

1

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Perception, Meaning, and Identity



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CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 1.1 The Process of Creating Meaning
- 1.2 Culture, Perception, and Schemas
- 1.3 Signs and Symbols
- 1.4 Communication, Perception, Identity . . . and Power

This is the job you want, no question. It's one anyone would want—working at a hospital in a great up-and-coming community, having significant responsibilities, getting paid a real salary.

You've done your research. You know that employers consider good communication skills the most important factor not only in job performance but also in career advancement (Sternberg, 2013). There's other evidence that a variety of communication competencies—effective listening, appropriate use of body language, clear and concise speaking, strong empathy, and giving meaningful feedback—are central to career success and satisfaction (Hynes, 2012; Robles, 2012). You also know that communication competencies are key to success in marketing (Taylor, 2003), public relations (Carnesi, 2022), journalism (Schmitt, 2014), and management (Whetton & Cameron, 2005); conversely, poor communication skills can doom a manager (Paulsen, 2021). Moreover, employers say good communication skills will save people

in administration, office support, manufacturing and production, finance, and IT from being replaced by robots (Dishman, 2018). In fact, good communication skills are essential for career success even for folks in the natural sciences (Feliú-Mójer, 2015) and accounting (Half, 2022). To your advantage, you think, you've also discovered that three-quarters of hiring professionals say finding job applicants with these skills is quite difficult (Bauer-Wolf, 2019).

So you know how to build your case. The night before your interview, you go over your notes one last time. This is what the interviewers will hear from you: "I will have to interact with all kinds of staff and clients, and I bring solid verbal and non-verbal communication skills to the job. On teams where there are inevitable tensions, my conflict and group communication studies will be an asset. I know, too, that I will be working with people from many different backgrounds, and my intercultural communication coursework has prepared me well. Just as important, I have classroom experience in health communication, especially in using the media to promote healthy behaviors. In fact, in this position I can combine my media literacy with my interpersonal communication and persuasion skills to everyone's benefit."

You're ready. With this background, how could you fail?

The skills and strengths mentioned in this anecdote represent different chapters in this book. Of course, the vignette is fictional, but the research it mentions is real. Communication is indispensable, not only to professional success but also to success as a person. We use communication to exchange information, to influence others, to build and maintain our relationships, to develop and sustain our sense of self, to be human. Good communication skills can make you a better friend, parent, colleague, and citizen. Communication competence can make interacting with people more satisfying, consuming media more fun, and experiencing life more meaningful.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Illustrate how communication is the process of mutually creating meaning.
- 1.2 Explain how culture influences meaning making and perception.
- 1.3 Investigate how signs and symbols are created, maintained, and used to make meaning.
- 1.4 Analyze the relationships between perception, communication, identity, and power.

THE PROCESS OF CREATING MEANING

We communicate to create, re-create, and understand our realities. Communication allows us to control our environments. It is how we know ourselves and how we let others know us. **Communication**, the process of mutual creation of meaning, is breathtakingly simple and often maddeningly complex. As cognitive scientist Benjamin Bergen explains, "Constantly, tirelessly, automatically, we make meaning. . . . To understand how meaning works, then,

is to understand part of what it is to be human. And not just human, but uniquely human” (2012).



Communicating—mutually creating meaning—is part of what makes us human.

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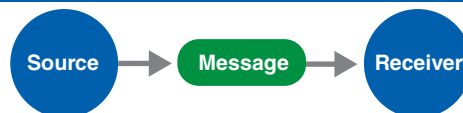
The Evolution of Communication Models

In the first half of the last century, when the field of communication studies was new, scholars saw communication as a process that followed a **linear model**. According to this view, messages travel in a more or less straight line from a *source*, through a *medium*, to a *receiver*. The most famous expression of this idea is political scientist Harold Lasswell’s (1948):

Who? Says what? Through which channel? To whom? With what effect?

The **source** has a goal in mind, creates a message, and selects a means (or **medium**) to deliver it; the **receiver** receives it and does or does not do what the source wants. Think of public relations and health professionals buying public service ads on YouTube to convince teens to avoid binge drinking. If the message does not have the desired effect, the source should modify the message or change the medium. Figure 1.1 shows the linear model of communication in its simplest form.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Simplified Linear Model of Communication

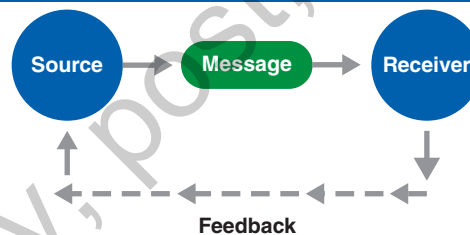


But maybe the message does not have the desired effect because of *noise* somewhere along the line. **Noise** is anything that interferes with the process of communication, and it exists in a variety of forms:

- *Physical noise*—something outside the communication effort itself; your roommate plays a loud video game while you’re trying to talk on the phone.
- *Semantic noise*—a problem in the construction of the message; your professor uses completely unfamiliar technical jargon.
- *Psychological noise*—predispositions, biases, or prejudices that shape how you construct and interpret messages; consider what different politicians mean when they talk about *freedom* and what voters of different political leanings take away when they hear that word.
- *Physiological noise*—sometimes you are simply not operating at full communication capacity because you are tired or hungry or sick; think how difficult it is to listen and respond in class after a night of little sleep.

How do sources know if their communication efforts are successful? They look for **feedback**, a response to their message. When feedback is taken into account, the linear model becomes a little less linear (see Figure 1.2).

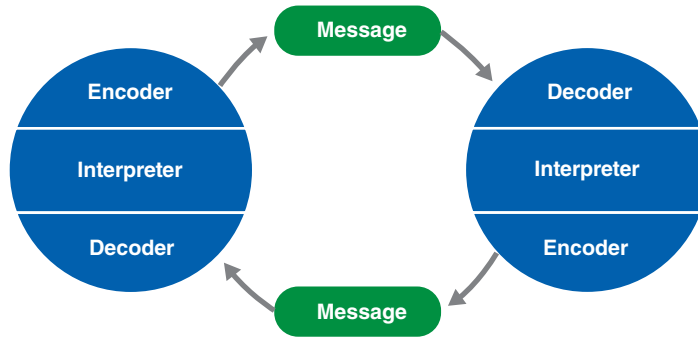
FIGURE 1.2 ■ The Linear Model of Communication, Including Feedback



This, however, is still a **source-dominated model** of communication; that is, it still views the success of the communication effort as primarily within the source’s control. But isn’t feedback a message? Hasn’t the receiver now become the source, sending a message back to the original source, who has now become the receiver?

The limits of the source-dominated view of communication become obvious as soon as we understand communication as a *reciprocal, ongoing process*, with all parties simultaneously engaged in creating shared meaning. Communication researcher Wilbur Schramm (1954) used this idea, originally offered by psychologist Charles E. Osgood, to create a more accurate model of communication, one having no source, no receiver, and no feedback. Stressing communication as *interaction*, it represents the participants in the communication process as *interpreters* who work together to create meaning by encoding and decoding messages. **Encoding** is transforming a message into an understandable sign and symbol system—for example, speaking in English or creating a TikTok using that app’s familiar visual conventions. **Decoding** is interpreting those signs and symbols—for example, listening to the speaker or watching the video and drawing meaning from them. Figure 1.3 shows this model of communication.

FIGURE 1.3 ■ Osgood and Schramm's Model of Communication



Credit: Schramm, W. (1954). *The process and effects of mass communication*. University of Illinois Press. Reproduced with permission.

Schramm made another important point: all that encoding and decoding takes place against the backdrop of communicators' fields of experience. This has a number of implications:

- *Communicators create and interpret messages in terms of what they already know and have experienced.* “Communication involves the total personality,” wrote communication theorist Dean Barnlund. Encoding and decoding can never be separated because “meanings [are] generated by the whole organism” (1962, p. 199). For example, if you tell a frugal friend that you *slipped near the bank*, she might imagine you sprawled out on an icy sidewalk in front of a financial institution. If you tell another friend, a dedicated white-water rafter, that you *slipped near the bank*, he might envision you tumbling through the weeds at the edge of a river.
- *There can be no communication unless interpreters share a common set of experiences.* *Vielleicht sprichst du Deutsch?* Unless you speak German, that message has no meaning. If German is not part of your experience, you and a German speaker cannot communicate very well. Messages are sent; meaning is *made*.
- *No two communicators share exactly the same set of experiences, so there is always some negotiation of meaning.* You and your friend both have experienced “dog,” but that small, fluffy, squeaking thing he brings with him everywhere is not what you mean by “dog.”



You and your friend might have different ideas about the meaning of “dog.”
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Communication, then, is the process of mutual creation of meaning. It is *social*—it involves people in interaction; it is a *process*—its parts operate interdependently and continuously; and it is *dynamic*—it is always changing. This last characteristic best defines modern notions of

communication, expressed as the **transactional model**—*communication changes the communicators*. Each new message, decoded into meaning by an interpreter, changes that interpreter. The interpreter is no longer the same person, simply by virtue of having added new meanings to their set of experiences. In fact, the transactional view assumes that communication has not occurred unless change has occurred in the participants (Pearce, Figgins, & Golen, 1984). In a sense, then, communicators enter into a deal, a transaction: the more they work at their negotiation of meaning to better align their fields of experience, the better they can make meaning (in other words, the better they can communicate).

Transmissional, Constitutive, and Ritual Views of Communication

The linear model of communication represents the **transmissional view**, which sees communication as the process of sending and receiving—transmitting or transferring—information from one person to another. By contrast, the transactional model represents the **constitutive view**, which sees communication as creating (constituting) something that did not exist before.

In this second perspective, communication does not simply represent some objective world that preceded it; it produces and then reproduces a new reality—shared meaning—and as a result, new experiences for the communicators, who are now themselves changed (Craig, 1999). For example, say a classmate invites you to her home for Thanksgiving break. She may say, “I know you live pretty far away, so how would you like to come home with me for the holiday?” The transmitted message is clear: “Do you want to come to my house for Thanksgiving, yes or no?” But what new “thing” has been constituted (produced) by those few words? In you, a new reality—a new understanding of what kind of person she is and the knowledge that, possibly, she wants to be your friend. When you say “Yes,” she realizes that you welcome her friendship. Together, you have constituted a new understanding of the nature of your relationship. Just as important, you have made a new friend.

To emphasize the extraordinary impact of this mutual creation of meaning, sociologist and communication scholar James Carey offered a third perspective on how communication works. For Carey (1989), the **ritual view** links communication to

“sharing,” “participation,” “association,” “fellowship,” and “the possession of a common faith.” It has the same root as the words “commonness,” “communion,” “community.” . . . A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs. (pp. 18–19)

In other words, communication constitutes culture, our shared beliefs.

Revisit the example of the Thanksgiving invitation. We’ve seen that the simple message transmitted from your classmate to you was, “Want to come to my house, yes or no?” But the invitation was special because it was for Thanksgiving. Among those who celebrate the holiday, it’s imbued with all kinds of rituals that bind families in meaning: who gets invited, where people sit, who is relegated to the kids’ table, what is on the menu, who falls asleep on the sofa. Thanksgiving is also part of a larger ritual that binds together the millions of people who observe it, from the 30-pound turkey to the big parades and even bigger football games. One set of rituals helps define a family’s culture; another set helps define U.S. American culture. Both are representations of shared beliefs. Once at your new friend’s home, you quickly learn how to act at her Thanksgiving celebration in accordance with her family’s traditions, which are within the context of the national tradition.

COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Communicating Well to Land the Job

Former LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner says that the most important attributes job seekers need to demonstrate to potential employers are good oral communication and team building and leadership skills (Mello, 2019). Economic workplace research backs him up, demonstrating that occupations that are “soft-skill intensive,” that is, that require writing, speaking, empathy, and critical thinking, will account for two-thirds of all jobs by 2030 (Lau, 2021). So there is no question that employers look for good communicators when making their hires. But what communication skills are important when interviewing to land that job? Here are 10 hints based on lessons you’ll learn throughout this text that can give you an edge:

1. *Think of the interview as a conversation, not an interrogation.* You’re less likely to be nervous in a conversation than you would be in an interrogation, and the interviewer will have a better time talking with you.
2. *Structure your answers.* A well-conceived, concise answer to a question shows that your thinking is organized, that you know your subject matter, and that you can communicate it. Try to anticipate questions before the interview and consider possible avenues of response.
3. *Offer concise answers.* Don’t give long, meandering answers. They tell an interviewer that you are nervous, didn’t understand the question, or worse, that you are trying to substitute quantity for quality.
4. *Directly answer questions, but don’t be afraid to digress.* Expand on your answers as needed to show imagination and critical thought.
5. *Ask questions when you are giving answers.* Just as in conversation with friends, interact by both answering and asking questions.
6. *Show a logical flow to the information you offer.* Logical responses show that you reason critically, connect ideas, and can be a skilled persuader.
7. *Connect with the interviewer on a personal level.* If you discover a personal connection, a favorite sports team, a hobby, the same college, or travel to an interesting place, for example, elaborate. Making that connection could help you stand out.
8. *Make eye contact.* Eye contact creates rapport, engagement, and trust. It tells your interviewer that you are interested in your interaction.
9. *Use the interviewer’s name.* Doing so signals that you are paying attention and that you care enough to be personal.
10. *Speak clearly.* Don’t mumble. Speaking clearly tells your interviewer that you are giving your words conscious thought.

CULTURE, PERCEPTION, AND SCHEMAS

No two people ever share precisely the same culture. Your culture is defined not only by your country but also by your gender, for example, and your specific set of geographic and ethnic experiences. Think of the words you use. Depending on where you live, you may enjoy an occasional *sub sandwich*, maybe a *grinder*, or possibly a *hoagie*, perhaps a *po’ boy*, *hero*, *torpedo*, or *zeppelin*. And again, depending on where you call home, you may sell your excess stuff at a *garage sale* (Midwestern United States and the West Coast), a *yard sale* (most of the East Coast and the Mountain States), or a *tag sale* (Western Massachusetts and Connecticut). You may or may not be a part of campus Greek life. If you are a baseball fan, you may be part of Red Sox Nation; if you are a football fan, you may well be a Cheesehead (a Green Bay Packers fan) or dwell in the Dawg Pound (a Cleveland Browns fan).



The name you give this sandwich goes a long way in telling people where you come from.

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When we communicate with others, we find what is common to our experiences—a shared language is an obvious example—and then we mutually negotiate new meanings, creating even more shared experiences. This is the true power of culture. **Culture** is the background, the set of experiences and expectations that we each carry around with us wherever we go. Culture allows us to interact with people who are different from us and, in the process, to become more alike. With every successful communication effort, big or small, culture is in transaction, in constant change. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall called culture “the medium evolved by humans to survive. Nothing is free from cultural influences. It is the keystone in civilization’s arch and is the medium through which all of life’s events must flow. We are culture” (1976, p. 14).

As you might imagine, something as big and important as culture has many different definitions. This text employs a definition that speaks specifically to the role of communication in culture’s influence on meaning making:

Culture is the world made meaningful; it is socially constructed and maintained through communication. It limits as well as liberates us; it differentiates as well as unites us. It defines our realities and thereby shapes the ways we think, feel, and act. (Baran, 2023, p. 13)

Our discussion so far should make it clear that culture is learned, negotiated, transacted, constructed, and maintained through communication. But how does culture limit and liberate, differentiate and unite? Cultural assumptions can indeed limit people’s ability to express themselves. A male manager who communicates forcefully and dominates his workplace is perceived as a natural leader, a man among men. A female manager is less likely to employ force and dominance in her communication style because doing so may move her colleagues to evaluate her much differently (Sandberg & Grant, 2015). But culture also liberates us, as

it offers us a wealth of information in all our interactions, making communication easier and more effective and efficient. We know quite a bit about the people and settings in which we find ourselves because of our cultural experiences and the assumptions we make from them. They free us to make meaning more deeply, more quickly, more mutually. Of course, as you'll see in Chapter 9, when these efficiencies turn into prejudices, they become noise that interferes with communication.

Culture differentiates *because* it defines. You communicate within your country's **dominant culture** (sometimes referred to as the **mainstream culture**): the collective cultural experience held and shared by the large majority of people. But you simultaneously belong to several **bounded cultures** (sometimes called **co-cultures**): these are your cultural identities existing within (bounded by) the larger culture. Maybe you identify with and take pride in your Latino/a or African American heritage. Or being from the country or the city sets you apart from the group. Or you stand out because you are an athlete or a member of a sorority.



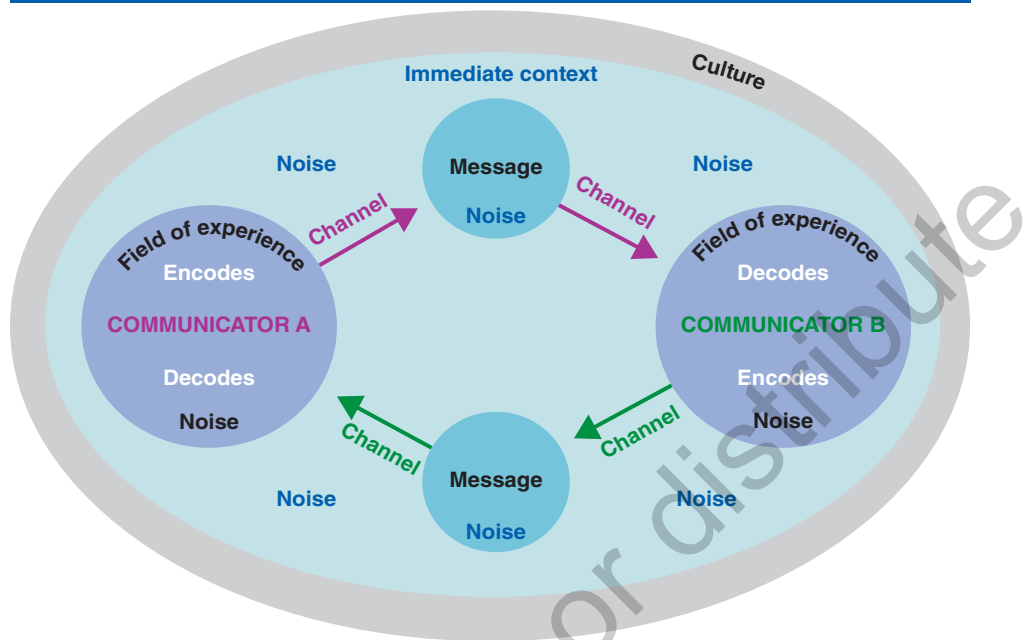
These fans may be part of the Green Bay Packers' culture, but they are also part of the larger U.S. American culture.

Scott Taetsch/Getty Images Sport/via Getty Images

U.S. Americans pride themselves on their ability to move between different bounded cultures (sorority member and athlete) and also between bounded cultures and the dominant culture (everyone from the United States coming together to root for Team USA in the Olympics). As different as individuals may be, they are still united (in this example) by their national culture. If you're from the United States and have traveled overseas, you probably had little problem identifying other U.S. Americans around you.

Understanding now that meaning making occurs in the context of culture as well as in the immediate context of an exchange, we can expand Osgood and Schramm's model into a fully transactional model of communication, as illustrated in Figure 1.4

FIGURE 1.4 ■ The Transactional Model



Communication and Perception

Most likely, those other travelers weren't shouting "USA . . . USA" as they went about their sight-seeing, but nonetheless, they communicated their *American-ness*. How did they do it? Was it on purpose? This question of *intentionality* in communication is linked closely with the concept of **perception**, being aware of and creating meaning from the world around us.

One way to understand the connection between intentionality and perception is to look at the work of researchers who came to be known as the Palo Alto Group. In the 1960s, they offered an early challenge to the source-dominated view of communication (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Communication does not happen when a source sends a message, they argued (as we've already seen in this chapter); it happens when a receiver draws meaning from interaction with the source. For example, on the first day of classes you may meet two new professors, one of whom wears a suit while the other wears old jeans. Without a word being uttered, quite a bit of communication has occurred. The Palo Alto scholars emphasize that because culture shapes the ways we think, feel, and act, our actions convey cultural meaning, and likewise, culture shapes how we feel or think about the actions of others. This means that every human behavior is potentially communicative, and as a result, *it is impossible to not communicate*. You've drawn meaning from those instructors' style choices. In a similar vein, you can easily draw meaning from a friend's refusal to "communicate" with you. Unanswered texts accompanied by the silent treatment in person may be the absence of talk, but they most certainly aren't the absence of communication.

Perception involves *selection*, *organization*, and *interpretation* as we interact with our environments. Back to our traveling U.S. Americans: they did not intentionally communicate their American-ness to you; you perceived it. But what was it about them that said, "I'm from the United States"—that you noticed (or *selected*)? Was it that they were speaking English; that they seemed a bit loud and energetic; that they were wearing Nike sneakers, jeans, and L.L. Bean backpacks? There were many other things—some new, some familiar, some exciting, some



What is each of these instructors communicating to you? Which one is teaching Business 101? Twentieth-Century Lit?
Susan Baran

routine—going on around you, but you selected a relatively small number and then *organized* them into a collection that you *interpreted* as *American*.

We're incapable of processing the enormous tide of sensory stimuli that constantly washes over us. It's not that we're too lazy or not smart enough; there's just no advantage to doing so. In fact, if we ever attempted it, we'd be immobilized by information overload; we'd accomplish nothing. What's the temperature in the room where you're reading these words? Unless it interferes with what you're doing, there is **no** need to pay attention to (to select) it for perception. But if the room does indeed become too hot or too cold to the point that you cannot focus on the immediate task of reading, that might change. In fact, it's quite likely that you were unaware of the temperature until we asked the question.

As you traveled abroad, the presence of people similar to and different from you was relevant to where you were and what you were doing. Therefore, what was distinctive about your fellow travelers from the United States stood out; you paid attention to those differences. If you were traveling in the States, however, American-ness would not necessarily be relevant or interesting to you. In that case, you'd be more likely to pay attention to pieces of data you perceived as Hawaiian, Midwestern, or Southern, for example.

Individual bits of data tell us relatively little, so we must organize them in some useful way in order to interpret them meaningfully. We accomplish this by developing **schemas**, mental structures built from past experiences that we use to process new information and organize new experiences; they are "active organization[s] of past reactions, or of past experiences" (Bartlett, 1932, p. 201). What makes up your U.S. American schema? Your Hawaiian, Midwestern, or Southern schemas? Where did those schemas come from? They come from your experiences—your interactions, in the media and in the physical world—with *U.S. American*, *Hawaiian*, *Midwestern*, or *Southern* in the past.

You can see schemas at work by reading aloud the following two phrases. First, *ABC* (the letters A, B, and C). Now, *12B14* (the numbers 12, 13, and 14; in 12, the 1 and 3 are close together and look identical to the B in the letter sequence). Even though the figure in the middle

of each series is the same, you no doubt read the first group as A, B, C and the second as 12, 13, 14. But why didn't you read the first as A, 13, C and the second as 12, B, 14? Because of all the information on this page, you *selected* the figures on either side of the B (letter B), *organized* them according to your alphabet schema (in the first case) and your number schema (in the second), and *interpreted* the B (letter B) accordingly to make meaning (adapted from Kahneman, 2011).

An obvious and sometimes troubling form of schema is a **stereotype**, a generalization about people, places, or things. Stereotypes may or may not be accurate, as you'll read in Chapter 9's discussion of intercultural communication; they may mask as many truths about people, places, and things as they illuminate. Yes, they may be useful in helping us quickly make meaning, but they may also produce ill-conceived or simply incorrect meanings. Yes, people from the United States traveling overseas often speak English, carry themselves with vigor, and wear Nikes, jeans, and L.L. Bean backpacks, but not all do.

ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

Effective communication grants power, letting you shape your own realities and those of the people around you. But like all power, it can be used for good or bad.

Ethics are rules of behavior or moral principles that guide human actions. There are *metaethics*, fundamental cultural values like justice, and there are *normative ethics*, generalized rules or principles of moral behavior such as "don't steal." How we apply both the big rules and the general guidelines to our everyday interactions is called *applied ethics*.

Your ethics are constituted by the moral choices you make. Keep in mind, though, that applying ethics is rarely the choice between equally good options, or even between good and bad ones. There's no moral dilemma in those instances. Applying ethics is quite often choosing between equally bad options. Communication ethicist Patrick Plaisance calls this "the art of uneasy compromise" (2014, p. 11). Do you stretch the truth on a resume to get a job? Lying is a bad option, but failing to get the job is also a bad option. Do you advertise sugared cereals to little kids? Targeting small children with commercials for unhealthy foods is a bad option, but so is getting fired for refusing your client's demand. What do you do?

Throughout this book, "Ethical Communication" boxes present ethical dilemmas that communicators regularly face. Examine these situations and weigh your choices. Because there is rarely a "right" choice, your task is not to pick one option over another; rather, it is to be able to explain why and how you would make a choice. As Plaisance counsels, "Ethics is about our *thinking process*. . . . The focus is on the quality of the *deliberative process* and not on the outcome" (2014, p. 10). He continues, "Ethics is about getting good at asking the right questions, which, in turn, clarify the problem and enable us to explore more effectively possible solutions or acceptable compromises" (p. 37).

There are several ways to apply ethics. Do you practice the *Golden Rule*, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you? Do you look for the *Golden Mean*, or middle ground? Are you an absolutist, applying the *Categorical Imperative* so that your moral decision makes no exceptions? Or might you apply *utilitarianism* toward the goal of making the most people happy (or bringing unhappiness to the fewest people)? Do you wear the *Veil of Ignorance*, blocking out any thought of what most benefits *you* as a path toward finding what is moral? Consider these questions as you read the "Ethical Communication" feature in each chapter.

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

Meaning making is based on our perception and interpretation of signs and symbols. Recall your friend's refusal to talk to you. The distance you feel surely means something, most likely something not good. But is it a sign or a symbol?

Various communication scholars differentiate between signs and symbols, sometimes in contradictory ways. For now, though, we'll take the more traditional route, defining a **sign** as something that signals the presence of something specific, more or less an objective substitute for that thing. A stop sign means stop. You may not want to stop; you may not stop when you encounter this sign at an intersection; however, you objectively know what it means. Likewise, the changing color of leaves signifies the coming of autumn, and the letters *d-o-g* signify a canine mammal (at least in English).



What does this sign—the changing color of leaves—signify?

iStock.com/Panorama Images

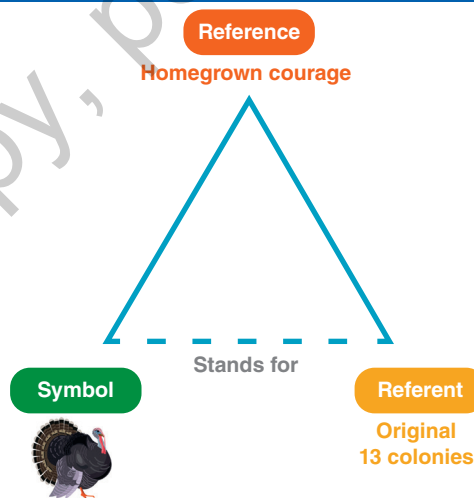
But the word “dog” can be a symbol as well, just as your friend’s silent treatment is more symbol than sign. A **symbol**, then, is a more arbitrary indicator of something else. While the meanings attached to both signs and symbols are arbitrary (there is nothing about an octagonal piece of red sheet metal that inherently means “stop”; English speakers may have decided that *d-o-g* signifies a canine, but Spanish speakers prefer *p-e-r-r-o*), the meanings attached to symbols are more open to negotiation and more dependent on the context in which they are used. When you and your friend sit comfortably silent while driving long-distance at night, that silence symbolizes something much different from the silence of unanswered texts. When your coworkers tell you to *stop dogging it*, “dog” is a symbol for laziness, but when your manager commends you for *working like a dog*, “dog” is a symbol for hard work. “Symbols aren’t neatly mandated,” explains musician Dessa. “We can’t assign cultural significance to a flag or a song in the same way we set speed limits on federal highways. The meaning of a symbol is determined only by an organic, collective agreement, which can flex or drift as culture changes” (2018, p. 17). In other words, as philosopher Susanne Langer wrote, symbols “are not proxy of their objects, but are vehicles for the conception of objects” (1942, p. 61). Symbols are not simply substitutes for other things; they are the means by which the meaning of those things is carried, negotiated, and maintained.

In 1923, linguist C. K. Ogden and literary critic I. A. Richards offered the *triangle of meaning*, a way of understanding the relationship between an object, our sign or symbol for it, and the meaning we give it (see Figure 1.5). Meaning, they tell us, comes from the relationship between

- the referent (the object itself),
- its sign or symbol (designed to “stand in” for the referent), and
- the reference (the thoughts generated by the sign or symbol; in other words, meaning).

Keep in mind, though, that not only are signs and symbols arbitrarily assigned to their referents, but the subsequent references (meanings) are constructed and negotiated, and they vary given the context. So, the triangle of meaning may show the linkage between referent, sign/symbol, and reference as pretty straightforward, but there is a great deal of individual and cultural experience that goes into forging those connections. American history offers a famous example. When the Founders of the United States determined that the country’s Great Seal would feature the bald eagle as its centerpiece, they wanted to link the United States (referent), the eagle (symbol), and bravery (reference). But Ben Franklin, in a letter to his daughter, confessed that he could not make the same connections. “The turkey is in comparison,” he wrote, “a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America. . . . He is besides, though a little vain & silly, a bird of courage” (in Lepore, 2022, p. 17). Franklin connected the United States (referent), the turkey (symbol), and reference (bravery) in a much different and personally meaningful way than did his colonial colleagues. Nonetheless, American culture seems to have decided that it prefers the eagle to the turkey as a national symbol.

FIGURE 1.5 ■ Ogden and Richards’s Triangle of Meaning



Source: Adapted from Ogden, C. K., & Richards, I. A. [1923]. *The meaning of meaning*. Harcourt, Brace. p. 11. Image credit: iStock.com/Hennadii

Franklin was arguing that the turkey would better symbolize (be a better stand-in for) his new nation, so he presented his version of the “facts” to his daughter. And this is one of the most important lessons of the triangle of meaning. Although communication can be **representational**—describing or conveying some objective fact or information—it is almost always **presentational**—*someone’s version* of the facts or information. In other words, someone connects

referent and symbol in a specific way—*presents them*—to produce meaning. For example, consider how a group of friends attending the same stadium concert will communicate their experience of that event on social media. They are at the same observable, objective event—the concert—but how is the reality of that event represented in their Instagram posts? It is represented by the images and stories they choose for *presentation*. Where do they point their phones? Some may take videos of the band in full performance mode. Others might post images facing away from the stage, showing people’s faces as they sing along. Another may give you the story of Chris, sprawled across several empty seats, asleep. These choices will produce specific meanings. Your friends’ various accounts of the concert are an example of the meaning triangle in action: the connection between referent (the event), symbol (the material chosen for inclusion), and reference (resulting thoughts) will be different for different friends enjoying the same event.



What does this presentation say about the enthusiasm fans showed at this concert? The reality has been presented through the choice (camera angle) made by the photographer.

Daniel Knighton/Getty Images Entertainment/via Getty Images

The same thing happens when you are communicating face-to-face. For example, when classmates ask you how you did on an exam, how do you respond? You *present* your version of your performance to suggest a specific reality. Yes, you could respond representationally, for example, offering the grade itself with little inflection in your voice, “Got an 89.” But more than likely you would say (present) that score somewhat shyly, concerned that your colleagues might not have done as well as you. Or, delighted by your unexpected success, you might boldly present the 89, as in “89! Nailed it!” If you are indeed concerned about your classmates’ feelings, you might do what students typically do: you matter-of-factly present your performance as, “I did OK.” The words and actions (symbol) standing in for your grade (referent) are designed to produce a specific meaning for your friends (reference). In fact, just as there are scholars who argue that there has been no communication unless there is change in the participants, many communication experts also believe that communication is always presentational, always designed to effect new thought, to produce that change, even if the goal is as benign as getting your conversational partners to be more comfortable in your presence or to like you more (Hauser, 1986).

PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATION

What do you do with your skill as a communicator? Do you try to make the people around you comfortable when talking with them? How do you make meaning for and of yourself when you engage others and the larger culture? Do you use your role as others' looking glass to help them see a better self? How well do you interact with people who are unlike you? Do you gravitate to people who look a certain way? How would you respond to some friends' racist description of that new sophomore in the front row? What you do and say will tell them not only who you think they are but who *you* are.

In the "Personally Responsible Communication" features throughout this book, you will be asked to consider just how much responsibility you carry when you communicate. Because communication is so natural and seemingly routine, it is easy to be a lazy or care-less communicator. It's easy to be inattentive to the meanings we make and those others make of us. But if you truly understand this book's philosophy, you know that while communication can often be complex and its responsible use sometimes difficult, you are what you communicate.

COMMUNICATION, PERCEPTION, IDENTITY . . . AND POWER

But why do you care what your classmates think about your performance on the test? Just as important, you did great, so why should you worry about protecting their feelings? You care because your identity—who you are—is transacted through communication. Regardless of who you might think you are, if you boast about your grade with little concern for others' feelings, they will perceive you as not very nice, as will others who might witness your behavior. Then it really doesn't matter who *you* think you are; to the world you are not nice. Knowingly or otherwise, you use communication to shape others' perceptions of who you are because, like it or not, intentional or not, *you are what you communicate*. Just as important, you are always, simultaneously, all your many identities. Depending on the context and content of your communication, sometimes one or more of these identities is more relevant and visible to you and those around you. Is the self you project on LinkedIn the same as your TikTok, Twitter, or Reddit self? Do you present those different selves based on other users' expectations of you?

There are several ways to examine the relationships between communication, perception, and identity, each highlighting a different aspect of those connections. We'll look at two—symbolic interaction and frame analysis—each of which adds something a little different to our understanding of these relationships.

Symbolic Interaction and the Looking Glass

Sociologist George Herbert Mead offered **symbolic interaction** as a way to understand how people's sense of self develops from their ongoing, interlinked conversations in and with a culture. His book *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934) explains that meaning (mind) and identity (self) arise in the context of culture (society). "Through a social process," wrote philosopher Charles Morris as he explained Mead's thinking, "the biologic individual of proper organic stuff gets a mind and a self. Through society the impulsive animal becomes a rational animal, a man [*sic*] . . . [Through] the social process of communication, the individual gains the mechanism of reflective thought . . . acquires the ability to make himself an object to himself and . . . becomes a moral individual" (1959, pp. xxv–xxvi).

Mead suggested that, to understand this concept, we can look at how people learn to play baseball or other team sports. We don't go online to learn how to field a ground ball deep in the hole or get a good break on a fly ball to right field. What actually happens is we learn to play through observing and interacting with our teammates, our competitors, and the game itself. Because we don't all play the same position, we each learn our specific role within the larger team and game. We accept our teammates' comments, encouragement, and criticism; and if the team plays well, we enjoy our newly negotiated role as a productive member of the group. Now that this role provides us with the ability to control our behavior (play better; be a better teammate) and garner the support and affection of those around us, we internalize that role, and our identity becomes bound up in it. We come to value ourselves to the extent that our role is respected by others.



You don't read a book on how to be a good teammate; you learn from playing the game.

Boston Globe/via Getty Images

Of course, in real life we play on many teams, that is, we have many different roles across the many different situations in which we find ourselves. You may be a ballplayer, but you may also be a marketing major, a conservative, a store clerk, and an atheist. In each of those different situations, you *take the role of others with whom you interact*—that is, you put yourself in others' positions and imagine how they perceive you, how they expect you to behave. Mead identified two important *others*:

- the *significant other*—influential people in the different situations in which you find yourself
- the *generalized other*—your sense of how others see you

To imagine how these two others affect your behavior, consider: What kind of friend are you? Everyone knows what *friend* means; it is a word or symbol with a strong cultural meaning. But you have known people who have shown themselves to be *real* friends, especially, say, your

older sister (significant other), so you may try to act as she does (role taking). For this, your pals often commend you on your worth as a friend (generalized other). This process of creation and maintenance of identity is known as the **Looking Glass Self**; the self is accomplished by seeing ourselves as others see us, that is, as others perceive who we are. There is a well-known quote sometimes attributed to Mead, sometimes to another early sociologist, Charles Cooley (1902): “I am not what I think I am and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think that you think I am.” This quote also suggests how complex (and complicated) communication, even a simple conversation between two friends, can be. It tells us that there are not simply two people communicating (Cooley, 1902). There are actually six “selves” involved in all interactions:

- You
- The Other
- What You think of the Other
- What the Other thinks of You
- What You think the Other thinks of You
- What the Other thinks You think of Them

Imagine buying a new car. You’re in the salesroom with the salesperson. You size her up as she sizes you up. You try to figure out what she thinks about you in order to present your best case for a better price; all the while, she is wondering what you’re thinking about her and her sales pitch in order to get you to pay as much as possible for the car. You can easily identify the operation of the six selves in any interaction. Try it out using the situation of asking someone out for a date or convincing your manager to give you Monday off so you can have a long weekend.

Mead borrowed Cooley’s ideas to make his central point: we can only experience ourselves in relation to others, and we do that through communication. We communicate, Mead explained, through the mutual work we undertake in assigning meaning not only to ourselves

but also to the symbols (including ourselves) that surround us. He called these symbols **social objects**, that is, any objects to which we can refer in order to make meaning. In this way Mead makes the final significant point of symbolic interaction: identity, as the most basic social object that makes communication possible, is not only created, defined, and maintained through interaction with the social world, it is performed in that world for others to see. Have you ever watched your own Instagram stories or practiced a speech in front of a mirror? If so, you were performing your identity to determine how others would perceive or make meaning of it. As William Shakespeare noted, we are all performers: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”



We see ourselves in the looking glass created by our interactions with others.

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Frame Analysis

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) uses that same theater analogy to make a subtly different point. Where Mead wanted us to know that we constitute our identities through interaction

with others, Goffman stresses that in our everyday lives we readily and routinely learn to *perform* those identities as presentations of our different selves. To combine an idea we have already discussed with Goffman's ideas, we use communication, which is *presentational*, to *present* ourselves. "What talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient," he wrote, "but to present dramas to an audience. Indeed, it seems that we spend most of our time not engaged in giving information but in giving shows" (1974, p. 508).

To Goffman, the various situations or settings in which we find ourselves are different scenes in a play, and we, life's actors, carry on different performances to let our audiences know who we are. But how do we know which role (identity) is appropriate at a given time and situation? Just as actors do in a play, we look for cues. Goffman calls his theory **frame analysis** because the cues alerting us to the proper role we should play are embedded in what he calls **frames**—a specific set of expectations we use to make sense of the specific social situation we find ourselves in at a given time. As a close reader, you can see that frames and schemas share many similarities. No one tells you to don your student identity as you enter a classroom for the first time in a new semester. No one has to give you your lines or tell you what your motivation is. You enter the room, see the rows of chairs and desks, and notice an individual standing at the front. Your classroom frame directs you to raise your hand to ask a question and not to interrupt when that individual is speaking. You know why you're there and what is expected of you. In fact, whether you're from the country or the city, an athlete or a sorority member, your identity is that of student as long as you maintain that frame.



What is this place? What role do you play in it? What cues do you see that can help you answer these questions?

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But what happens when your professor begins addressing you and your classmates informally, telling a lot of jokes? You use that cue to make meaning of the changing situation, adjusting your character, presenting a variation on your student role that might be more in line with how you see yourself. You **upshift**; you frame the situation as less serious, more open to personal expression. But one of your classmates goes a bit too far, referring to the professor by an unflattering nickname. Your instructor becomes stern. You **downshift**, framing the changing situation as more serious, less open to expressions of your personal identity.

We easily upshift and downshift, allowing us to fine-tune our presentations of self, because we are skilled at reading **social cues** in interactions. How do we learn to interpret or make meaning from those cues? Mead would respond, “Through communication with the various others with whom we interact.” But Goffman returns to the stage analogy to investigate the question raised by that answer: If we are actors upon a stage, interacting with many different people, identifying many different significant others, each of us framing different situations and reading social cues in individual, personally meaningful ways, why does there seem to be order to our daily lives? How can we and others coordinate our identities and actions to apparently so easily *mutually* make meaning? We can do this because we share a common set of experiences with those beside us on stage; we share their perceptions. We’ve built those perceptions growing up at home, with friends, in church or temple or mosque, in the schoolyard, and when traveling, reading, listening to music, texting, connecting online, and watching movies and television. Yes, we may each have our individual identities, but we read from much the same script as do the other actors who share our bounded and dominant cultures.



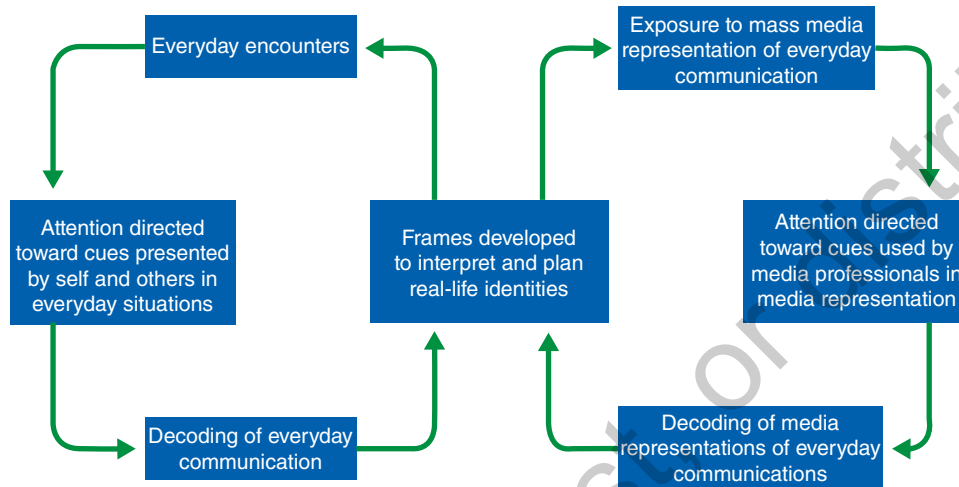
Our classroom frames are built in part from media’s hyper-ritualized representations. What did you come to understand about school from classic TV shows like *Degrassi*?

George Pimentel/WireImage/via Getty Images

We personally encounter all kinds of people and situations in our everyday lives, and the people involved in each interaction choose to present specific, certainly not all, aspects of their identities. We decode—make meaning—of those cues, and they become part of our frame of the situation where that encounter took place. But we also encounter all kinds of people and situations in mass media portrayals. Because of the way those portrayals are constructed (no media portrayal can show every single aspect and nuance of a phenomenon, so Goffman calls them **hyper-ritualized representations** of social actions), our attention is directed to a specific, narrow set of cues. We decode those cues and they, too, become part of our frame of that situation. Return to our classroom example. Yes, your classroom frame has quite a bit of everyday, “real world” experience in its makeup, but it is also composed of a lot of mass media experience as well.

Think of the hundreds of television shows, movies, and books you've read that present people much like yourself in school. What might *Never Have I Ever*, *Euphoria*, *Degrassi*, *Pitch Perfect*, *Old School*, *Animal House*, and the *American Pie* movies have added to your classroom frame (or schema)? Figure 1.6 shows how our experiences with the world, both in human interaction and mass-mediated, combine to constitute the frames we use to choose which identities (and which characteristics of those identities) to perform in different situations.

FIGURE 1.6 ■ Frame Theory Model



SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATION

You interact not only with your friends and family but with layer upon layer of larger groups and institutions. You have different roles in each and every one. You may be a friend and a child, but you may also be an employee, a manager, a patient, a customer or client, a student, a club member, a juror, an official, a citizen, and a voter. In each of these situations you are not simply you. In fact, if there are six selves involved in any face-to-face encounter, imagine how many there are in larger settings, when the expectations placed on you multiply exponentially.

When you work in a group, what identity do you assume? Are you the devil's advocate or the tension releaser? As a supervisor, how do you manage cultural differences that put your employees in conflict? As a working professional, how do you navigate changing understandings of workplace power structures? As a citizen, how do you cast an informed vote? How do you engage in the kind of responsible, inclusive talk that builds and maintains a culture that benefits everyone?

In the chapters ahead, "Socially Responsible Communication" features will ask you to consider just how much responsibility you have to the larger culture around you. In a world as big and complex as ours, it's easy to hide, to take the path of least resistance. But if communication is power, why would you want to cede control to others? Why would you decline the chance to make the world *your* world? The world you inhabit is the world you create. If you work responsibly to make meaning in and of your world, if you are a thoughtful, generous, and inclusive communicator, you will live in a more thoughtful, generous, and inclusive world. This raises the question, then, "How good a communicator are you?" You can see for yourself in this chapter's "Challenge Yourself" feature.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF

Am I a Good Communicator?

Skilled communicators have greater control over the meaning they make of others and that others make of them. They are more in command of themselves and the situations they find themselves in. But what about you? How good a communicator are you? For each statement, give yourself a

1 for **Never**, **2** for **Rarely**, **3** for **Sometimes**, **4** for **Often**, **5** for **Very Often**

After responding to all 15 statements, total your score to see how you rate as a communicator. And remember, your response shouldn't be what you wish were true but how you actually think and act.

1. When talking with others, I anticipate likely causes of confusion and work to avoid them in advance. _____
2. When I talk with people, I try to understand their perspectives. _____
3. I can tell when people haven't understood what I've said. _____
4. When I write an email, I offer as much background information and detail as I can to ensure my message is understood. _____
5. If I don't understand something I've heard, I ask for clarification. _____
6. Because of its convenience and efficiency, I use email to communicate complex issues with others. _____
7. I think about what I'm about to say, hoping to predict how the other person might perceive it. _____
8. I consider likely cultural differences when planning my communication. _____
9. When I finish writing an email, I reread it before sending it. _____
10. When talking to people, I pay attention to their body language. _____
11. Before I communicate with others, I think about what they may need to know and how best to convey it. _____
12. When speaking in public, I use appropriate charts or other visual aids to help express my ideas. _____
13. When in conversation, I think about what I'm going to say next to ensure I correctly get my point across. _____
14. When planning a message, I consider the best way to communicate it (face-to-face, on the phone, by text, via email, and so on). _____
15. To reduce meaning-making errors, I try to help people understand the underlying concepts behind the points I'm trying to make. _____

Scoring

15–35: You need to work at being a better communicator. Communication is a skill that can be learned.

36–55: You're an OK, capable communicator, but you will occasionally run into problems in your meaning making. Work to get better.

56–75: You are a skilled communicator, but don't rest on your laurels. Everyone can get better.

Source: Adapted from MindTools. (n.d.). How good are your communication skills? https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCS_99.htm

Communication's Power

James Grant, who writes under the pen name Lee Child and is best known for his Jack Reacher novels, explains, using language as his example, the power inherent in communication. Arguing

that a half a million years ago “language rescued our species,” he wrote that language is “crucial. A single human was slow and puny. More likely prey, not predator. But a coordinated tribe of, say, 100 humans—organized, drilled, rehearsed—was suddenly the most powerful animal on earth” (2022, p. ST2).

He is correct. Communication is power—the power to control the making of meaning and, therefore, our own identities and realities. Even when we are talking with friends, we want to control the meaning they take from our words. Sometimes we may choose to be vague and ambiguous, but that is still our choice—we *want* the meaning to be unclear.

But of course, communication is much more than talking with friends. We communicate to meet many goals:

- *Be human*—We are all social animals, as dependent on the sight and sound of others as we are on food and water. Communication is our primary means of interaction.
- *Exchange information*—We are all naïve scientists, always exploring new people, places, and things. Communication is our primary tool of discovery.
- *Have influence*—We are always persuading. From vital topics—“This is my version of me”—to those less important—“Let’s go out to eat tonight”—communication is the vehicle for expressing and securing the things we want.
- *Build and maintain relationships*—None of us is an island; we swim in a sea of friends, family, and important others. Communication strengthens those ties as it defines them.
- *Develop and maintain our sense of self*—We know who we are through communication with others. The way people respond to us tells us who they think we are, and we see ourselves, for better or worse, in that reflection. We use communication to make the adjustments we want to make.

In all these instances we have something in mind; we want to be successful. We know that as people make meaning *with* us, they are making meaning *of* us. We want to control others’ perceptions. We all want to be liked, and in line with this chapter’s discussion of identity, others are the looking glass through which we come to see ourselves. Why wouldn’t we want to shape what is reflected?

We’ve also learned in this chapter that the creation of meaning occurs against the backdrop of culture. And although we communicate in and with culture, much of culture’s influence in shaping our meanings comes from the mass media. For example, how does a culture define attractiveness? Even if *you* do not accept your culture’s view of attractiveness, if those around you do, it affects how they see you and, therefore, how you see yourself.

For these reasons, this text devotes space to a variety of communication skills and literacies, both face-to-face and mediated. The world contains other humans. You often have conflict with these people, many of whom come from different cultural backgrounds, making conflict resolution even more difficult. Many people want to persuade you to their point of view, just as you hope to move them to yours. While you are working to make meaning of the world, producers of mass media and social media content encourage you to accept their meanings. Becoming a better communicator gives you greater power as you engage with your world. Social scientist Michael Crotty wrote that “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Before there were consciousnesses on earth capable of interpreting the world, the world held no meaning at all” (1998, p. 43).

CHAPTER REVIEW

Review of Learning Objectives

1.1 Illustrate how communication is the process of mutually creating meaning.

Communication scholars initially conceived of communication as the sending of messages from a source to a receiver. They then added feedback to the model, and eventually interaction and mutual influence, resulting in the transactional perspective—communication changes communicators as they communicate.

Communication is social—it involves people in interaction; it is a process—its parts operate interdependently and continuously; and it is dynamic—it is always changing. The transmissional view sees communication as the mere sending of signals from sources to receivers. The constitutive view sees communication as creating something that did not exist before. The ritual view sees communication as central to the maintenance of society and the representation of shared beliefs.

1.2 Explain how culture influences meaning making and perception.

Communication can occur only when participants share some common experiences. Culture is the set of experiences and expectations we each carry with us wherever we go. Culture shapes the ways we think, feel, and act. As a result, culture forms the backdrop for mutually negotiating new meanings, thus creating even more shared experiences. Perception involves *selection*, *organization*, and *interpretation* as we interact with our environments. We use schemas, active collections of past reactions or of past experiences, to organize the flood of information we perceive in order to interpret it meaningfully.

1.3 Investigate how signs and symbols are created, maintained, and used to make meaning.

Signs signal the presence of something specific, more or less an objective substitute for that thing. Symbols are more arbitrary indicators of something else. While the meanings attached to both signs and symbols are arbitrary, the meanings attached to symbols are more open to negotiation and more dependent on the context in which they are used. This connection between signs and symbols and their referents helps explain that while communication can be representational (describing or conveying some objective fact or information) it is almost always presentational (someone's version of the facts or information).

1.4 Analyze the relationships between perception, communication, identity, and power.

Because we cannot possibly make meaning of the flood of stimuli that surrounds us, we selectively perceive pieces of data that are personally and situationally relevant. We organize these into schemas that shape our perceptions and identities. Symbolic interaction and frame analysis demonstrate the idea that the self is constituted through interaction with others (the Looking Glass Self). We readily and routinely learn to perform our identities as presentations of our different selves by building frames for different situations. Communication is power—the power to control meaning making and, therefore, our own identities and realities. We also communicate to be human, to exchange information, to build and maintain relationships, and to have influence.

KEY TERMS

bounded cultures (co-cultures)
communication

constitutive view
culture

decoding	representational (communication)
dominant culture (mainstream culture)	ritual view
downshift	schemas
encoding	sign
feedback	social cues
frame analysis	social objects
frames	source
hyper-ritualized representations	source-dominated model
linear model	stereotype
Looking Glass Self	symbol
medium	symbolic interaction
noise	transactional model
perception	transmissional view
presentational (communication)	upshift
receiver	

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What distinguishes the linear and transactional models of communication? What are the elements of each?
2. What are the four types of noise? Give an example of each.
3. What differentiates the transmissional view of communication from the constitutive and ritual views?
4. How do you define *culture*? How does it limit and liberate, differentiate and unite, and define our realities? What are dominant and bounded cultures?
5. What are the elements involved in perception?
6. Is it possible to *not* communicate? Explain.
7. What are the elements of the meaning triangle? How do they interact to produce meaning?
8. Is communication primarily representational or presentational? Explain your answer.
9. What are *symbolic interaction* and the *Looking Glass Self*? How do they relate?
10. What are the elements of frame analysis, and how do they operate to shape our understandings of ourselves?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree that there must be change in the participants for communication to have occurred? If so, describe a conversation you had with someone in which you walked away seemingly changed for the better.
2. If you've ever spent time in a culture, dominant or bounded, not your own, what did you do to make meaning of the situation and others in it? Initially, these situations often make

people uncomfortable; how did you manage to overcome any discomfort you may have experienced?

3. Ben Franklin didn't like the eagle as the symbol for the United States, so he proposed the turkey. You don't think either makes sense. So identify the animal you think would be a better choice and, using the logic of the meaning triangle, explain your decision.
4. Can you test your own experience on a sports team or club against Mead's baseball analogy?
How did you learn your identity among your colleagues? How did you come to define your specific role? Who were the significant others? Why were they important to you? What did you learn from them about membership in the team or club? About yourself?

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