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Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
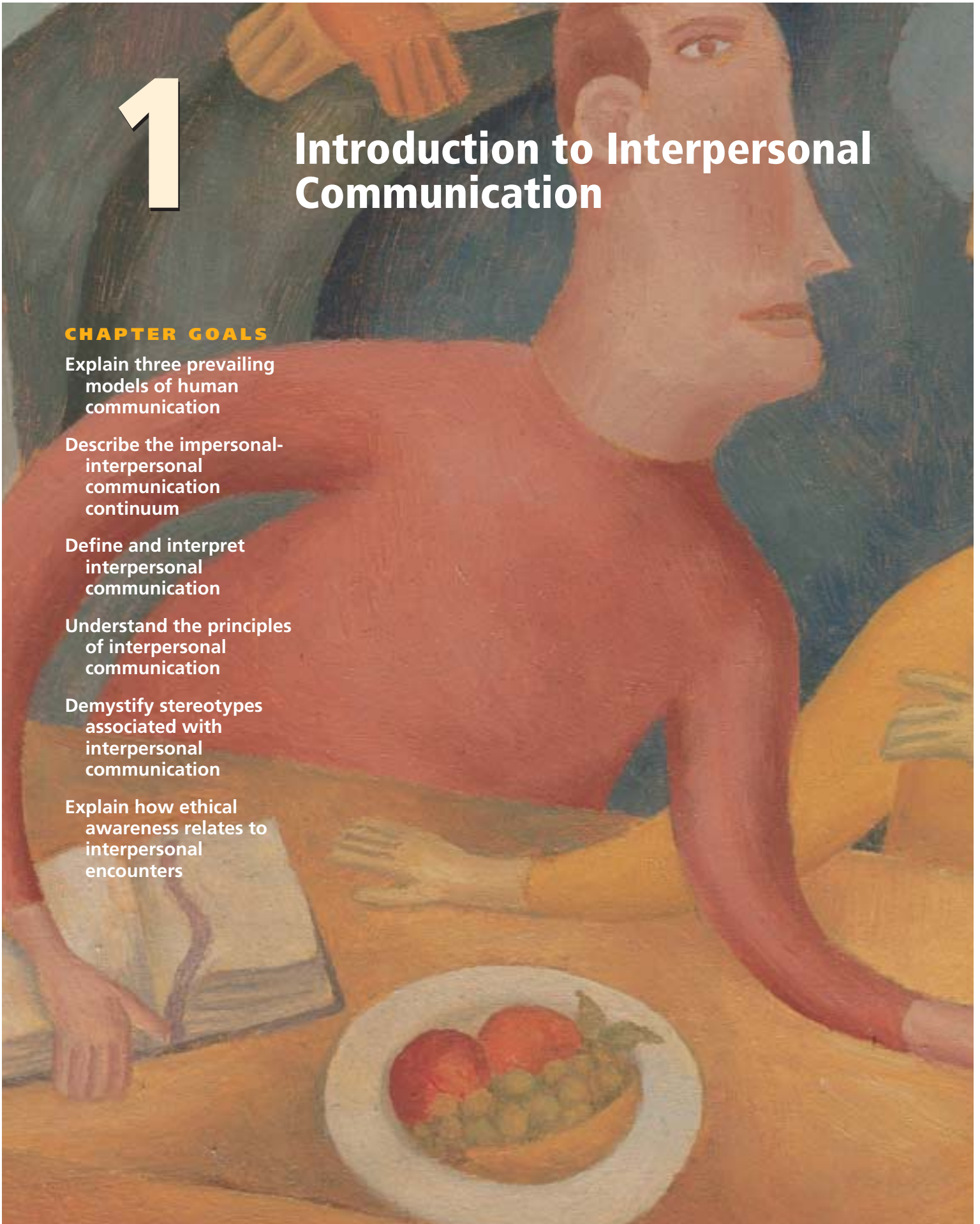
As Jackie Ellis stood in her driveway shoveling snow, she heard her neighbor, Phil Perona, yell across the lawn, "Hey, can't get any hired help for that?!" Jackie yelled back, "Sure—show me the money, buddy!" They both laughed. As Phil approached Jackie's driveway, her cat was rolling around on the ground. The two watched as the cat started to spin aimlessly in the drive. They began a casual conversation about the weather, but then the topic turned more sobering: Jackie's sister's death. Jackie related to Phil that it was exactly a year ago that her sister had died of skin cancer. "I can't believe how fast time goes by, Phil," Jackie said, sighing. "Wow," Phil said. "Incredible that it's been that long. It seems like we were just telling each other that everything would be fine." As the two started to talk about Jackie's sister, tears welled up in Phil's eyes. He told her that if she ever needed to talk, just to let him know. Jackie smiled ruefully and said, "But, hey, we got by that one, and we're still here talking about it. And if we can survive that *and* this stupid winter, we'll make it through anything. Right?" The two laughed awkwardly, but both knew that the topic had to change quickly. They began to talk about Phil's daughters and their holiday concert.

As the minutes ticked by, they found themselves talking about everything from foreign policy to reality television shows, and then Phil went back to his house. Jackie finished shoveling her sidewalk and went back inside. As she sat in her kitchen thumbing through catalogs, she once again thought about her sister. One year, she thought—

it couldn't be possible. And she felt lucky to have such a good and caring neighbor as Phil. ▪

Each day, we perform one of the most ancient of all behaviors: interpersonal communication. We head off to work and greet people on the bus, in the office, in the carpool, or on the street. We talk to our roommates and ruminate about last night's party over breakfast. Or we wake up and soon find ourselves in the middle of a heated exchange with a family member about dirty dishes. Although each of these situations differs, they all underscore the pervasiveness of interpersonal communication in our lives.

This chapter's Case in Point scenario between Jackie and Phil represents one of these interpersonal encounters. We rarely think about the fact that we are easily able to carry out conversations like these. In this scenario, Phil established verbal contact with Jackie. In turn, Jackie moved the conversation from the weather to her sister's death. The entire dialogue lasted only a few minutes, but it carried enormous importance. Phil and Jackie not only initiated a conversation—their conversation also showed just how close they are to each other. As you can tell from their conversation, they are more than just neighbors; they are also good friends. The content of their brief conversation gives us an idea that they have more than a superficial relationship with each other.

These dialogues take place all the time without us giving them a second thought. And we often feel content about the way we communicate with others. A national poll commissioned by the National Communication Association (n.d.) reports that nearly two-thirds of U.S. citizens feel very comfortable communicating with others. Women are more likely than men to feel comfortable, and older respondents (55 years and older) are more comfortable than any other age group. This comfort level pertains to informal settings such as talking to a friend, family member, or partner.

Yet, not everyone is comfortable talking to others. In fact, some people are quite anxious and nervous about communicating. The extent to which people exhibit anxiety about speaking to others is called **communication apprehension.** Communication apprehension is a legitimate life experience that researchers contend usually negatively affects our communication with others (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). People can be fearful and go to great lengths to avoid communication situations. When such people find themselves in uncomfortable circumstances, they are usually shy, embarrassed, and tense.

There are many times when we have difficulty getting our message across to others because of our unique communication circumstances. We may feel unprepared to argue with a supervisor for a raise, to let our apartment manager know that the hot water is not hot enough, or to tell our partner, "I love you." At times throughout the day, we may struggle with what to say, how to say something, or when to say something. We also may struggle with listening to certain messages because of their content or the manner in which they are presented. In addition, communication may seem difficult when others don't respond as we'd wish or don't even seem to pay attention to us.

This book is about improving your ability to interact with other people. Improving your interpersonal communication skills will assist you in becoming more effective in your relationships with a variety of people, including those with whom you are close (e.g., family members, friends, coworkers) and those with whom

Communication Assessment Test

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA)

Directions: This instrument is composed of twenty-four statements concerning feelings about communicating with other people. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you using the following five-point scale:

> strongly agree = 1   agree = 2   are undecided = 3
> disagree = 4   strongly disagree = 5

There are no right or wrong answers. Please mark your first impression and answer quickly. You can also take this test online under Student Resources for Chapter 1 at the Understanding Interpersonal Communication website.

_____ **1.** I dislike participating in group discussions.

_____ **2.** Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.

_____ **3.** I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.

_____ **4.** I like to get involved in group discussions.

_____ **5.** Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.

_____ **6.** I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.

_____ **7.** Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.

_____ **8.** Usually, I am calm and relaxed while participating in a meeting.

_____ **9.** I am calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.

_____ **10.** I am afraid to express myself at meetings.

_____ **11.** Communicating at meetings usually makes me feel uncomfortable.

_____ **12.** I am relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.

_____ **13.** While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.

_____ **14.** I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.

_____ **15.** Ordinarily, I am very tense and nervous in conversations.

_____ **16.** Ordinarily, I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.

_____ **17.** While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.

_____ **18.** I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.

_____ **19.** I have no fear of giving a speech.

_____ **20.** Certain parts of my body feel tense and rigid while giving a speech.

_____ **21.** I feel relaxed while giving a speech.

_____ **22.** My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.

_____ **23.** I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.

_____ **24.** While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

Scoring

There are four categories for scoring: group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking. To compute your scores, add or subtract the numbers you marked for each item as indicated below:

1. Group discussions
18 + (plus) scores for items 2, 4, and 6 − (minus) scores for items 1, 3, and 5 = Subtotal _____

2. Meetings
18 + (plus) scores for items 8, 9, and 12 − (minus) scores for items 7, 10, and 11 = Subtotal _____

3. Interpersonal conversations
18 + (plus) scores for items 14, 16, and 17 − (minus) scores for items 13, 15, and 18 = Subtotal _____

4. Public speaking
18 + (plus) scores for items 19, 21, and 23 − (minus) for items 20, 22, and 24 scores = Subtotal _____

To obtain your score, add your four subscores together. Your score should range between 24 and 120. If your score is below 24 or above 120, you have made a mistake in computation. Scores can range, in each context, from a low of 6 to a high of 30. Any score above 18 indicates some degree of communication apprehension.

Questions to Focus On

1. What does your score say about you?

2. Do you have higher apprehension in some contexts than in others? If so, why do you think so?

3. Discuss how your scores can help you better understand your relationships with others.
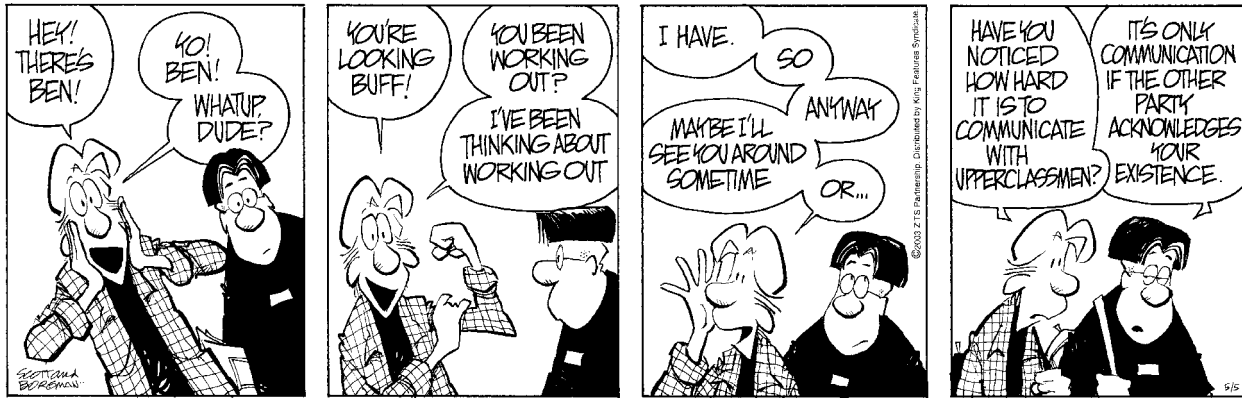
you interact less frequently (e.g., health care providers, contractors, babysitters). Throughout this course, you will see how research and theory associated with interpersonal communication can inform your everyday encounters. You will also be introduced to a number of important skills to improve your interpersonal effectiveness with others. Our first task is to map out a definition of interpersonal communication.

Understanding Interpersonal Communication

Even though we engage in interpersonal communication daily, it is a complex process that is not always easy to define. Something that is so integral to our human experience is often difficult to disentangle from everything else we do, and that is the case with interpersonal communication. To make the definition of interpersonal communication more understandable, it helps to distinguish it from other types of communication. Scholars have identified the following kinds of situations in which human communication exists: intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, organizational, mass, and public. As you review this list, you may notice that the communication department at your school is organized around some or all of these communication types. Many schools use these categories as an effective way to organize their curriculum and course offerings.

Note that, in some ways, these communication types build on each other because they represent increasing numbers of people included in the process. In addition, keep in mind that these communication types aren't mutually exclusive. For example, you may engage in both intrapersonal and interpersonal communication in a single encounter, or interpersonal communication may take place in an organizational context. With these caveats in mind, let's take a closer look at the six types of communication.

- *Intrapersonal communication:* Communication with ourselves. We may find ourselves daydreaming or engaging in internal dialogues even in the presence of another person. This is an intrapersonal process. Intrapersonal communication includes imagining, perceiving, or solving problems in your head. For instance, intrapersonal communication takes place when you debate with yourself, mentally listing the pros and cons of a decision before taking action.
- *Interpersonal communication:* The process of message transaction between people (usually two) who work toward creating and sustaining shared meaning. We will discuss this definition in more detail later in this chapter.

- *Small group communication:* Communication between and among members of a team who meet for a common purpose or goal. Small group communication occurs in classrooms, the workplace, and in more social environments (for example, sports teams or book clubs).
- *Organizational communication:* Communication with and among large, extended groups. Organizational communication may involve other communication types, such as interpersonal communication (for example, supervisor-subordinate relationships), small group communication (for example, a task group preparing a report), and intrapersonal communication (for example, daydreaming at work).
- *Mass communication:* Communication to a large audience via some mediated channel, such as television, radio, the Internet, or newspapers. At times, people seek out others using personal ads either on the Internet or in newspapers or magazines. This is an example of the intersection of mass communication and interpersonal communication.
- *Public communication:* Communication in which one person gives a speech to a large audience in person. Public communication is also often called *public speaking.* Public speakers have predetermined goals in mind, such as informing, persuading, or entertaining.

Although there is some overlap among these types, are you beginning to get an understanding of interpersonal communication by seeing how it differs from the other types of communication? This classification of communication continues to evolve as communication technology advances. Years ago, interpersonal communication was limited to sending letters or talking to someone personally. However, today the options seem infinite; cell phones, email, pagers, digital personal assistants, and video phones, to name just a few, affect our communication with others. It's safe to say that no one can predict all future communication types. The communication process has been redefined in the twenty-first century with the advent of technology. In Chapter 11, we investigate technology's impact on interpersonal communication specifically.

Models of Communication

To further understand the interpersonal communication process, we draw upon what theorists call **models of communication** (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). Communication models are visual, simplified representations of complex relationships in the communication process. They will help you see how the communication field has evolved over the years and will provide you with a foundation to return to throughout the book. The three prevailing models we discuss will give you insight into how we will frame our definition of interpersonal communication. Let's start with the oldest model.

Mechanistic Thinking and the Linear Model

More than fifty years ago, Claude E. Shannon, a Bell Telephone scientist, and Warren Weaver, a Sloan Cancer Research Foundation consultant, set out to understand radio and telephone technology by looking at how information passed through various channels (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). They viewed information transmission as a linear process, and their research resulted in the creation of the **linear model of communication.**
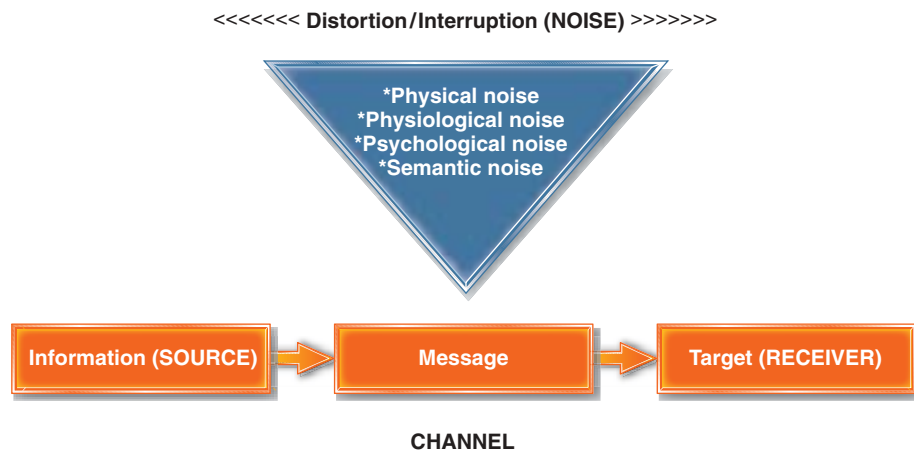
<<<<<<< **Distortion/Interruption (NOISE)** >>>>>>>

*Physical noise
*Physiological noise
*Psychological noise
*Semantic noise

| Information (SOURCE) | → | Message | → | Target (RECEIVER) |

CHANNEL

Figure 1.1 | **Linear model of communication**

This approach frames communication as a one-way process that transmits a message to a destination. You may have seen the commercial for a cell phone in which a man travels to a series of places, at each stop yelling into the phone, "Can you hear me now?" When a message is sent and received, communication takes place. Someone can hear you. That is the essence of the linear model.

Several components comprise the linear model of communication (see Figure 1.1). The **sender** is the source of the **message,** which may be spoken, written, or unspoken. The sender passes the message to the **receiver,** the intended target of the message. The receiver, in turn, assigns meaning to the message. All of this communication takes place in a **channel,** which is a pathway to communication. Typically, channels represent our senses (visual/sight, tactile/touch, olfactory/smell, and auditory/hearing). You use the tactile channel to hug your mother, and you use the auditory channel to listen to your roommate complain about a midterm exam.

In the linear model, communication also involves **noise,** which is anything that interferes with the message. Four types of noise can interrupt a message:

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

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

- **Psychological noise** (or *internal noise*) refers to a communicator's biases, prejudices, and feelings toward a person or a message. For example, you may have heard another person use language that is offensive and derogatory while speaking about a certain cultural group. If you were bothered by this language, you were experiencing psychological noise.

- **Semantic noise** occurs when senders and receivers apply different meanings to the same message. Semantic noise may take the form of jargon, technical

"O.K. What part of 'malignant regression and pathogenic reintrojection as a defense against psychic decompensation' don't you understand?"

language, and other words and phrases that are familiar to the sender but that are not understood by the receiver. For example, consider Jim, a 40-year-old Franco American living in Maine. Jim's primary language is French, so he frequently uses the English language in ways that are a bit nonsensical. For instance, when asking to look at something, he says "hand me, see me" instead of "may I see that." Or, at times, he will say "it will go that" in lieu of the phrase "this is the story." These sorts of phrases and their use could be considered conversational semantic noise.

The linear view suggests that communication takes place in a **context,** or the environment in which a message is sent. Context is multidimensional and can be physical, cultural, psychological, or historical. The **physical context** is the tangible environment in which communication occurs. Examples of physical contexts are the hotel van on the way to the airport, the dinner table, the apartment, and the church hall. Environmental conditions such as temperature, lighting, and the size of the surroundings are also part of the physical context. For example, consider trying to listen to your best friend talk about her financial problems in a crowded coffee shop. The environment does not seem conducive to receiving her message clearly and accurately.

The **cultural context** refers to the rules, roles, norms, and patterns of communication that are unique to particular cultures. Culture always influences the communication taking place between and among people. We discuss culture and interpersonal communication in detail in Chapter 3.

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

feel intimidated or awkward. The socioemotional context helps explain the nature of the interaction taking place.

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

We will return to the notion of context throughout this book. Keep in mind that context is a significant influence on our relationships with others. If we don't consider context in our interactions with others, we have no way to judge our interpersonal effectiveness.

Although the linear model was highly regarded when it was first conceptualized, the linear approach has been criticized because it presumes that communication has a definable beginning and ending (Anderson & Ross, 2002). In fact, Shannon and Weaver (1999) later emphasized this aspect of their model by claiming people receive information in organized and discrete ways. Yet, we know that communication can be messy. We have all interrupted someone or had someone interrupt us. The linear model also presumes that the listeners are passive and that communication is done only by the speakers. But we know that often listeners affect speakers and are not simply passive receivers of a speaker's message. With these criticisms in mind, researchers developed another way to represent the human communication process: the interactional model.

Feedback and the Interactional Model

To emphasize the two-way nature of communication between people, Wilbur Schramm (1954) conceptualized the **interactional model of communication.** Schramm's model shows that communication goes in two directions: from sender to receiver and from receiver to sender. This circular, or interactional, process suggests that communication is ongoing rather than linear. In the interactional view, individuals in a conversation can be both sender and receiver, but not both simultaneously (see Figure 1.2).

The interactional approach is characterized primarily by **feedback,** which can be defined as responses to people, their messages, or both. Feedback may be verbal (meaning we respond in words) or nonverbal (meaning we respond in facial expressions, body posture, and so forth). Feedback may also be internal or external. **Internal feedback** occurs when you assess your own communication (for example, by thinking "I never should have said that"). **External feedback** is the feedback you receive from other people (for example, "Why did you say that? That was dumb!").

A person can provide external feedback that results in important internal feedback for himself or herself. For example, let's say that Alexandra gives Dan the following advice about dealing with the death of his partner: "You feel sad as long as you need to. Don't worry about what other people think. I'm sick of people telling others how they should feel about something. These are your feelings." While giving Dan this external feedback, Alexandra may realize that her advice can also be applied to her own recent breakup. Although she may intend to send Dan a comforting message, she may also be providing herself internal feedback as she deals with her relational circumstances.
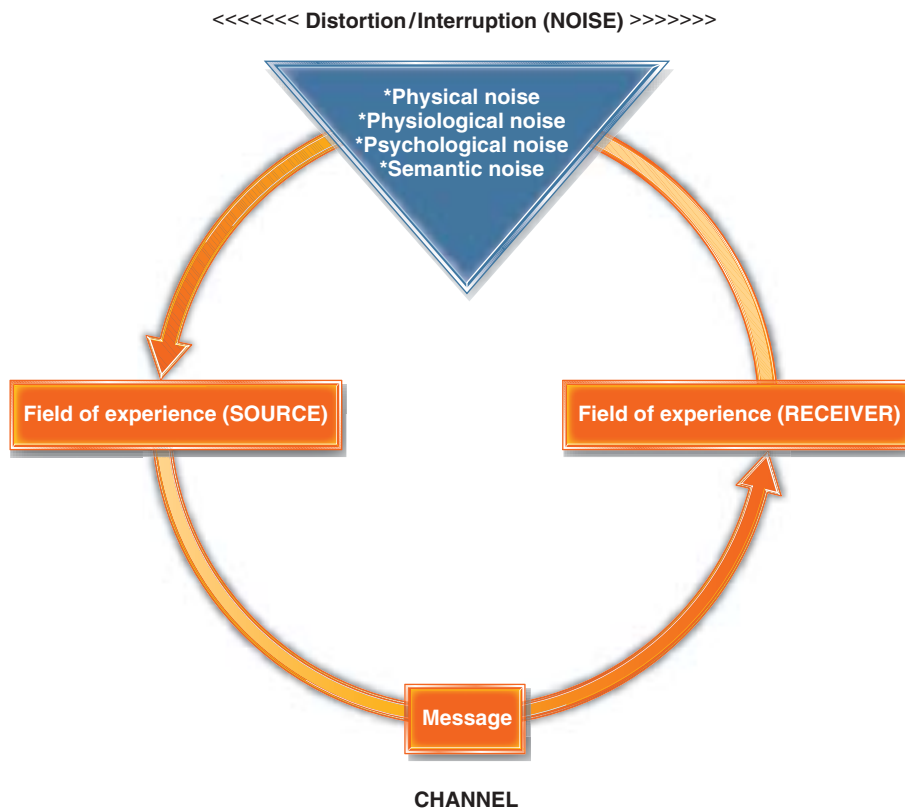
<<<<<<< **Distortion/Interruption (NOISE)** >>>>>>>

*Physical noise
*Physiological noise
*Psychological noise
*Semantic noise

Field of experience (SOURCE)

Field of experience (RECEIVER)

Message

CHANNEL

Figure 1.2 | **Interactional model of communication**

Like the linear model, the interactional model has been criticized primarily for its view of senders and receivers—that is, one person sends a message to another person. In addition, neither model takes into consideration what happens when nonverbal messages are sent at the same time as verbal messages. For example, when a father disciplines his child and finds the child either looking the other way or staring directly into his eyes, the father will "read" the meaning of the child's nonverbal communication as inattentive or disobedient. What happens if the child doesn't say anything during the reprimand? The father will still make some meaning out of the child's silence. The interactional view acknowledges that human communication involves both speaking and listening, but it asserts that speaking and listening are separate events and thus does not address the effect of nonverbal communication as the message is sent. It was this criticism that led to the development of a third model of communication, the transactional model.

Shared Meaning and the Transactional Model

Whereas the linear model of communication assumes that communication is an action that moves from sender to receiver, and the interactional model suggests that the presence of feedback makes communication an interaction between people, the **transactional model of communication** (Barnlund, 1970; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) underscores the fact that giving and receiving messages is reciprocal. In fact, the word *transactional* indicates that the communication process is cooper-
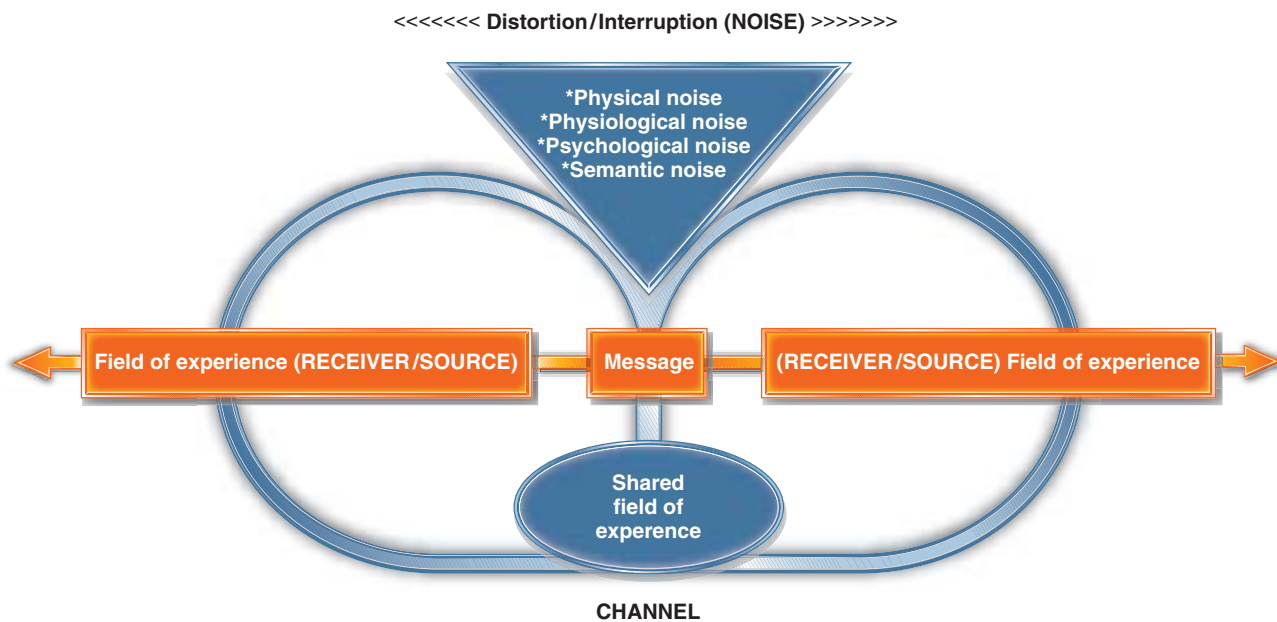
<<<<<<< **Distortion/Interruption (NOISE)** >>>>>>>

*Physical noise
*Physiological noise
*Psychological noise
*Semantic noise

Field of experience (RECEIVER/SOURCE) — Message — (RECEIVER/SOURCE) Field of experience

Shared field of experience

CHANNEL

Figure 1.3 | **Impersonal and interpersonal communication**

ative. In other words, communicators (senders and receivers) are both responsible for the effect and effectiveness of communication. In a transactional encounter, people do not simply send meaning from one to the other and then back again; rather, they build shared meaning.

A unique feature of the transactional model is its recognition that messages build upon each other. Further, both verbal and nonverbal behaviors are necessarily part of the transactional process. For example, consider Alan's conversation with his coworker Pauline. During a break, Pauline asks Alan about his family in Los Angeles. He begins to tell Pauline that his three siblings all live in Los Angeles and that he has no idea when they will be able to "escape the prison" there. When he mentions "prison," Pauline looks confused. Seeing Pauline's puzzled facial expression, Alan clarifies that he hates Los Angeles because it is so hot, people live too close to each other, and he felt that he was being watched all the time. In sum, he felt like he was in a prison. This example shows how much both Alan and Pauline are actively involved in this communication interaction. Pauline's nonverbal response to Alan prompted him to clarify his original message. As this interaction shows, the nonverbal message works in conjunction with the verbal message, and the transactional process requires ongoing negotiation of meaning.

Note that the transactional model in Figure 1.3 is characterized by a common field of experience between communicator A and communicator B. The **field of experience** refers to a person's culture, past experiences, personal history, and heredity, and how these elements influence the communication process.

People's fields of experience overlap at times, meaning that people share things in common. Where two people's fields of experience overlap, they can communicate effectively. And as they communicate, they create more overlap in their experiences. This process explains why initial encounters often consist of questions and answers between communicators, such as "Where are you from?", "What's your major?",

"Do you ski?" The answers to these questions help establish the overlap in the communicators' experiences: "Oh, I was in Chicago over the holidays last year," "Really, that's my major, too," "Yeah, I don't ski either." Further, fields of experience may change over time.

For instance, in class, Rhonda and Marcy have little in common and have little overlap in their fields of experience. They just met this term, have never taken a course together before, and Rhonda is eighteen years older than Marcy. It would appear, then, that their fields of experience would be limited to being women enrolled in the same course together. However, consider the difference if we discover that both Rhonda and Marcy are single parents, have difficulty finding quality child care, and have both received academic scholarships. The overlap in their fields of experience would be significantly greater. In addition, as the two continue in the class together, they will develop new common experiences, which, in turn, will increase the overlap in their fields of experience. This fact may affect their interactions with each other in the future.

Interpersonal communication scholars have embraced the transactional process in their research. For example, Julia Wood (1998) believes that human communication "is always tied to what came before and always anticipates what may come later" (p. 6). Wood believes that many misunderstandings occur in relationships because people are either unaware of or don't attend to the transactional communication process. Consider her words:

> The dynamic quality of communication keeps it open to revision. If someone misunderstands our words or nonverbal behavior, we can say or do something to clarify our meaning. If we don't understand another person's communication, we can look puzzled to show our confusion or ask questions to discover what the other person meant. (p. 6)

In summary, earlier communication models showed that communication is linear and that senders and receivers have separate roles and functions. The interactional approach expanded that thinking and suggested less linearity and more involvement of feedback between communicators. The transactional model refined our understanding by noting the importance of a communicator's background and also by demonstrating the simultaneous sending and receiving of messages. To check out interactive versions of these models, use your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM to access **Interactive Activity 1.1: Interactive Models of Communication.**

Before we move on to the next discussion, consider that our notion of communication models is continually evolving. For example, the transactional model may soon become a bit outdated as technology shapes how we view the communication process. As we develop new ways to communicate technologically, communication scholars may reconsider the communication model to take into account email, keyboard symbols that indicate emotions, and geographically dispersed people. In addition, we recognize that the communication roles described by the models are not absolute and can vary depending on the situation. To check out a website that highlights communication roles in a particular setting, use your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM to access **Interactive Activity 1.2: Communication in Emergency Situations.**

With this foundation, let's now discuss the nature of interpersonal communication.

The Nature of Interpersonal Communication

By now, you may be starting to realize that the interpersonal communication process is a complex undertaking. Although it shares some overlap with other types of communication, it also differs from them in important ways. It is marked by two people who simultaneously send and receive messages, attempting to create meaning. We explained interpersonal communication by elaborating on three models that describe its components. Another way to understand interpersonal communication is by examining its nature through the interpersonal communication continuum.

### The Interpersonal Communication Continuum

Gerald Miller and Mark Steinberg (1975) proposed looking at communication along a continuum. Like many interpersonal communication researchers, Miller and Steinberg believed that not all human communication is interpersonal. Our interactions with others can be placed on a continuum from impersonal to interpersonal (Figure 1.4).

Think about the various interactions you have that could be considered impersonal. You tell a receptionist that you've arrived for a job interview. You tell a man hawking tickets to a sold-out concert that you're not interested. You tell the woman sitting next to you at a wedding that you're a friend of the groom. Typically, these episodes remain on the impersonal end of the continuum because the conversations remain superficial.

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

These two ends of the continuum—impersonal and interpersonal—are the extremes. Most of our conversations fall in between or along various points on the con-

Figure 1.4 | The continuum of interpersonal communication
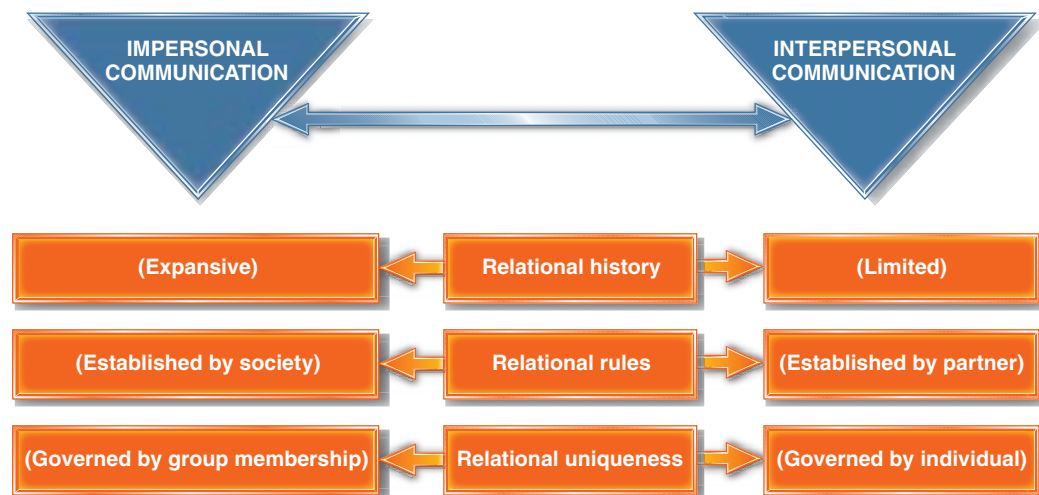
tinuum. Your talks with a physician, professor, coworker, or car mechanic are examples of the types of encounters that, although not particularly emotionally fulfilling, have a personal dimension to them. You have to share your health status with your doctor. Your professor sometimes delicately asks what personal problems might have caused a failing grade on an exam. A coworker may share family stories. And a car mechanic may ask if you have enough money for a new transmission. Each of these interactions entails some degree of closeness but not a lot of emotional depth.

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

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

When two people have **relational rules,** they themselves set guidelines for their behavior in their conversations. Rules help relational partners negotiate how information is managed and stored (Petronio, 2002). Most of the time, these rules (which can be either verbalized or tacitly understood) are not formally noted but are nonetheless important. Relational rules indicate what the people in the relationship expect and allow when they talk to each other. Relational rules differ from social rules in that the two relational partners negotiate them as opposed to having them set by an outside source. For example, one relational rule that Rolanda and Maria may have agreed upon is that all restaurant gossip should remain private. Another of their rules may communicate the need to be professional while on the job and to avoid "inside" jokes. If the restaurant manager had set these rules, then when Rolanda and Maria followed them, their communication would be more impersonal.

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

Although most of us interact with people all day, the nature of our relationships is what determines whether our interactions are interpersonal.
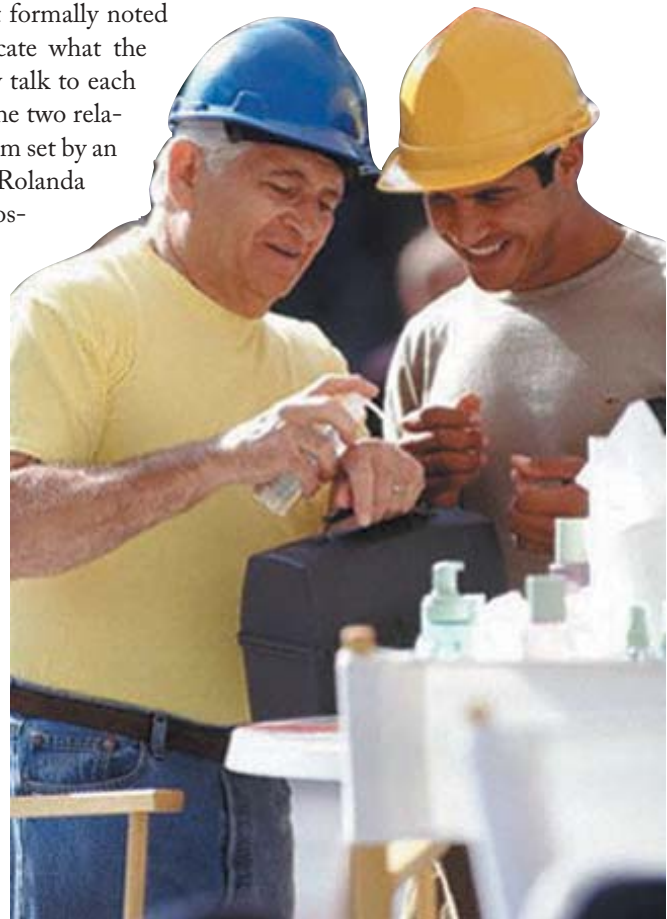
Again, much of our communication isn't purely impersonal or interpersonal; rather, it falls somewhere between the two ends of the continuum. Further, the relationship you have with someone doesn't always indicate whether your communication is personal or not. At times, personal communication occurs in our impersonal relationships. For example, consider telling a tailor about your divorce or confiding to a fellow passenger that you are deathly afraid of flying. At other times, we may have some impersonal communication in our close relationships. For instance, a couple with five children may be too exhausted to worry about being sensitive, loving, and compassionate with each other. Feeding the kids, bathing them, preparing their lunches, and getting them to the bus present enough challenges. In fact, for the sake of communication efficiency, many couples have developed abbreviated communication systems (Pearson, 1992) that fit the description of impersonal encounters.

Looking at the interpersonal communication continuum provides one avenue to understanding interpersonal communication. However, it may pose overly restrictive limits on our definition by demanding that interpersonal communication always be relationally oriented. We now turn our attention to defining exactly what we mean by interpersonal communication in this text.

Defining Interpersonal Communication

We define **interpersonal communication** as the process of message transaction between people to create and sustain shared meaning. There are three critical components embedded in this definition: process, message transaction, and shared meaning. Let's look at each in turn.

When we state that interpersonal communication is a **process,** we mean that it is an ongoing, unending vibrant activity that is always changing. When we enter into an interpersonal communication exchange, we are entering into an event with no definable beginning or ending, and one that is irreversible. Our focus on process suggests that not only do individuals change, but the cultures in which they live also change. For instance, modern U.S. society is very different than it was in the 1950s. The climate of the United States in the 1950s can be characterized as a time of postwar euphoria, colored by a concern about communism. The feminist movement of the 1970s had yet to occur, and for many white middle-class families, sex roles were traditional. Women's roles were more rigidly defined as nurturers and primary caretakers for children, whereas men's roles were relegated to emotionless financial providers. These roles influenced decision making in various families (Turner & West, 2006).

However, nowadays roles are less rigid. Many dads stay at home to care for children, and many women work outside the home. And more than ever, women and men make all kinds of decisions about the family together. Further, the Cold War has ended, and the threat of communism has been replaced by fears about terrorism. This new type of concern form a context for conversations between people, if for no other reason than it is a topics of our time. Although it might be very common for people to talk about terrorism in 2005, it is unlikely that they'll spend much time worrying about an invasion by Russia.

The second element of our definition highlights **message exchange,** by which we mean the transaction of verbal and nonverbal messages being sent simultaneously between two people. Messages, both verbal and nonverbal, are the vehicles we

use to interact with others. But messages are not enough to establish interpersonal communication. For example, consider an English speaker stating the message, "I need to find the post office. Can you direct me there?" to a Spanish speaker. Although the message was clearly stated in English, no shared meaning results if the Spanish speaker is not bilingual.

Meaning is central to our definition of interpersonal communication because **meaning** is what people extract from a message. As you will learn in Chapter 6, words alone have no meaning; people attribute meaning to words. We create the meaning of a message even as the message unfolds. Perhaps our relational history helps us interpret the message. Perhaps a message is unclear to us and we ask questions for clarity. Or maybe the message has personal meaning to us, and no one else understands the personal expressions used. Make no mistake: Meaning directly affects our relational life. As Steve Duck and Julia Wood (1995) state: "we suspect that 'good' and 'bad' relational experiences are sometimes a matter of personal definition and personal meaning, but always intertwined, sometimes seamlessly, in the broader human enterprise of making sense of experience" (p. 3). In other words, achieving meaning is achieving sense-making in your relationships.

When we say that people work toward creating and sustaining meaning, we are suggesting that there must be some shared meaning for interpersonal communication to take place. Judith Martin and Tom Nakayama (2000) illustrate the problem of assuming that our meaning will automatically be clear to others and result in shared meaning. They point out that meaning is affected by culture in more ways than language differences. For example, in the United States, many people tend to dislike Monday, the first day of the workweek, and enjoy Friday, which is the end of the workweek. However, many Muslims dislike Saturday, which is the first day of the week for Muslims after Friday, the holy day. The researchers conclude that cultural expressions such as TGIF (thank goodness it's Friday) may not communicate the same meaning to all individuals, even when accurately translated. Do not assume that others will understand words and phrases you may use on a daily basis. To read an article that examines the complexity associated with the term *message,* read the article "Where Is the 'Message' in Communication Models?" available through InfoTrac College Edition. Use your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM to access **InfoTrac College Edition Exercise 1.1: Received as Meant to Be Sent?**

Now that you are getting a clearer picture of what interpersonal communication is, let's turn to a discussion of the value of interpersonal communication in our lives.

The Value of Interpersonal Communication

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2002) reports that interpersonal skills top the list of skills employers look for in new hires in virtually all professions. In his book *10 Things Employers Want You to Learn in College,* William Coplin (2004) writes that communication skills are paramount. Without solid communication skills, Coplin writes, employees will not be productive. Clearly, without some knowledge and skill in interpersonal communication, you may have a difficult time finding a job in today's marketplace. To read an interesting article about the importance of interpersonal communication at work, use your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM to access **Interactive Activity 1.3: Technical versus Interpersonal Skills.** And to take a look at the communication model applied

to today's business environment, read the article "**Avoiding Breakdowns in the Communication Process,**" available through InfoTrac College Edition. Use your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM to access **InfoTrac College Edition Exercise 1.2: The Communication Model at Work.**

However, jobs are not the only reason to learn about interpersonal communication. Most of us desire long-term, satisfying relationships, and effective interpersonal communication with others can help us establish such relationships. Learning about interpersonal communication can literally improve our lives—physically, emotionally, and psychologically—and it can improve our relationships with others. A number of recent conclusions by both the academic and medical communities (for example, Fleishman, Sherbourne, & Crystal, 2000; American Cancer Society, 2001; Support4Hope, 2004) show the value of communication and relationships:

- Older people with the ability to communicate in extended interpersonal networks improve their physical and emotional well-being.
- The American Cancer Society encourages cancer patients to establish an interpersonal relationship with their physicians. This relationship involves taking the time to ask questions, making concerns known, sharing information, and making choices.
- A chat room for those with depression indicates that limited or no interpersonal contact may lead to permanent changes in brain function that increase one's chances to be clinically depressed.
- Patients have a preference for physicians who show a "patient-centered" approach that includes quality communication skills and a desire to establish a partnership between patient and physician.

To read an article that offers an interesting look at how our interactions with others affect our health, read "Nuances of Interpersonal Relationships Influence Blood Pressure," available through InfoTrac College Edition. Use your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM to access **InfoTrac College Edition Exercise 1.3: Interpersonal Communication and Health.**

Another benefit of studying interpersonal communication is that it can improve relationships with family and friends. Communicating in close relationships can be tough. Yet, think about the advantages, for instance, of (1) working toward improving your listening skills with a roommate, (2) committing yourself to using more sensitive language with a sibling, (3) employing nondefensive reactions in your conflicts with parents, and (4) accepting responsibility for your feelings in all interactions. These are a few areas that you will explore in this book.

Another value associated with learning about interpersonal communication pertains to the classroom. Specifically, research has shown that using your communication skills in the classroom may improve your academic performance. For instance, students who are considered to have high degrees of interaction involvement in class are more likely to increase their learning, motivation, and satisfaction with the course (Myers & Bryant, 2002). Learning to listen, to participate, and to involve yourself in class, then, has lasting positive effects on your learning and grades.

A final way that learning about interpersonal communication can improve your life is that it can help you gain information about yourself. Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954/1970) calls this the process of **self-actualization.** When we are self-actualized, we become the best person we can be. We are tapping our full potential

in terms of our creativity, our spontaneity, and our talents. When we self-actualize, we try to cultivate our strengths and eliminate our shortcomings. At times, others help us to self-actualize. For instance, in the movie *As Good As It Gets,* Jack Nicholson's character, Melvin, suffers from an obsessive-compulsive disorder. His date, Carol, portrayed by Helen Hunt, has her own family problems but tries to help Melvin overcome some of his idiosyncrasies. In a poignant exchange that occurs during their first date, Carol becomes distressed and tells Melvin that she will leave the restaurant unless he gives her a compliment. Carol pleads: "Pay me a compliment, Melvin. I need one quick." Melvin responds by saying, "You make me want to be a better man." Although Melvin clearly frames the compliment from his vantage point, he still, nonetheless, manages to help Carol see her value through his eyes.

Overall, then, we can reap a number of benefits from practicing effective interpersonal skills. Aside from the fact that it allows us to function every day, becoming adept at interpersonal communication helps us become more healthy, helps us in the workplace, and aids us in our relationships with family and friends. We have now set the stage for examining some principles and misconceptions of interpersonal communication.

Effective interpersonal communication can help us feel better physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Think of how good it feels to have someone take the time to talk with you when you're feeling lonely, sick, or depressed.

Principles of Interpersonal Communication

To better understand interpersonal communication, let's explore some major principles that shape it. Interpersonal communication is unavoidable, is irreversible, involves symbol exchange, is rule-governed, is learned, and involves both content and relationship dimensions.

Interpersonal Communication Is Unavoidable

Researchers have stated that you cannot *not* communicate (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). This means that as hard as we try, we cannot prevent someone else from making meaning out of our behavior—it is inevitable and unavoidable. No matter what poker face we try to establish, we are still sending a message to others. Even our silence and avoidance of eye contact are communicative. It is this quality that makes interpersonal communication transactional. For instance, imagine that Maresha and her partner, Chloe, are talking about the balance in their checking account. In this scenario, the two engage in a rather heated discussion because Maresha has discovered that $300 cannot be accounted for in the account balance. As Maresha speaks, Chloe simply sits and listens to her. Yet, Maresha can't help but notice that Chloe is unable to look her in the eye. Maresha begins to think that Chloe's shifting eyes and constant throat clearing must signify something deceptive. Clearly, although Chloe hasn't spoken a word, she is communicating. Her nonverbal communication is being perceived as highly communicative. We return to the impact that nonverbal communication has on creating meaning in Chapter 7.

Interpersonal Communication Is Irreversible

There are times when we wish that we hadn't said something. Wouldn't it be great if we could take back a comment and pretend that it hadn't been spoken? Think about the times you told a parent, a partner, a roommate, or your child something that you later felt was a terrible thing to say. Or what about the times you told a good friend that you couldn't stand his new hair color ("It's too bleached out. You look like an idiot") or her new car ("For *that* you paid how much? You got ripped off!"). Although we might later wish to eat our words, the principle of **irreversibility** means that what we say to others cannot be reversed.

In fact, the principle of irreversibility affects even mediated interpersonal communication such as e-mail. Think about sending an email that was written in haste. It may have been filled with personal attacks against someone because you were upset and were venting. Now imagine that email getting into the hands of the person you were slamming. An apology may help, but saying you're sorry does nothing to erase the original message. The irreversibility of your message becomes apparent.

Interpersonal Communication Involves Symbol Exchange

One important reason interpersonal communication occurs is because symbols are mutually agreed upon by the participants in the process. Yet, **symbols** are arbitrary labels or representations for feelings, concepts, objects, or events. Words are symbols. For instance, the word *table* represents something we sit at. Similarly, the word *love* represents the idea of love, which means feelings for someone or something.

Words like *love* suggest that symbols may be somewhat abstract, and with this abstraction comes the potential for miscommunication. For instance, consider how hard it would be for someone who has never attended college to understand the following:

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

Because the verbal symbols used in this message are not understood by everyone, the message would be lost to someone who had never encountered "prereqs" and an "independent study." This example underscores the importance of developing a transactional viewpoint because communication requires mutual understanding. In Chapter 6, we look in more detail at the importance of language in interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal Communication Is Rule-Governed

Consider the following examples of communication rules:

- As long as you live under my roof, you'll do what I say.
- Always tell the truth.
- Don't talk back.
- Always say "thank you" when someone gives you a present.
- Don't interrupt while anyone is talking.

You probably heard at least one of these while growing up. We noted earlier that rules are important ingredients in our relationships. They help guide and structure

our interpersonal communication. Rules essentially say that individuals in a relationship agree that there are appropriate ways to interact in their relationship. Like the rules in our childhood, most of the rules in our relationships today basically tell us what we can or can't do. Susan Shimanoff (1980) has defined a rule as "a followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts" (p. 57). In other words, Shimanoff, like many other communication researchers, thinks that we have a choice whether or not we wish to follow a rule. Ultimately, we must decide whether the rule must be adhered to or can be ignored in our interpersonal exchanges.

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

Interpersonal Communication Is Learned

People obviously believe that interpersonal communication is a learned process. Otherwise, why would we be writing this book, and why would you be taking this course? Yet, as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we often take for

From birth, we are taught how to communicate interpersonally, most significantly by our family. As we grow older, we refine our skills as we interact with a wider and wider group of people, such as our teachers, friends, coworkers, and partners.
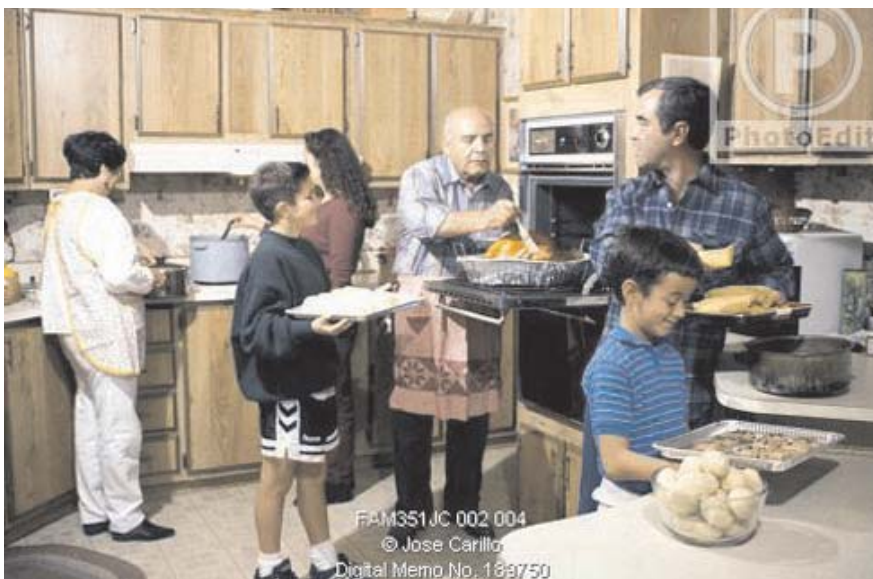
granted our ability to communicate. Still, we all need to refine and cultivate our skills to communicate with a wide assortment of people. As our book's theme underscores, you must be able to make informed communication choices in changing times.

You're in this course to learn more about interpersonal communication. But you've also been acquiring this information throughout your life. We learn how to communicate with one another from television, our peer group, and our partners. Early in our lives, most of us learn from our family. Consider this dialogue between Laura Reid and her 5-year-old son, Tucker:

TUCKER: Mom, I saw Holly's dad driving a motorcycle today.

LAURA: Really? That must've been cool to see. Holly's dad's name is Mr. Willows.

TUCKER: What's his name?

LAURA: Mr. Willows.

TUCKER: No, Mom—what's his real name?

LAURA: Honey, I told you. Mr. Willows.

TUCKER: Doesn't he have a name like I do?

LAURA: Little kids call him Mr. Willows. Grownups call him Kenny.

TUCKER: Why can't I call him Kenny?

LAURA: Because you're not a grownup and because he is older than you, you should call him Mr. Willows.

Clearly, Laura Reid is teaching her child a communication rule she believes leads to interpersonal effectiveness. She tells her son that he should use titles for adults. Implied in this teaching is that kids do not have the same conversational privileges as adults. Interestingly, this learned interpersonal skill evolves with age. For example, at age 24, what do you think Tucker will call Kenny Willows? This awkwardness about names is frequently felt by newlyweds as they become members of their spouse's family. Does a husband call his wife's mother "Mom," or does he call her by her first name? Of course, his mother-in-law may ask to be called "Mom," and yet her son-in-law may be uncomfortable with accommodating her request, especially if his own biological mother is still alive.

Interpersonal Communication Has Both Content and Relationship Information

Each message that you communicate to another contains information on two levels. **Content information** refers to the information contained in the message. The words you speak to another person and how you say those words constitute the content of the message. Content, then, includes both verbal and nonverbal components. A message also contains **relationship information,** which can be defined as how you want the receiver of a message to interpret your message. The relational dimension of a message gives us some idea how the speaker and the listener feel about each other. Content and relationship information work simultaneously in a message, and it is difficult to think about sending a message that doesn't, in some way, comment on the relationship between the sender and receiver (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). In other words, we can't really separate the two. We always express an idea or thought (content), but that thought is always presented within a relational framework. Consider the following example.

Father Paul is a Catholic priest who is the pastor of a large parish in the Rocky Mountains. Corrine Murphy is the parish administrative assistant. Both have been at the parish for more than ten years and have been good friends throughout that

time. One of the most stressful times in the church is during the Christmas season. The pastor is busy visiting homebound parishioners, while Corrine is busy overseeing the annual holiday pageant. With this stress comes a lot of shouting between the two. On one occasion, several parishioners hear him yell, "Corrine, you forgot to tell me about the Lopez family! When do they need me to visit? Where is your mind these days?" Corrine shoots back: "I've got it under control. Just quit your nagging!" Those listening to the two couldn't believe their ears. They were a bit taken aback by the way the two yelled at each other.

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

In this chapter so far, we have explored the definition of interpersonal communication in some detail and have described several principles associated with interpersonal communication. Now that you know what interpersonal communication is, let's focus on some of the misconceptions about interpersonal communication, or what it is not.

Myths of Interpersonal Communication

Maybe it's the media. Maybe it's Hollywood. Maybe it's Oprah! Whatever the source, for one reason or another, people operate under several misconceptions about interpersonal communication. These myths impede our understanding and enactment of effective interpersonal communication.

Interpersonal Communication Solves All Problems

We cannot stress enough that simply being skilled in interpersonal communication does not mean that you are prepared to work out all of your relational problems. When you learn to communicate well, you may clearly communicate about a problem but not necessarily be able to solve it. Also, keep in mind that communication involves both talking and listening. Many students have told us during their advising appointments that sometimes when they try to "talk out a problem," they achieve no satisfaction. It seems, then, that with the emphasis the media places on talking, many students forget about the role of listening. We hope you leave this course with an understanding of how to communicate effectively with others in a variety of relationships. We also hope you realize that simply because you are talking does not mean that you will solve all of your relationship problems.

Interpersonal Communication Is Always a Good Thing

National best-selling self-help books and famous self-improvement gurus have made millions of dollars selling the idea that communication is the magic potion for all of life's ailments. Most often, communication is a good thing. Yet, there are times when communication results in less-than-satisfying relationship experiences. A relatively new area of research in interpersonal communication is called "the dark side" (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994, 2004; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). The **dark side of interpersonal communication** generally refers to negative communication exchanged between people.

People are manipulative, deceitful, exploitive, homophobic, racist, and emotionally abusive (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994). In other words, we need to be aware that communication can be downright nasty at times and that interpersonal communication is not always satisfying and rewarding. Throughout this book, we refer to the dark (and bright) side of communication as we talk about interpersonal relationships. Although most people approach interpersonal communication with an open and thoughtful mind, others are less sincere.

Interpersonal Communication Is Common Sense

Consider the following question: If interpersonal communication is just a matter of common sense, why do we have so many problems communicating with others? We need to abandon the thinking that communication is simply common sense. To put it bluntly, we all can benefit from help in this area.

It is true that we should be sure to use whatever common sense we have in our personal interactions, but this strategy will get us only so far. In some cases, a skilled interpersonal communicator may effectively rely on his or her common sense, but we usually also need to make use of an extensive repertoire of skills to make informed choices in our relationships. One problem with believing that interpersonal communication is common sense relates to the diversity of our population. As we discuss in Chapter 3, cultural variation continues to characterize U.S. society. Making the assumption that all people intuitively know how to communicate with everyone undermines the rich tapestry of groups in the United States. Even males and females tend to look at the same event differently (Wood, 2005). To rid ourselves of the myth of common sense, we simply need to take culture and gender into consideration.

Interpersonal Communication Is Synonymous with Interpersonal Relationships

We don't automatically have an interpersonal relationship with someone merely because we are exchanging interpersonal communication with him or her. Interpersonal communication can *lead to* interpersonal relationships, but an accumulation of interpersonal messages does not automatically result in an interpersonal relationship. Sharing a pleasant conversation about your family with a stranger riding on the bus with you doesn't mean you have a relationship with that person.

Relationships do not just appear. William Wilmot (1995) remarked that relationships "emerge from recurring episodic enactments" (p. 25). That is, for an interaction between you and another person to be considered an interpersonal relationship, a pattern of intimate exchanges over time must take place. Relationships usually will not happen unless two people demonstrate a sense of caring and respect, and have significant periods of time to work on their relational issues.

Interpersonal Communication Is Always Face to Face

Throughout this chapter, most of our discussion has centered on face-to-face encounters between people. Indeed, this is the primary way that people meet and cultivate their interpersonal skills with each other. It is also the focus of most of the research in interpersonal communication. Yet, large numbers of people are beginning to utilize the Internet in their communication with others. This mediated interpersonal communication requires us to expand our discussion of interpersonal communication beyond personal encounters. To establish a relationship, two people

Your*Turn*

There are similarities and differences in the way we communicate with our neighbors, family, friends, and coworkers. Write about these and use examples of the types of conversations you have with each. What conclusions can you draw about how interpersonal communication varies based on particular sets of people with whom you interact? If you'd like, you can use your student workbook to complete this activity.

must eventually meet one another. However, we realize that some people may disagree with this statement. In the spirit of inclusiveness, then, we include technological relations in our interpretation of interpersonal communication and devote Chapter 11 to this issue.

Thus far, this chapter has given you a fundamental framework for examining interpersonal communication. We close the chapter by examining a feature of the interpersonal communication process that is not easily taught and that is often difficult to comprehend: ethics.

Interpersonal Communication Ethics

Communication ethicist Richard Johanneson (2000) concluded that "ethical issues may arise in human behavior whenever that behavior could have significant impact on other persons, when the behavior involves conscious choice of means and ends, and when the behavior can be judged by standards of right and wrong" (p. 1). In other words, ethics is the cornerstone of interpersonal communication.

Ethics is the perceived rightness or wrongness of an action or behavior. Researchers have identified ethics as a type of moral decision making, determined in large part by society (Pfeiffer & Forsberg, 2005). A primary goal of ethics is to "establish appropriate constraints on ourselves" (Englehardt, 2001, p. 1). Ethical decisions involve value judgments, and not everyone will agree with those values. For instance, do you tell racist jokes in front of others and think that they are harmless ways to make people laugh? What sort of value judgment is part of the decision to tell or not to tell a joke? Acting ethically is critical in interpersonal communication. As Raymond Pfeiffer and Ralph Forsberg (2005) concluded, "To act ethically is, at the very least, to strive to act in ways that do not hurt other people, that respect their dignity, individuality, and unique moral value, and that treat others as equally important to oneself" (p. 7). The authors maintain that if we're not prepared to act in this way, one can conclude that we do not consider ethics important.

Five Ethical Systems of Communication

There are many ways to make value judgments in interpersonal communication. Researchers have discussed a number of different ethical systems of communication relevant to our interpersonal encounters (e.g., Andersen, 1996; Englehardt, 2001; Jensen, 1997). We will discuss five of them here. As we briefly overview each system, keep in mind that these systems attempt to let us know what it means to act morally.

Categorical Imperative
The first ethical system, named the **categorical imperative,** is based on the work of philosopher Immanuel Kant (Kuehn, 2001). Kant's categorical imperative refers to individuals fol-

"Miss Dugan, will you send someone in here who can distinguish right from wrong!"

lowing moral absolutes. This ethical system suggests that we should act as though we are an example to others. According to this system, the key question when making a moral decision is: What would happen if everyone did this? Thus, you shouldn't do something that you wouldn't feel is fine for everyone to do all the time. Further, Kant believed that the consequences of actions are not important; what matters is the ethical principle behind those actions.

For example, let's say that Mark confides to Karla, a coworker, that he has leukemia. Karla tells no one else because Mark fears his health insurance will be threatened if management finds out. Elizabeth, the supervisor, asks Karla if she knows what's happening with Mark because he misses work and is always tired. The categorical imperative dictates that Karla tell her boss the truth, despite the fact that telling the truth may affect Mark's job, his future with the company, and his relationship with Karla. The categorical imperative requires us to tell the truth because Kant believed that enforcing the principle of truth telling is more important than worrying about the short-term consequences of telling the truth.

Utilitarianism

The second ethical system, **utilitarianism,** was developed by John Stuart Mill (Capaldi, 2004). According to this system, what is ethical is what will bring the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Unlike Kant, Mill believed the consequences of moral actions were important. Maximizing satisfaction and happiness is essential. For example, suppose you're over at a friend's house and her baby sister is crying incessantly. You notice your friend grabbing her sister, shaking her, and yelling for her to be quiet. Afterward, you observe red marks on the child's arms. Do you report your friend to the authorities? Do you remain quiet? Do you talk to your friend?

Making a decision based on utilitarianism or what is best for the greater good means that you will speak out or take some action. Although it would be easier on you and your friend if you remain silent, doing so will not serve the greater good. According to utilitarianism, you should either talk to your friend or report your friend's actions to an appropriate individual.

The Golden Mean

The **golden mean,** a third ethical system, proposes that we should aim for harmony and balance in our lives. This principle, articulated more than 2,500 years ago by Aristotle (Metzger, 1995), suggests that a person's moral virtue stands between two vices, with the middle, or the mean, being the foundation for a rational society.

Let's say that Cora, Jackie, and Lester are three employees who work for a large insurance company. During a break one afternoon, someone asks what kind of childhood each had. Cora goes into specific detail, talking about her abusive father: "He really let me have it, and it all started when I was 7," she begins before launching into a long description. On the other hand, Jackie tells the group only, "My childhood was okay." Lester tells the group that his was a pretty rough childhood: "It was tough financially. We didn't have a lot of money. But we really all got along well." In this example, Cora was on one extreme, revealing too much information. Jackie was at the other extreme, revealing very little, if anything. Lester's decision to reveal a reasonable amount of information about his childhood was an ethical one; he practiced the golden mean by providing a sufficient amount of information but not too much. In other words, he presented a rational and balanced perspective.

Ethic of Care

Developing an **ethic of care,** the fourth ethical system, means being concerned with connection. Carol Gilligan first conceptualized an ethic of care by looking at women's ways of moral decision making. She felt that because men have been the dominant voices in society, women's commitment toward connection has gone unnoticed. Gilligan (1982) initially felt that an ethic of care was a result of how women were raised. Although her ethical principles pertain primarily to women, Gilligan's research applies to men as well. Some men adopt the ethic, and some women do not adopt the ethic. In contrast to the categorical imperative, for instance, the ethic of care is concerned with consequences of decisions.

For instance, suppose that Ben and Paul are having a conversation about whether it's right to go behind a person's back and disclose that he or she is gay (called *outing* a person). Ben makes an argument that it's a shame that people won't own up to being gay; they are who they are. If someone hides his or her sexuality, Ben believes that it's fine to "out" that person. Paul, expressing an ethic of care, tells his friend that no one should reveal another person's sexual identity. That information should remain private unless an individual wishes to reveal it. Paul explains that outing someone would have serious negative repercussions for the relationships of the person being outed and thus shouldn't be done. In this example, Paul exemplifies a symbolic connection to those who don't want to discuss their sexual orientation with others.

Significant Choice

The fifth ethical system, **significant choice,** is an ethical orientation conceptualized by Thomas Nilsen (Nilsen, 1966). Nilsen argued that communication is ethical to the extent that it maximizes people's ability to exercise free choice. Information should be given to others in a noncoercive way so that people can make free and informed decisions. For example, when personal ads are placed on the Internet, if you fail to disclose that you are married, you are not ethical in your communication with others. However, if you give information regarding your relationship status and other details, you are practicing the ethical system of significant choice.

Understanding Ethics and Our Own Values

Ethics permeates interpersonal communication. We make ongoing ethical decisions in all our interpersonal encounters. Should someone's sexual past be completely revealed to a partner? How do you treat an ex-friend or ex-partner in future encounters? Is it ever okay to lie to protect your friend? These kinds of questions challenge millions of interpersonal relationships.

Raymond Pfeiffer and Ralph Forsberg (2005) conclude that when we are confronted with ethical decisions, "we should not ignore our society's cultural, religious, literary, and moral traditions. Our values have emerged from and are deeply enmeshed in these traditions. They often teach important lessons concerning the difficult decisions we face in life" (p. 8).

The five ethical systems, which are summarized in Table 1.1, can give you strategies for making ethical decisions. However, making sense of the world and of our interpersonal relationships

"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Table 1.1 | **Ethical Systems of Interpersonal Communication**

Ethical System	Responsibility	Action
Categorical imperative	To adhere to a moral absolute	Tell the truth.
Utilitarianism	To ensure the greatest good for the greatest number of people	Produce favorable consequences.
Ethic of care	To establish connection	Establish caring relationships.
Golden mean	To achieve rationality and balance	Create harmony and balance for the community and the individual.
Significant choice	To enable free choice	Maximize individual choice.

Adapted from Englehardt, 2001.

requires us to understand our own values. We also need to understand how those values influence our ethical decisions. Today more than ever, ethics should guide us on a daily basis. Being aware of and sensitive to your decisions and their consequences will help you make the right choices in these changing times.

Ethics & Choice

Lenora Watkins was clearly in a bind. She had dated Luke for about a month. She really didn't have any serious complaints about him but felt that Luke was sending her mixed messages. One day, he'd come over to her dorm room, and they'd sit together studying on the bed. The next time they were together, Luke would act distant, not wanting to even hold her hand. This back-and-forth intimacy was driving Lenora nuts, and she was quite frustrated over the situation.

Lenora thought nothing could be much worse than her current experiences with Luke, so she let her friend Carmen set her up with a coworker. On a coffee date, Lenora met Rodney, a professional who had divorced about three months ago. Lenora and Rodney got along great, and she felt less frustration with him than with Luke. They started dating regularly, and Lenora enjoyed his company a lot.

Lenora wasn't sure what she should do in this situation. Although neither Luke nor Rodney had said they expected an exclusive relationship with her, she knew they probably assumed she wasn't dating anyone else. Plus, she just felt funny trying to juggle the two relationships. She felt her silence to each of the guys about the other was a lie of omission, but she wasn't sure what would happen if she told them the truth.

Lenora is facing an ethical dilemma. Discuss the ethical problems pertaining to her relationships with Luke and Rodney. How should she handle the question of whether to tell them about each other? Justify your answers by using one or more of the ethical systems of communication (categorical imperative, utilitarianism, golden mean, ethic of care, or significant choice).

Use your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM to access an interactive version of this scenario on the Understanding Interpersonal Communication website. Look under Student Resources for Chapter 1 and click on the "Ethics & Choice" menu at left. The interactive version of this scenario allows you to choose an appropriate response to this dilemma and then see what consequences your choice brings about. You can also compare your answers to the questions at the end of the scenario to those provided by the authors and, if requested, e-mail your response to your instructor.

Choices for Changing Times

We close Chapter 1 by reiterating two themes that guide this book: choice and changing times. Throughout this text, you will explore many topics associated with interpersonal communication. We encourage you to consider the importance of choice and change as you read the material.

First, we believe that you have an abundance of choices available to you in your communication with others. Simply stated, we hope you choose to become a more effective communicator. At the core of this effectiveness is **communication competency,** or the ability to communicate with knowledge, skills, and thoughtfulness. As you read the following chapters, you will acquire a lot of knowledge about interpersonal communication. You will also be asked to apply much of that knowledge as you consider several interpersonal skills. Developing a large repertoire of skills and applying them appropriately is a hallmark of a competent communicator.

Second, as we often remind you in this book, we live in changing times. Over the course of our lives, many of us have discovered that what were communication skills that were once effective may have to be revisited. Adapting to the culture and individuals around us is paramount in the twenty-first century. As you learned earlier in this chapter, interacting with others is often challenging because of their various fields of experience. Varying backgrounds can affect how a message is sent and received.

Throughout the rest of this text, we continue to reiterate how interpersonal communication functions in our lives. These are changing times, and with change comes

challenge. One such challenge is communicate interpersonally in a diverse culture. As a start, assess your current communication skills by using your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM to access **Interactive Activity 1.4: Communication Skills Test.** In addition, see whether you are (mostly) an intuitive, thinking, feeling, or sensing communicator by reading the article "What Type of Communicator Are You?" available through InfoTrac College Edition. Use your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM to access **InfoTrac College Edition Exercise 1.4: What Type of Communicator Are You?**

Summary

We often take our ability to communicate for granted, and the majority of people living in the United States believe they communicate well. However, some people experience communication apprehension in uncomfortable situations, and all of us can improve our interpersonal communication skills in some way.

Interpersonal communication is a complex process that is unique from other forms of communication, such as intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, organizational, mass, and public. The definition of interpersonal communication has evolved over the years as several models of communication have been advanced. The earliest, the linear model, says that communication is a one-way process in which a sender transmits a message to a receiver. In this model, several types of noise—physiological, physical, psychological, or semantic—can interfere with a message while it's being transmitted. The linear view also specifies that context—be it physical, cultural, or social-emotional—affects communication. The drawback of this model is that it fails to account for the receiver as an active participant in conversations.

According to the interactional model, communication goes from sender to receiver and from receiver to sender. This approach focuses on feedback, which can consist of words (verbal) or body language (nonverbal). Feedback can also be internal, meaning you assess your own communication, or external, meaning you receive feedback from others. The drawback of this model is that it assumes that nonverbal and verbal messages cannot be sent concurrently.

The transactional model views communication as a cooperative process in which the sender and receiver are both responsible for the effectiveness of communication. In this model, messages build upon each other as people negotiate shared meaning. This model also takes into account people's fields of experience, which are their culture, heredity, and personal history. The more people's fields of experience overlap, the more they have in common, which can lead to more and deeper personal communication. The transactional model may soon become a bit outdated because technological communication, such as e-mail, may affect scholars' view of the communication process.

Another way to understand the nature of interpersonal communication is to look at the interpersonal communication continuum. Interactions come in all degrees of closeness, not just the extremes of impersonal and interpersonal, which are at either end of the continuum. Where an interaction falls on the continuum depends on the relational history, relational rules, and relational uniqueness of the people involved.

After you understand the definition, evolution, and nature of interpersonal communication, you can appreciate its value. Employers look for this quality in their employees, and good communication skills can reap you personal benefits as well. To make the most of interpersonal communication, you need to understand

that it is unavoidable, is irreversible, involves symbol exchange, is rule-governed, is learned, and involves both content and relationship dimensions. Also, you need to avoid the common myths of interpersonal communication, such as that it will solve all your problems, it's always a good thing, it's common sense, it's synonymous with interpersonal relationships, and it's always face to face. Finally, you have to understand the ethics—that is, the perceived rightness or wrongness of an action or behavior—involved in interpersonal communication. Five systems—categorical imperative, utilitarianism, ethic of care, golden mean, and significant choice—can guide you, but ultimately you need to understand your own values as well as the consequences of your actions. This book is geared to improve your communication competency in the changing times in which we live.

Understanding Interpersonal Communication Online

Now that you've read Chapter 1, use your Understanding Interpersonal Communication CD-ROM for quick access to the electronic study resources that accompany this text. Your CD-ROM gives you access to the video of Jackie and Phil's interaction on pages xxx–xxx, the Communication Assessment Test on page xxx, the CNN video clip "Gulf War Forces Use of Email" on page xxx, the Ethics & Choice interactive activity on page xxx, InfoTrac College Edition, and the Understanding Interpersonal Communication website. When you get to the Understanding Interpersonal Communication home page, click on "Student Book Companion Site" in the Resource box at right to access the online study aids for this chapter, including a digital glossary, review quizzes, and the chapter activities. ■

Terms for Review

categorical imperative xxx
channel xxx
communication apprehension xxx
communication competency xxx
content information xxx
context xxx
cultural context xxx
dark side of communication xxx
ethic of care xxx
ethics xxx
external feedback xxx
feedback xxx
field of experience xxx
golden mean xxx
historical context xxx
interactional model of

communication xxx
internal feedback xxx
interpersonal communication xxx
irreversibility xxx
linear model of
    communication xxx
meaning xxx
message xxx
message exchange xxx
models of communication xxx
noise xxx
physical context xxx
physical noise xxx
physiological noise xxx
process xxx

receiver xxx
relational history xxx
relational rules xxx
relational uniqueness xxx
relationship information xxx
self-actualization xxx
semantic noise xxx
sender xxx
significant choice xxx
social-emotional context xxx
symbols xxx
transactional model of
    communication xxx
utilitarianism xxx

Questions for Understanding

Comprehension Focus

1. Distinguish between interpersonal communication and the other types of human communication.
2. Compare and contrast the primary models of communication.

3. Identify several principles associated with interpersonal communication.
4. Explain the myths pertaining to interpersonal communication.
5. Why should we consider ethical

systems of communication while relating to others?

Application Focus

1. **CASE IN POINT**

   Our chapter opening story represents the sort of interpersonal exchanges we all often experience. Do you believe that Phil and Jackie's dialogue is realistic? Discuss the various types of conversations that start out quite simply and then proceed to a more complex level.

2. Discuss how you developed your interpersonal communication skills before enrolling in this course. What strategies did you undertake—if any—to make sure that

meaning was achieved in your exchanges? Include examples in your response.

3. Indicate times when physiological, physical, psychological, or semantic noise affected how you received a message. Recount the specifics of the situation and explain how you managed the noise.

4. What do you hope to gain from enrolling in this course? What practical results do you expect to gain from studying interpersonal communication?

5. Discuss your career choice and how you think interpersonal communication skills will be needed in your future occupation.

Interactive Activities and InfoTrac College Edition Exercises

Complete the Interactive Activities and InfoTrac College Edition Exercises for Chapter 1 online at the Understanding Interpersonal Communication website. Select the chapter resources for Chapter 1, then click on "Activities" or "InfoTrac College Edition." If requested, you can submit your answers to your instructor.

Interactive Activities

1.1 Interactive Models of Communication xxx

1.2 Communication in Emergency Situations xxx

1.3 Technical versus Interpersonal Skills xxx

1.4 Communication Skills Test xxx

InfoTrac College Edition Exercises

1.1 Received as Meant to Be Sent? xxx

1.2 The Communication Model at Work xxx

1.3 Interpersonal Communication and Health xxx

1.4 What Type of Communicator Are You? xxx

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