to:

- explain the importance of listening
- differentiate between five stages of the listening process
- identify four listening styles
- describe six barriers to effective listening
- demonstrate ways to improve listening in all stages of the process
- recognize contextual influences on listening
- recognize the value of reflection on listening and relationships

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- Sections 7.0: Interpersonal Communication Abridged Textbook (I.C.A.T.); Central New Mexico Community College; 2019; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](#)
  - Sections 7.1.1 – 7.5.3: adapted from Communication in the Real World: An Introduction to Communication Studies; University of Minnesota; 2016; [CC BY NC SA 4.0](#)

## 7.1.0: The Importance of Listening

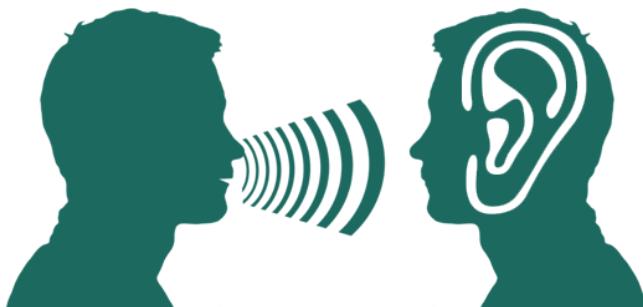
Listening is the learned process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. We begin to engage in the listening process from infancy, long before we engage in any recognizable verbal or nonverbal communication. In general, listening helps us achieve all the communication goals (physical, instrumental, relational, and identity) that we learned about in Chapter 1. Listening is also important in academic, professional, and personal contexts. In terms of academics, students with high scores for listening ability have greater academic achievement. Listening skills are highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2010). Listening also has implications for our personal lives and relationships. We shouldn't underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information. Listening can also help us expand our self and social awareness by learning from other people's experiences and by helping us take on different perspectives.



*Listening is an important part of both our personal and professional relationships.*

## 7.2.0: The Stages of the Listening Process

**L**istening is a process and as such it doesn't unfold in a linear, step-by-step fashion with a defined start and finish. Listening in action is a fast, complex process, with many overlapping components. However, in order to aid in your understanding of listening, we will break the process into five stages and cover each stage in this section: receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding.



### 7.2.1: Receiving

Before we can engage other steps in the listening process, we must take in stimuli through our senses. In any given communication encounter, it is likely that we will return to the receiving stage many times as we process incoming feedback and new messages. We primarily take in information needed for listening through auditory and visual channels. Although we don't often think about visual cues as a part of listening, they influence how we interpret messages. For example, seeing a person's face when we hear their voice allows us to take in nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and eye contact.

Chapter 3, The Perception Process and Perception of Others, discussed some of the ways in which incoming stimuli are filtered. These perceptual filters also play a role in listening. Some stimuli never make it in, some are filtered into subconsciousness, and others are filtered into various levels of consciousness based on their salience. Salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. We tend to find salient those things that are visually or audibly stimulating and those that meet our needs or interests. Think about how it's much easier to listen to a lecture on a subject that you find very interesting.

It is important to consider noise as a factor that influences how we receive messages. Some noise interferes primarily with hearing, which is the physical process of receiving stimuli through internal and external components of the ears and eyes, and some interferes with listening, which is the cognitive process of processing the stimuli taken in during hearing. While hearing leads to listening, they are not the same thing. Noise resulting from the physical context, such as other people talking, the sounds of traffic, and music interfere with the physiological aspects of hearing. Noise resulting from the individual context like stress and anger interfere primarily with the cognitive processes of listening.

### To improve listening at the receiving stage:

- prepare yourself to listen, both physically and mentally
- concentrate on stimuli most relevant to your listening purpose(s) or goal(s)
- pay attention to turn-taking signals so you can follow the conversational flow
- stay tuned in and avoid interrupting someone while they are speaking

## 7.2.2: Interpreting

During the interpreting stage of listening, we combine the visual and auditory information we receive and try to make meaning out of that information using schemata. The interpreting stage engages cognitive and relational processing as we take in informational, contextual, and relational cues and try to connect them in meaningful ways to previous experiences. It is through the interpreting stage that we may begin to understand the stimuli we have received. When we understand something, we are able to attach meaning by connecting information to previous experiences. If we have difficulty interpreting information, meaning we don't have previous experience or information in our existing schemata to make sense of it, then it is difficult to transfer the information into our long-term memory for later recall. In situations where understanding the information we receive isn't important or isn't a goal, this stage may be fairly short or even skipped. After all, we can move something to our long-term memory by repetition and then later recall it without ever having understood it.

### To improve listening at the interpreting stage:

- identify main points
- avoid assuming and try to see from the speaker's perspective
- be aware of how context can influence meaning
- pay attention to nonverbal cues, such as facial expression tones, tone of voice, and the use of silence

## 7.2.3: Recalling

Our ability to recall information is dependent on some of the physiological limits of how memory works. Overall, our memories are known to be fallible. We forget about half of what we hear immediately after hearing it, recall 35 percent after eight hours, and recall 20 percent after a day (Hargie, 2011). Our memory consists of multiple “storage units,” including sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory (Hargie, 2011).

Our sensory storage is very large in terms of capacity but limited in terms of length of storage. We can hold large amounts of unsorted visual information but only for about a tenth of a second. By comparison, we can hold large amounts of unsorted auditory information for longer—up to four seconds.

As stimuli are organized and interpreted, they make their way to short-term memory where they either expire and are forgotten or are transferred to long-term memory. Short-term memory is a mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for twenty seconds to one minute. Long-term memory is a mental storage capability to which stimuli in short-term memory can be transferred if they are connected to existing schema and in which information can be stored indefinitely (Hargie, 2011). Working memory is a temporarily accessed memory storage space that is activated during times of high cognitive demand. When using working memory, we can temporarily store information and process and use it at the same time.

### To improve listening at the recalling stage:

- use multiple sensory channels to decode messages and make more complete memories
- repeat, rephrase, and reorganize information to fit your cognitive preferences
- make connections between what you hear and what you already know

- use mnemonic devices as a gimmick to help with recall

## 7.2.4: Evaluating

When we evaluate something, we make judgments about its credibility, completeness, and worth. In terms of credibility, we try to determine the degree to which we believe a speaker's statements are correct and/or true. In terms of completeness, we try to "read between the lines" and evaluate the message in relation to what we know about the topic or situation being discussed. We evaluate the worth of a message by making a value judgment about whether we think the message or idea is good/bad, right/wrong, or desirable/undesirable. All these aspects of evaluating require critical thinking skills, which we aren't born with but must develop over time through our own personal and intellectual development. One danger within the evaluation stage of listening is to focus your evaluative lenses more on the communicator than the message. This can quickly become a barrier to effective listening if we begin to prejudge a communicator based on their identity or characteristics rather than on the content of their message.

### To improve listening at the evaluating stage:

- separate facts, inferences, and opinions
- be familiar with and able to identify persuasive strategies and fallacies of reasoning
- assess the credibility of the speaker and the message
- be aware of your own biases and how your perceptual filters can create barriers to effective listening

## 7.2.5: Responding

Responding entails sending verbal and nonverbal messages that indicate attentiveness and understanding or a lack thereof. From our earlier discussion of the communication model, you may be able to connect this part of the listening process to feedback. Back-channel cues are the verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking and can consist of verbal cues like “uh-huh,” “oh,” and “right,” and/or nonverbal cues like direct eye contact, head nods, and leaning forward. Backchannel cues are generally a form of positive feedback that indicates others are actively listening. People also send cues intentionally and unintentionally that indicate they aren’t listening. If another person is looking away, fidgeting, texting, or turned away, we will likely interpret those responses negatively. Paraphrasing, which we will discuss in the Communication Competence section of this chapter, is a responding behavior that can also show that you understand what was communicated.



## To improve listening at the responding stage:

- ask appropriate clarifying and follow-up questions and paraphrase information to check understanding,
- give responses that are relevant
- adapt your response to the communicator and the context
- use back-channel cues to show you are listening

## 7.3.0: Listening Styles

Research finds that 40 percent of people have more than one preferred listening style, and that they choose a style based on the listening situation (Bodie & Villaume, 2003). Other research finds that people often still revert back to a single preferred style in times of emotional or cognitive stress, even if they know a different style of listening would be better (Worthington, 2003). In this section, we will cover the four types of listening styles: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented.



### 7.3.1: People-Oriented Listeners

People-oriented listeners are

People-oriented listeners are concerned about the emotional states

concerned about the needs and feelings of others and may get distracted from a specific task or the content of a message in order to address feelings.

of others and listen with the purpose of offering support in interpersonal relationships. People-oriented listeners can be characterized as “supporters” who are caring and understanding. These listeners are sought out because they are known as

people who will “lend an ear.” They may or may not be valued for the advice they give, but what people often want is a good listener. This type of listening may be especially valuable in interpersonal communication involving emotional exchanges, as a person-oriented listener can create a space where people can make themselves vulnerable without fear of being cut off or judged.

### 7.3.2: Action-Oriented Listeners

Action-oriented listeners prefer well-organized, precise, and accurate information. They can become frustrated when they perceive messages to be unorganized or inconsistent, or a speaker to be “longwinded.”

Action-oriented listeners focus on what action needs to take place in regards to a received message and try to formulate an organized way to initiate that action. These listeners are frustrated by disorganization, because it detracts from the possibility of actually doing something. Action-oriented listeners are problem solvers. This style of listening can be very

effective when a task needs to be completed under time, budgetary, or other logistical constraints. One research study found that people prefer an action-oriented style of listening in professional contexts (Imhof, 2004). In other situations, such as interpersonal communication, action-oriented listening may be frustrating to the speaker as it comes off as the listener trying to “fix” or “solve” the other persons problems when all the speaker wants is someone to understand and/or validate what they are saying.

### 7.3.3: Content-Oriented Listeners

Content-oriented listeners are analytic and enjoy processing complex messages. They like in-depth information and like to learn about multiple sides of a topic or hear multiple perspectives on an issue. Their thoroughness can be difficult to manage if there are time constraints.

information.

Content-oriented listeners like to listen to complex information and evaluate the content of a message, often from multiple perspectives, before drawing conclusions. These listeners can be thought of as “learners,” and they also ask questions to solicit more information to fill out their understanding of an issue. Content-oriented listeners often enjoy high perceived credibility because of their thorough, balanced, and objective approach to engaging with

### 7.3.4: Time-Oriented Listeners

Time-oriented listeners are concerned with completing tasks and achieving goals. They do not like information perceived as irrelevant and like to stick to a timeline. They may cut people off and make quick decisions (taking short cuts or cutting corners) when they think they have

Time-oriented listeners are more concerned about time limits and timelines than they are with the content or senders of a message. These listeners tend to actually verbalize the time constraints under which they are operating. For example, a time-oriented supervisor may say the following to an employee who has just

enough information.

entered his office and asked to talk: “Sure, I can talk, but I only have about five minutes.” These listeners may also exhibit nonverbal cues that indicate

time and/or attention shortages, such as looking at a clock, phone, avoiding eye contact, or nonverbally trying to close down an interaction. Time-oriented listeners are also more likely to interrupt others, which may make them seem insensitive to emotional/personal needs.

People often get action-oriented and time-oriented listeners confused. Action-oriented listeners would be happy to get to a conclusion or decision quickly if they perceive that they are acting on well-organized and accurate information. They would, however, not mind taking longer to reach a conclusion when dealing with a complex topic, and they would delay making a decision if the information presented to them didn’t meet their standards of organization.

## **7.4.0: Barriers to Listening**

**B**arriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process (Hargie, 2011). In this section, we will explore how environmental and physical factors, cognitive and personal factors, prejudices, and bad listening practices present barriers to effective listening.

### **7.4.1: Environmental and Physical Barriers to Listening**



I'M NOT LISTENING.

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

sight and well-placed furniture.

## 7.4.2: Cognitive and Personal Barriers to Listening

Physiological noise linked to the individual context, can also interfere with our ability to process incoming information. This is considered a physical barrier to effective listening because it emanates from our physical body. Physiological noise is noise stemming from a physical illness or injury.

Another type of noise that is part of the individual context, psychological noise, bridges physical and cognitive barriers to effective listening. Psychological noise, or noise stemming from our psychological states including moods and level of arousal, can facilitate or impede listening. Any mood or state of arousal, positive or negative, that is too far above or below our regular baseline creates a barrier to message reception and processing. The generally positive emotional state of being in love can be just as much of a barrier as feeling hatred.

Cognitive limits and personal concerns can interfere with our ability to listen. Whether you call it multitasking, daydreaming, glazing over, or drifting off, we all cognitively process other things while receiving messages. If you think of your listening mind as a wall of ten televisions, you may notice that in some situations five of the ten televisions are tuned into one channel. If that one channel is a lecture being given by your professor, then you are exerting about half of your cognitive processing abilities on one message. In another situation, all ten televisions may be on different channels.

Personal concerns are often the focus of competing thoughts that can take us away from listening and challenge our ability to concentrate on others' messages. Two common barriers to concentration are self-centeredness and lack of motivation (Brownell, 1993). For example, when our self-consciousness

is raised, we may be too busy thinking about how we look, how we're sitting, or what others think of us to be attentive to an incoming message. Additionally, we are often challenged when presented with messages that we do not find personally relevant. In general, we employ selective attention, which refers to our tendency to pay attention to the messages that benefit us in some way and filter others out.

### 7.4.3: Response Preparation

Another common barrier to effective listening is response preparation. Response preparation refers to our tendency to rehearse what we are going to say next while a speaker is still talking. Rehearsal of what we will say once a speaker's turn is over is an important part of the listening process that takes place between the recalling and evaluation and/or the evaluation and responding stage. Rehearsal becomes problematic when response preparation begins as someone is receiving a message and hasn't had time to engage in interpretation or recall. In this sense, we are listening with the goal of responding instead of with the goal of understanding, which can lead us to miss important information that could influence our response.

### 7.4.4: Bad Messages and/or Speakers

Bad messages also present a barrier to effective listening. Sometimes our trouble listening originates in the sender. In terms of message construction, poorly structured messages or messages that are too vague, too jargon filled, or too simple can present listening difficulties. In terms of speakers' delivery, verbal fillers, monotone voices, distracting movements, or a disheveled appearance can inhibit our ability to cognitively process a message (Hargie, 2011). Listening also becomes difficult when a speaker tries to present too much

information.

### 7.4.5: Prejudice

Unfortunately, some of our default ways of processing information and perceiving others lead us to rigid ways of thinking. When we engage in prejudiced listening, we are usually trying to preserve our ways of thinking and avoid being convinced of something different. This type of prejudice is a barrier to effective listening, because when we pre-judge a person based on their identity or ideas, we usually stop listening in an active and/or ethical way. We exhibit prejudice in our listening in several ways, some of which are more obvious than others. For example, we may claim to be in a hurry and only selectively address the parts of a message that we agree with or that aren't controversial. We can also operate from a state of denial where we avoid a subject or person altogether so that our views are not challenged. Prejudices that are based on a person's identity, such as race, age, occupation, or appearance, may lead us to assume that we know what they will say, essentially closing down the listening process.

### 7.4.6: Bad Listening Practices



The previously discussed barriers to effective listening may be difficult to overcome because they are at least partially beyond our control. Physical barriers, cognitive limitations, and perceptual biases exist within all of us, and it is more realistic to believe that we can become more conscious of and lessen them than it is to believe that we can eliminate them altogether. Other “bad listening” practices may be habitual, but they are easier to address with some concerted effort. These bad listening practices include interrupting, distorted listening, and pseudo-listening.

- **Interrupting:**

Conversations unfold as a series of turns and turn taking is negotiated through a complex set of verbal and nonverbal signals that are consciously and subconsciously received. In this sense, conversational turn taking has been likened to a dance where communicators try to avoid stepping on each other’s toes. One of the most frequent glitches in the turn-taking process is interruption, but not all interruptions are considered “bad listening.” Sometimes interruptions are more like overlapping statements that show support (e.g., “I think so, too.”) or excitement about the conversation (e.g., “That’s so cool!”). Back-channel cues like “uh-huh” also overlap with a

speaker's message. We may also interrupt out of necessity if we're engaged in a task with the other person and need to offer directions (e.g., "Turn left here."), instructions (e.g., "Will you whisk the eggs?"), or warnings (e.g., "Look out behind you!"). All these interruptions are not typically thought of as evidence of bad listening unless they become distracting for the speaker or are unnecessary.

- **Distorted Listening:**

Distorted listening occurs in many ways. Sometimes we just get the order of information wrong, which can have relatively little negative effects if we are casually recounting a story, annoying effects if we forget the order of turns (left, right, left or right, left, right?) in our driving directions, or very negative effects if we recount the events of a crime out of order, which leads to faulty testimony at a criminal trial. Rationalization is another form of distorted listening through which we adapt, edit, or skew incoming information to fit our existing schemata. We may, for example, reattribute the cause of something to better suit our own beliefs. If a professor is explaining to a student why he earned a "D" on his final paper, the student could reattribute the cause from "I didn't follow the paper guidelines" to "this professor is an unfair grader." Sometimes we actually change the words we hear to make them better fit what we are thinking. This can easily happen if we join a conversation late, overhear part of a conversation, or are being a lazy listener and miss important setup and context.

- **Pseudo-listening:**

Pseudo-listening is behaving as if you're paying attention to a speaker when you're actually not (McCornack, 2007). Outwardly visible signals of attentiveness are an important part of the listening process, but when they are just an "act," the pseudo-listener is engaging in bad listening behaviors. They are not actually going through the stages of the listening process and will likely not be able to recall the speaker's message or offer a competent and relevant response. Although it is a bad listening practice, we all understandably engage in pseudo-listening from time to time. If a friend needs to talk but you're really tired or experiencing some other barrier to effective listening, it may be worth engaging in pseudo-listening as a relational maintenance strategy, especially if the friend just needs a

sounding board and isn't expecting advice or guidance. We may also pseudo-listen to a romantic partner or grandfather's story for the fifteenth time to prevent hurting their feelings.



*Do you think having technology present in your interactions affects your ability to fully listen to others?*

## 7.5.0: Communication Competence

In this section, we will cover techniques for better listening, address cultural and co-cultural influences on our listening, and discuss the importance of listening in our relationships.

### 7.5.1: Effective Communication: Paraphrasing

One way to help you become a more effective listener is to paraphrase what the other person is saying. When you paraphrase information, you rephrase the message into your own words. Paraphrasing is a useful communication skill for a variety of reasons. It helps verify your understanding of the speaker's message which aids in creating shared meaning, forces you to actively listen to others, and likewise demonstrates that you are listening. We can paraphrase in three different ways: by rephrasing and reflecting back the content/denotative meaning of the message, the feelings behind the message, or both.

#### To paraphrase you need to:

- A. Listen to what the speaker is saying
- B. Pay attention to the speaker's nonverbal cues and the emotion(s) you think they are conveying
- C. Determine what both the verbal and nonverbal message(s) mean to you
- D. Rephrase the meaning verbal and/or nonverbal message in your own words

Avoid stating your paraphrase like a fact or putting words in the speaker's mouth. Instead, use a questioning tone of voice and a lead-in statement. For example, you might say the following to start off a paraphrased response: "What I heard you say was..." or "It seems like you're saying..." You can also ask clarifying questions to get more information. It is often a good idea to pair a paraphrase with a question to keep a conversation flowing. For example, you might pose the following paraphrase and question pair: "It seems like you believe you were treated unfairly. Is that right?" Or you might ask a standalone question like "What did your boss do that made you think he was 'playing favorites?'" Make sure to paraphrase and/or ask questions after a person's turn is over, because interrupting can also be interpreted as a sign of not listening. Paraphrasing is also a good tool to use in computer-mediated communication, especially since miscommunication can occur due to a lack of nonverbal and other contextual cues.

## Lead ins to start a paraphrase:

- It sounds like...
- It seems like...
- My interpretation of...
- So what you're saying...
- Are you saying...
- So you think that...
- What I'm hearing is...

### Paraphrasing Example:

**Other's Message:** "So I've been working hard on revising my English paper. I spent an entire week working on it and thought the changes I made really improved my explanations. Well, yesterday I stopped by and got the paper back from my professor, they told me they didn't really see much of an improvement from the original version."

**Content Parphrase    Feelings  
                            Parphrase**

**Combination  
Parphrase**

“So it sounds like thought you had provided more depth and detail to your explanations, but your professor didn’t notice?”

“You seem really frustrated that your professor didn’t notice the changes you made?”

“So your professor told you that they didn’t notice the work you had done? No wonder you sound so frustrated!”

## 7.5.2: Contextual Communication: Cultural and Co-cultural Influence on Listening

Understanding some contextual variations in listening can help us become more competent [communicators](#). In particular, contextual nuances due to culture and co-culture can influence the importance placed on listening and how people listen.

- **Listening and Culture:**

Some cultures place more importance on listening than other cultures. In general, collectivistic cultures tend to value listening more than individualistic cultures that are more speaker oriented. The value placed on verbal and nonverbal meaning also varies by culture and influences how we communicate and listen. A low-context communication style is one in which much of the meaning generated within an interaction comes from verbal communication rather than nonverbal or contextual cues. Conversely, much of the meaning generated by a high-context communication style comes from nonverbal and contextual cues (Lustig & Koester, 2006). For example, U.S. Americans of

European descent generally use a low-context communication style, while people in East Asian and Latin American cultures use a high-context communication style. Contextual communication styles affect listening in many ways. Cultures with a high-context orientation generally use less verbal communication and value silence as a form of communication, which requires listeners to pay close attention to nonverbal signals and consider contextual influences on a message. Cultures with a low-context orientation must use more verbal communication and provide explicit details, since listeners aren't expected to derive meaning from the context. Note that people from low-context cultures may feel frustrated by the ambiguity of speakers from high-context cultures, while speakers from high-context cultures may feel overwhelmed or even insulted by the level of detail used by low-context communicators.

- **Listening and Co-culture:**

Much of the research on listening focuses on co-cultural identities based on gender, and this research has produced mixed results. As we've already learned, much of the research on gender differences and communication has been influenced by gender stereotypes and falsely connected to biological differences. More recent research has found that people communicate in ways that conform to gender stereotypes in some situations and not in others, which shows that our communication is more influenced by societal expectations than by innate or gendered "hard-wiring." For example, through socialization, men are generally discouraged from expressing emotions in public. A woman sharing an emotional experience with a man may perceive the man's lack of emotional reaction as a sign of inattentiveness, especially if he typically shows more emotion during private interactions. The man, however, may be listening but withholding nonverbal expressiveness because of social norms. He may not realize that withholding those expressions could be seen as a lack of empathetic or active listening.

## 7.5.3: Reflective Communication: Listening and Relationships



*Our ability to listen to others, or not, has implications for the overall relationship satisfaction.*

It's important to reflect on how you listen to others as it plays a central role in maintaining our relationships (Nelson-Jones, 2006), can influence relationship satisfaction, and impacts self-esteem. Listening to others provides a psychological reward, through the simple act of recognition that helps maintain our relationships. Listening to our relational partners and being listened to in return is part of the give-and-take of any interpersonal relationship. Our thoughts and experiences "back up" inside of us and getting them out helps us maintain a positive balance (Nelson, Jones, 2006). Something as routine and seemingly pointless as listening to our romantic partner debrief the events of their day or our roommate recount their weekend back home shows that we are taking an interest in their lives and are willing to put our own needs and concerns aside for a moment to attend to their needs. Listening also plays an important role in conflict. A lack of listening can often create or intensify conflict while effective listening helps us resolve it.

Listening has relational implications throughout our lives, too. Parents who engage in competent listening behaviors with their children from a very young age make their children feel worthwhile and appreciated, which affects their development in terms of personality and character (Nichols, 1995). A lack of listening leads to feelings of loneliness, which results in lower self-esteem and higher degrees of anxiety. In fact, by the age of four or five years old, the

empathy and recognition shown by the presence or lack of listening has molded children's personalities in noticeable ways (Nichols, 1995). Children who have been listened to grow up expecting that others will be available and receptive to them. These children are therefore more likely to interact confidently with teachers, parents, and peers in ways that help develop communication competence that will be built on throughout their lives. Children who have not been listened to may come to expect that others will not want to listen to them, which leads to a lack of opportunities to practice, develop, and hone foundational communication skills.