

Foundations of Interpersonal Communication



Effective and satisfying interpersonal communication rests on a solid foundation of knowledge and skills. *Resolve to build a really strong foundation for your own communication.*

Chapter Topics

The Benefits of Studying Interpersonal Communication

The Elements of Interpersonal Communication

The Principles of Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives

- 1.1** Identify the personal and professional benefits of studying interpersonal communication.
- 1.2** Define *interpersonal communication* and its essential elements including *source–receiver*, *messages*, *channels*, *noise*, *context*, *effects*, and *ethics*.
- 1.3** Paraphrase the principles of interpersonal communication.

This chapter introduces the study of interpersonal communication and explains why interpersonal communication is so important, examines the essential elements of this unique form of communication, and describes its major principles.

The Benefits of Studying Interpersonal Communication

1.1 Identify the personal and professional benefits of studying interpersonal communication.

Fair questions to ask at the beginning of this text and this course are “What will I get out of this?” and “Why should I study interpersonal communication?” One very clear answer is given by the importance of interpersonal communication: it’s a major part of human existence that every educated person needs to understand. Much as you need to understand history, science, geography, and mathematics, for example, you need to understand how people interact (how people communicate interpersonally) and how people form relationships—both face-to-face and online. On a more practical level, you’ll learn the skills that will yield both personal and professional benefits.

Personal Benefits

Your personal success and happiness depend largely on your effectiveness as an interpersonal communicator. Close friendships and romantic relationships are developed, maintained, and sometimes destroyed largely through your interpersonal interactions. Likewise, the success of your family relationships depends heavily on the interpersonal communication among members. For example, in a survey of 1,001 people over 18 years of age, 53 percent felt that a lack of effective communication was the major cause of marriage failure—significantly greater than money (38 percent) and in-law interference (14 percent) (How Americans Communicate, 1999).

Likewise, your success in interacting with neighbors, acquaintances, and people you meet every day depends on your ability to engage in satisfying conversation—conversation that’s comfortable and enjoyable.

Professional Benefits

The ability to communicate interpersonally is widely recognized as crucial to professional success (Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Satell, 2015; Morreale, Valenzano, & Bauer, 2016). From the initial interview at a college job fair to interning, to participating in and then leading meetings, your skills at interpersonal communication will largely determine your success.

Employers want graduates who can communicate orally and in writing (Berrett, 2013). This ability is even considered more important than job-specific skills, which employers feel could be learned on the job. For example, one study found that among the 23 attributes ranked as “very important” in hiring decisions, “communication and interpersonal skills,” noted by 89 percent of the recruiters, was at the top of the list. This was a far higher percentage of recruiters than the percentage who noted “content of the core curriculum” (34 percent) or “overall value for the money invested in the recruiting effort” (33 percent) (Alsop, 2004). Interpersonal skills offer an important advantage for persons in finance (Messmer, 1999), play a significant role in preventing workplace violence (Parker, 2004), reduce medical mishaps and improve doctor–patient communication (Smith, 2004; Sutcliffe, Lewton, & Rosenthal, 2004), are one of six areas that define the professional competence of physicians and trainees (Epstein & Hundert, 2002), and contribute greatly to maintaining diversity in the workplace, team building, and employee morale (Johnson, 2017). In a survey of employers who were asked what colleges should place more emphasis on, 89 percent identified “the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing” as the highest of any skill listed (Hart

Research Associates, 2010). And in that same survey, the largest number of employers (84 percent), when asked what would prepare college students for success, identified “communication skills.” In still another survey of women and leadership, the ability to communicate and to build relationships—the essential of interpersonal communication—were noted among the competencies exemplified by top leaders (Goleman, 2013b). The importance of interpersonal communication skills extends over the entire spectrum of professions.

Clearly, interpersonal skills are vital to both personal and professional success. Understanding the theory and research in interpersonal communication and mastering its skills go hand in hand (Greene & Burleson, 2003). The more you know about interpersonal communication, the more insight and knowledge you’ll gain about what works and what doesn’t work. The more skills you have within your arsenal of communication strategies, the greater your choices for communicating in any situation. Put differently, the greater your knowledge and the greater the number of communication choices at your disposal, the greater the likelihood that you’ll be successful in achieving your interpersonal goals. You might look at this text and this course as aiming to enlarge your interpersonal communication choices and give you a greater number of options for communicating effectively than you had before this exposure to the study of interpersonal communication.

Because of the importance of choice—after all, your interpersonal messages and relationships are the result of the choices you make in any given situation—you’ll find boxes labelled *Interpersonal Choice Point* throughout the text. **Choice points** are simply moments when you need to make a choice, a decision, about your interpersonal communication—for example, about whom you communicate with, what you say, what you don’t say, how you phrase what you want to say, the photos you want to post and those you don’t, and so on. Some of the questions about choices will prove easy to answer while others will prove to be more difficult. This variation in difficulty mirrors real-life interpersonal communication; getting your meanings and feelings across is easy sometimes and very difficult at others. Let’s look first at the easy-difficult dimension and then at a choice point.

Consider the following situations and rate them on a continuum from easy to difficult (use 1 for extremely easy and 5 for extremely difficult).

- ___ 1. Impressing a recruiter at a job fair.
- ___ 2. Asking a work supervisor to be friends on Facebook.
- ___ 3. Breaking up a two-year romantic relationship because you’ve fallen out of love with your partner.
- ___ 4. Responding to a compliment about the way you dress.
- ___ 5. Reconnecting with a long-lost friend by phone.
- ___ 6. Voicing an opinion about religion in class that is contrary to the opinions of all others in the class.
- ___ 7. Crying at a movie you’re attending with three or four same-sex friends.
- ___ 8. Asking a relative to lie for you so you can get out of a family gathering.
- ___ 9. Introducing yourself to a group of people who are culturally very different from you.
- ___ 10. Asking an instructor for an extension on your term paper.
- ___ 11. Making small talk with someone you don’t know in an elevator.
- ___ 12. Meeting someone face-to-face with whom you’ve interacted romantically online.

If you have the opportunity to compare your continuum with those of others, you’ll probably find both similarities and differences. Reflecting on the easy-to-difficult interpersonal interactions will help you identify the skills you’d want to acquire or enhance as you make your varied interpersonal choices. Take a look at the first *Interpersonal Choice Point* which also explains the feature’s purpose and format.

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Communicating an Image

The *Interpersonal Choice Point* feature is designed to help you apply the text material to real-life situations by first considering your available choices and then making a communication decision. For each choice point, try to identify, as specifically as possible, the advantages and disadvantages of your available choices. Of all your choices, ask yourself which response is likely to work best for you.

You're taking a course in interpersonal communication at a new college and you want to be liked by your fellow students. *What might you do to appear likeable and be accepted as an approachable person? What would you be sure to avoid doing?*

- a. Smile and make eye contact.
- b. Compliment others frequently even for no reason.
- c. Dress a level above the average student.
- d. Speak in class—regularly asking and answering questions.
- e. Other

The Elements of Interpersonal Communication

1.2 Define *interpersonal communication* and its essential elements including *source–receiver*, *messages*, *channels*, *noise*, *context*, *effects*, and *ethics*.

Although this entire text is, in a sense, a definition of interpersonal communication, a working definition is useful at the start. **Interpersonal communication** is *the verbal and nonverbal interaction between two (or sometimes more than two) interdependent people*. This relatively simple definition implies a variety of elements which we discuss in this section. But, first, let's look at some of the myths about interpersonal communication that can get in the way of a meaningful understanding and mastery of this area.

Examine your beliefs about interpersonal communication by responding to the following questions with T if you believe the statement is usually true or F if you believe the statement is usually false.

- ___ 1. Good communicators are born, not made.
- ___ 2. The more you communicate, the better you will be at it.
- ___ 3. In your interpersonal communication, a good guide to follow is to be as open, empathic, and supportive as you can be.
- ___ 4. When communicating with people from other cultures, it's best to ignore the differences and treat the other person just as you'd treat members of your own culture.
- ___ 5. Fear of meeting new people is detrimental and must be eliminated.
- ___ 6. When there is conflict, your relationship is in trouble.

As you probably figured out, all six statements are generally false. As you read this text, you'll discover not only why these beliefs are false but also the trouble you can get into when you assume they're true. For now, and in brief, here are some of the reasons each of the statements is generally false:

1. Effective communication is a learned skill; although some people are born brighter or more extroverted, everyone can improve their abilities and become more effective communicators.
2. It's not the amount of communication people engage in but the quality that matters; if you practice bad habits, you're more likely to grow less effective than more effective, so it's important to learn and follow the principles of effectiveness (Greene, 2003; Greene & Burleson, 2003).
3. Each interpersonal situation is unique, and therefore the type of communication appropriate in one situation may not be appropriate in another.
4. This assumption will probably get you into considerable trouble because people from different cultures often attribute different meanings to a message; members of different cultures also follow different rules for what is and is not appropriate in interpersonal communication.
5. Many people are nervous meeting new people, especially if these are people in authority; managing, not eliminating, the fear will enable you to become effective regardless of your current level of fear.
6. All meaningful relationships experience conflict; relationships are not in trouble when there is conflict, though dealing with conflict ineffectively can often damage the relationship.

The model presented in Figure 1.1 is designed to reflect the circular nature of interpersonal communication; both persons send messages simultaneously rather than in a linear sequence, where communication goes from Person 1 to Person 2 to Person 1 to Person 2 and on and on.

Each of the concepts identified in the model and discussed here may be thought of as a universal of interpersonal communication in that it is present in all interpersonal interactions: (1) **source–receiver** (including competence, encoding–decoding, and code-switching), (2) messages (and the metamesages of feedback and feedforward), (3) channels, (4) noise, (5) contexts, (6) effects, and (7) ethics (though not indicated in the diagram), is an overriding consideration in all interpersonal communication.

Source–Receiver

Interpersonal communication involves at least two people. Each individual performs source functions (formulates and sends messages) and also performs receiver functions (perceives and comprehends messages). The term source–receiver emphasizes that both



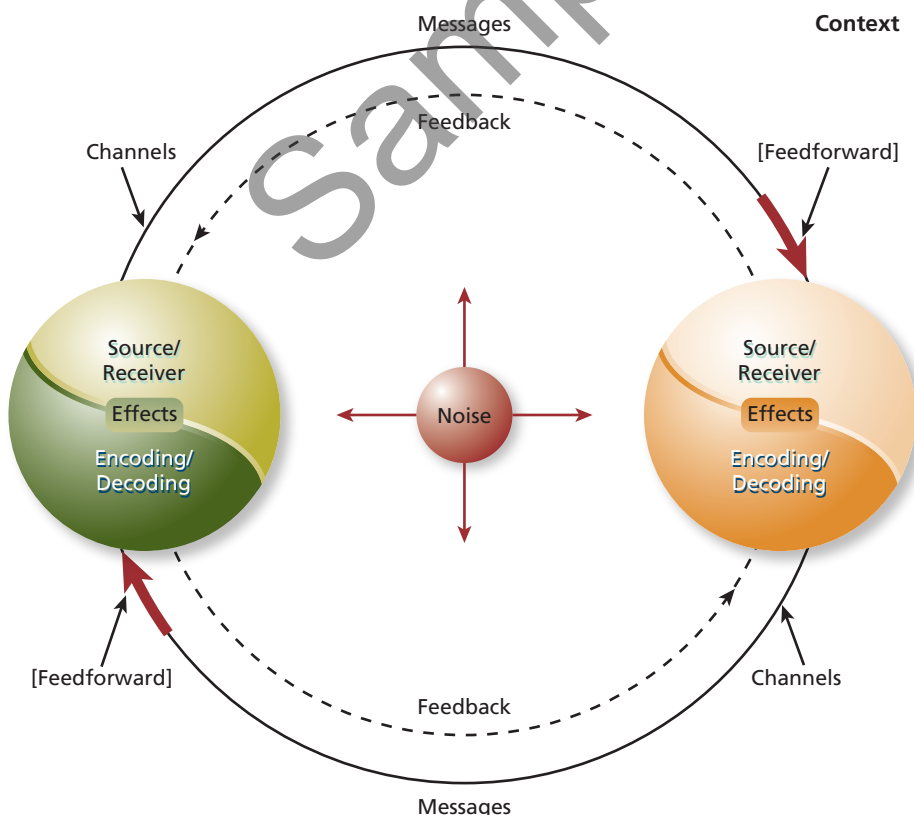
VIEWPOINTS

Interpersonal Metaphors

Metaphors—figures of speech in which two unlike things are compared—are useful for providing different perspectives on interpersonal communication; they help you to look at interpersonal communication from different perspectives and help highlight different aspects of the interpersonal process. *How would you explain interpersonal communication in terms of metaphors such as a seesaw, a ball game, a television sitcom, a recliner, the weather, an opera, a good book, or a tug of war?*

Figure 1.1 A Model of Interpersonal Communication

After you read the section on the elements of interpersonal communication, you may wish to construct your own model of the process. In constructing this model, be careful that you don't fall into the trap of visualizing interpersonal communication as a linear or simple left-to-right, static process. Remember that all elements are interrelated and interdependent. After completing your model, consider, for example: (1) Could your model also serve as a model of intrapersonal communication (communication with oneself)? Is the model applicable to both face-to-face and online communication? (2) What elements or concepts other than those noted here might be added to the model?



functions are performed by each individual in interpersonal communication. This, of course, does not mean that people serve these functions equally. As you've no doubt witnessed, some people are (primarily) talkers and some people are (primarily) listeners. And some people talk largely about themselves and others participate more in the give and take of communication. In an interesting analysis of Twitter messages, two major types of users were identified (Bersin, 2013; Dean, 2010a):

- **Informers** were those who shared information and also replied to others; these made up about 20 percent.
- **Meformers** were those who mainly gave out information about themselves; these made up about 80 percent.

Who you are, what you know, what you believe, what you value, what you want, what you have been told, and what your attitudes are all influence what you say, how you say it, what messages you receive, and how you receive them. Likewise, the person you're speaking to and the knowledge that you think that person has greatly influences your interpersonal messages (Lau, Chiu, & Hong, 2001). Each person is unique; each person's communications are unique.

To complicate matters just a bit, we need to recognize that although interpersonal communication may take place between two close friends, for example, there is generally what might be called a **remote audience**. For example, you update your status on Facebook for your friends (your intended audience) to see. This is your intended audience and the audience to whom you're directing your message. But, it's likely (even probable) that your prospective employers will also see this as will others who may receive it from a member of your intended audience. These are your remote audiences. The important practical implication is to be aware of both your audiences and know that the dividing line between your intended and your remote audiences is getting thinner every day.

Interpersonal Competence Your ability to communicate effectively (as source and receiver) is your interpersonal **competence** (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Your competence includes, for example, the knowledge that, in certain contexts and with certain listeners, one topic is appropriate and another isn't. Your knowledge about the rules of nonverbal behavior—for example, the appropriateness of touching, vocal volume, and physical closeness—is also part of your competence. In short, interpersonal competence includes knowing how to adjust your communication according to the context of the interaction, the person with whom you're interacting, and a host of other factors discussed throughout this text.

You learn communication competence much as you learn to eat with a knife and fork—by observing others, by explicit instruction, and by trial and error. Some individuals learn better than others, though, and these are generally the people with whom you find it interesting and comfortable to talk. They seem to know what to say and how and when to say it.

A positive relationship exists between interpersonal competence on the one hand and success in college and job satisfaction on the other (Rubin & Graham, 1988; Wertz, Sorenson, & Heeren, 1988). So much of college and professional life depends on interpersonal competence—meeting and interacting with other students, teachers, or colleagues; asking and answering questions; presenting information or argument—that you should not find this connection surprising. Interpersonal competence also enables you to develop and maintain meaningful relationships in friendship, love, family, and work. Such relationships, in turn, contribute to the lower levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness observed in interpersonally competent people (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989).

Encoding–Decoding **Encoding** refers to the act of producing messages—for example, speaking or writing. **Decoding** is the reverse and refers to the act of understanding messages—for example, listening or reading. By sending your ideas via sound waves (in the case of speech) or light waves (in the case of writing), you're putting these ideas into a code, hence *encoding*. By translating sound or light waves into ideas, you're taking them out of a code, hence *decoding*. Thus, speakers and writers are called encoders,

and listeners and readers are called decoders. The term *encoding–decoding* is used to emphasize that the two activities are performed in combination by each participant. For interpersonal communication to occur, messages must be encoded and decoded. For example, when a parent talks to a child whose eyes are closed and whose ears are covered by stereo headphones, interpersonal communication does not occur because the messages sent are not being received.

Code-Switching Technically, code switching refers to using more than one language in a conversation, often in the same sentence (Bullock & Toribio, 2012; Thompson, 2013; Esen, 2016). And so a native Spanish speaker might speak most of a sentence in English and then insert a Spanish term or phrase. More popularly, however, **code-switching** refers to using different language styles depending on the situation. For example, you probably talk differently to a child than to an adult—in the topics you talk about and in the language you use. Similarly, when you text or tweet, you use a specialized language consisting of lots of abbreviations and acronyms that you discard when you write a college term paper or when you’re interviewing for a job.

The ability to code-switch serves at least two very important purposes. First, it identifies you as one of the group; you are not an outsider. It’s a way of bonding with the group. Second, it often helps in terms of making your meaning clearer; some things seem better expressed in one language or code than in another.

Code switching can create problems, however. When used to ingratiate yourself or make yourself seem one of the group when you really aren’t—and that attempt is obvious to the group members—code switching is likely to work against you. You risk being seen as an interloper, as one who tries to gain entrance to a group to which one really doesn’t belong. The other case where code switching creates problems is when you use the code appropriate to one type of communication in another where it isn’t appropriate, for example, when you use your Facebook or Twitter grammar during a job interview. Communication competence, then, involves the ability to code-switch when it’s appropriate—when it makes your message clearer and when it’s genuine.

Messages

Messages are signals that serve as stimuli for a receiver and are received by one of our senses—auditory (hearing), visual (seeing), tactile (touching), olfactory (smelling), gustatory (tasting), or any combination of these senses. You communicate interpersonally by gesture and touch as well as by words and sentences. The clothes you wear communicate to others and, in fact, to yourself as well. The way you walk communicates, as does the way you shake hands, tilt your head, comb your hair, sit, smile, or frown. Similarly, the colors and types of cell phones, the wallpaper and screen savers on your computer, and even the type and power of your computer communicate messages about you. The photo and background theme you choose for your Twitter page reveals something about yourself beyond what your actual tweets reveal. Tweeters with the generic white bird photo and standard background communicate something quite different from the Tweeters who customize their pages with clever photos, original backgrounds, and sidebars. The same is true of Facebook pages. All of these signals are your interpersonal communication messages.



VIEWPOINTS

On-Screen Competence

What characters in television sitcoms or dramas do you think demonstrate superior interpersonal competence? What characters demonstrate obvious interpersonal incompetence? What specifically do they say or do—or don’t say or don’t do—that leads you to judge them as being or not being interpersonally competent?

Interpersonal communication can take place by phone, through prison cell walls, through webcams, or face-to-face. Increasingly, it's taking place through computers, through Facebook and Twitter. Some of these messages are exchanged in real time. This is **synchronous communication**; the messages are sent and received at the same time, as in face-to-face and phone messages. Other messages do not take place in real time. This is **asynchronous communication**; the messages are sent at one time and received at another and perhaps responded to at still another time. For example, you might poke someone on Facebook today, but that person may not see it until tomorrow and may not poke you back until the next day. Similarly, you might find a tweet or a blog post today that was actually written weeks or even years ago.

Messages may be intentional or unintentional. They may result from the most carefully planned strategy as well as from the unintentional slip of the tongue, lingering body odor, or nervous twitch. Messages may refer to the world, people, and events as well as to other messages (DeVito, 2003a).

Messages that are about other messages are called **metamessages** and represent many of your everyday communications; they include, for example, "Do you understand?," "Did I say that right?," "What did you say?," "Is it fair to say that . . .?," "I want to be honest," "That's not logical." Two particularly important types of metamessages are feedback and feedforward.

Feedback Messages Throughout the interpersonal communication process, you exchange feedback—messages sent back to the speaker concerning reactions to what is said (Sutton, Hornsey, & Douglas, 2012). **Feedback** tells the speaker what effect she or he is having on listeners. On the basis of this feedback, the speaker may adjust, modify, strengthen, deemphasize, or change the content or form of the messages.

Feedback may come from yourself or from others. When you send a message—say, in speaking to another person—you also hear yourself. That is, you get feedback from your own messages: You hear what you say, you feel the way you move, you see what you write. In addition to this self-feedback, you get feedback from others. This feedback can take many forms. A frown or a smile, a yea or a nay, a pat on the back or a punch in the mouth are all types of feedback.

Feedback, of course, has significant effects on the receiver. For example, in one study, positive feedback on social networking sites, complimenting, say, the photo or profile, enhanced self-esteem and the sense of well-being whereas negative feedback (criticism, for example) resulted in a decrease in self-esteem and well-being (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006).

Sometimes feedback is easy to identify, but sometimes it isn't (Skinner, 2002). Part of the art of effective communication is to discern feedback and adjust your messages on the basis of that feedback.

Feedforward Messages **Feedforward** is information you provide before sending your primary message (Richards, 1968). Feedforward reveals something about the message to come. Examples of feedforward include the preface or table of contents of a book, the opening paragraph of a chapter or post, movie previews, magazine covers, e-mail subject headings, and introductions in public speeches. Feedforward may serve a variety of functions. For example, you might use feedforward to express your wish to chat a bit, saying something like "Hey, I haven't

VIEWPOINTS

Feedback and Relationships

If we were to develop a feedback theory of relationships, it would hold that satisfying friendships, romantic relationships, or workplace relationships may be characterized by feedback that is positive, person-focused, immediate, low in monitoring (not self-censored), and supportive—and that unsatisfying relationships are characterized by feedback that is negative, self-focused, non-immediate, high in monitoring, and critical. *How effective is this "theory" in explaining the relationships with which you're familiar?*



seen you the entire week; what's been going on?" Or you might give a brief preview of your main message by saying something like "You'd better sit down for this; you're going to be shocked." Or you might ask others to hear you out before they judge you.

Channel

The communication **channel** is the medium through which messages pass. It's a kind of bridge connecting source and receiver. Communication rarely takes place over only one channel; two, three, or four channels are often used simultaneously. For example, in face-to-face interaction, you speak and listen (vocal–auditory channel), but you also gesture and receive signals visually (gestural–visual channel), and you emit odors and smell those of others (chemical–olfactory channel). Often you communicate through touch (cutaneous–tactile channel). When you communicate online, you often send photo, audio, or video files in the same message or links to additional files and sites. In most situations, a variety of channels are involved.

Another way to think about channels is to consider them as the means of communication: for example, face-to-face contact, telephone, e-mail and snail mail, Twitter, instant messaging, news postings, Facebook, film, television, radio, smoke signals, or fax—to name only some.

Note that the channel imposes different restrictions on your message construction. For example, in e-mail you can pause to think of the right word or phrase, you can go on for as short or as long a time as you want without any threat of interruption or contradiction, and you can edit your message with ease. In face-to-face communication, your pauses need to be relatively short. You don't have the time to select just the right word or to edit, though we do edit a bit when we review what we said and put it in different words.

In this text, face-to-face communication and online/social media communication are integrated for a number of important reasons:

1. **It's the way we communicate today.** We interact face-to-face and online. Some interactions are likely exclusively face-to-face, while others are exclusively online. Increasingly, our interactions are with people with whom we communicate both online and offline.
2. **Online and offline communication are related.** The research and theory discussed here on face-to-face and on online communication inform each other. Most of the interpersonal theories discussed here were developed for face-to-face interaction but have much to say about online relationships as well.
3. **Employers expect employees to have both offline and online communication skill sets.** The ability to communicate orally and in writing (both online and offline) is consistently ranked among the most important qualities employers are looking for in new employees. For example, your employability will depend, in great part, on how effectively you communicate in your e-mails, in your phone conferences, in your Skype interviews, and in your in-person interviews.
4. **Both forms of communication are vital to current-day communication.** We increasingly develop, and maintain, relationships online with many of them moving to face-to-face interactions if the online interaction proves satisfying. And increasingly, relationships are dissolved through email and Facebook and Twitter posts.

Throughout this text, face-to-face and online communication are discussed, compared, and contrasted. Table 1.1 presents a brief summary of some communication concepts and some of the ways in which these two forms of communication are similar and different.

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Channels

Your teacher's wife has passed away after a sudden heart attack. *How will you express your condolences?*

- a. Send him a text message.
- b. Phone him.
- c. Visit his house.
- d. Pat his hand and look sympathetic.
- e. Other

Table 1.1 Face-to-Face and Online Communication

	Face-to-Face Communication	Online Communication
Sender		
• Presentation of self and impression management	• Personal characteristics (sex, approximate age, race, etc.) are open to visual inspection; receiver controls the order of what is attended to; disguise is difficult.	• Personal characteristics are hidden and are revealed when you want to reveal them; anonymity is easy.
• Speaking turn	• You compete for the speaker's turn and time with the other person(s); you can be interrupted.	• It's always your turn; speaker time is unlimited; you can't be interrupted.
Receiver		
• Number	• One or a few who are in your visual field.	• Virtually unlimited.
• Opportunity for interaction	• Limited to those who have the opportunity to meet; often difficult to find people who share your interests.	• Unlimited.
• Third parties	• Messages can be overheard by or repeated to third parties but not with complete accuracy.	• Messages can be retrieved by others or forwarded verbatim to a third party or to thousands.
• Impression formation	• Impressions are based on the verbal and nonverbal cues the receiver perceives.	• Impressions are based on text messages and posted photos and videos.
Context		
• Physical	• Essentially the same physical space.	• Can be in the next cubicle or separated by miles.
• Temporal	• Communication is synchronous; messages are exchanged at the same (real) time.	• Communication may be synchronous (as in chat rooms) or asynchronous (where messages are exchanged at different times, as in e-mail).
Channel		
	• All senses participate in sending and receiving messages.	• Visual (for text, photos, and videos) and auditory.
Message		
• Verbal and nonverbal	• Words, gestures, eye contact, accent, vocal cues, spatial relationships, touching, clothing, hair, etc.	• Words, photos, videos, and audio messages.
• Permanence	• Temporary unless recorded; speech signals fade rapidly.	• Messages are relatively permanent.

Noise

Technically, **noise** is anything that distorts a message—anything that prevents the receiver from receiving the message as the sender sent it. At one extreme, noise may prevent a message from getting from source to receiver. A roaring noise or line static can easily prevent entire messages from getting through to your receiver. At the other extreme, with virtually no noise interference, the message of the source and the message received are almost identical. Most often, however, noise distorts some portion of the message a source sends as it travels to a receiver. Four types of noise (**physical noise**, **physiological noise**, **psychological noise**, and **semantic noise**) are especially relevant and will help you identify sources of noise you'd want to lessen.

- **Physical noise** is interference that is external to both speaker and listener; it impedes the physical transmission of the signal or message. Examples include the screeching of passing cars, the hum of a computer, sunglasses, extraneous messages, illegible handwriting, blurred type or fonts that are too small or difficult to read, misspellings and poor grammar, and pop-up ads. Still another type of physical noise is extraneous information that makes what you want to find more difficult, for example, spam or too many photos on Facebook.
- **Physiological noise** is created by barriers within the sender or receiver, such as visual impairments, hearing loss, articulation problems, and memory loss.
- **Psychological noise** is mental interference in the speaker or listener and includes preconceived ideas, wandering thoughts, biases and prejudices, closed-mindedness, and extreme emotionalism. You're likely to run into psychological noise when you talk with someone who is closed-minded or who refuses to listen to anything he or she doesn't already believe.

- **Semantic noise** is interference that occurs when the speaker and listener have different meaning systems; examples include language or dialectical differences, the use of jargon or overly complex terms, and ambiguous or overly abstract terms whose meanings can be easily misinterpreted. You see this type of noise regularly in the medical doctor who uses “medicalese” without explanation or in the insurance salesperson who speaks in the jargon of the insurance industry.

A useful concept in understanding noise and its importance in communication is **signal-to-noise ratio**. **Signal** refers to information that you find useful; *noise* refers to information that is useless (to you). For example, a blog post that contains lots of useful information would be high on signal and low on noise; messages that contain lots of useless information are high on noise and low on signal. Spam, pop-ups, and advertisements for products you’re not interested in are good examples. When you do an online search for information, the advertisements and the irrelevant sites are noise; the information you’re looking for is the signal.

All communications contain noise. Noise cannot be totally eliminated, but its effects can be reduced. Making your language more precise, sharpening your skills for sending and receiving nonverbal messages, and improving your listening and feedback skills are some ways to combat the influence of noise.



VIEWPOINTS

Signal and Noise Online

Social media users are advised to be brief in their profiles and even in responding (Conniff & Nicks, 2014). Similarly, recruiters find that too much information on, say, Facebook, detracts from the candidate’s résumé (Bersin, 2013). *How would you explain this in terms of signal and noise?*

Context

Communication always takes place in a **context** or environment that influences the form and content of your messages. At times this context isn’t obvious or intrusive; it seems so natural that it’s ignored—like background music. At other times the context dominates, and the ways in which it restricts or stimulates your messages are obvious. Compare, for example, the differences among communicating in a funeral home, football stadium, formal restaurant, and a rock concert. The context of communication has at least four dimensions, all of which interact with and influence each other.

Physical Dimension The *physical dimension* is the tangible or concrete environment in which communication takes place—the room, hallway, or park; the boardroom; or the family dinner table. The size of the space, its temperature, and the number of people present in the physical space are also part of the physical dimension. In print media, such as magazines or newspapers, context includes the positioning of stories and news articles; an article on page 37 is identified as less important than an article on page 1 or 2. Twitter’s restriction of messages to 140 characters or fewer is an especially good example of the physical dimension influencing the message; Twitter requires you to abbreviate your message, while having coffee at Starbucks seems to encourage the opposite.

Temporal Dimension The *temporal dimension* has to do not only with the time of day and moment in history but also with where a particular message fits into the sequence of communication events. For example, a joke about illness told immediately after the disclosure of a friend’s sickness will be received differently than the same joke told in response to a series of similar jokes. Also, some channels (for example, face-to-face, chat rooms, and instant messaging) allow for synchronous communication in which messages are sent and received simultaneously. Other channels (for example, letter writing, e-mail, and social networking postings) are asynchronous; messages are sent and received at different times.

Social–Psychological Dimension The *social–psychological dimension* includes, for example, status relationships among the participants; roles and games that people play; norms of the society or group; and the friendliness, formality, or gravity of the situation. Social networks such as Facebook are informal and largely for fun communication; LinkedIn and Plaxo, on the other hand, are primarily for serious, business-oriented communication.

THE CULTURAL MAP

Because of the importance of culture in all aspects of interpersonal communication, we return to culture and especially cultural differences in “The Cultural Map” feature. Consider these as reminders of the tremendous influence of culture on all aspects of interpersonal communication.



Cultural Dimension The *cultural context* includes the cultural beliefs and customs of the people communicating. When you interact with people from different cultures, you may each follow different rules of communication. This can result in confusion, unintentional insult, inaccurate judgments, and a host of other miscommunications. Similarly, communication strategies or techniques that prove satisfying to members of one culture may prove disturbing or offensive to members of another. In fact, research shows that you lose more information in an intercultural situation (approximately 50 percent) than in an intracultural situation (approximately 25 percent) (Li, 1999).

Effects

Interpersonal communication always has some **effect** on one or more persons involved in the communication act. For every interpersonal interaction, there is some consequence, some effect. Generally, three types of effects are distinguished.

- **Cognitive effects** Cognitive effects are changes in your thinking. When you acquire information from a friend’s Facebook post about the time of the concert, for example, the effect is largely intellectual.
- **Affective effects** Affective effects are changes in your attitudes, values, beliefs, and emotions. Thus, when you become frightened hearing about the increase in gun violence, its effect is largely affective. Similarly, after a great experience with, say, a person of another culture, your feelings about that culture may change. Again, the effect is largely affective (but perhaps also intellectual).
- **Behavioral effects** Behavioral effects are changes in behaviors such as, for example, learning new dance movements, to throw a curve ball, to paint a room, or to use different verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

These effects are not separate; rather, they interact. In many cases, a single message—say, a conversation on homelessness—may inform you (intellectual effect), move you to feel differently (affective effect), and lead you to be more generous when you come upon a homeless person (behavioral effect).

In addition to effects on others, your interpersonal communications also have effects on you. Part of this effect is from your self-evaluation; you might smile after posting a really clever comment or feel bad after criticizing a friend. In addition, however, the reactions of others will have effects on you. For example, your clever comment may be retweeted 30 or 40 times (which is likely to have effects on your self-esteem and perhaps on your future tweeting) and your criticism of your friend may result in a broken relationship (which will have affective and behavioral effects).

Ethics

Largely because interpersonal communication has effects on others, it also involves questions of **ethics**, the study of good and bad, of right and wrong, of moral and immoral. Ethics is concerned with actions, with behaviors; it's concerned with distinguishing between behaviors that are moral (ethical, good, and right) and those that are immoral (unethical, bad, and wrong). There's an ethical dimension to any interpersonal communication act (Neher & Sandin, 2007; Bok, 1978).

Consider some of the popular beliefs about ethics, perhaps one or more of which you hold personally. For each of the following statements, place a T (for true) if you feel the statement accurately explains what ethical behavior is and an F (for false) if you feel the statement does not accurately explain what ethical behavior is.

- ___ 1. My behavior is ethical when I feel (in my heart) that I'm doing the right thing.
- ___ 2. My behavior is ethical when it is consistent with my religious beliefs.
- ___ 3. My behavior is ethical when it is legal.
- ___ 4. My behavior is ethical when the majority of reasonable people would consider it ethical.
- ___ 5. My behavior is ethical when the effect of the behavior benefits more people than it harms.

These statements are based on responses given to the question, "What does ethics mean to you?" discussed on the website of the Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. The following "answers" are intended to stimulate discussion and the formation of your own ethical code for interpersonal communication; they are not "answers" in the traditional sense. All five of these statements are (generally) false; none of them state a useful explanation of what is and what is not ethical.

- Statement 1 is false simply because people often do unethical things they feel are morally justified. Jack the Ripper killing prostitutes is a good historical example, but there are many current ones such as stalking (*I'm so in love I need to be with this person.*) or insurance scams (*My family needs the money more than the insurance company.*). Even though Jack, the stalker, and the scam artist may feel justified in their own minds, it doesn't make their behavior moral or ethical.
- Statement 2 must be false when you realize that different religions advocate very different kinds of behavior, often behaviors that contradict one another. Examples abound in almost every issue of a daily newspaper.
- Statement 3 must be false when you realize so much discrimination against certain people is perfectly legal in many parts of the world, and, in many countries, war (even "preemptive" war) is legal.
- Statement 4 is false because the thinking of the majority changes with the times and has often proven to be extremely immoral. The burning of people supposed to be witches or of those who spoke out against majority opinion (as in the Inquisition) are good examples.

- Statement 5 comes the closest to being possibly and sometimes true, but it's more generally false. The reason it's more false than true is that the burning of witches, for example, was in the interest of the majority, as was slavery and discrimination against gay men and lesbians, certain religions, or different races. But despite this majority interest, we'd readily recognize these actions as immoral.

So, when is behavior ethical, and when is it unethical? Lots of people have come up with lots of theories. If you take an *objective view*, you'd claim that the ethical nature of an act—any act—depends on standards that apply to all people in all situations at all times. If lying, advertising falsely, using illegally obtained evidence, and revealing secrets, for example, are considered unethical, then they'd be considered unethical regardless of the circumstances surrounding them or of the values and beliefs of the culture in which they occur.

If you take a *subjective view*, you'd claim that the morality of an act depends on a specific culture's values and beliefs as well as on the particular circumstances. Thus, from a subjective position, you would claim that the end might justify the means—a good result can justify the use of unethical means to achieve that result. You would further argue that lying is wrong to win votes or to sell cigarettes but that lying can be ethical if the end result is positive (such as trying to make someone who is unattractive feel better by telling them they look great or telling a critically ill person that they'll feel better soon).

In addition to this introductory discussion, ethical dimensions of interpersonal communication are presented in each chapter in Ethics in Interpersonal Communication boxes.

ETHICS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Ethical Standards

Each field of study defines what is not ethical to its concerns. Here are just a few to highlight some communication-oriented codes:

- The National Communication Association Ethical Credo
- Blogger's Ethics
- The Twitter Rules
- Online Journalism
- Radio-Television News Directors Association and Foundation Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct

Ethical Choice Point

You'll also find it interesting to look up the code of ethics for the profession you're in or planning on entering. Before you do so, however, think about what you consider ethical communication. *What ethical standards do you follow in your own communication (online and face-to-face)? What ethical principles do you, even if only rarely, violate?*

Table 1.2 presents a brief summary of the essential elements of interpersonal communication.

Table 1.2 In a Nutshell The Elements of Interpersonal Communication

Elements	Meaning
Source–receiver	The sender–receiver, the person who both sends and receives messages during communication.
Messages	The verbal and nonverbal signals that are sent by the source/encoder and received by the receiver/decoder.
Channels	The media through which the signals are sent.
Noise	Disturbances that interfere with the receiver receiving the message sent by the source.
Context	The physical, social-psychological, temporal, and cultural environment in which the communication takes place.
Effects	Interpersonal communication can have cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects on others and on yourself.
Ethics	The morality, the rightness-wrongness aspect of communication behavior.

UNDERSTANDING INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Mindfulness: A State of Mental Awareness

Mindfulness is a state of mental awareness; in a mindful state, you're conscious of your reasons for thinking or communicating in a particular way. You're conscious of the uniqueness of the situation and of the many choices you have for interacting (Beard, 2014). And, especially important in interpersonal communication, you become aware of your choices. You act with an awareness of your available choices.

Its opposite, **mindlessness**, is a lack of conscious awareness of your thinking or communicating (Langer, 1989). To apply interpersonal skills appropriately and effectively, you need to be mindful of the unique communication situation you're in, of your available communication options or choices, and of the reasons why one option is likely to prove better than the others. You can look at this text and this course in interpersonal communication as a means of awakening your mindfulness about the way you engage in interpersonal communication. After you complete this course and this text, you should be much more mindful about all your interpersonal interactions (Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004; Sagula & Rice, 2004). In addition, mindfulness has been found to improve scores on verbal reasoning tests, increase short-term memory, and decrease mind wandering (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillip, Baird, & Schooler, 2013). It has also been found to reduce depression in adolescents (Raes, Griffith, Van der Gucht, & Williams, 2013).

None of this is to argue that you should be mindful always and everywhere. Certainly, there are times when mind wandering may help you develop a great idea (Hurley, 2014). But, generally, it's mindfulness that needs to be practiced.

Communicating with Mindfulness

To increase mindfulness in general, try the following suggestions (Langer, 1989; Burgoon, Berger, & Waldron, 2000):

- **Create and re-create categories.** Learn to see objects, events, and people as belonging to a wide variety of categories. Try to see, for example, your prospective romantic partner in a variety of roles—child, parent, employee, neighbor, friend, financial contributor, and so on. Avoid storing in memory an image of a person with only one specific label; if you do, you'll find it difficult to re-categorize the person later.
- **Be open to new information and points of view,** even when these contradict your most firmly held stereotypes. New information forces you to reconsider what might be outmoded ways of thinking. New information

can help you challenge long-held but now inappropriate beliefs and attitudes. Be willing to see your own and others' behaviors from a variety of viewpoints, especially from the perspective of people very different from yourself.

- **Beware of relying too heavily on first impressions** (Langer, 1989; Beard, 2014). Treat your first impressions as tentative—as hypotheses that need further investigation. Be prepared to revise, reject, or accept these initial impressions.
- **Be aware of possible misinterpretations in the message.** Make sure it's interpreted correctly. For example, you can paraphrase or restate the message in different ways or you can ask the person to paraphrase.
- **Become conscious of unproductive communication patterns.** For example, in a conflict situation, one common pattern is that each person brings up past relationship injustices. If you notice this happening, stop and ask yourself if this pattern is productive. If not, consider what you can do to change it. For example, in this conflict example, you can refuse to respond in kind and thereby break the cycle.
- **Remind yourself of the uniqueness of this communication situation.** Consider how you can best adapt your messages to this unique situation. For example, you may want to be especially positive to a friend who is depressed but not so positive to someone who betrayed a confidence.
- **Identify and evaluate your communication choices.** Especially in delicate situations (for example, when expressing anger or communicating commitment messages), it's wise to pause, think over the situation mindfully, and identify and evaluate your choices (DeVito, 2003b).

Working with Mindfulness

As you think about mindfulness, reflect on your own tendencies to communicate mindlessly and mindfully. *Do you regularly examine your choices before you send your message? In which situations are you more apt to communicate mindlessly? For example, when compared to face-to-face communication, are you more or less mindful when communicating on Facebook, Twitter, or other social network sites? If there is a difference, why do you suppose it exists? Do you communicate mindfully with certain people and mindlessly with others?*