CHAPTER 1

The Essentials of Human Communication

Why read this chapter?

Because you’ll learn about:
● human communication: its nature and skills
● the essential concepts and principles of human communication
● the role of culture in communication

Because you’ll learn to:
● use the essential elements and principles of human communication in your daily interactions
● acknowledge the role of culture in all forms of human communication
Of all the knowledge and skills you have, those concerning communication are among your most important and useful. Your communication ability will influence how effectively you live your personal and professional life; it will influence your effectiveness as a friend and lover, as a member and leader of small groups (both social and business), and as a public speaker, communicating information and influencing the attitudes and behaviors of others.

This first section introduces human communication, beginning with the skills and forms of human communication and some of the popular but erroneous beliefs that can get in the way of effective communication.

Foundations of Human Communication

Human communication consists of the sending and receiving of verbal and nonverbal messages between two or more people. This seemingly simple (but in reality quite complex) process is the subject of this book, to which this chapter provides a foundation. Let’s begin by looking at the skills you’ll learn as you progress through this book and this course.

SKILLS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Among the skills you’ll learn through your study of human communication are these:

- **Self-presentation skills** enable you to present yourself as (and just for starters) a confident, likable, approachable, and credible person. It is also largely through your communication skills (or lack of them) that you display negative qualities.
- **Relationship skills** help you build friendships, enter into love relationships, work with colleagues, and interact with family members. These are the skills for initiating, maintaining, repairing, and sometimes dissolving relationships of all kinds.
- **Interviewing skills** enable you to interact to gain information, to successfully present yourself to get the job you want, and to participate effectively in a wide variety of other interview types. (This topic is covered in a separate supplement, The Interviewing Guidebook.)
- **Group interaction and leadership skills** help you participate effectively in relationship and task groups—informative, problem-solving, and brainstorming groups, at home or at work—as a member and as a leader.
- **Presentation or public speaking skills** will enable you to manage your fear and make it work for you, rather than against you. These skills will enable you to communicate information to small and large audiences and influence their attitudes and behaviors.

You’ll learn these skills and reap the benefits as you develop facility in the varied forms of communication, to which we now turn.

FORMS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

You’ll accomplish these objectives and acquire these skills as you engage in and master a variety of communication forms. **Intrapersonal communication** is the communication you have with yourself. Through intrapersonal communication you talk with, learn about, and judge yourself. You persuade yourself of this or that, reason about possible decisions to make, and rehearse messages that you plan to send to others. In intrapersonal communication you might, for example, wonder how you did in an interview and what you could have done differently. You might conclude you did a pretty good job but tell yourself you need to be more assertive when discussing salary.

**Interpersonal communication** occurs when you interact with a person with whom you have some kind of relationship; it can take place face-to-face as well as through electronic channels (e-mail or instant messaging, e.g.) or even in traditional
letter writing. For example, you e-mail your friends or family about your plans for the weekend, ask someone in class for a date, or confront a colleague's racist remarks at the water cooler. Through interpersonal communication you interact with others, learn about them and yourself, and reveal yourself to others. Whether with new acquaintances, old friends, lovers, family members, or colleagues at work, it's through interpersonal communication that you establish, maintain, sometimes destroy, and sometimes repair personal relationships.

**Interviewing** is communication that proceeds by question and answer. Through interviewing you learn about others and what they know, counsel or get counseling from others, and get or don’t get the job you want. Today much interviewing (especially initial interviews) takes place through e-mail and (video) phone conferencing.

**Small group or team communication** is communication among groups of, say five to ten people and may take place face-to-face or in virtual space. Small group communication serves *relationship needs* such as those for companionship, affection, or support and *task needs* such as balancing the family budget, electing a new chairperson, or designing a new ad campaign. Through small group communication you interact with others, solve problems, develop new ideas, and share knowledge and experiences. You live your work and social life largely in groups, from school orientation meetings to executive board meetings, from informal social groups to formal meetings discussing issues of local or international concern. You also may spend a significant amount of time in chat rooms, where you may interact with people from different cultures living thousands of miles away, and on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and MySpace) in which you learn about and communicate with others.

**Public communication** is communication between a speaker and an audience. Audiences range in size from several people to hundreds, thousands, and even millions. Through public communication others inform and persuade you. And you, in turn, inform and persuade others—to act, to buy, or to think in a particular way. Much as you can address large audiences face-to-face, you also can address such audiences electronically. Through newsgroups, blogs, or social networks, for example, you can post your “speech” for anyone to read and then read their reactions to your message. And with the help of the more traditional mass media of radio and television, you can address audiences in the hundreds of millions as they sit alone or in small groups all over the world.

**Computer-mediated communication** is a general term that includes all forms of communication between people that take place through some kind of computer, whether it’s on your smart phone or via a standard Internet connection. Examples include e-mail, blogging, instant messaging, or chatting on social network sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter. Throughout this text, we’ll make frequent reference to the similarities and differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication.

E-mail is still the most common use of Internet communication. The number of daily e-mails is now in the billions. E-mail communication is *asynchronous*, meaning that it does not take place in real time. You may send your message today, but the receiver may not read it for a week and may take another week to respond. Consequently, much of the spontaneity created by face-to-face, real-time communication is lost. You may, for example, be very enthusiastic about a topic when you send your e-mail but hardly remember it by the time someone responds.

Through instant messaging or IM you interact online in (essentially) real time; the communication messages are *synchronous*—they occur at the same time and are similar to phone communication except that IM is text-based rather than voice-based. Among college students, as you probably know, the major purpose of IM is to maintain “social connectedness” (Kindred & Roper, 2004). And, of course, today most businesses in the United States now use IM as part of their total communications network (Strom, 2006).

In chat groups and especially in social networking groups like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter you communicate in some cases asynchronously and in some cases synchronously. According to one survey, 75 percent of all online users aged 18–24 and 57 percent aged 25–34 have a profile on one or more social network sites (Lenhart, 2009).
Among the main uses of social networking are: to keep up with friends (89 percent of users noted this among their reasons for using such sites), to make plans with friends (57 percent), and to make friends (49 percent). Whereas e-mail and IM are largely text-based systems, social network communication includes voice, photos, and videos. Such sites enable you to communicate with people you would never meet or interact with otherwise. Because many of these groups are international, they provide excellent exposure to other ideas, and ways of communicating, as well as a good introduction to intercultural communication.

Blogs and interactive websites now enable you to communicate your opinions for others to read and react to, and to communicate your reactions to what others say. Increasingly, blogs are being used for more relational purposes, such as maintaining family or group ties and encouraging frequent communication among family or group members.

Mass communication refers to communication from one source to many receivers who may be scattered throughout the world. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and film are the major mass media. The coverage of mass communication in the study of human communication presented here is focused on media literacy, helping you to become a wiser, more critical user of the media. A variety of Media Literacy boxes appear on MyCommunicationLab (www.mycommunicationlab.com).

As you can see if you glance through your college catalog, each of these forms of communication is likely to be covered in separate and more detailed courses. For example, most communication departments offer separate courses in interpersonal communication, small group communication, public speaking, and so on. This course and this text introduce the essentials of such communication forms, giving you the knowledge and skills to become a more effective communicator and at the same time the background to move on to more detailed study, whether in additional courses or in your own reading.

This book focuses on all these forms of communication—and on you as both message sender and message receiver. It has two major purposes:

● to explain the concepts and principles, the theory and research in human communication, so that you’ll have a firm understanding of what communication is and how it works.

● to provide you with skills in human communication (including the skills of critical thinking) that will help you increase your own communication competence and effectiveness in the real world. A multitude of social interaction and workplace examples throughout the book present useful and practical techniques that you’ll take with you when you leave the college classroom.

MYTHS ABOUT HUMAN COMMUNICATION

A good way to begin your study of human communication is to examine just a few of the popular but erroneous beliefs about communication, many of which are contradicted by research and theory. Understanding these myths and why they are false will help eliminate potential barriers and pave the way for more effective and efficient learning about communication.

The more you communicate, the better your communication will be. Although this proposition seems logical—the same idea lies behind the popular belief that practice makes perfect—it actually is at the heart of much faulty learning. Practice may help make perfect if you practice the right habits. But if you practice bad habits, you’re likely to grow less, rather than more, effective. Consequently, it’s important to learn and practice the principles of effectiveness.

When two people are in a close relationship, neither person should have to communicate needs and wants explicitly; the other person should know what these are. This assumption is at the heart of many interpersonal difficulties. People
aren’t mind readers, and to expect them to be sets up barriers to open and honest communication.

Interpersonal or group conflict is a reliable sign that the relationship or group is in trouble. Conflict is inevitable in relationships and in groups. As famed author William Ellery Channing put it: “Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict.” If the conflict is managed effectively, it may actually benefit the individuals and the relationship.

Like good communicators, leaders are born, not made. Leadership, like communication and listening, is a learned skill. You’ll develop leadership abilities as you learn the principles of human communication and those unique to group communication and group leadership.

Fear of speaking in public is detrimental and must be eliminated. Most speakers are nervous—and, to be perfectly honest, you’re probably not going to learn from this book or this course to eliminate what is commonly called stage fright or communication apprehension. But you can learn to manage your fear, making it work for you rather than against you; you can learn, and this is crucial, to become a more effective speaker regardless of your current level of anxiety.

**Communication Models and Concepts**

In early models (representations) or theories, the communication process was thought to be linear. According to this linear view, the speaker spoke and the listener listened. Communication was seen as proceeding in a relatively straight line. Speaking and listening were seen as taking place at different times; when you spoke, you didn’t listen, and when you listened, you didn’t speak (Figure 1.1).

A more satisfying view, the one held currently, sees communication as a transactional process in which each person serves as both speaker and listener, as simultaneously communicating and receiving messages (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Watzlawick, 1977, 1978; Barnlund, 1970). At the same time that you send messages, you’re also receiving messages from your own communications and from the reactions of the other person (Figure 1.2).

The transactional view also sees the elements of communication as interdependent (never independent). This means that each element exists in relation to the others. A change in any one element of the process produces changes in the other elements. For example, if you’re having a meeting with a group of your coworkers and your boss enters the room, this change in “audience” will lead to other changes. Perhaps you’ll change what you’re saying or how you’re saying it. Regardless of what change is introduced, other changes will occur as a result.

In communication people act and react on the basis of the present situation as well as on the basis of their histories, past experiences, attitudes, cultural beliefs, and a host of related factors. Because of this, actions and reactions in communication are determined not only by what is said, but also by the way the recipient of the message interprets what is said. Your responses to a movie, for example, don’t depend solely on the words and pictures in the film; they also depend on your previous experiences, present emotions, knowledge, physical well-being, and more. For this reason, two people listening to the same message will often derive two very different meanings.

Communication occurs when you send or receive messages and when you assign meaning to another person’s signals. All human communication occurs within a context, via one or more channels, is distorted by noise, and has some effect. We can expand the basic transactional model of communication by adding these essential elements, as shown in Figure 1.3.
SOURCES–RECEIVERS

According to the transactional model, each person involved in communication is both a source (speaker) and a receiver (listener); hence the term sources–receivers. You send messages when you speak, write, gesture, or smile. You receive messages in listening, reading, seeing, smelling, and so on. At the same time that you send messages, you’re also receiving messages: You’re receiving your own messages (you hear yourself, feel your own movements, see many of your own gestures), and, at least in face-to-face communication, you’re receiving the messages of the other person—visually, auditorily, or even through touch or smell. As you speak, you look at the person for responses—for approval, understanding, sympathy, agreement, and so on. As you decipher these nonverbal signals, you’re performing receiver functions.

When you put your ideas into speech, you’re putting them into a code, hence encoding. When you translate the sound waves (the speech signals) that impinge on your ears into ideas, you take them out of the code they’re in, hence decoding. Thus, speakers or writers are referred to as encoders, and listeners or readers as decoders. The linked term encoding–decoding emphasizes the fact that you perform these functions simultaneously.

Usually, you encode an idea into a code that the other person understands—for example, English, Spanish, or Indonesian, depending on the shared knowledge that you and your listener possess. At times, however, you may want to exclude others by speaking in a language that only one of your listeners knows or by using jargon. Adults, when speaking of things they don’t want children to understand, may spell out key words—a code that the young children don’t yet understand. The use of abbreviations and jargon in text messaging is another example of how people communicate in a code that only certain people will understand.

MESSAGES

Communication messages take many forms and are transmitted or received through one sensory organ or a combination of them. You communicate verbally (with words) and nonverbally (without words). Your meanings or intentions are conveyed with words (Chapter 4) and with the clothes you wear, the way you walk, and the way you smile (Chapter 5). Everything about you communicates a message.

Feedforward Messages Feedback is information you provide before sending your primary messages (Richards, 1951). It reveals something about the messages to come and includes, for example, the preface or table of contents of a book, the opening paragraph of a chapter, movie previews, magazine covers, and introductions in public speeches.

Feedforward may be verbal (“Wait until you hear this one”) or nonverbal (a prolonged pause or hands motioning for silence to signal that an important message is about to be spoken). Or, as is most often the case, it is some combination of verbal and nonverbal. Feedforward may refer to the content of the message to follow (“I’ll tell you exactly what they said to each other”) or to the form (“I won’t spare you the gory details”). In e-mail, feedforward is given in the header, where the name of the sender, the date, and the subject of the message are identified. Caller ID is also an example of feedforward.

Another type of feedforward is phatic communication, or “small talk” that opens the way for “big talk.” It includes the “How are you?” and “Nice weather” greetings that are designed to maintain rapport and friendly relationships (Placencia, 2004; Burnard,
2003). Similarly, listeners’ short comments that are unrelated to the content of the conversation but indicate interest and attention also may be considered phatic communication (McCarthy, 2003).

**Feedback Messages**  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 also 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 tells the speaker what effect he or she is having on listeners. On the basis of feedback, the speaker may adjust, modify, strengthen, deemphasize, or change the content or form of the messages. For example, if someone laughs at your joke (giving you positive feedback), it may encourage you to tell another one. If the feedback is negative—no laughing, just blank stares—then you may resist relaying another “humorous” story.

**Metamessages**  A metamessage is a message that refers to another message; it is communication about communication. For example, remarks such as “This statement is false” or “Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?” refer to communication and are therefore “metacommunicational.”

Nonverbal behavior may also be metacommunicational. Obvious examples include crossing your fingers behind your back or winking when telling a lie. On a less obvious level, consider the blind date. As you say, “I had a really nice time,” your nonverbal messages—the lack of a smile, failure to maintain eye contact—metacommunicate and contradict the verbal “really nice time,” suggesting that you did not enjoy the evening. Nonverbal messages may also metacommunicate about other nonverbal messages. The individual who, on meeting a stranger, both smiles and extends a totally lifeless hand shows how one nonverbal behavior may contradict another.

**COMMUNICATION CONTEXT**

Communication exists in a context that determines, to a large extent, the meaning of any verbal or nonverbal message. The same words or behaviors may have totally different meanings when they occur in different contexts. For example, the greeting “How are you?” means “Hello” to someone you pass regularly on the street but “Is your health improving?” to a friend in the hospital. A wink to an attractive person on a bus means something completely different from a wink that signifies a put-on or a lie. Divorced from the context, it’s impossible to tell what meaning was intended from just examining the signals.

The context will also influence what you say and how you say it. You communicate differently depending on the specific context you’re in. Contexts have at least four aspects: physical, cultural, social-psychological, and temporal or time.

- **The physical context** is the tangible or concrete environment, the room, park, or auditorium; you don’t talk the same way at a noisy football game as you do at a quiet funeral.

- **The cultural context** involves the lifestyles, beliefs, values, behavior, and communication of a group; it is the rules of a group of people for considering something right or wrong.

- **The social-psychological context** has to do with the status relationships among speakers, the formality of the situation, the norms of a group or organization; you don’t talk the same way in the cafeteria as you would at a formal dinner at your boss’s house.

- **The temporal context** is a message’s position within a sequence of events; you don’t talk the same way after someone tells you about the death of a close relative as you do after someone reveals they’ve won the lottery.

These four contexts interact—each influences and is influenced by the others. For example, arriving late for a date (temporal context) may lead to changes in the degree
of friendliness (social–psychological context), which would depend on the cultures of you and your date (cultural context) and may lead to changes in where you go on the date (physical context).

**CHANNEL**

The communication **channel** is the vehicle or medium through which messages pass. Communication rarely takes place over only one channel. Rather, two, three, or four channels may be used simultaneously. In face-to-face conversations, for example, you speak and listen (vocal channel), but you also gesture and receive signals visually (visual channel). You also emit and smell odors (olfactory channel) and often touch one another; this tactile channel, too, is communication.

Another way to classify channels is by the means of communication. Thus, face-to-face contact, telephones, e-mail, movies, television, smoke signals, and telegraph all are types of channels.

At times one or more channels may be damaged. For example, in individuals who are blind, the visual channel is impaired and adjustments have to be made. Table 1.1

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**TABLE 1.1  Communication Tips**

<table>
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<th>Louis Braille</th>
<th>Helen Keller</th>
<th>Ray Charles</th>
<th>David Paterson</th>
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People vary greatly in their visual abilities; some are totally blind, some are partially sighted, and some have unimpaired vision. Ninety percent of people who are “legally blind” have some vision. All people, however, have the same need for communication and information. Here are some tips for making communication better between those who have visual impairments and those without such difficulties.

**If you’re the sighted person and are talking with a visually impaired person:**

1. Identify yourself. Don’t assume the visually impaired person will recognize your voice.
2. Face your listener; you’ll be easier to hear. Don’t shout. Most people who are visually impaired are not hearing impaired. Speak at your normal volume.
3. Because your gestures, eye movements, and facial expressions cannot be seen by the visually impaired listener, encode into speech all the meanings you wish to communicate.
4. Use audible turn-taking cues. When you pass the role of speaker to a person who is visually impaired, don’t rely on nonverbal cues; instead, say something like “Do you agree with that, Joe?”
5. Use normal vocabulary and discuss topics that you would discuss with sighted people. Don’t avoid terms like “see” or “look” or even “blind.” Don’t avoid discussing a television show or the way your new car looks; these are normal topics for all people.

**If you are a visually impaired person, interacting with a sighted person:**

1. Help the sighted person meet your special communication needs. If you want your surroundings described, ask. If you want the person to read the road signs, ask.
2. Be patient with the sighted person. Many people are nervous talking with people who are visually impaired for fear of offending. Put them at ease in a way that also makes you more comfortable.

gives you an idea of how such adjustments between people with visual impairments and those without such impairments can make communication more effective.

NOISE

Noise is anything that interferes with your receiving a message. At one extreme, noise may prevent a message from getting from source to receiver. A roaring noise or line static can prevent entire messages from getting through to your phone 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. Just as messages may be auditory or visual, noise comes in both auditory and visual forms. Four types of noise are especially relevant:

- **Physical noise** is interference that is external to both speaker and listener; it interferes with the physical transmission of the signal or message and would include the screeching of passing cars, the hum of a computer, sunglasses, blurred type or fonts that are too small or difficult to read, misspellings and poor grammar, and popup ads.
- **Physiological noise** is created by barriers within the sender or receiver and would include visual impairments, hearing loss, articulation problems, and memory loss.
- **Psychological noise** refers to mental interference in the speaker or listener and includes preconceived ideas, wandering thoughts, biases and prejudices, close-mindedness, and extreme emotionalism. You’re likely to run into psychological noise when you talk with someone who is close-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; it would 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.

As you can see from these examples, noise is anything that distorts your receiving the messages of others or their receiving your messages.

A useful concept in understanding noise and its importance in communication is **signal-to-noise ratio**. In this term the word signal refers to information that you’d find useful, and noise refers to information that is useless (to you). So, for example, a mailing list or newsgroup that contains lots of useful information is high on signal and low on noise; one that contains lots of useless information is high on noise and low on signal.

All communications contain noise. Noise can’t 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.

EFFECTS

Communication always has some effect on those involved in the communication act. For every communication act, there is some consequence. For example, you may gain knowledge or learn how to analyze, synthesize, or evaluate something. These are intellectual or cognitive effects. You may acquire new feelings, attitudes, or beliefs or change existing ones (affective effects). You may learn new bodily movements, such as how to throw a curve ball, paint a picture, give a compliment, or express surprise (psychomotor effects).
Communication Competence

Communication competence refers to (1) your knowledge and understanding of how communication works and (2) your ability to use communication effectively (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989, 2002). Your understanding of communication would include a knowledge of the elements involved in communication, how these elements interact, and how each communication situation is both different from and similar to other situations. Your knowledge would also include an understanding of the choices you have for communicating in any given situation.

Using communication effectively would involve your ability to select and implement the best choices for communicating, and to read and adjust to the ongoing feedback that you receive from your own messages and that guide the choices you make in selecting future messages.

The more you know about communication, the more choices you'll have available for your day-to-day interactions. It's like learning vocabulary. The more vocabulary you know, the more choices you have to express yourself. In a similar way, the aim of this book is to increase your communicative competence and thus to give you a broad range of options to use in your own communications.

Let’s spell out the nature of communication competence in more detail by discussing the major themes of competence that contemporary research and theory identify and that are highlighted in this text.

THE COMPETENT COMMUNICATOR THINKS CRITICALLY AND MINDFULLY

An essential part of communication skill is the ability to think critically about the communication situations you face and the options for communicating that you have available; this is crucial to your success and effectiveness.

Without critical thinking there can be no competent exchange of ideas. Critical thinking is logical thinking; it’s thinking that is well reasoned, unbiased, and clear. It involves thinking intelligently, carefully, and with as much clarity as possible. And, not surprisingly, critical thinking is one of the stepping stones to effective management (Miller, 1997).

A special kind of critical thinking is mindfulness. Mindfulness is a state of awareness in which you’re conscious of your reasons for thinking or behaving. In its opposite, mindlessness, you lack conscious awareness of what or how you’re thinking (Langer, 1989). To apply interpersonal skills effectively in conversation, you need to be mindful of the unique communication situation you’re in, of your available communication options, and of the reasons why one option is likely to be better than the others (Elmes & Gemmill, 1990; Burgoon, Berger, & Waldron, 2000).

As you progress through your study of human communication, actively increase your own mindfulness (Langer, 1989):

- Create and re-create categories. Group things in different ways; remember that people are constantly changing, so the categories into which you may group them also should change. 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.
- Be open to new information and points of view, even when these contradict your most firmly held beliefs. New information forces you to reconsider what might be outmoded ways of thinking and can help you challenge long-held, but now inappropriate, beliefs and attitudes.
- Beware of relying too heavily on first impressions (Chanowitz & Langer, 1981; Langer, 1989). Treat first impressions as tentative, as hypotheses that need further investigation. Be prepared to revise, reject, or accept these initial impressions.
- Think before you act. Especially in delicate situations such as anger or commitment messages, it’s wise to pause and think over the situation mindfully (DeVito, 2003b). In this way you’ll stand a better chance of acting and reacting appropriately.
You’ll find frequent opportunities to apply mindful, critical thinking throughout your reading of the text but perhaps especially in the Skill Development Experiences, in the Communication Choice Points, and in the Test Yourself quizzes.

THE COMPETENT COMMUNICATOR RECOGNIZES

THE ROLE OF POWER

All communication transactions involve power, the ability to influence the thoughts and behavior of others. In fact, you can look at the principles and skills of communication covered in this text as skills and principles of power—the power to speak your own mind, the power to influence a friend, the power to lead a group responsibly and efficiently, the power to get your point across to an audience. As motivational speaker Anthony Robbins put it, “Communication is power. Those who have mastered its effective use can change their own experience of the world and the world's experience of them.” Because of the central importance of power in all forms of communication, concepts and principles relevant to power are discussed throughout the text and, in fact, considered later in this chapter as one of the essential principles of human communication.

THE COMPETENT COMMUNICATOR IS CULTURALLY SENSITIVE

Communication competence is culture-specific; that is, the principles of effective communication vary from one culture to another, and what proves effective in one culture may prove ineffective in another. For example, in American culture you would call a person you wished to date three or four days in advance. In certain Asian cultures, you might call the person's parents weeks or even months in advance. Thus, discussions of cultural implications accompany all of the major topics considered in this text.

Some examples include the major ways in which cultures differ and the implications these differences have for communication; cultural differences in politeness; cultural and gender differences in nonverbal messages such as facial expressions, colors, touch, silence, and time; cultural differences in approaches to small group communication and leadership; and cultural differences in varied aspects of public speaking such as language usage and approaches to proof and evidence.

THE COMPETENT COMMUNICATOR IS ETHICAL

Human communication 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, right) and those that are immoral (unethical, bad, wrong). Not surprisingly, there’s an ethical dimension to any communication act (Neher & Sandin, 2007; Bok, 1978).

In addition to this introductory discussion, ethical dimensions of human communication are presented in each of the remaining chapters in Communicating Ethically boxes. As a kind of preview, here are just a few of the ethical issues raised. As you read these questions, think about your own ethical beliefs and how they would influence the way you answered the questions.

- What are your ethical obligations as a listener? (Chapter 3, p. 58)
- When is it unethical to remain silent? (Chapter 5, p. 109)
- When is gossiping ethical and when is it unethical? (Chapter 9, p. 180)
- At what point in a relationship do you have an obligation to reveal intimate details of your life? (Chapter 7, p. 150)
- Are there ethical and unethical ways to engage in conflict and conflict resolution? (Chapter 8, p. 173)

Woven through these discussions of ethics are two overriding questions that will influence all your ethical decisions: (1) Are ethical principles objective or subjective? (2) Does the end justify the means?
In an **objective view of ethics**, you’d argue that the rightness or wrongness of an act is absolute and exists apart from the values or beliefs of any individual or culture. With this view, you’d hold that there are standards that apply to all people in all situations at all times. If lying, false advertising, using illegally obtained evidence, and revealing secrets you’ve promised to keep were considered unethical, then they would be unethical regardless of circumstances or of cultural values and beliefs. In an objective view the end can never justify the means; an unethical act is never justified regardless of how good or beneficial its results (or ends) might be.

In a **subjective view of ethics**, you’d argue that absolute statements about right and wrong are too rigid and that the ethics of a message depends on the culture’s values and beliefs as well as on the particular circumstances. Thus, a subjective position would claim that lying might be wrong to win votes or sell cigarettes, but that it might be quite ethical if good would result from it—as when we try to make friends feel better by telling them that they look great or that they’ll get well soon. In a subjective view a good end would often justify the use of means that would in other situations be considered unethical.

As a preface to these future discussions, 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 it benefits more people than it harms.

These statements are based on responses given to the question, “What does ethics mean to you?” (www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/whatisethics.html, accessed March 20, 2009). 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.
THE COMPETENT COMMUNICATOR IS AN EFFECTIVE LISTENER

Often we tend to think of competence in communication as “speaking effectiveness,” paying little attention to listening. But listening is an integral part of communication; you cannot be a competent communicator if you’re a poor listener.

If you measured importance by the time you spend on an activity, then—according to the research studies available—listening would be your most important communication activity. Studies conducted from 1929 to 1980 show that listening was the most often used form of communication. For example, in a study of college students conducted in 1980 (Barker, Edwards, Gaines, Gladney, & Holley), listening also occupied the most time: 53 percent compared to reading (17 percent), speaking (16 percent), and writing (14 percent). In a more recent survey, the figures for the four communication activities were: listening (40%), talking (35%), reading (16%), and writing (9%) (Watkins, 2007). Again, listening is the most often used of all communication activities.

Because of the importance of listening, it is emphasized in this text in two major ways: (1) Chapter 4 is devoted exclusively to listening and covers the nature and importance of listening, the steps you go through in listening, the role of culture and gender in listening, and ways to increase your listening effectiveness. (2) In each of the remaining chapters, Listen to This boxes are included to illustrate how listening relates to the topic of each chapter and to provide a variety of specific listening skills. Among the topics of these boxes are the importance of listening to yourself, the role of gender differences, and ways to listen during conflict.

Principles of Communication

Several principles are essential to an understanding of human communication in all its forms. These principles, as you’ll see throughout the text, also have numerous practical implications for your own communication effectiveness.

COMMUNICATION IS PURPOSEFUL

You communicate for a purpose; some motivation leads you to communicate. When you speak or write, you’re trying to send some message and to accomplish some goal. Although different cultures emphasize different purposes and motives (Rubin, Fernandez-Collado, & Hernandez-Sampieri, 1992), five general purposes seem relatively common to most, if not all, forms of communication:

- to learn: to acquire knowledge of others, the world, and yourself
- to relate: to form relationships with others, to interact with others as individuals
- to help: to assist others by listening, offering solutions
- to influence: to strengthen or change the attitudes or behaviors of others
- to play: to enjoy the experience of the moment

Popular belief and research findings both agree that men and women use communication for different purposes. Generally, men seem to communicate more for information and women more for relationship purposes (Gamble & Gamble, 2003; Stewart, Cooper, & Stewart, 2003; Helgeson, 2009). Gender differences also occur in electronic communication. For example, women chat more for relationship reasons; men chat more to play and to relax (Leung, 2001).

COMMUNICATION IS A PROCESS OF ADJUSTMENT

The principle of adjustment states that communication can take place only to the extent that the communicators use the same system of signals (Pittenger, Hockett, & Daneyh, 1960). You will be unable to communicate with another person to the extent that your language systems differ. Parents and children, for example, not only have largely different vocabularies, but also may assign different meanings to the terms they
do share. Different cultures, even when they use a common language, often have greatly different nonverbal communication systems. In reality, no two individuals use identical signal systems, so this principle is relevant to all forms of communication.

Part of the art of communication is identifying the other person’s signals, learning how they’re used, and understanding what they mean. Those in close relationships will realize that learning the other person’s signals takes a great deal of time and often a great deal of patience. If you want to understand what another person means (by smiling, by saying “I love you,” by arguing about trivia) rather than merely acknowledging what the other person says or does, you have to learn that person’s system of signals.

An interesting theory revolving largely around adjustment is communication accommodation theory. This theory holds that speakers adjust to, or accommodate to, the speaking style of their listeners in order to gain, for example, social approval and greater communication efficiency (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987; Giles, 2008). For example, when two people have a similar speech rate, they seem to be attracted more to each other than to those with dissimilar rates (Buller, Lepoire, Aune, & Eloy, 1992). Still another study found that roommates who had similar communication attitudes (both roommates were high in communication competence and willingness to communicate, and low in verbal aggressiveness) were highest in roommate liking and satisfaction (Martin & Anderson, 1995). And in interethnic interactions, people who saw themselves as similar in communication styles were attracted to each other more than to those they perceived as having different communication styles (Lee & Gudykunst, 2001).

**COMMUNICATION IS AMBIGUOUS**

Ambiguity is the condition in which something can be interpreted in more than one way. The first type, language ambiguity, is created by words that can be interpreted differently. Informal time terms offer good examples; soon, right away, in a minute, early, late, and similar terms can be understood differently by different people. The terms are ambiguous. A more interesting type of ambiguity is grammatical ambiguity. You can get a feel for this type of ambiguity by trying to paraphrase—rephrase in your own words—the following sentences:

- What has the cat in its paws?
- Flying planes can be dangerous.
- They are frying chickens.

Each of these ambiguous sentences can be interpreted and paraphrased in at least two different ways:

- What does the cat have in its paws? What monster has the cat in its paws?
- To fly planes is dangerous. Planes that fly can be dangerous.
- Those people are frying chickens. Those chickens are for frying.

Although these examples are particularly striking—and are the work of linguists who analyze language—some degree of ambiguity exists in all communication. When you express an idea, you never communicate your meaning exactly and totally; rather, you communicate your meaning with some reasonable accuracy—enough to give the other person a reasonably clear idea of what you mean.

The second type of ambiguity is relationship ambiguity. All relationships are ambiguous to some extent. Consider your own close relationships and ask yourself the following questions. Answer using a six-point scale on which 1 = completely or almost completely uncertain and 6 = completely or almost completely certain. How certain are you about:

1. what you can or cannot say to each other in this relationship?
2. whether or not you and your partner feel the same way about each other?
3. how you and your partner would describe this relationship?
4. the future of the relationship?
You probably were not able to respond with 6s for all four questions, and equally likely that your relationship partner would not respond with all 6s to these questions, adapted from a relationship uncertainty scale (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999).

You can look at the skills of human communication presented throughout this text as means for appropriately reducing ambiguity and making your meaning as unambiguous as possible.

COMMUNICATION INVOLVES CONTENT AND RELATIONSHIP DIMENSIONS

Communication exists on at least two levels. A single message can refer to something external to both speaker and listener (e.g., the weather) as well as to the relationship between speaker and listener (e.g., who is in charge). These two aspects are referred to as content and relationship dimensions of communication (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). In the cartoon below, the father is explicitly teaching his son the difference between content and relationship messages. In real life this distinction is rarely discussed (outside of textbooks and counseling sessions).

Some research shows that women send more relationship messages than men; they talk more about relationships in general and about the present relationship in particular. Men engage in more content talk; they talk more about things external to the relationship (Wood, 1994; Pearson, West, & Turner, 1995; Helgeson, 2009).

Problems often result from a failure to distinguish between the content and the relationship levels of communication. Consider a couple, Pat and Chris. Pat made plans to attend a rally with friends during the weekend without first asking Chris, and an argument has ensued. Both would probably have agreed that attending the rally was the right choice to make. Thus, the argument is not centered on the content level. The argument, instead, centers on the relationship level. Chris expected to be consulted about plans for the weekend. Pat, in not doing so, rejected this definition of the relationship.

COMMUNICATION HAS A POWER DIMENSION

Power, as mentioned earlier, has to do with your ability to influence or control the behaviors of another person. Power influences the way you communicate, and the way you communicate influences the power you wield. Research has identified six types of power: legitimate, referent, reward, coercive, expert, and information or persuasion (French & Raven, 1968; Raven, Centers, & Rodrigues, 1975). Let’s take a look at each.

You hold legitimate power when others believe you have a right—by virtue of your position—to influence or control others’ behaviors. For example, as an employer, judge, manager, or police officer, you’d have legitimate power by virtue of your role.

You have referent power when others wish to be like you. Referent power holders often are attractive, have considerable prestige, and are well liked and well respected. For example, you may have referent power over a younger brother because he wants to be like you.

You have reward power when you control the rewards that others want. Rewards may be material (money, promotion, jewelry) or social (love, friendship, respect). For example, teachers have reward power over students because they control grades, letters of recommendation, and social approval.

You have coercive power when you have the ability to administer punishments to or remove rewards from others if they do not do as you wish. Usually, people who have reward power also have coercive power. For example, teachers
Coercive power may reduce your other power bases. It can have a negative impact when used, for example, by supervisors on subordinates in business (Richmond et al., 1984).

You have expert power when others see you as having expertise or special knowledge. Your expert power increases when you’re perceived as being unbiased and as having nothing personally to gain from exerting this power. For example, judges have expert power in legal matters and doctors have expert power in medical matters.

You have information power—also called “persuasion power”—when others see you as having the ability to communicate logically and persuasively. For example, researchers and scientists may acquire information power because people perceive them as informed and critical thinkers.

The power you wield is not static; it can be increased or decreased depending on what you do and don’t do. For example, you might increase your reward power by gaining wealth and using it to exert influence, or you might increase your persuasive power by mastering the principles of public speaking.

You can also decrease or lose power. Probably the most common way to lose power is by unsuccessfully trying to control another’s behavior. For example, if you threaten someone with punishment and then fail to carry out your threat, you’ll most likely lose power. Another way to lose power is to allow others to control you or to take unfair advantage of you. When you don’t confront these power tactics of others, you lose power.

**COMMUNICATION IS PUNCTUATED**

Communication events are continuous transactions that have no clear-cut beginning or ending. As a participant in or an observer of communication, you divide this continuous, circular process into causes and effects, or stimuli and responses. The **punctuation of communication** is the segmenting of the continuous stream of communication into smaller pieces (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Some of these pieces you label causes (or stimuli) and others effects (or responses).

Consider this example: The manager of a local supermarket lacks interest in the employees, seldom offering any suggestions for improvement or any praise for jobs well done. The employees are apathetic and morale is low. Each action (the manager’s lack of involvement and the employees’ low morale) stimulates the other. Each serves as the stimulus for...
the other but there is no identifiable initial starting point. Each event may be seen as a stimulus or as a response.

To understand what the other person in an interaction means from his or her point of view, try to see the sequence of events as punctuated by the other person. The manager, for example, needs to see the problem from the point of view of the employees and the employees need to see it from the viewpoint of the manager. Further, recognize that neither person’s punctuation reflects what exists in reality. Rather, it reflects the subjective and fallible perception of each individual (the other person as well as yourself).

COMMUNICATION IS INEVITABLE, IRREVERSIBLE, AND UNREPEATABLE

Inevitability  Communication is inevitable; that is, in interactional situations it is always taking place, even when a person may not intend or want to communicate. To understand the inevitability of communication, think about a student sitting in the back of a classroom with an expressionless face, perhaps staring out the window. Although the student might claim not to be communicating with the instructor, the instructor may derive a variety of messages from this behavior. Perhaps the instructor assumes that the student lacks interest, is bored, or is worried about something. In any event, the teacher is receiving messages even though the student may not intentionally be sending any (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Motley, 1990a, 1990b; Bavelas, 1990). This does not mean that all behavior is communication. For instance, if the student looked out the window and the teacher didn’t notice, no communication would have taken place. The two people must be in an interactional situation and the behavior must be perceived for the principle of inevitability to operate.

Notice, too, that when you’re in an interactional situation, you cannot not respond to the messages of others. For example, if you notice someone winking at you, you must respond in some way. Even if you don’t respond actively or openly, your lack of response is itself a response: It communicates.

Irreversibility  Another all-important attribute of communication is its irreversibility. Once you say something or click “send” on your e-mail, you cannot uncommunicate the message. You can, of course, try to reduce its effects. You can say, for example, “I really didn’t mean what I said.” But regardless of how hard you try to negate or reduce the effects of a message, the message itself, once it has been received, cannot be taken back. In a public speaking situation in which the speech is recorded or broadcast, inappropriate messages may have national or even international effects. Here, attempts to reverse what someone has said (e.g., efforts to offer clarification) often have the effect of further publicizing the original statement.

In face-to-face communication, the actual signals (nonverbal messages and sound waves in the air) are evanescent; they fade almost as they are uttered. Some written messages, especially computer-mediated messages such as those sent through e-mail, are unerasable. E-mails among employees in large corporations or even at colleges are often stored on disk or tape and may not be considered private by managers and administrators (Sethna, Barnes, Brust, & Kaye, 1999). Much litigation has involved evidence of racist or sexist e-mails that senders thought had been erased but weren’t. E-mails and entire hard drives are finding their way into divorce proceedings. As a result of the permanency of computer-mediated communication, you may wish to be especially cautious in these messages.

In all forms of communication, because of irreversibility (and unerasability), be careful not to say things you may be sorry for later, especially in conflict situations, when tempers run high. Commitment messages—“I love you” messages and their variants—also need to be monitored. Messages that you considered private but that might be
interpreted as sexist, racist, or homophobic may later be retrieved by others and create all sorts of problems for you and your organization. In group and public communication situations, when the messages are received by many people, it’s especially crucial to recognize the irreversibility of communication.

**Unrepeatability** Finally, communication is *unrepeatable*. A communication act can never be duplicated. The reason is simple: Everyone and everything is constantly changing. As a result, you can never recapture the exact same situation, frame of mind, or relationship dynamics that defined a previous communication act. For example, you can never repeat meeting someone for the first time, comforting a grieving friend, leading a small group for the first time, or giving a public speech. You can never replace an initial impression; you can only try to counteract this initial (and perhaps negative) impression by making subsequent impressions more positive.

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**Culture and Human Communication**

**Culture** consists of the beliefs, ways of behaving, and artifacts of a group. By definition, culture is transmitted through communication and learning rather than through genes.

A walk through any large city, many small towns, or just about any college campus will convince you that the United States is a collection of lots of different cultures. These cultures coexist somewhat separately, but all influence one another. This coexistence has led some researchers to refer to these cultures as *cocultures* (Shuter, 1990; Samovar & Porter, 1991; Jandt, 2003).

*Gender* is considered a cultural variable largely because cultures teach boys and girls different attitudes, beliefs, values, and ways of communicating and relating to one another. This means that you act like a man or a woman in part because of what your culture has taught you about how men and women should act. This is not to deny that biological differences also play a role in the differences between male and female behavior. In fact, research continues to uncover the biological roots of behavior we once thought was entirely learned—acting happy or shy, for example (McCroskey, 1997).

Yet we’re living in a time of changing gender roles. Many men, for example, are doing more housekeeping chores and caring for their children. More obvious perhaps is that women are becoming more visible in career fields once occupied exclusively by men—politics, law enforcement, the military, and the clergy are just some examples. And, of course, women are increasingly present in the corporate executive ranks; the glass ceiling may not have disappeared, but it has cracked.

Because your communication is heavily influenced by the culture in which you were raised, culture is highly relevant to communication, and a cultural perspective serves numerous important purposes.

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE**

Because of (1) demographic changes, (2) increased sensitivity to cultural differences, (3) economic interdependency, and (4) advances in communication technology, it’s impossible to communicate effectively without being aware of how culture influences human communication.

**Demographic Changes** Whereas at one time the United States was a country largely populated by Europeans, it’s now greatly influenced by the enormous number of new citizens from Latin and South America, Africa, and Asia. This is true on college and university campuses as well. With these changes have come different customs and the need to understand and adapt to new ways of looking at communication. For example, consider health care workers and patients. Each group needs to understand how the other communicates about illness, sees ways to prevent health problems, and views taking medication. Police officers and civilians need to understand each other’s views of “disorderly conduct,” “the right to assemble,” and “free speech.”
Sensitivity to Cultural Differences As a people, we’ve become increasingly sensitive to cultural differences. U.S. society has moved from an assimilationist perspective (the idea that people should leave their native culture behind and adapt to their new culture) to a view that values cultural diversity (people should retain their native cultural ways). And with some notable exceptions—hate speech, racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism come quickly to mind—we’re more concerned with saying the right thing and ultimately with developing a society in which all cultures can coexist and enrich one another. At the same time, the ability to interact effectively with members of other cultures often translates into financial gain and increased employment opportunities and advancement prospects.

Economic Interdependence Today most countries are economically dependent on one another. Our economic lives depend on our ability to communicate effectively across cultures. Similarly, our political well-being depends in great part on that of other cultures. Political unrest in any part of the world—Africa, Eastern Europe, or the Middle East, to take a few examples—affects our own security. Intercultural communication and understanding now seem more crucial than ever.

Communication Technology The rapid spread of communication technology has brought different cultures from around the world right into our homes. News from remote countries is commonplace. Technology has made intercultural communication easy, practical, and inevitable. It’s common to have social network friends from a wide geographical areas, from different countries and cultures—something that would have been impossible before the advent of computer-mediated communication. Daily, the media bombard you with evidence of racial tensions, religious disagreements, sexual bias, and, in general, the problems caused when intercultural communication fails. And, of course, the Internet has made intercultural communication as easy as writing a note on your laptop. You can now communicate daily by e-mail or social network sites just as easily with someone in Europe or Asia, for example, as with someone in another city or state.

DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE
Because of its importance in all forms of human communication, culture is given a prominent place in this text. Throughout this text theories and research findings that bear on culture and communication are discussed. Prominent among these discussions are the five major dimensions of culture. By way of a brief preview, these dimensions are:

- **Uncertainty avoidance**: The degree to which a culture values predictability. In high-uncertainty-avoidance cultures, predictability and order are extremely important; in low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures, risk-taking and ambiguity are tolerated more easily.
- **Masculinity–femininity**: The extent to which cultures embrace traditionally masculine characteristics such as ambition and assertiveness or embrace traditionally feminine characteristics such as caring and nurturing others.
- **Power distance**: The way power is distributed throughout the society. In high-power-distance cultures, there is a great power difference between those in authority and others. In low-power-distance cultures, power is distributed more evenly.
- **Individualism–collectivism**: A culture’s emphasis on the importance of the individual or of the group. Individualist cultures value such qualities as self-reliance, independence, and individual achievement; collectivist cultures emphasize social bonds, the primacy of the group, and conformity to the larger social group.
- **High and low context**: The extent to which information is seen as embedded in the
context or tacitly known among members. In high-context cultures information is part of the context and does not have to be verbalized explicitly. In low-context cultures information is made explicit and little is taken for granted.

THE AIM OF A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Because culture permeates all forms of communication, and because what messages are effective in one culture may prove totally ineffective in another culture, it’s necessary to understand its influences if you’re to understand how communication works and master its skills. As illustrated throughout this text, culture influences communications of all types (Moon, 1996). It influences what you say to yourself and how you talk with friends, lovers, and family in everyday conversation. It influences how you interact in groups and how much importance you place on the group versus the individual. It influences the topics you talk about and the strategies you use in communicating information or in persuading.

Cultural differences exist across the communication spectrum—from the way you use eye contact to the way you develop or dissolve a relationship (Chang & Holt, 1996). But these differences should not blind you to the great number of similarities among even the most widely separated cultures. Close interpersonal relationships, for example, are common in all cultures, although they may be entered into for very different reasons by members of different cultures. Further, when reading about cultural differences, remember that they are usually matters of degree. For example, most cultures value honesty, but not all value it to the same extent. The advances in media and technology and the widespread use of the Internet, among other factors, are influencing cultures and cultural change and are perhaps homogenizing cultures, lessening intercultural differences, and increasing similarities. They’re also Americanizing various cultures—because the dominant values and customs evidenced in the media and on the Internet are in large part American.

This book’s emphasis on cultural understanding does not imply that you should accept all cultural practices or that all cultural practices must be evaluated as equally good (Hatfield & Rapson, 1996). For example, cockfighting, foxhunting, and bullfighting are parts of the cultures of some Latin American countries, England, and Spain, respectively; but you need not find these activities acceptable or equal to cultural practices in which animals are treated kindly. Similarly, you can reject your own culture’s values and beliefs; its religion or political system; or its attitudes toward the homeless, the disabled, or the culturally different. Of course, going against your culture’s traditions and values is often very difficult. Still, it’s important to realize that culture influences but does not determine your values or behavior. Often, for example, personality factors (your degree of assertiveness, extroversion, or optimism, e.g.) will prove more influential than culture (Hatfield & Rapson, 1996).

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ETHNOCENTRISM

As you learn your culture’s ways, you develop an ethnic identity, a commitment to the beliefs and philosophy of your culture (Chung & Ting-Toomey, 1999). The degree to which you identify with your cultural group can be measured by your responses to measures such as the list below (from Ting-Toomey, 1981). Using a five-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, indicate how true the following statements are about you:

_____ I am increasing my involvement in activities with my ethnic group.
_____ I involve myself in causes that will help members of my ethnic group.
_____ It feels natural being part of my ethnic group.
_____ I have spent time trying to find out more about my own ethnic group.
_____ I am happy to be a member of my ethnic group.
_____ I have a strong sense of belonging to my ethnic group.
_____ I often talk to other members of my group to learn more about my ethnic culture.
One of the best ways to appreciate the influence of culture on communication is to consider people's attitudes. In groups of five or six—try for as culturally diverse a group as possible—discuss how you think most of the students at your school feel (not how you feel) about each of the following. Use a five-point scale where 5 = most students strongly agree; 4 = most students agree; 3 = students are relatively neutral; 2 = most students disagree; 1 = most students strongly disagree.

____ 1. Some of the most important values in my culture are gaining recognition in other cultures.
____ 2. Courses on ethnicity should be required in our schools.
____ 3. The values of other cultures are the same as those of our culture.
____ 4. I'm not interested in the values and customs of other cultures.
____ 5. Many students would be happier if they lived like people in my culture.

Source: These statements were taken from the Human Relations Attitude Inventory (Koppelman, 2005). The author notes that this inventory is based on one developed by Flavio Vega.
I do not cooperate with people who are different.
I do not trust people who are different.
I dislike interacting with people from different cultures.
Other cultures are smart to look up to my culture.
People from other cultures act strange and unusual when they come into my culture.

**HOW DID YOU DO?** This test gave you the opportunity to examine some of your own cultural beliefs—particularly those cultural beliefs that contribute to ethnocentrism. The person low in ethnocentrism would have high scores (4s and 5s) for items 3, 6, 12, and 13 and low scores (1s and 2s) for all the others. The person high in ethnocentrism would have low scores for items 3, 6, 12, and 13 and high scores for all the others.

**WHAT WILL YOU DO?** Use this test to bring your own cultural beliefs to consciousness so you can examine them logically and objectively. Ask yourself if your beliefs are productive and will help you achieve your professional and social goals, or if they’re counterproductive and will actually hinder your achieving your goals.

*Source:* This test is taken from Wrench, McCroskey, & Richmond (2008, pp. 394–395) and was originally published in Neuliep, Chaudoir, & McCroskey (2001).

As you’ve probably gathered from taking this test, ethnocentrism is the tendency to see others and their behaviors through your own cultural filters, often as distortions of your own behaviors. It’s the tendency to evaluate the values, beliefs, and behaviors of your own culture as superior and as more positive, logical, and natural than those of other cultures. Although ethnocentrism may give you pride in your own culture and its achievements,

### TABLE 1.2 The Ethnocentrism Continuum

This table summarizes some of the interconnections between ethnocentrism and communication. Five degrees of ethnocentrism are identified; in reality, there are as many degrees as there are people. The “communication distances” are general terms that highlight the attitude which dominates that level of ethnocentrism. Under “communications” are some of the major ways people might interact given their particular degree of ethnocentrism. Can you identify your own ethnocentrism in this table? For example, are there groups to which you have low ethnocentrism? Middle? High? What accounts for these differences? This table draws on the work of several intercultural researchers (Lukens, 1978; Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Gudykunst, 1991).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Ethnocentrism</th>
<th>Communication Distance</th>
<th>Communications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>You treat others as equals; you view different customs and ways of behaving as equal to your own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sensitivity</td>
<td>You want to decrease the distance between yourself and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indifference</td>
<td>You lack concern for others; you prefer to interact in a world of similar others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>You avoid and limit interactions, especially intimate communication with interculturally different others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disparagement</td>
<td>You engage in hostile behavior and belittle others; you view different cultures and ways of behaving as inferior to your own.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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and encourage you to sacrifice for the culture, it also may lead you to see other cultures as inferior and may make you unwilling to profit from the contributions of other cultures. For example, recent research shows a “substantial relationship” between ethnocentrism and homophobia (Wrench & McCroskey, 2003).

Ethnocentrism exists on a continuum (Table 1.2). People are not either ethnocentric or nonethnocentric; most are somewhere between these polar opposites. And, of course, your degree of ethnocentrism often varies depending on the group on which you focus. For example, if you’re Greek American, you may have a low degree of ethnocentrism when dealing with Italian Americans but a high degree when dealing with Turkish Americans or Japanese Americans. Your degree of ethnocentrism will influence your communication in all its forms, as we’ll see throughout this text.

**Summary of Concepts and Skills**

This chapter considered the nature of human communication, its major elements and principles, communication competence, and the role of culture in human communication.

1. Communication is the act, by one or more persons, of sending and receiving messages that are distorted by noise, occur within a context, have some effect (and some ethical dimension), and provide some opportunity for feedback.

2. Communication is transactional. It is a process of interrelated parts in which a change in one element produces changes in other elements.

3. The essentials of communication—the elements present in every communication act—are sources–receivers; messages (feedforward, feedback, and metamessages); context (physical, cultural, social–psychological, and temporal); channel; noise (physical, physiological, psychological, and semantic); and effects.

4. Communication competence refers to your knowledge of how communication works and your ability to use communication effectively.

5. Communication is purposeful. Through communication, you learn, relate, help, influence, and play.

6. Communication is a process of adjustment in which each person must adjust his or her signals to the understanding of the other if meaning is to be transmitted.

7. Communication and relationships are always—in part—ambiguous.

8. Communication involves both content and relationship dimensions.

9. Communication and relationships invariably involve issues of power.

10. Communication sequences are punctuated for processing. Individuals divide the communication sequence into stimuli and responses in different ways.

11. In any interactional situation, communication is inevitable (you cannot not communicate, nor can you not respond to communication), irreversible (you cannot take back messages), and unrepeatable (you cannot exactly repeat messages).

12. Culture permeates all forms of communication, and intercultural communication is becoming more and more frequent as the United States becomes home to a variety of cultures and does business around the world.

13. Significant dimensions along which cultures may differ are uncertainty avoidance, masculinity–femininity, power distance, individualism–collectivism, and high and low context.

14. Ethnocentrism, existing on a continuum, is the tendency to evaluate the beliefs, attitudes, and values of our own culture positively and those of other cultures negatively.

Several important communication skills emphasized in this chapter are presented here in summary form (as they are in every chapter). These skill checklists don’t include all the skills covered in the chapter but rather are representative of the most important skills. Place a check mark next to those skills that you feel you need to work on most.

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1. I’m sensitive to contexts of communication. I recognize that changes in physical, cultural, social–psychological, and temporal contexts will alter meaning.

2. I assess my channel options and evaluate whether my message will be more effective if delivered face-to-face, through e-mail, or by some third party, for example.

3. I look for meaning not only in words, but also in nonverbal behaviors.

4. I am sensitive to the feedback and feedforward that I give to others and that others give to me.

5. I combat the effects of the various types of physical, psychological, and semantic noise that distort messages.

6. I listen not only to the more obvious content messages but also to the relational messages that I (and others) send, and I respond to the relational messages of others to increase meaningful interaction.
7. Instead of looking only at the punctuation patterns, I also look at the patterns that others might be using in order to understand better the meanings communicated.

8. Because communication is transactional, I recognize that all elements influence every other element in the communication process and that each person communicating is simultaneously a speaker/listener.

9. Because communication is purposeful, I look carefully at both the speaker’s and the listener's purposes.

10. Because communication is inevitable, irreversible, and unrepeatable, I look carefully for hidden meanings, am cautious in communicating messages that I may later wish to withdraw, and am aware that any communication act occurs but once.

11. I am sensitive to cultural variation and differences, and I see my own culture's teachings and those of other cultures without undue bias.

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Key Word Quiz

The Essentials of Human Communication

Match the terms about human communication with their definitions. Record the number of the definition next to the appropriate term.

1. Communication between two or more people through some electronic means
2. Knowledge of communication and the ability to apply that knowledge for effective communication
3. The view of communication that sees each person as taking both speaker and listener roles simultaneously
4. Communication with yourself
5. Commitment to the beliefs and values of your culture
6. The process of putting ideas into a code; for example, thinking of an idea and then describing it in words
7. The tendency to see others and their behaviors through your own cultural filters
8. The messages you get back from your own messages and from the responses of others to what you communicate
9. Messages that refer to other messages
10. The ability to influence the behaviors of others

These ten terms and additional terms used in this chapter can be found in the glossary and on flashcards on MyCommunicationLab (www.mycommunicationlab.com).

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MyCommunicationLab

Visit MyCommunicationLab (www.mycommunicationlab.com) for a wealth of additional information on the essentials of human communication. Flash cards, videos, skill building exercises, sample test questions, and additional examples and discussions will help you continue your study of human communication.