PART I

Communication Foundations

1 The Communication Process

CHAPTER OUTLINE

CHAPTER GOALS

At the completion of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Define communication.
- Clarify the elements in the communication process.
- Explain and differentiate among the primary models of communication.
- Recount important turning points in the history of the communication field.
- Illustrate the destructive side of communication.
- Elucidate three ethical systems as they apply to communication.

COMMUNICATION ENCOUNTER: SOFIA CONTEDARAS

Sofia Contedaras hummed along to the music on her phone as she walked into the Federal One Bank building. She loved her job as the personal assistant to Frank Padillo, the bank's president. He was easy to work for and the bank's mission to remain in the Latinx neighborhood where Sofia had grown up was very appealing. She smiled and nodded to the security guard whom she saw every day. She turned off her music when she felt her cell vibrate. She opened a text from her husband saying he would pick up their children at the childcare center immediately after work.

As Sofia settled down at her desk, she checked her email. The first message destroyed her good mood. It was a directive from Mr. Padillo instructing her to send the following message to the head of Human Resources:

> As a result of downsizing and consolidations in the banking industry and the increase of Internet banking by many of our customers, I regret to inform you that by the end of the fiscal year, we must reduce the teller staff by half. Please see me immediately so we can strategize for this personnel change.

Sofia felt very nervous; just a month ago her niece was hired as a teller at the bank because of Sofia's recommendation. Also, several of her close friends at work were tellers. After seeing the memo, Sofia wasn't sure what to do, and she was beginning to feel a little sick. So many questions were swirling in her head. And, she couldn't help but imagine the toll that the lay-offs would take on the workers and their families.

It's not possible to go through a day without communication. From the moment we wake up to the sound of our phone alarm to the time we go to sleep listening to our favorite music, we are engaging in communication. Just think about the variety of communication activities you participate in on a daily basis. For instance, at home, television commercials tell you to buy more products, and you may get into an argument with a family member about conspicuous consumption. If you work, you receive memos and emails about the job, and you may engage in some conflict with colleagues about the best way to fulfill a boss's expectations. At school you listen to lectures and chat with friends, and you may find yourself in an internal debate about whether to study or party. At any time, you may receive texts informing you of what friends are doing, where you should meet them, and so forth. If you attend a house of worship, you'll have quiet, reflective moments with your own thoughts, and you'll also enter into conversations with others about committee work, retreat planning, or to discuss the topic of the service. What other communication activities do you encounter daily? Which ones have you engaged in today already?

In our opening vignette, Sofia hasn't said a word to anyone, but she's listened to her music, exchanged a smile and nod with the security guard, read a text from her husband, looked at her email, and thought to herself about these events. Communication surrounds Sofia (and each of us) since verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors are central to all aspects of our lives.

Even though we constantly communicate, we're not always clear about the definition of communication; sometimes we may interpret it one way and other times we'll use a different interpretation. A friend may think all behavior is communication while you believe that communication only occurs when two people understand each other. Communication is a complex process that isn't easy to define, just like most abstract concepts that are integral to human experience. When a concept is as all encompassing as communication, it may have different meanings in different situations. In this chapter, we provide a general definition for communication that allows us to use it across multiple contexts. We'll also explain the definition's critical components as well as some background and fundamental issues that affect how we understand and use communication. In doing so, we hope to develop a common interpretation of this important, yet frequently misunderstood, behavior. This interpretation forms a framework for the rest of the text.

Background

To begin our exploration of communication, we first define it, and the key terms that make up the definition. Then we discuss the concept of intentionality as it relates to defining communication. Next we examine four communication models that aid our understanding of the communication process. Finally, in this section, we briefly survey the history of the communication field.

Definition of Terms

The word communication comes from a Latin word meaning "to make common", and this sense of common or shared meaning resonates through most definitions that researchers and communicators themselves utilize. With this in mind, we offer our definition of communication: **Communication** is a transactional process using symbols to create (shared) meaning. Four critical components comprise this definition:

- process
- transaction
- symbols
- meaning

We will address each in turn.

When we state that communication is a **process**, we mean that it's an ongoing, unending activity that's always changing. Our communication encounters have no beginnings or endings. Of course, we turn our tablets on and off, we start and stop talking on the phone, and we strike up conversations and then walk out of the room when we've finished. But the processual nature of communication alerts us to the fact that these are temporary (and somewhat arbitrary) beginnings and endings. In other words, a specific communication encounter is always conditioned by what took place before it and what will take place afterwards. In the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, we see that Sofia is thinking about her relationship with the bank president she works for, the recommendation she gave that resulted in her niece's job at the bank, her friends who work as tellers, and the directive the president has just given her. She reflects on what will happen in the future based on past communication she's engaged in with a variety of people. Further, in the background of her immediate problems at work, she's also thinking about her family and how she and her husband are dividing childcare responsibilities.

Our focus on process also suggests that individuals change, and the cultures in which they live also change. For instance, contemporary US society is significantly different than US society in the 1950s. The climate of the United States in the 1950s was characterized by postwar euphoria and colored by fears about communism. The feminist movement of the 1970s and the #MeToo movement of 2017 both had yet to occur, and for many white middle-class families, gender roles were traditional. Women's roles consisted of caretaking for children and nurturing others, whereas men's roles were predominantly those of financial providers. These roles influenced decision making in various families (Turner & West, 2018). Further, women's roles in the workplace were generally subordinate to men's, and the term "sexual harassment" wasn't in the vocabulary. However, today, roles in the family are less rigid, and workplaces are focusing on eliminating gender inequities. This cultural shift underscores a process view; changing times indicate that we cannot completely understand US communication in the twenty-first century using models from the twentieth century. The same is true of other cultures, of course. In 2006, Hugh Cortazzi wrote in the *Japan Times* that over time Japanese culture has undergone multiple changes resulting in alterations in class, economic, and family structure, as well as employment practices. All of these shifts affect communication in Japan (Cortazzi, 2006).

Change is easy to understand when examining something like gender roles over time in the US or comparing the cultural climate in Japan in the 1900s to contemporary Japan. But, it's important to remember that calling communication a process also includes subtle changes. These changes occur daily (or hourly) and we often don't notice them at the time. You aren't the same person today as you were yesterday because all today's

experiences have influenced you and caused changes – you learned something new, a friend surprised you, or you spent time with an old friend who reminded you of things you hadn't thought about for a while. Sometimes large changes occur in a day – you graduate, get a job, break up with a partner, lose a parent – and it's very obvious that change has occurred, and likely changed you. But, large or small, change is always occurring. Saying that communication is a process highlights the fact that we can't hold it still; it's too dynamic.

The second component of our definition states that the communication process is a **transactional** one. This means that communication involves simultaneous messages between or among communicators. Although people usually don't speak at the same time, they send nonverbal messages while another speaks. In addition, a transactional approach argues that communicators essentially create one another through communication. Think about a professor whose classes you enjoy. You think this professor is bright, funny, student-centered, and approachable. You are shocked to learn that your friend thinks the professor is arrogant, biased, and self-centered. You and your friend had different transactions with the professor and these transactions "created" different personas.

The third component of our definition is symbols. **Symbols** are arbitrary labels or representations for phenomena. Words are symbols for ideas and objects – for instance, in the English language *hate* stands for the concept of extreme dislike and the word *desk* represents the thing we sit at to do work. As you see from this example, symbols can be **abstract** (symbols that represent a concept or idea like *hate*) or **concrete** (symbols that represent a specific event or object like *desk*). To expand, the concrete symbol "car" depicts a vehicle. The abstract symbol of "democracy," however, doesn't refer to a specific thing. Although the word "car" can represent a lot of different types of cars (e.g., Mercedes, Toyota), all the objects represented are tangible. Democracy, in contrast, is not a material or physical concept and has no one specific referent.

Symbols (especially abstract symbols) may be ambiguous. For example, Beth asks "How do you like my haircut?" And Angie replies "It's *unique*." The word "unique" is ambiguous because Beth is free to choose whether Angie liked, disliked, or wasn't sure about the haircut. If the response was, "It looks great!" there would be less ambiguity. Finally, symbols are agreed upon by a group of people. The group can be large, such as an entire country (e.g., Germany, Iran), or small, such as a family. People who are outside of the group may not understand the symbols used within a particular group. The immediate members of a specific family will understand the in-joke "only Grandma knows the recipe" while those who are outside of the family may not completely understand its meaning, even though they can define the words. One way that people are socialized into a group is by learning its jargon or unique language (Becker-Ho, 2015). In Chapter 4, we discuss this issue further.

Meaning is the fourth component of our definition and it's especially important to understand because **meaning** is what people make out of a message, and shared meaning is usually considered the goal of communication. As you will learn in Chapter 4, words or symbols alone have no meaning; people attribute meaning to them. For example, if you spoke in English asking a French speaker for directions to the post office, you will have provided a message, but someone who speaks only French won't be able to make any meaning out of the message. One of the complexities in defining communication has to do with whether to include messages that don't create shared meaning as part of communication. Do you think misunderstandings, and failed explanations, equal communication?

Meaning can also be understood as existing on two levels: *content* and *relationship* (Segrin, 2015; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The content level refers to the literal meaning of a message. If you ask your professor where the final exam will be held, the literal level of that message is a request for information about the exam's location. The relationship level has to do with the relationship that exists between the communicators. If you ask the question of your professor in a deferential tone while smiling, the relationship that is being communicated is one of power difference and, possibly, respect. If you snap the question out and frown at your professor while asking, the relationship-level meaning being communicated is one of dislike and disrespect. The content level remains the same but the relationship level changes in this example.

Our definition of communication stresses that it is a transactional process dependent on symbols that make meaning between people. Although the goal is shared meaning, misunderstandings happen so frequently that we do include them as communication, albeit poor communication. One element that is not mentioned in our definition, however, is **intentionality**, or whether a communicator means to send a particular message. Scholars debate about whether messages that are sent unintentionally actually qualify as communication.

Communication and Intentionality

An ongoing question related to the definition of communication relates to intentionality. The question, "Is all behavior communication?" is at the heart of this debate in the communication field. Suppose during a job interview with Ms. Thomas, Anthony Wells avoided eye contact with her and his voice quivered a bit. He twisted his hands in his lap and tapped his foot repeatedly. Can Anthony's shifting eye contact, vocal nervousness, and other distracting nonverbals be considered communication? Or, are Anthony's behaviors simply manifestations of his nervousness that he was unaware of and did not intend Ms. Thomas to notice?

Gerald Miller and Mark Steinberg (1975) comment that communication only exists when it's intentional. They define the communication process this way:

> *We have chosen to restrict our discussion of communication to intentional symbolic transactions: those in which at least one of the parties transmits a message to another with the intent of modifying the other's behavior. . . . by our definition, intent to communicate and intent to influence are synonymous. If there is no intent, there is no message. (p. 15)*

However, other scholars argue that this interpretation is too limited and narrows the definition of communication too much.

In the 1950s, a group of researchers and theorists from different disciplines including communication, anthropology, and psychiatry, got together to study communication. They met in Palo Alto, California (home of Stanford University) and are known as the Palo Alto group. They worked to establish a common understanding about the communication process. One central (and provocative) outcome from their theoretical discussions is the phrase: "One cannot not communicate" (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). What they meant is we are continually communicating; even if we aren't saying a word or intending to convey a message. Anthony's shifting eye contact in our previous example would be communication according to the Palo Alto group.

You may be thinking that there are inherent challenges pertaining to the view espoused by the Palo Alto group. First, if *everything* is considered to be communication – all verbal and nonverbal behaviors – then studying communication in a thoughtful and organized way seems impossible. If everything is defined as communication, it's hard to consider communication a field of study. One of the first things scholars do to carve out a field of study is to define their object of study. They accomplish this by disentangling their focus of study from all other related things so they can discuss it clearly. An important question for us as communication scholars is: how does communication behavior differ from all other behavior?

One of the early pioneers associated with the Palo Alto group later clarified their initial claim. Janet Beavin-Bavelas (1990) stated that "all behavior is not communicative, although it may be informative" (p. 599). Our position is in this tradition. All behavior has communicative potential, but communication exists in a more intentional format. To establish and share meaning, some intention is required although unintended behaviors (i.e. smiling nervously) may affect the process of establishing and sharing meaning.

Four Communication Models

As you have seen, defining communication is a complicated task. We continue our efforts to interpret communication by drawing upon what theorists call **models of communication** (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). Models allow us to understand the complex process of communication by creating a visual representation of it. A model freezes the

process (it's a little bit like understanding swimming by looking at a photograph of a swimmer) so it's incomplete, but it helps us get a handle on some of the important aspects of communication encounters. We present three traditional models of communication (linear, interactional, transactional) and then provide a fourth model (holistic) we've created using components from other researchers. This fourth model maps more of the complexity of communication than do the earlier three by including more components of the process. This fourth model provides the approach we use throughout this book. We begin our discussion with the oldest model as it represents early thinking about communication.

Linear Model

More than 50 years ago, two men, one a Bell Telephone scientist and the other a Sloan Cancer Research Foundation consultant, looked at how information passed through various channels (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). They viewed communication as information transmission that transpired in a linear fashion. This approach essentially frames communication as unidirectional: transmitting a message to a destination (think of someone throwing a ball to another person). Shannon and Weaver's research resulted in the creation of the **linear model of communication** (see Figure 1.1).

The linear model is based on five components:

- sender
- message
- channel
- receiver
- noise

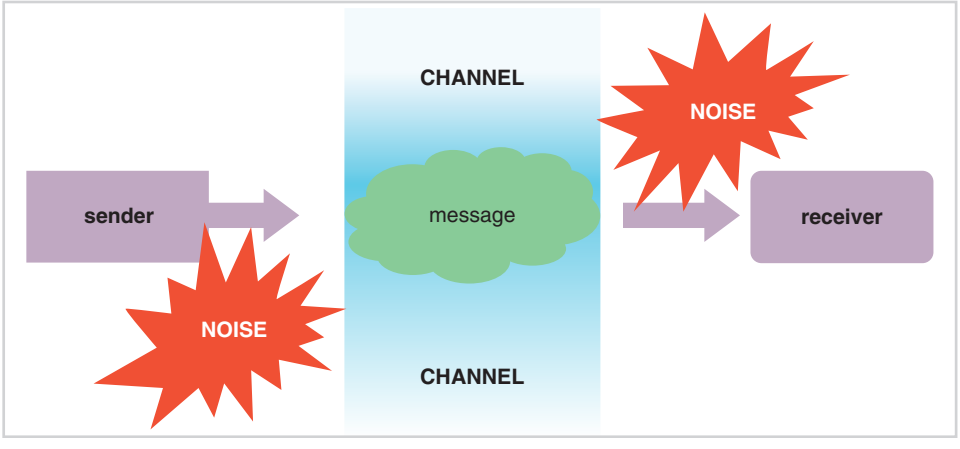

Figure 1.1 Linear Model of Communication