6.1: Principles of Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Define interpersonal communication.
2. Discuss the functional aspects of interpersonal communication.
3. Discuss the cultural aspects of interpersonal communication.

In order to understand interpersonal communication, we must understand how interpersonal communication functions to meet our needs and goals and how our interpersonal communication connects to larger social and cultural systems. Interpersonal communication is the process of exchanging messages between people whose lives mutually influence one another in unique ways in relation to social and cultural norms. This definition highlights the fact that interpersonal communication involves two or more people who are interdependent to some degree and who build a unique bond based on the larger social and cultural contexts to which they belong. So a brief exchange with a grocery store clerk who you don’t know wouldn’t be considered interpersonal communication, because you and the clerk are not influencing each other in significant ways. Obviously, if the clerk were a friend, family member, coworker, or romantic partner, the communication would fall into the interpersonal category. In this section, we discuss the importance of studying interpersonal communication and explore its functional and cultural aspects.

Why Study Interpersonal Communication?

Interpersonal communication has many implications for us in the real world. Did you know that interpersonal communication played an important role in human evolution? Early humans who lived in groups, rather than alone, were more likely to survive, which meant that those with the capability to develop interpersonal bonds were more likely to pass these traits on to the next generation (Leary, 2001). Did you know that interpersonal skills have a measurable impact on psychological and physical health? People with higher levels of interpersonal communication skills are better
able to adapt to stress, have greater satisfaction in relationships and more friends, and have less depression and anxiety (Hargie, 2011). In fact, prolonged isolation has been shown to severely damage a human (Williams & Zadro, 2001). Have you ever heard of the boy or girl who was raised by wolves? There have been documented cases of abandoned or neglected children, sometimes referred to as feral children, who survived using their animalistic instincts but suffered psychological and physical trauma as a result of their isolation (Candland, 1995). There are also examples of solitary confinement, which has become an ethical issue in many countries. In “supermax” prisons, which now operate in at least forty-four states, prisoners spend 22.5 to 24 hours a day in their cells and have no contact with the outside world or other prisoners (Shalev, 2011).

![Solitary Confinement](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Communication/Introduction_to_Communication/Book%3A_Communication_in_th...)

Aside from making your relationships and health better, interpersonal communication skills are highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2010). Each of these examples illustrates how interpersonal communication meets our basic needs as humans for security in our social bonds, health, and careers. But we are not born with all the interpersonal communication skills we’ll need in life. So in order to make the most out of our interpersonal relationships, we must learn some basic principles.

Think about a time when a short communication exchange affected a relationship almost immediately. Did you mean for it to happen? Many times we engage in interpersonal communication to fulfill certain goals we may have, but sometimes we are more successful than others. This is because interpersonal communication is strategic, meaning we intentionally create messages to achieve certain goals that help us function in society and our relationships. Goals vary based on the situation and the communicators, but ask yourself if you are generally successful at achieving the goals with which you enter a conversation or not. If so, you may already possess a high degree of interpersonal communication competence, or the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in personal relationships. This chapter will help you understand some key processes that can make us more effective and appropriate communicators. You may be asking, “Aren’t effectiveness and appropriateness the same thing?” The answer is no. Imagine that you are the manager of a small department of employees at a marketing agency where you often have to work on deadlines. As a deadline approaches, you worry about your team’s ability to work without your supervision to complete the tasks, so you interrupt everyone’s work and assign them all individual tasks and give them a bulleted list of each subtask with a deadline to turn each part in to you. You meet the deadline and have effectively accomplished your goal. Over the next month, one of your employees puts in her two-weeks’ notice, and you learn that she and a few others have been talking about how
they struggle to work with you as a manager. Although your strategy was effective, many people do not respond well to strict hierarchy or micromanaging and may have deemed your communication inappropriate. A more competent communicator could have implemented the same detailed plan to accomplish the task in a manner that included feedback, making the employees feel more included and heard. In order to be competent interpersonal communicators, we must learn to balance being effective and appropriate.

**Functional Aspects of Interpersonal Communication**

We have different needs that are met through our various relationships. Whether we are aware of it or not, we often ask ourselves, “What can this relationship do for me?” In order to understand how relationships achieve strategic functions, we will look at instrumental goals, relationship-maintenance goals, and self-presentation goals.

What motivates you to communicate with someone? We frequently engage in communication designed to achieve instrumental goals such as gaining compliance (getting someone to do something for us), getting information we need, or asking for support (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). In short, instrumental talk helps us “get things done” in our relationships. Our instrumental goals can be long term or day to day. The following are examples of communicating for instrumental goals:

- You ask your friend to help you move this weekend (gaining/resisting compliance).
- You ask your coworker to remind you how to balance your cash register till at the end of your shift (requesting or presenting information).
- You console your roommate after he loses his job (asking for or giving support).

When we communicate to achieve relational goals, we are striving to maintain a positive relationship. Engaging in relationship-maintenance communication is like taking your car to be serviced at the repair shop. To have a good relationship, just as to have a long-lasting car, we should engage in routine maintenance. For example, have you ever wanted to stay in and order a pizza and watch a movie, but your friend suggests that you go to a local restaurant and then to the theatre? Maybe you don’t feel like being around a lot of people or spending money (or changing out of your pajamas), but you decide to go along with his or her suggestion. In that moment, you are putting your relational partner’s needs above your own, which will likely make him or her feel valued. It is likely that your friend has made or will also make similar concessions to put your needs first, which indicates that there is a satisfactory and complimentary relationship. Obviously, if one partner always insists on having his or her way or always concedes, becoming the martyr, the individuals are not exhibiting interpersonal-communication competence. Other routine relational tasks include celebrating special occasions or honoring accomplishments, spending time together, and checking in regularly by phone, e-mail, text, social media, or face-to-face communication. The following are examples of communicating for relational goals:

- You organize an office party for a coworker who has just become a US citizen (celebrating/honoring accomplishments).
- You make breakfast with your mom while you are home visiting (spending time together).
- You post a message on your long-distance friend’s Facebook wall saying you miss him (checking in).
Another form of relational talk that I have found very useful is what I call the DTR talk, which stands for “defining-the-relationship talk” and serves a relationship-maintenance function. In the early stages of a romantic relationship, you may have a DTR talk to reduce uncertainty about where you stand by deciding to use the term boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner. In a DTR talk, you may proactively define your relationship by saying, “I'm glad I'm with you and no one else.” Your romantic interest may respond favorably, echoing or rephrasing your statement, which gives you an indication that he or she agrees with you. The talk may continue on from there, and you may talk about what to call your relationship, set boundaries, or not. It is not unusual to have several DTR talks as a relationship progresses. At times, you may have to define the relationship when someone steps over a line by saying, “I think we should just be friends.” This more explicit and reactive (rather than proactive) communication can be especially useful in situations where a relationship may be unethical, inappropriate, or create a conflict of interest—for example, in a supervisor-supervisee, mentor-mentee, professional-client, or collegial relationship.

We also pursue self-presentation goals by adapting our communication in order to be perceived in particular ways. Just as many companies, celebrities, and politicians create a public image, we desire to present different faces in different contexts. The well-known scholar Erving Goffman compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts (Goffman, 1959). Indeed, competent communicators can successfully manage how others perceive them by adapting to situations and contexts. A parent may perform the role of stern head of household, supportive shoulder to cry on, or hip and culturally aware friend to his or her child. A newly hired employee may initially perform the role of serious and agreeable coworker. Sometimes people engage in communication that doesn’t necessarily present them in a positive way. For example, Haley, the oldest daughter in the television show Modern Family, often presents herself as incapable in order to get her parents to do her work. In one episode she pretended she didn’t know how to crack open an egg so her mom Claire would make the brownies for her school bake sale. Here are some other examples of communicating to meet self-presentation goals:

- As your boss complains about struggling to format the company newsletter, you tell her about your experience with Microsoft Word and editing and offer to look over the newsletter once she’s done to fix the formatting (presenting yourself as competent).
- You and your new college roommate stand in your dorm room full of boxes. You let him choose which side of the room he wants and then invite him to eat lunch with you (presenting yourself as friendly).
- You say, “I don’t know,” in response to a professor’s question even though you have an idea of the answer.
(presenting yourself as aloof, or “too cool for school”).

"Getting Real": Image Consultants

The Association of Image Consultants International (AICI) states that appearance, behavior, and communication are the “ABC’s of image.” Many professional image consultants are licensed by this organization and provide a variety of services to politicians, actors, corporate trainers, public speakers, organizations, corporations, and television personalities such as news anchors.[1] Visit the AICI’s website (www.aici.org/About_Image.Consulting.htm) and read about image consulting, including the “How to Choose,” “How to Become,” and “FAQs” sections. Then consider the following questions:

1. If you were to hire an image consultant for yourself, what would you have them “work on” for you? Why?
2. What communication skills that you’ve learned about in the book so far would be most important for an image consultant to possess?
3. Many politicians use image consultants to help them connect to voters and win elections. Do you think this is ethical? Why or why not?

As if managing instrumental, relational, and self-presentation goals isn’t difficult enough when we consider them individually, we must also realize that the three goal types are always working together. In some situations we may privilege instrumental goals over relational or self-presentation goals. For example, if your partner is offered a great job in another state and you decided to go with him or her, which will move you away from your job and social circle, you would be focusing on relational goals over instrumental or self-presentation goals. When you’re facing a stressful situation and need your best friend’s help and call saying, “Hurry and bring me a gallon of gas or I’m going to be late to work!” you are privileging instrumental goals over relational goals. Of course, if the person really is your best friend, you can try to smooth things over or make up for your shortness later. However, you probably wouldn’t call your boss and bark a request to bring you a gallon of gas so you can get to work, because you likely want your boss to see you as dependable and likable, meaning you have focused on self-presentation goals.

The functional perspective of interpersonal communication indicates that we communicate to achieve certain goals in our relationships. We get things done in our relationships by communicating for instrumental goals. We maintain positive relationships through relational goals. We also strategically present ourselves in order to be perceived in particular ways. As our goals are met and our relationships build, they become little worlds we inhabit with our relational partners, complete with their own relationship cultures.

Cultural Aspects of Interpersonal Communication

Aside from functional aspects of interpersonal communication, communicating in relationships also helps establish relationship cultures. Just as large groups of people create cultures through shared symbols (language), values, and rituals, people in relationships also create cultures at a smaller level. Relationship cultures are the climates established through interpersonal communication that are unique to the relational partners but based on larger cultural and social norms. We also enter into new relationships with expectations based on the schemata we have developed in previous relationships and learned from our larger society and culture. Think of relationship schemata as blueprints or plans that show the inner workings of a relationship. Just like a schematic or diagram for assembling a new computer desk helps you put it together, relationship schemata guide us in how we believe our interpersonal relationships should work and
how to create them. So from our life experiences in our larger cultures, we bring building blocks, or expectations, into our relationships, which fundamentally connect our relationships to the outside world (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). Even though we experience our relationships as unique, they are at least partially built on preexisting cultural norms.

Some additional communicative acts that create our relational cultures include relational storytelling, personal idioms, routines and rituals, and rules and norms. Storytelling is an important part of how we create culture in larger contexts and how we create a uniting and meaningful storyline for our relationships. In fact, an anthropologist coined the term *homo narrans* to describe the unique storytelling capability of modern humans (Fisher, 1985). We often rely on relationship storytelling to create a sense of stability in the face of change, test the compatibility of potential new relational partners, or create or maintain solidarity in established relationships. Think of how you use storytelling among your friends, family, coworkers, and other relational partners. If you recently moved to a new place for college, you probably experienced some big changes. One of the first things you started to do was reestablish a social network—remember, human beings are fundamentally social creatures. As you began to encounter new people in your classes, at your new job, or in your new housing, you most likely told some stories of your life before—about your friends, job, or teachers back home. One of the functions of this type of storytelling, early in forming interpersonal bonds, is a test to see if the people you are meeting have similar stories or can relate to your previous relationship cultures. In short, you are testing the compatibility of your schemata with the new people you encounter. Although storytelling will continue to play a part in your relational development with these new people, you may be surprised at how quickly you start telling stories with your new friends about things that have happened since you met. You may recount stories about your first trip to the dance club together, the weird geology professor you had together, or the time you all got sick from eating the cafeteria food. In short, your old stories will start to give way to new stories that you’ve created. Storytelling within relationships helps create solidarity, or a sense of belonging and closeness. This type of storytelling can be especially meaningful for relationships that don’t fall into the dominant culture. For example, research on a gay male friendship circle found that the gay men retold certain dramatic stories frequently to create a sense of belonging and to also bring in new members to the group (Jones Jr., 2007).

We also create personal idioms in our relationships (Bell & Healey, 1992). If you’ve ever studied foreign languages, you know that idiomatic expressions like “I’m under the weather today” are basically nonsense when translated. For example, the equivalent of this expression in French translates to “I’m not in my plate today.” When you think about it, it doesn’t make sense to use either expression to communicate that you’re sick, but the meaning would not be lost on English or French speakers, because they can decode their respective idiom. This is also true of idioms we create in our interpersonal relationships. Just as idioms are unique to individual cultures and languages, personal idioms are unique to certain relationships, and they create a sense of belonging due to the inside meaning shared by the relational partners. In romantic relationships, for example, it is common for individuals to create nicknames for each other that may not directly translate for someone who overhears them. You and your partner may find that calling each other “booger” is sweet, while others may think it’s gross. Researchers have found that personal idioms are commonly used in the following categories: activities, labels for others, requests, and sexual references (Bell & Healey, 1992). The recent cultural phenomenon *Jersey Shore* on MTV has given us plenty of examples of personal idioms created by the friends on the show. *GTL* is an activity idiom that stands for “gym, tan, laundry”—a common routine for the cast of the show. There are many examples of idioms labeling others, including *grenade* for an unattractive female, *gorilla juice head* for a very muscular man, and *backpack* for a clingy boyfriend/girlfriend or a clingy person at a club. There are also many idioms for sexual references, such as *smush*, meaning to hook up / have sex, and *smush room*, which is the room set aside for these activities (Benigno, 2010). Idioms help create cohesiveness, or solidarity in relationships, because they
are shared cues between cultural insiders. They also communicate the uniqueness of the relationship and create boundaries, since meaning is only shared within the relationship.

Routines and rituals help form relational cultures through their natural development in repeated or habitual interaction (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). While “routine” may connote boring in some situations, relationship routines are communicative acts that create a sense of predictability in a relationship that is comforting. Some communicative routines may develop around occasions or conversational topics.

For example, it is common for long-distance friends or relatives to schedule a recurring phone conversation or for couples to review the day’s events over dinner. When I studied abroad in Sweden, my parents and I talked on the phone at the same time every Sunday, which established a comfortable routine for us. Other routines develop around entire conversational episodes. For example, two best friends recounting their favorite spring-break story may seamlessly switch from one speaker to the other, finish each other’s sentences, speak in unison, or gesture simultaneously because they have told the story so many times. Relationship rituals take on more symbolic meaning than do relationship routines and may be variations on widely recognized events—such as birthdays, anniversaries, Passover, Christmas, or Thanksgiving—or highly individualized and original. Relational partners may personalize their traditions by eating mussels and playing Yahtzee on Christmas Eve or going hiking on their anniversary. Other rituals may be more unique to the relationship, such as celebrating a dog’s birthday or going to opening day at the amusement park. The following highly idiosyncratic ritual was reported by a participant in a research study:

I would check my husband’s belly button for fuzz on a daily basis at bedtime. It originated when I noticed some blanket fuzz in his belly button one day and thought it was funny…We both found it funny and teased often about the fuzz. If there wasn’t any fuzz for a few days my husband would put some in his belly button for me to find. It’s been happening for about 10 years now (Bruess & Pearson, 1997).
Whether the routines and rituals involve phone calls, eating certain foods, or digging for belly button fuzz, they all serve important roles in building relational cultures. However, as with storytelling, rituals and routines can be negative. For example, verbal and nonverbal patterns to berate or belittle your relational partner will not have healthy effects on a relational culture. Additionally, visiting your in-laws during the holidays loses its symbolic value when you dislike them and comply with the ritual because you feel like you have to. In this case, the ritual doesn’t enrich the relational culture, but it may reinforce norms or rules that have been created in the relationship.

Relationship rules and norms help with the daily function of the relationship. They help create structure and provide boundaries for interacting in the relationship and for interacting with larger social networks (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). Relationship rules are explicitly communicated guidelines for what should and should not be done in certain contexts. A couple could create a rule to always confer with each other before letting their child spend the night somewhere else. If a mother lets her son sleep over at a friend’s house without consulting her partner, a more serious conflict could result. Relationship norms are similar to routines and rituals in that they develop naturally in a relationship and generally conform to or are adapted from what is expected and acceptable in the larger culture or society. For example, it may be a norm that you and your coworkers do not “talk shop” at your Friday happy-hour gathering. So when
someone brings up work at the gathering, his coworkers may remind him that there’s no shop talk, and the consequences may not be that serious. In regards to topic of conversation, norms often guide expectations of what subjects are appropriate within various relationships. Do you talk to your boss about your personal finances? Do you talk to your father about your sexual activity? Do you tell your classmates about your medical history? In general, there are no rules that say you can’t discuss any of these topics with anyone you choose, but relational norms usually lead people to answer “no” to the questions above. Violating relationship norms and rules can negatively affect a relationship, but in general, rule violations can lead to more direct conflict, while norm violations can lead to awkward social interactions. Developing your interpersonal communication competence will help you assess your communication in relation to the many rules and norms you will encounter.

Key Takeaways

- **Getting integrated:** Interpersonal communication occurs between two or more people whose lives are interdependent and mutually influence one another. These relationships occur in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts, and improving our interpersonal communication competence can also improve our physical and psychological health, enhance our relationships, and make us more successful in our careers.

- There are functional aspects of interpersonal communication.
  - We “get things done” in our relationships by communicating for instrumental goals such as getting someone to do something for us, requesting or presenting information, and asking for or giving support.
  - We maintain our relationships by communicating for relational goals such as putting your relational partner’s needs before your own, celebrating accomplishments, spending time together, and checking in.
  - We strategically project ourselves to be perceived in particular ways by communicating for self-presentation goals such as appearing competent or friendly.

- There are cultural aspects of interpersonal communication.
  - We create relationship cultures based on the relationship schemata we develop through our interactions with our larger society and culture.
  - We engage in relationship storytelling to create a sense of stability in the face of change, to test our compatibility with potential relational partners, and to create a sense of solidarity and belonging in established relationships.
  - We create personal idioms such as nicknames that are unique to our particular relationship and are unfamiliar to outsiders to create cohesiveness and solidarity.
  - We establish relationship routines and rituals to help establish our relational culture and bring a sense of comfort and predictability to our relationships.

Exercises

1. **Getting integrated:** In what ways might interpersonal communication competence vary among academic, professional, and civic contexts? What competence skills might be more or less important in one context than in another?
2. **Recount a time when you had a DTR talk.** At what stage in the relationship was the talk? What motivated you or the other person to initiate the talk? What was the result of the talk?
3. **Pick an important relationship and describe its relationship culture.** When the relationship started, what relationship schemata guided your expectations? Describe a relationship story that you tell with this person or about this
person. What personal idioms do you use? What routines and rituals do you observe? What norms and rules do you follow?

References


