



LordHenriVoton/Getty Images

# 1

## AN OVERVIEW OF COMMUNICATION

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- 1.1 Explain what is meant by everyday communication and the relational perspective.
- 1.2 Describe how communication is symbolic.
- 1.3 Describe how meaning is established.
- 1.4 Explain how communication is influenced by cultural context.
- 1.5 Explain how communication is relational.
- 1.6 Describe the use of communication frames.
- 1.7 Explain what it means to view communication as both representational and presentational.
- 1.8 Explain what it means to view communication as a transaction, rather than as a mere action or as an interaction.

Communication scholars become very agitated when people refer to their discipline as “communications” (note the *s*), but nobody else can tell the difference. Well, we are here to tell you (as people say to others these days) that communications is about wires, cables, TV screens, information technology, and the electronics by means of which communication (no *s*) is carried out. Both may be important in their own ways and to their own geeks, but this book is about the activity of communicating with other people rather than about the electronics that may convey and conduct communication sometimes. We are your “no-*s*” authors Teve Duck and David Travi McMahan. When we talk about media and technology, we are focused not on the physics and electronics (communications with an *s*) but on what people convey to one another using those means.

So we are focused on communication with no *s*.

Can you think of anything important in your life that does not involve communication? In reality, we believe that communication and understanding of other people are essential components of life for the human social animal. Just consider some of the areas covered in this book. Although the topics are often listed in textbooks as friendships and romantic relationships, social media, cultures, personal and public influence, families, health care, and the workplace, every one of them invokes communication and is impossible without it. If you think about any of them, you must also think about communication.

We are passionate about the study of communication, and we believe very strongly that everyone can benefit from knowing more about the ways that communication works or can go wrong. We wrote this book because we believe that everyone needs to know more about communication. *Communication in Everyday Life* will help you better understand—and even improve—your life through better understanding of this key thread of the fabric of human life.

In this initial chapter, we will examine the concept and scope of communication. You will likely discover that something you have been skillfully doing all your life is more complex than it appears. You will also discover that communication is more than just sending and receiving symbols (something we will soon discuss). It is actually a lot more than just sending and receiving messages or symbols. To get things started, we will discuss two primary features of this textbook: *everyday communication* and our *relational perspective*.

## EXPLORING COMMUNICATION: EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION AND THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In introductory chapters such as this one, you might expect the primary subject to be defined, given that we have already distinguished it from communications with an *s*. In this case, you might be looking for an authoritative definition of *communication* that may very well show up on an examination you will take in the near future. Well, here is one you might like: *Communication* is the transactional use of symbols, influenced, guided, and understood in the context of relationships. Actually, that definition is not half bad, but it does not really do justice to what communication really entails. It already introduces some terms and concepts that need unpacking, and we will work through them as we go.

A number of definitions of communication are out there, and many of those definitions are very acceptable. Five decades ago, Dance and Larson (1976) compiled a list of 126 definitions of *communication* appearing in communication scholarship.

One fact that makes the study of communication unique, compared with, say, inorganic chemistry, is that you have been conscious of communicating your entire life. Your previous experience with this topic can be beneficial, because you will be able to draw from this experience as well as from relationships and events in your own life when studying the material. You will even be able to apply the material—and, we hope, improve your communication abilities and life in general along the way.

The drawback to previous experience is that people may not see the value in studying something that is such a common part of life. You may even be asking the “big deal” questions: What is so problematic about communication? Why bother to explain it? Don’t people know what it is about and how it works? Communication is just about sending messages, right?

True: Most of the time, people communicate without thinking, and it is not usually awkward. However, if communicating is so easy, why do people have misunderstandings, conflicts, arguments, disputes, and disagreements? Why do people get embarrassed because they have said something thoughtless? Why are allegations of sexual harassment sometimes denied vigorously, and how can there ever be doubt whether one person intentionally touched another person inappropriately—and what makes something “appropriate” and to whom? Why are some family members such a problem, and what is it about their communication that makes them difficult? Why is communication via email or text message so easy to misunderstand? None of these problems would occur if people who asked the previous “big deal” questions were right.

### Thinking About Communication

When first coming to the study of communication, many people assume that communication simply involves the sending of messages from person to person through the spoken word, written or texted messages, SMS updates, or TikTok posts. That basic view has some truth to it, but communication involves a lot more than the action of merely transmitting information from Person A to Person B.



Is communication simply the exchange of messages?

©iStockphoto.com/Wavebreak



As you read this chapter, you will likely start to recognize that communication is more complex than it initially appears. Let's begin by examining a common situation, a restaurant server speaking to customers:

*"Hi! My name is Chris, and I'll be your server today. Our special is a bowl of soup for \$7.95. If you have any questions about the menu, let me know."*

What you may already suppose about communication before studying it formally may be somewhat obvious in this example. Words are being used to convey information from one person to another person. Upon closer inspection, however, much more activity is taking place in this basic proclamation.

The message is made up of words or symbols, which are used to allow one idea or representation to stand for something else. Taken-for-granted cultural assumptions are being made when these symbols are selected. "Menu" rather than "a list of all the food that we prepare, cook, and serve in this restaurant for you to choose for your meal" is said because it is assumed the customer will know the code word *menu* and its meaning in a restaurant rather than its meaning on a computer screen. If you are a member of a culture in which this sort of interaction is common, it all likely makes sense.

The server's message may also make sense because you know how to perform/communicate "restaurant," yet comments are appropriate only in some places and at some times. If Chris were standing in the middle of a park screaming those words at everyone who passed by, you would likely think: "Mentally unstable." They also work appropriately only at the beginning of the interaction, not during the meal or when the customer is leaving the restaurant.

Notice also how the message makes the interaction work in a particular way, setting up one person (server) in a particular kind of relationship with the other person (customer) while setting up that relationship as friendly and casual ("Hi," not "A thousand welcomes, great ones. Command me as you will, and I shall obey"). The single word does a lot of work to set up the nature of the subsequent interaction.

You have built-in expectations about the relationship between a server and a customer. You already know and take for granted that these relational differences exist in restaurants and that restaurants have "servers" who generally carry out instructions of "customers." Therefore, you expect the customer will be greeted, treated with some respect by the server, told what "the special" is, and asked to make choices. You know the customer will eventually pay for the food and that the server is there not only to bring food, water, the check, and change but also to help resolve any difficulties understanding the menu. Chris will answer any questions about the way the food is prepared or help if you need to find the restrooms. Chris will not, however, offer to polish your shoes or read you a bedtime story. All participants in the scenario understand that such tasks are outside the scope of "restaurant server." Both the customer and the server take this for granted and build it into their communication; it is a cultural as well as a relational element of communication.

This relatively brief encounter also demonstrates that communication is more than just the pronouncement of messages. It may appear as though a simple message (involving the greeting, the speaker's name and job, their relationship to you, and the nature of the special on the menu) is being sent to the customer. Beyond the transmission of a simple message, however, something will take place as a result of the message being sent. Further, worlds of meaning are being created, and personal perspectives are being displayed. Additional issues such as gender, status, power, and politeness are being negotiated. All of these things and much more are taking place within this simple declaration of a message.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will introduce and begin our initial discussion of seven key characteristics of communication: (1) Communication is symbolic, (2) communication requires meaning, (3) communication is cultural, (4) communication is relational, (5) communication



involves “frames,” (6) communication is both presentational and representational, and (7) communication is a transaction. Examining these characteristics will provide a better understanding of what communication and its study really involve. Before doing so, though, we need to talk about what makes this textbook different from other textbooks—and more beneficial to you.

## Everyday Communication

One thing making this book different from other communication textbooks is its focus on *everyday communication*. Communication studies have traditionally focused on the “big” moments or seemingly extraordinary events of human interaction. These instances include initial encounters, betrayals, disclosure of secret information, family upheavals, and other dramatic experiences you may occasionally encounter during your lifetime. These events may be memorable, but they do not make up most of a person’s lived experiences. For instance, romantic relationships only rarely feature moments in which partners hold hands, gaze into one another’s eyes, and share their deepest darkest secrets and declarations of unending love. The rest of the time they may be chatting, eating pizza together, or planning a trip.

The focus on major events distorts the representation of human experience, just as the idea that humans were once cave dwellers distorts the realities by focusing on an unrepresentative sample of evidence. We know about cave people only because their remains and habitats survived to be analyzed. Those who lived in grass huts or on riverbanks did not leave traces for us to examine. This “survivor bias” leads researchers to a distorted picture because they focus *not* on *all* the evidence but only on the evidence that remains for their attention. It has survived to be explored or, in the case of Communication Big Events, can be readily reproducible in the laboratory. Routine—even boring—everyday conversation can’t; or at least its study does not attract large grants. Nevertheless, what makes us human is that we chat about topics that are often mundane.

In actuality, most interactions of romantic partners are of the everyday, seemingly ordinary, or even seemingly dull variety that nevertheless keeps the relationship polished and functioning. These events are much more like the necessary and repeated but boring jobs of doing the dishes or vacuuming the apartment than the memorable one-off events like throwing a wild party or going on vacation to Paris. This everyday communication might include brief conversations as we get ready for work or school, a short text between classes or during a break, talking while eating a quick lunch, sending a Viber message or reading a subreddit, or FaceTiming while watching video clips online. The content of these conversations is seemingly trivial and may include topics such as schedules, weather, what to eat, what to watch online, what bills need paying, or the even source of a foul odor.

Everyday communication may not always be memorable, but it happens to be very important. Major portions of a person’s life take shape through routine, seemingly mundane, everyday communication. Everyday communication creates, maintains, challenges, and alters relationships and identities as well as enacting culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, meaning, and even reality. Everyday communication should be studied not just because of its frequency in our lives but also because extraordinary things happen through everyday communication. We are not saying that big moments are not worthy of attention, but they are by definition big—and rare—and unrepresentative of most communication in everyday life. When discussing all types of communication, we will continuously interconnect them with your everyday life and experiences.



Is the connection between relationships and communication really that significant?

kali9/iStockPhoto

## Relational Perspective

Something else that sets this book apart from other communication textbooks is the relational perspective that we have developed through our previous books and research. The constant guide in understanding communication will be the relationships that you have with other people. The relational perspective is based on the belief that communication and relationships are interconnected. Any type of communication you ever participate in has a relationship assumed underneath it.

The relationship shared by people will influence what is communicated, how it is shared, and the meanings that develop. People generally talk with friends in a different way than with their parents, as we will see later. Likewise, coworkers generally talk with one another in a different way than with their supervisors. The meanings of communication also change depending on the relationships. For instance, saying “I love you” will take on a different meaning if said to a romantic partner, a friend, a family member, a supervisor, or someone you just met. In turn, communication creates, reinforces, and modifies all relationships. Saying “I love you” can do many things. It can lead to the creation of a new relationship, strengthen a relationship, maintain a relationship, or result in a shocking realization that the two partners do not view a relationship and its future in the same way. Ultimately, the link between relationships and communication is undeniable, and it can be used to study all communicative activity.

We believe that your life as a student, friend, romantic partner, colleague, and family member can be improved through the study of communication. Whatever your purpose in reading this book, and whatever your ultimate goal in life, we hope that it will enrich your life by sharpening your abilities to observe and understand communication activities going on around you.

### BY THE WAY . . . : CITING SOURCES

As we proceed, you will notice us putting names and dates in parentheses occasionally in our sentences. These citations (of previous work by other authors) are the scholarly way to acknowledge a debt to the scholarship of others. They act as references to the original sources where you may read the full details of these other scholars' work. You will find a complete list of these references at the end of the book, and you can locate the original sources for more details by pasting each reference into Google Scholar ([scholar.google.com](https://scholar.google.com)).

## COMMUNICATION IS SYMBOLIC

All communication is characterized by the use of symbols. A **symbol** is an arbitrary representation of something else. This may be an object, an idea, a place, a person, or a relationship—to name only a few. As we discuss in the upcoming chapters, symbols are either verbal or nonverbal. Verbal communication involves language, whereas nonverbal communication involves all other symbols. Accordingly, a symbol can be a word, a movement, a sound, a picture, a logo, a gesture, a mark, or anything else that represents something other than itself.

To fully understand symbols, we can begin by discussing what they are not. Although the terms *symbol* and *sign* are sometimes used interchangeably, they do not represent the same thing. A **sign** is a consequence or indicator of something specific, which human beings cannot change by their arbitrary actions or labels. For example, wet streets may be a sign that it has rained;

smoke is a sign of fire. There is a direct causal connection between smoke and fire or between wet streets and rain.

Symbols, however, have no direct connection with that which they represent. They have been arbitrarily selected. For instance, the word *chair* has been arbitrarily chosen to represent the objects on which we sit, and other languages present the same item in different symbolic ways (e.g., *cathedra*, *sella*, *chaise*, *stoel*, and *zetel*). We call a chair a *chair* simply because the symbol made up of the letters *c*, *h*, *a*, *i*, and *r* has been chosen by English speakers to represent that object. There is nothing inherent within that object that connects it to the symbol *chair*. Nothing about the symbol *chair* connects it to that object. Once again, a symbol is an arbitrary representation.

It is sometimes difficult to recognize that symbols are simply arbitrary representations. It sometimes might seem as though there is a natural connection rather than an arbitrary connection. A stop sign is actually not a *sign* in our advanced sense but is a stop *symbol*, though it is one example of how people tend to see symbols as naturally linked to what they represent. It may seem natural that a red octagon with the capital letters *S*, *T*, *O*, and *P* written in the middle would compel observers to cease forward movement when driving an automobile. However, there is no direct connection between that symbol and that particular behavior. Pigeons do not stop when they see a stop sign because it has no meaning for them, for example. A giant moose placed on a pole could arbitrarily represent that same course of action just as naturally as the symbol people call a stop sign arbitrarily represents that action. There is no direct causal connection between a symbol and what it represents; all we need for it to work as a symbol is some social agreement about its function and purpose. Of course, it is also necessary for you to share in the understanding of that agreement (which is why you have to relearn what you know about “traffic signs” when you drive in different countries).



As close to a moose placed on a pole as we are going to get, this particular traffic sign is actually warning motorists of a moose crossing rather than instructing them to stop. Are traffic signs really signs, or are they symbols?

©iStockphoto.com/Pgiam

## DIVERSE VOICES: THE CASE OF THE MISSING TOILET AND SOMETHING TO DRINK

Because symbols are arbitrary representations of something else, they can be different in different cultures. When Steve's mother first came to the United States from England, for example, she could find directions not to “toilets” but only to “restrooms,” and she did not want a rest. Eventually, she had to ask someone. The euphemism *restroom* is not immediately obvious to cultural outsiders as a reference to toilet facilities. In other cultures—for example, in England—they may be referred to as “conveniences” or by a sign saying “WC” (meaning “water closet”) that are equally puzzling to cultural outsiders.

Cultural challenges associated with the use of symbols is not just confined to different countries. Within the United States, the words *pop*, *soda*, *cola*, and *soft drink* are all used



Steve Duck



to represent the same thing. Those might not be problematic, but some people in the United States use the brand name *Coke* to refer to all carbonated beverages. That could lead to difficulties, if Chris the server asks someone unfamiliar with that usage what kind of coke they want when they really want a Mountain Dew. Regardless, if you drink too much, it would be a good idea to know where the nearest *convenience* is located, and for all travelers to foreign lands, the relevant term is always one you should find out before you travel, though crossed legs and an agitated look can amount to a symbol for a need that is universally understood.

### Questions to Consider

1. What cultural differences in terms have you personally experienced?
2. If challenges occurred, how did you overcome them?

## COMMUNICATION REQUIRES MEANING

Communication requires that symbols convey **meaning**, what a symbol represents. Seems simple enough. However, meanings assigned to symbols change based on multiple contexts, other symbols being used (both verbal and nonverbal), and even the way that symbols are being sent. Something else to consider: People did not just wake up one day and decide *chair* was suddenly going to represent that object you sit on. Rather, meaning associated with that symbol developed over time as people used the symbol when communicating with one another. The development of meaning does not suddenly stop. Instead, it continues as long as a symbol continues to be used.

We will examine these ideas within this section. We will begin with the social construction of meaning—giving you a better idea about how *chair* did come to represent that object you sit on.

### Social Construction of Meaning

**Social construction** involves the way in which symbols take on meaning in a social context or society as they are used over time. The words and phrases used every day within your society did not “just happen.” Rather, the taken-for-granted meanings attached to these symbols have developed through repeated and adapted use over time.

Meaning has to develop somehow, and it happens when groups of people use particular symbols. To demonstrate this idea, we can use a bent paper clip as an example. To our knowledge, there is no word or symbol for a bent paper clip, so we will just randomly use the made-up word *abdak*—which seems as good a word as any. One day, your instructor decides that there is a need to use a word to convey “bent paper clip” and selects *abdak* to do so. (Stay with us, as we are going somewhere with this example!) So, from now on, in that particular class, students refer to bent paper clips as *abdaks*. In another course, you see a bent paper clip and refer to it as an *abdak*. You might have to explain to your classmates in that course what you mean, or they might just figure it is a word they have never come across and take for granted you know what you are talking about. Then, other people use it, again and again, all over campus. The term *abdak* soon becomes a word used and understood on your campus, and using and understanding that word might even indicate being a member of your campus community.

Yet, *abdak* does not stop there. Members of your campus community use the term when interacting with people from other schools. Next thing you know, *abdak* is a term used in academic settings. Then, when used by academics with their nonacademic friends, family, and acquaintances, it becomes a term generally recognized by most people. Eventually, the symbol made up of the letters *a*, *b*, *d*, *a*, and *k* becomes recognized and understood just as the symbol made up of the letters *c*, *h*, *a*, *i*, and *r* is recognized and understood. (You might think that this is a fanciful idea, but in the previous version of this book, nobody knew the slang word *rizz*. However, in the intervening five years it has acquired the meaning of “charisma.” This acquisition of meaning has happened during your own life—so you have actually witnessed this process in your own experience.)

The meanings associated with and assigned to any symbol have been socially constructed. In other words, through the social and relational use of symbols, meanings become associated and assigned. Something else to consider is that this process happens continuously. So, over time, original meanings can be lost, and new meanings can vary wildly. Someday, you might call someone an *abdak*, and that person will be offended!

## COMMUNICATION AND CAREER: LEARNING THE LINGO



PeopleImages/iStockPhoto

The social construction of meaning is often discussed more broadly in terms of large societal groups. However, the same thing happens within smaller groups. Your group of friends or family members, for instance, might use certain words or phrases that have particular shared meanings just for that group. Within relationships, partners often develop nicknames for one another, and these personal idioms (Hopper et al., 1981) serve to make the relationship private and personal, as do private terms for activities that can be safely described in public using terms that are meaningless to outsiders (Yeomans et al., 2023).

The same thing occurs in workplaces (Bradley et al., 2023). It might involve symbols used and recognized within a broad industry, where terms like *USP* (*unique selling point*) may be

assumed as understood and used freely without definition. It might also involve symbols used and recognized within a single business or even among a small group of employees within that business where technical terms like *today's special* or *GPA* (grade point average) or *ATC* (air traffic control) or *saggar maker's bottom knocker* (google it—it's really a thing) are freely understood by members of the relevant community but may not be immediately understood outside of it.

Especially when beginning a new job, it is important to pick up on the unique meanings associated with certain words and phrases as soon as possible. Using them correctly not only enables you to accomplish your work more easily but also enables you to establish or to perform membership in that group.

### Questions to Consider

1. What are some examples of symbols with meanings unique to places you have worked?
2. Why do you think knowing the unique meanings associated with such symbols is so important to establishing membership or connecting with a group?



What type of communication context involves physical locations?

PamelaJoeMcFarlane/iStockPhoto

### Meaning and Context

A single symbol or message can also have multiple meanings when used in different contexts. For example, the *physical context*, or the actual location in which a symbol is used, will affect its meaning. If you said “There is a fire” while in a campground, it would mean something entirely different than if you said those exact same words while in a crowded movie theater.

The same symbols will also differ in meaning according to the *relational context*, or the relationship shared by the people interacting. Look again at the earlier example of saying “I love you.” It means something vastly different said to you by your mother, your brother, your friend, your priest, your instructor, someone you have been dating for more

than a year, or someone you have just met on a blind date. (Try saying it to your instructor and see how *you* feel.)

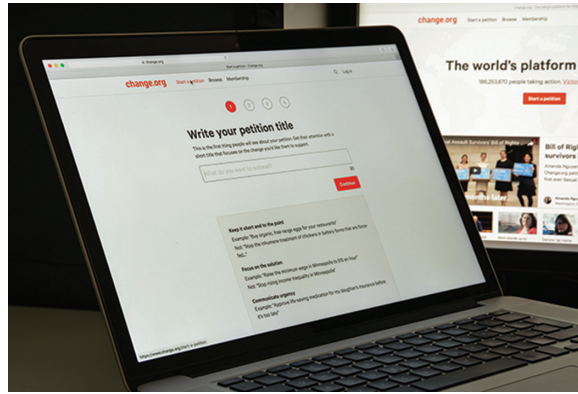
The *situational context* will also affect the meaning of a symbol. Consider the phrase “I love you” said by the same person (e.g., your mother) on your birthday, after a fight with her, on her deathbed, at Thanksgiving, or at the end of a phone call.

### Verbal and Nonverbal Influence on Meaning

Accompanying verbal and nonverbal symbols will also affect meaning. For instance, the same words send different messages depending on how they are delivered. Using “I love you” as an example once again, consider those words said by a romantic partner in a short, sharp way; in a long, lingering way; with a frown; with a smile; or with a hesitant and questioning tone of voice. We discuss the interaction between verbal and nonverbal communication in greater detail later in the book. For now, however, just recognize how the determination of meaning is more complex than it may originally seem.



## COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT: INTERNET ACTIVISM



Casimiro/Alamy Stock Photo

In the not-so-distant past, social activism required face-to-face marches and protests, printed pamphlets, and phone calls to convey a message. Now, these methods of communicating are being supplemented with or replaced by internet activism. There are many different forms of internet activism, ranging from hacking into secure computer systems to including a hashtag at the end of a post. Some people claim that such activism is not as meaningful or effective when compared with other forms of activism. Other people claim that such activism is just as meaningful as and even more effective than other forms of activism.

### Questions to Consider

1. What impact do you think these media systems would have on the meaning assigned to the same message?
2. Do you think one medium is more influential than others at bringing about social change?

### Meaning and the Medium

The **medium**, or the means through which a message is conveyed, will also affect the meaning of a message. A medium might include sound waves or sight—especially when interacting face-to-face with someone. It can also include smartphones, text messages, email, instant messaging, chat rooms, social networking sites, a note placed on someone's windshield, smoke signals, or many other methods of communication.

The topic is especially important in cases involving the same message in a different medium. For instance, breaking up with a romantic partner can be accomplished using any of the means listed, but some may be deemed more appropriate than others. Breaking up with someone face-to-face may be considered more appropriate than sending a text message to dump a partner. Beyond the message of wanting to break up, additional messages, including how you view the romantic partner, the relationship itself, and yourself, are conveyed by the medium used.

## COMMUNICATION IS CULTURAL

Another characteristic of communication is that it is cultural. Different cultures make different assumptions and take different knowledge for granted. Each time you talk to someone, from your culture or another, you are taking knowledge for granted, doing what your culture expects, and treating people in ways the culture acknowledges. You are doing, performing, and enacting your culture through communication. For example, a thumbs-up in the United Kingdom means “OK,” “I approve,” “This is good,” or “All’s well,” but in some Middle Eastern countries it is a gesture as offensive as the middle finger in the United States.

Ultimately, culture influences communication, and communication creates and reinforces these cultural influences. Consider what took place during your most recent face-to-face conversation with someone. Did you greet this person with a kiss or a handshake? Was there additional touch or no touch at all? How far were you standing from one another? Did you maintain eye contact? What were you wearing? Did you take turns talking, or did you talk at the same time? How did you refer to one another? What did you talk about? Did the physical setting affect what was discussed (dorm room, café, bus)? How was the conversation brought to a close? What happened at the end? Your answers to these questions are based partly on cultural expectations.

When you follow these cultural expectations, you are also reinforcing them. Their position as the “proper” way to do things has been strengthened. Cultural expectations are also reinforced when someone violates them. Consider the most recent experience when you or someone else did something embarrassing. It was probably embarrassing because cultural expectations had been violated. Or, if there was no touch in your most recent face-to-face conversation, what would have happened if you had touched the other person? If touching would have been inappropriate, then the other person may have responded in a negative manner—enforcing cultural expectations.

### ETHICAL ISSUES: FAKING IT

In general, communicating in a manner consistent with another person’s cultural expectations will result in increased liking by that person and being able to influence that person should that be a goal of the interaction. Accordingly, in such situations, people are often taught and encouraged to adjust how they normally communicate to match the expectations of the other person. However, is communicating in a manner consistent with someone else’s cultural expectations but inconsistent with your normal communication style unethical? In other words, are you being a fake?

#### Questions to Consider

1. Are there situations where “faking it” might be ethical and other situations where it might be unethical? If it depends on the situation, when would it be ethical, and when would it be unethical?
2. If you have ever been in such a situation, what decision did you make, and why?

## COMMUNICATION IS RELATIONAL

As mentioned previously, communication and relationships are intertwined. Communication affects relationships, and relationships affect communication. The ways in which communication and relationships are connected are more fully explored throughout the book. For now,

it is important to recognize that relationships are assumed each time you communicate with someone.

Paul Watzlawick and colleagues (1967) originally put it a little differently, suggesting that whenever you communicate with someone, you relate to them at the same time. All communication contains both a content (message) level and a relational level, which means that, as well as conveying information, every message indicates how the sender of a message and the receiver of that message are socially and personally related.

Sometimes the relational connection between sender and receiver is obvious, such as when formal relational terms of address (e.g., *Father*) or terms unique to a relationship (e.g., *sweetie* or *stinky*) are included. Quite often, however, the relational connection between sender and receiver is less obvious. Relational cues within communication enable you to determine, for instance, who is the boss and who is the employee. Yelling “You! My office! Now!” indicates a status difference just through the *style* of the communication. Because the relationships between people often are not openly expressed but subtly indicated or taken for granted in most communication, the content and relational components of messages are not always easy to separate.

Exploring the relational characteristics of communication a little further, it can be maintained that relationships create worlds of meaning for people through communication, and communication produces the same result for people through relationships. Group decision making, for example, is accomplished not just by the logic of arguments, agenda setting, and solution evaluations but also by group members’ relationships with one another outside the group setting. Groups that meet to make decisions almost never come from nowhere, communicate, make a decision, and then go home. Rather, the members know one another before the meeting, talk informally outside the group setting, and have personal likes and dislikes for one another that will affect their discussions about certain matters. Many decisions that appear to be made during an open discussion are actually sometimes tied up before the communication begins. Words have been whispered into ears, promises made, factions formed, and relationships displayed well in advance of any discussion.

Consider examples from your life. Is everyone equal in your family? How are your interactions with friends different from your interactions with enemies? Have you ever felt a connection to a character in a movie? In your last job interview, did the employer treat you like a potential valued colleague or an interchangeable worker? Are you more likely to contact some people through text messages and less likely to contact other people through text messages? We examine these questions and more throughout the remainder of the book.

## COMMUNICATION INVOLVES FRAMES

Communication is very complex, but the use of frames helps people to make sense of things. A **frame** is a basic form of knowledge that provides a definition of a scenario, either because both people agree on the nature of the situation or because the cultural assumptions built into the interaction and the previous relational context of talk give them a clue (Wood & Duck, 2006). Think of the frame on a picture and how it pulls your attention into some elements (the picture) and excludes all the rest (the wall, the gallery, the furniture). In similar fashion, a **communication frame** draws a boundary around the conversation and pulls our attention toward certain things and away from others. Returning to our restaurant example, if Chris the server presents you with a check at the end of the meal, you will not be in the least surprised because the frame (“going to a restaurant”) assumes that you will pay for your meal. If, however, the frame is “having a meal at home with my parents,” then something will be strange if they present you with a check at the end of the dinner, and you’ll wonder what they are trying to tell you.



## Coordinating Interactions

Frames help people understand their roles in a conversation and what is expected of them. Your understanding of the classroom frame will inform you of what you should do as a student and how you should interact with your instructor and with your classmates. A shared understanding of these frames is what enables people to make sense of what is taking place to coordinate their symbolic activities.

## Assigning Meanings

People also use framing assumptions to make decisions about what symbols are used and how these symbols should be interpreted. Your relationship with someone, for instance, influences how you assign meaning to their words. If someone says something insulting to you, and that person is a friend, you use that relational frame to recognize those words as likely being intended as a joke. If that person is an enemy, you use that particular relational frame to recognize those words as being intended as offensive.



Many conversations between close friends are “framed” by previous experiences and conversations—hence, the phrase *frame of reference*. In what ways can you deduce that these women are friends and that they therefore share some history together that frames their interaction?

Jacob Wackerhausen/iStockPhoto

## Perspectives

Communication frames are based partly on a person’s perspectives of situations and relationships with others. These frames of perspective will greatly influence the coordinating of interactions and the assigning of meaning discussed earlier. They also explain why people do not always agree on what exactly is taking place if they do not recognize the same frame for a conversation—for example, if one thinks it is “a date” and the other thinks it is “a social event.”

Consider how instructors and students do not always frame situations and their relationships in the same way. For instance, when a student asks an instructor for an extension on an assignment, a number of factors influence how both approach that

interaction. A student may be considering personal demands at home, work, and other classes as valid reasons an extension should be granted. An instructor may be considering fairness to other students, maintaining accountability, and personal schedule constraints as reasons an extension should not be granted. A student may perceive the instructor as unwilling to provide an extension simply because of meanness or a power trip. An instructor may perceive a student as simply being uncaring and lazy, which explains why the assignment could not be completed on time. Students may see themselves as consumers paying for an education and expect instructors to satisfy their every whim. (Do not get us started on this one!) An instructor may view students more like clients—sometimes a person must tell clients things they do not want to hear. These are just a few examples of perspectives being used to frame an interaction. They certainly do not represent all perspectives, and some perspectives may be the total opposite of those presented here. Still, it gives you some idea about how a person’s perspectives will influence communication frames being used during an interaction.

## DISCIPLINARY DEBATE: WHICH FRAME IS THE CORRECT FRAME?

Multiple frames can be used when assigning meaning to communication. Some of those frames are competing or are in direct opposition, as discussed within the text. It is possible that a correct frame exists. However, it is also possible that no single frame could be considered correct or be more appropriate than other frames.

### Questions to Consider

1. Describe situations in which competing frames were in play. If one eventually dominated, why was that the case?
2. Are there situations when people can agree on a single frame? If so, how might that be determined?

## COMMUNICATION IS BOTH PRESENTATIONAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL

Another characteristic of communication is that it is both representational and presentational. In other words, although communication normally describes facts or conveys information (**representation**), it also presents your particular version of the facts or events (**presentation**). When you describe something (representation), you also select the elements to describe and the evaluation to put on that description (presentation), and when you comment on something that you have a strong opinion about, the two activities may be indistinguishable so that your evaluative presentations may be offered as representations of fact. For example, most media covered the coronation of King Charles III with such headlines as “His Majesty King Charles III Crowned in Westminster Abbey” giving it a certain solemnity (see, e.g., Kirka & Lawless, 2023; Westminster Abbey, 2023), but a satirical magazine summed it up as “Man in Hat Sits on Chair” (2023). Communication is never neutral. It always conveys the perspective or worldview of the person sending a message. Your communication with other people *presents* them with a way of looking at the world that is based on how you prefer them to see it.

At first glance, the notion of communication being both presentational and representational is difficult to grasp. Consider the following way of looking at this issue: When you speak to someone, you have a number of words—your entire vocabulary—that can be used to construct your message. You will choose some words to construct the message and not choose other words. You will arrange those words chosen in certain ways and not in other ways. Your selection of words and the arrangement of those words are meaningful acts. For instance, two different perspectives concerning people in the United States unlawfully are presented through using either the term *undocumented worker* or the term *illegal alien*. Your use of words and your construction of messages do not just represent ideas and information; your use of words presents your view of the world to others. One states facts (the person is a worker who has no required documents); the other represents a judgment that emphasizes lawbreaking and “otherness.” The two terms may indicate the same person, but one term is



Would sending a text message be considered an act, an interaction, or a transaction?

©iStockphoto.com/JRLPhotographer

representational (*undocumented*) while the other overlays a (presentational) judgment of illegality and difference.

On some occasions, the presentation of these views is carefully developed. For example, imagine or recall a situation in which a friend has questioned something you have done, but you believe your actions were justified and want to explain this justification to your friend. In such cases, you will likely select your words very carefully and thoughtfully, wanting your friend to view the situation from your perspective. Your message is conveying information (representational) while providing a glimpse into your perspective and how you want your friend to view the situation (presentational).

On other occasions, the selection of words may not be carefully planned but nevertheless presents your perspective to others. Each time someone communicates, a worldview is being shared through the selection of terms, regardless of how much thought has gone into the construction of a message. Someone saying “I suppose I should probably go to work now” in a gloomy manner provides a glimpse into how that person views the job—presumably not favorably. Someone saying “I get to go to my communication class now” in an understandably excited manner provides a glimpse into how that person views the course—presumably very favorably. Start looking out for such presentational features of communication in your everyday life experiences as we add detail and skills to your repertoire.

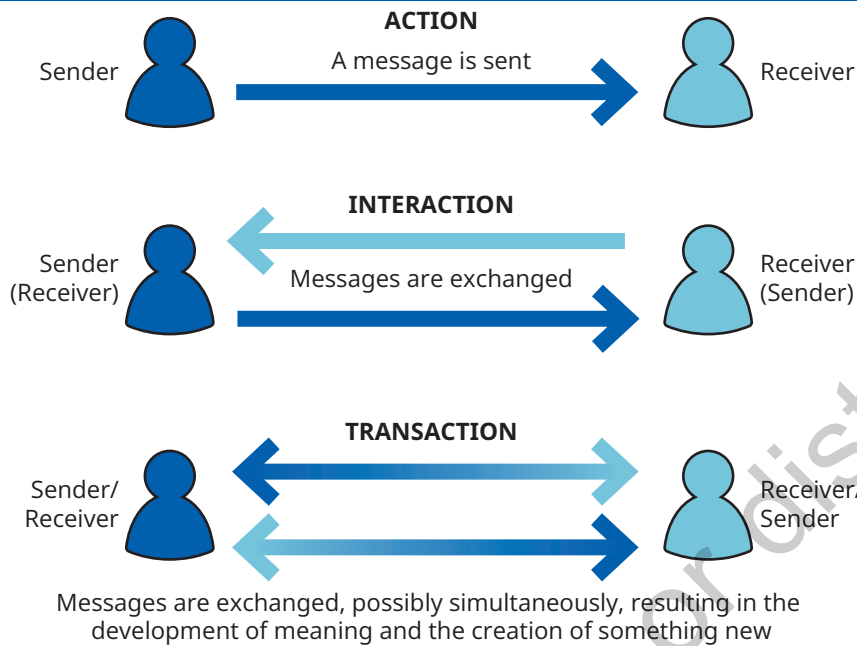
## COMMUNICATION IS A TRANSACTION

The transactional nature of communication is the final characteristic we will address in this chapter. When addressing communication as a transaction, though, we first must address two other common ways of thinking about communication: communication as action and communication as interaction. As seen in Figure 1.1, each way of thinking about communication assumes something different about how communication works, with communication as transaction being the more sophisticated and more fruitful way of thinking about communication.

### Communication as Action

**Communication as action** is simply the act of a sender sending a message to an intended receiver. Communication as *action* occurs when someone leaves a message on your voicemail, sends you an email, or puts a message in a bottle in the ocean—that is, when someone transmits a message. So, on this definition, if Emalyn sends a text message to Corban, communication has occurred. It is pretty simple, really. However, it is not too interesting. If action was all there was to communication, we would be studying something else and not writing books about it. Communication as action could be developed slightly by questioning whether someone must *receive* a message for it to be communication. What if Corban does not check his text messages? Has communication truly occurred? That is about as far as we can take things, though. If communication were only an action, then there would really be no need to study it.



**FIGURE 1.1 ■ Communication as Action, Interaction, and Transaction**

### Communication as Interaction

**Communication as interaction** counts something as communication only if there is an acknowledgement of the message, a response or an exchange of information. In this much more typical perception of communication, someone sends a message, which is received by someone who in turn sends a message back to the original sender. Using the previous example, communication takes place if Emalyn sends Corban a text, Corban receives the text from Emalyn, and Corban then acknowledges receipt of the message and perhaps sends a reply to Emalyn. Although this view of communication is slightly more advanced than communication as action, it remains limited in its scope and fails to capture what truly happens when people communicate.

### Communication as Transaction

A more useful and interesting way to see communication is **communication as transaction**, or the construction of shared meanings or understandings. For example, communication exists between Emalyn and Corban if, through their texts, they both arrive at the shared realization that they understand/know/love/need each other. In other words, communication in this sense is more than the mere exchange of symbols. The speakers get more out of it, and extra meanings are communicated above and beyond the content of the messages exchanged. The best example is two people, in the right circumstances, saying “I do” to each other—they do not exchange messages alone; they also transact “marriage.”

Communication is interesting and worthy of study not because it merely involves the exchange of messages but because something magical and extra happens in this process. Two people speak, and trust is built (transacted); two people touch one another, and love is realized (transacted); two people argue, and power is exerted (transacted); a man holds the door open for a woman, and either sexist stereotyping or politeness is transacted, depending on your perspective.

In all cases, the communication transacts or constitutes something above and beyond the symbols being exchanged.

If that is not enough reason to study communication, there is even more to consider. Communication does not just create meaning; it creates the stuff of life. This **constitutive approach to communication** maintains that communication creates or brings into existence something that has not been there before. From this point of view, communication does not just construct meanings. Through communication, relationships are created, cultures are created, genders are created, ethnicities are created, sexualities are created, and even realities are created. These are created through communication and maintained, negotiated, challenged, and altered through communication.

For instance, relationships are not locations that we suddenly jump into—even though people refer to being *in* a relationship. Instead, relationships are quite literally talked into existence. Through communication—especially words, but also nonverbal communication—relationships are brought into being, and, through communication, the maintenance, negotiation, challenges, and alterations of relationships occur.

So, returning to the question posed at the beginning of the chapter, there does not appear to be any part of life that does not involve communication. Communication serves as the actual foundation for most of our life experiences. This fascinating area of study provides a great deal of enjoyment and comes with continuous transformation and paths to explore. Those are some of the reasons we study communication. We are glad that you are joining us.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES REVISITED

After reading this chapter, you should now be able to:

- 1.1 Explain what is meant by everyday communication and the relational perspective.  
Making this book unique from other ones is its focus on everyday communication and the relational perspective. Everyday communication is that routine, seemingly mundane communication which may not always be memorable, but it happens to be very important and represent most of our communication. It should be studied not just because of its frequency but also because extraordinary things happen through it. Everyday communication creates, maintains, challenges, and alters relationships and identities as well as enacting culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, meaning, and even reality. The relational perspective is based on the belief that communication and relationships are interconnected. Any type of communication you ever participate in has a relationship assumed underneath it, and communication is how relationships are created, maintained, and transformed. This perspective assists in better understanding both communication and relationships and provides a common theme among various topics addressed in this book.
- 1.2 Describe how communication is symbolic.  
Symbols are arbitrarily selected representations of something with no direct connection to that which they represent. Though sometimes used interchangeably, the terms *symbol* and *sign* do not describe the same thing. Signs are consequences or indicators of something specific, which human beings cannot change by their arbitrary actions or labels.
- 1.3 Describe how meaning is established.  
Because they are completely arbitrary, symbols have the potential for multiple meanings that are subject to change. The meaning assigned to a symbol has been socially constructed and is contingent on the contexts (physical, relational, situational) in which

the symbol is used and other symbolic activity (verbal and nonverbal), as well as on the medium used to transmit it.

- 1.4 Explain how communication is influenced by cultural context.  
Culture influences communication, and communication creates and reinforces these cultural influences. Each time we communicate, we are taking knowledge for granted, doing what our culture expects, and treating people in ways the culture acknowledges. Culture is accomplished, performed, and enacted through communication.
- 1.5 Explain how communication is relational.  
All communication contains both a content (message) level and a relational level, which means that, as well as conveying information, every message indicates how the sender of a message and the receiver of that message are socially and personally related. Communication and relationships are intertwined. Communication affects relationships, and relationships affect communication.
- 1.6 Describe the use of communication frames.  
Communication frames are basic forms of knowledge that provide a definition of a scenario, either because both people agree on the nature of the situation or because the cultural assumptions built into the interaction and the previous relational context of talk give them a clue. A communication frame draws a boundary around the conversation and pulls our attention toward certain things and away from others. Frames help people understand their role in a conversation and what is expected of them. People also use framing assumptions to make decisions about what symbols are used and how these symbols should be interpreted.
- 1.7 Explain what it means to view communication as both representational and presentational.  
Communication describes facts or conveys information (representation) while conveying the perspective or worldview or slant of the person sending a message (presentation). Communication gives other people and audiences a way of looking at the world that is based on how the source of a message prefers them to see it.
- 1.8 Explain what it means to view communication as a transaction, rather than as a mere action or as an interaction.  
Viewing communication as a transaction means understanding that communication is more than just the simple exchange of messages. Rather, communication involves the construction of shared meanings or understandings between two (or more) individuals. Moreover, communication constitutes, or creates, aspects of life such as relationships, culture, gender, and even reality.

## KEY TERMS

communication as action	medium
communication as interaction	presentation
communication as transaction	representation
communication frame	sign
constitutive approach to communication	social construction
frame	symbol
meaning	

## COMMUNICATION AND YOU

1. Communicating by using words, terms, and knowledge shared by other people can include them in a conversation. At the same time, doing so can exclude individuals who lack that shared understanding. Describe situations when you have encountered both instances. When would you consider both instances to be appropriate, and when would you consider both instances to be inappropriate?
2. Your communication with someone may appeal to certain relational obligations. For instance, friends may be expected to do certain things if they are truly friends—“Come on, be a friend and help me move this weekend.” Describe situations when such appeals have been done, with friends but also romantic partners and family members. Why do you think such appeals work?
3. Frames provide you with additional context and information in any communication interaction. Think back to a recent conversation with someone. What might have been said by you and by that other person to frame the interaction?

## TECHNOLOGY CONNECTIONS

1. Locate examples of internet activism. What do you think is most effective and least effective about the strategies used in the examples located?
2. In Japanese, there are more than 200 ways for one person to address another according to protocols of respect and status differences recognized by the participants (Sir, Ma'am, Buddy, Pal, etc.). In English and other languages, there may not be that many, but multiple forms of address are still used to show respect and recognize status difference. Is it as important to acknowledge status and show respect when communicating with people on the internet as compared with communicating with them face-to-face?
3. *Communication apprehension* is the technical term used for the fear or anxiety you might experience when faced with communicating in situations that make you uncomfortable. Some people are anxious when answering a question posed in the classroom. Other people are uncomfortable contributing to small-group discussions. For most people, delivering a presentation is something that makes them quite anxious. Are you more or less comfortable talking with someone through text or instant messaging as compared with face-to-face or video chat such as FaceTime? Does it matter with whom you are talking or the topic of conversation? What do you think the reasons are for your answers?





Westend61/Getty Images



## IDENTITIES, PERCEPTIONS, AND COMMUNICATION

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- 2.1 Explain the basic assumptions of identity construction.
- 2.2 Explain the processes of perceptions.
- 2.3 Explain how identities are transacted through communication and performance.
- 2.4 Explain how identities are transacted through self-disclosure.
- 2.5 Explain how identities are transacted in connection with other people.

Did you know that you develop multiple identities throughout the day? Before making an appointment for a psychological evaluation, recognize that we are not talking about a medical disorder. Everyone constructs multiple identities as part of everyday relational life. Consider the many relational roles a person establishes in everyday life. A person may at once be a friend, sibling, parent, and child. That same person may be a student, coworker, supervisor, or customer. Within these various roles, when interacting with different people and in different contexts, a person may be passive, strict, caring, detached, honest, or assertive. That same person may end the day cheering for a sports team in a group of die-hard fans or taking part in an online discussion about a favorite streaming series. Each of these aspects of daily experience requires the deployment of a different identity.

**Identities** can be defined as symbolic creations based on the performance of personal roles, how people perceive themselves, and how people want to be viewed by others. Sorts of identities might include personal identities (kind, mean, hardworking, lazy, fan of musicals), relational identities (parent, child, friend, enemy), social identities (customer, employee, supervisor), and demographic identities (biological sex, race, sexual orientation, place of origin, age, socioeconomic status).

The presence of identity work influences the communication that takes place during an interaction. Our relationships with others are also greatly influenced by identities. (Think how you interact with your friends as compared to with your parents. You are still “you” but a different “you” in each case, if you are perfectly normal!) Accordingly, greater awareness, knowledge, and appreciation of identities will assist you as you develop communication and relational understanding and skills.

The notion of identities as symbolic creations may be new to you, especially since it is common to think of an identity as something stable and central within a person. In fact, people’s actions are sometimes explained by saying, “That is just who they are” or “That’s Trump being Trump”: More than one website clickbait ad promises to expose the “real” Billie Eilish, Taylor Swift, or other celebrity. However, people do *not* possess a single core, unchanging self that drives their behavior and is just waiting to be revealed to others. In fact, there is a great deal to unpack and explain when it comes to identities. Fortunately, we have an entire chapter to do it!

You may have very perceptively noticed that the word *perceptions* is included in the chapter title. You may have also noticed that the word *perceive* is included in the definition of *identities*. The creation and maintenance of identities are guided partly through perceptions of oneself, other people, and situations. **Perception** involves how a person views the world, organizes what is perceived, interprets information, and evaluates information—all of which will influence symbolic activity (in this case, the symbolic activity is about the way they present themselves to other

people and understand how [and what it means when] other people present themselves in turn). It is therefore important to include such material in discussions of identity.

In what follows, we will provide key ideas about identities. We will then turn our attention to perceptions, explore the creation and development of identities through communication, and finally examine how other people's activities influence identity creation.

## BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF IDENTITY CREATION

We will begin by examining basic assumptions of identity creation. Doing so will assist in better understanding what you might find to be a novel way of thinking about identities. We will lead with a big misconception—that people have a core self.

### Myth of the Core Self

First, people do not possess core, unchanging selves that influence actions and are waiting to be disclosed. Having said that, people develop and possess core values and beliefs, and we are certainly not arguing against religious or spiritual beliefs about personhood. We are just pointing out that people display these characteristics in different ways in different circumstances and yet can still retain a sense of coherence both in their own minds and in the minds of other observers. Additionally, people's particular biological makeup and physical characteristics can influence the way they communicate with others and—probably more influential—the way others communicate with them. Even with these characteristics, people construct multiple, sometimes contradictory, identities through communication with others.

### Different Moods

You may feel outgoing and confident some days and communicate with others accordingly. Other days, you may feel more reserved and insecure, and this is reflected in your communication with others. People can get in a lousy mood as a result of periodic irritations (missed the bus again!), too much coffee, hormonal imbalances, gluten intolerance, or just a series of really unfortunate events happening to them on a bad hair day. People can also get in a good mood after talking with a good friend, happening to get the last good parking spot, or earning an A on their communication exam because of their due diligence in reading Duck & McMahan before the test. If people had a core self, wouldn't they feel the same way, maintain the same mood, and communicate accordingly all the time?

### Different Situations

A person may be unfriendly and distant at school but funny and sociable at work. This person may be more confident and comfortable at work than at school. Or this person may have yet to make friends at school with classmates in a sociable manner. It is also possible that this person views the time at school as serious business and wants to remain focused. Whatever the case may be, the point is the same. People *transact* multiple identities in different situations and in different areas of their lives. When we think about it, we all know this even though we also think of everyone as having a core self!

### Different Relationships

People also transact multiple identities given the many different relationships shared with others. You may act one way around your friends and an entirely different way around your relatives.

Different relational identities are constructed based on the relationships being transacted. Once again, if people had an unchanging core self, there would be no change in communication and behavior around different people. However, this change takes place, occasionally in dramatic ways.

### Different Evaluations

Sometimes people evaluate the same person in vastly different ways. For instance, you may know someone whom you view as kind, yet one of your friends sees the person as nasty. Or two professors may argue about whether a particular student is intelligent or stands no chance of improving. If every person had just one identity as the core of personality and everyone perceived it identically, then these competing evaluations would make no sense. Yet such varying evaluations of people happen quite frequently.

Sometimes even a single person will evaluate another person in vastly different ways. If people really had a stable core inside a set of layers that we could peel away to reach “the truth,” then we would never be able to change our minds about someone. If someone were a good and loyal friend, they would never turn into an enemy unless they had a personality transplant. Yet you have most likely had the experience of seeing someone in a different light over time.

## DIVERSE VOICES

### College for Traditional and Nontraditional Students

Diversity can involve age and experience. Consider nontraditional students and identities. Nontraditional students have the same concerns as all students, such as getting their work done on time and receiving good grades. However, they view themselves differently. Nontraditional students frequently return to school after working for several years. Perhaps they have decided that their line of work is not challenging enough, they recognize that their full potential is not being realized, or they have lost their job in a rough economy. Many of these students have already been successful outside of the classroom, yet they are very apprehensive about *entering* one. Such students are used to being obeyed—to being someone to whom people turn for advice: a leader, a mentor, an example.



Tom Uhlman/Alamy Stock Photo

Now consider traditional students. These students most likely experienced success in high school. Many entering students graduated high school with honors, participated in many activities, received a number of awards and distinctions, were well known in their school,



and were admired by others. Now, these students may view themselves as adrift in a sea of people who were more successful in their own high schools and are now classmates in college competing for grades.

### Questions to Consider

1. Which is the *real* person: the successful professional and authoritative leader or the obviously older student in a classroom where previous experience counts for very little?
2. Which is the *real* person: the standout high school student who excelled at everything or the awkward first-year college student seeking some sort of recognition?

Return to these questions once you have read the entire chapter, and see if your responses have changed.

## Culture and Identities

A second basic idea is that cultural groups to which you belong provide you with ways to describe and evaluate identities. Labels for identities such as *gluttonous*, *sexy*, *paranoid*, and *bipolar* are available for use. Also, cultural groups to which you belong inform you about the proper ways to perform identities (Walters et al., 2021). Societies and groups tell you how to be “masculine” and “feminine.” They indicate such things as “guys can’t say *that* to guys” (Burleson et al., 2005), restricting the way men can give one another emotional support and requiring specific strategies for displays of emotion—“manly tears exploded from my eyes, lets feel together brahs” (Underwood & Olson, 2019). Societies and groups also place more value on some identities than others. In some rural cultures, for instance, being “tough” is considered something toward which men should strive, whereas being “weak” is something that should be avoided (McMahan, 2011).

## Identities and Relationships

Another basic idea to explore is that identities are created in the context of personal relationships. Identities and personal relationships are interconnected in various ways. First, some identities are squarely based on relationships themselves—the identity of parent, child, friend, or romantic partner, for example.

Second, it is through personal relationships that identities are *enacted*. When people are performing personal identities of being kind, mean, tough, passive, or a fan of the Chicago Bears, they are generally not doing it in a darkened room. Rather, they are performing these identities when interacting with other people—with whom, more often than not, a personal relationship exists. Personal relationships are also where identities are tested—if you went through a rebellious stage in high school, it probably involved your friends and family.

Third, we learn about cultural understandings and evaluations of identities, as mentioned previously, through relationships. This is an idea we examine more closely in Chapter 5, on cultures. In cultural groups in which it is “unmanly” to cry, for instance, that is learned through interactions with friends, family, and other macho members of the community. A young boy might be told directly by an older relative not to cry when doing so. Or, a young boy might witness another young boy being teased by a group of friends when crying on the playground. Our understanding and evaluation of identity develop through personal relationships.

Finally, certain identities might be considered more socially attractive than others when it comes to establishing and evaluating personal relationships. For example, someone might seek another person who generally seems outgoing as being more socially attractive than someone

who is reserved, an idea that was verified over 50 years ago (Hendrick & Brown, 1971). Personal and cultural preferences naturally play an important role in such a process.

### Performance of Identities

Lastly, people *perform* their identities with others. You may have noticed that up to this point we already used the term *perform* when discussing identities. This idea means that rather than *having* an identity, people are *doing* an identity.

Consider the following question. If you happen to see an adult and a child together and determine the adult is the child's parent, how do you conclude that to be the case? The answer is likely that the person is *acting* like a parent, doing certain things and communicating the way a parent would communicate, such as pointing things out for the child to think about, or giving examples, or explaining, or defining words, or asking challenging questions, or showing them how to do something and encouraging them to improve.

When people perform identities associated with social roles, they are not being fake, nor are they necessarily being dishonest—although one would hope the pilot getting ready to fly a plane is actually a pilot or the doctor getting ready to perform surgery is actually qualified! Rather, they are acting in ways that both society and they themselves perceive to be associated with a certain identity.

## IDENTITIES AND PERCEPTIONS

Having introduced those foundational ideas about identities, we can now turn our attention to perceptions. Consider further the notion introduced earlier when discussing the myth of a core self that one person's evaluation of another person changes over time. Could identity be a matter of *perception* rather than *fact*? When a stranger does something rude, your first thought may be to blame personality ("This is an evil person, perhaps with psychopathic tendencies"). Conversely, that "rude stranger" probably sees identity in personality terms, too, but more favorable ones—as a decent person who is being irritated by an annoying stranger (you!)—and may walk away thinking, "What a jerk!" On the other hand, you might be thinking, "This humidity level is making me very uncomfortable" or "That chicken sandwich is giving my guts a hard time" or "I really don't feel right today. How can I get out of this interaction with dignity?" Notice that these are representations, attributions, or claims based on individual perception and not on facts about the other person. These views are based on the way one person perceives and understands the evidence, but all of them could influence the way that the perceiver sees the other person in the interaction. (In fact, psychologists have a term for this phenomenon: the *fundamental attribution error*, or *FAE* [Ross, 2018], where people interpret *others' actions* as energized by personality traits but *their own actions* as steered by situation or immediate circumstances.)

Perceptions influence the development of identities and all meaning making. Perceptions are based on relational and cultural understandings. They also involve the process of actively selecting, organizing, and evaluating information, activities, situations, and people. Essentially these are processes of naming and giving significance to all the things that make up your world. In what follows, we will examine how that takes place.

### Selecting

Receiving stimuli does not necessarily mean you will recognize their presence or direct your attention to them. Imagine going up to a friend whose concentration is focused on reading

*Communication in Everyday Life*. You greet them by saying hello or by saying their name, but your friend does not seem to recognize you are speaking. This person continues to focus solely on the book. You speak again, a little louder this time, and still receive no response. You may tap them on the shoulder to get their attention or hit them gently over the head with your very own paperback copy of *Communication in Everyday Life*. You are not being ignored; this person simply does not attend to the sound of your voice. In short, they are attending to the world *selectively and are engrossed in reading*.

Everyone selects and focuses more on some things than others. If something stands out for whatever reason, you are more likely to focus your attention on that. If you scan a room of people wearing similar clothing, you will likely focus on the one person whose clothing is dissimilar to that of the others.

A person's motives or needs at a particular moment in time will also influence the selection process. If you have an important appointment later in the day, you will probably focus more on clocks than you might when you have nothing planned. If you are traveling and getting hungry, you might start noticing restaurants when you pass by.

Our beliefs, attitudes, and values also affect the selection process, as explained by the following: (a) selective exposure, (b) selective perception, and (c) selective retention.

### Selective Exposure

One explanation for our selectivity is **selective exposure**, which means you are more likely to expose yourself to that which supports your beliefs, values, and attitudes. Accordingly, you are less likely to expose yourself to that which counters your beliefs, values, and attitudes (Zillmann & Bryant, 2013). So, if you tend to be politically conservative, you are more likely to listen to Fox News and more likely to avoid watching MSNBC. If you are politically liberal, you are more likely to do the opposite. Selective exposure also explains why people are more likely to spend time with individuals whose beliefs, values, and attitudes are similar to their own. More than this, however, people's tendency to selectively expose themselves to information is a critically important factor in risk management (Noble et al., 2023) and drives many responses to development of early warning systems. In these cases, it is vitally important that monitors do not overlook or attend selectively to dangers or fall victim to the "cry wolf effect" and ignore warnings that are real (Ikegai et al., 2024).

### Selective Perception

Beyond exposing ourselves to some things and not others, we will also pick up on some parts of a message and not pick up on other parts. **Selective perception** means you are more likely to perceive and focus on things that support your beliefs, values, and attitudes. You are less likely to perceive and focus on things that do not support your beliefs, values, and attitudes. If you view yourself as a competent person, you will be more likely to pick up on compliments and to brush off criticism. The opposite, of course, will happen if you view yourself as an incompetent person. Selective perception also explains why two different people might evaluate the same person in different ways. If you want to believe that someone is good, you will probably focus on that person's good qualities while ignoring the negative ones.

### Selective Retention

Once something has been experienced, we are also likely to remember some parts and not remember other parts. **Selective retention**, also referred to as *selective memory*, means you are more likely to recall things that support your beliefs, values, and attitudes (Schacter et al., 2024). You are less likely to recall things that do not support your beliefs, values, and attitudes. Using the earlier

examples, if you view yourself as a competent person, you will be more likely to remember receiving compliments and less likely to remember receiving criticism. The opposite holds true, once again, if you view yourself as an incompetent person. Likewise, if you want to believe someone is good, you will tend to remember the good things that the person does and tend to forget the negative things.

### Organizing, Interpreting, and Evaluating

Your observations of the world are selectively chosen and then organized in ways that allow you to retrieve them when necessary. The ways in which the world is organized will influence how they are interpreted and evaluated, which is why we examine these three areas together.

When new information is selected, it is connected to previous information that is already organized and stored as your own characteristic way of looking at the world (through your organizational goggles). Your organizational goggles are constantly being updated based on new experiences and evaluations of their meaning to you. This system seems efficient. However, it is not without its disadvantages.

George Kelly (1955) maintained that a person's processes are "channelized" by the ways in which events are anticipated; that is to say, our ways of anticipating the future and recognizing patterns will be directed by what we have made of past experiences. As a result, certain ways of acting become more deeply ingrained in our thinking. Imagine running the end of a stick in a straight line over and over in the same spot on the ground. Eventually, an indentation begins to develop and becomes deeper as you continue to run the end of that stick in the same place. You create a rut, and the same thing can happen with ways of behaving and viewing the world. The more you behave in a certain way and the more often you view the world in the same way, the deeper and more ingrained it becomes in your thinking. After a while, it becomes difficult to imagine behaving in another way or viewing the world in a different way.

Kelly's (1955) work has resulted in a better understanding of the ways in which people think and relate to others. It can also be used to better understand how we organize information through the following: (a) schemata, (b) prototypes, and (c) personal constructs.

#### Schemata

**Schemata** are mental structures used to organize information partly by clustering associated material. For example, information about relationships can be stored and connected in "relationship" schemata and drawn on when needed. This information is stored in a relatively accessible manner, so it can be used to make sense of what you are experiencing and to anticipate what might happen in a given situation.

#### Prototypes

A **prototype** is the best-case example of something (Fehr, 1993, 2006). For instance, we may have a prototype of a romantic partner based on our schemata or experiences of an actual person or a composite of different people. You use your prototype of *romantic partner* or anything else as a guidepost for measuring other people (Bhargava, 2024). Of course, no one is likely to measure up fully to the ideal version you have in your head.

#### Personal Constructs

How evaluation actually takes place and how we perceive the world are the result of **personal constructs**—individualized ways of construing or understanding the world and its contents;



they are bipolar dimensions we use to measure and evaluate things. Whereas prototypes tend to be broad categories, personal constructs are narrow and more specific characteristics. These personal constructs can be used in the development of prototypes and to determine how close someone may come to meeting all the criteria.

## TRANSACTIONING IDENTITIES: COMMUNICATION AND PERFORMANCE

We began this chapter by presenting basic ideas about identities. We continued by discussing how people understand identities—and other things—based partly on their perceptions. Now, we will examine how identities are performed symbolically, something we touched on briefly earlier in the chapter. We will talk about performance here, then talk about self-disclosure, and then talk about the communication of other people.

Through their performance, identities can be understood as being transacted (created, maintained, reinforced, or transformed) symbolically through communication with other people. Performing personal identities, then, includes communicating and behaving in ways culturally understood to represent those characteristics. For example, a kind person might talk in ways and do things that people would consider kind within a specific culture, though in other cultures they may not register. Or a fan of musicals might spend the day humming the soundtrack to *Wicked* when not talking about other favorite Broadway performers. Performing relational and social identities includes communicating and behaving in ways culturally associated with those roles. For instance, a parent will communicate in ways that a parent is expected to communicate and will do parent-type stuff, whatever that happens to be.

### Front and Back Regions

Sometimes identities are performed without a great deal of purpose or strategy. They just sort of happen when people communicate. Other times, identity performance is very purposeful and strategic.

Goffman (1959) differentiated a **front region** and **back region** to social performance. The front region/front stage is *not a place but an occasion* where your professional, proper self is performed. For example, a server is all smiles and civility in the front stage of the restaurant when talking to customers. This behavior might be different from talk in the back region/backstage (say, the restaurant kitchen) when servers discuss customers with the cooks or other servers and might make jokes about the customers or be disrespectful about them. But again, the back region is not just a place: If all servers are standing around in the restaurant before the customers come in and they are just chatting informally among themselves, then they are performing in the back region, but the instant the first customer comes through the door, their demeanor will change to “professional,” and they will switch to a socially front-region performance, while remaining in the same physical space.

That means the performance of your identity is sprung into action not by your own free wishes but by social cues that this is the time to perform your “self” in a specific and situated way. An identity is a situated performance. It shows how a person makes sense of the world not just alone but within a specific context provided by others and by social/cultural expectations.

Any identity is, therefore, not something that exists in a vacuum or in a pure abstract form, but it is animated by circumstances and comes to life only when enacted. Your identity is therefore like potential energy: It has many possible forms rather than one single form, and it connects to, and is energized by, other identities and circumstances. Thus, you can be friendly when you are with your friends, but you will be professional when on the job and will perform your student identity when in class.

Individuals inevitably draw on knowledge shared in any community, so any person draws on information that is both personal and communal. If you change from thinking of identity as about “self as character” and instead see it as “self as performer,” you also must consider the importance of changes in performance to suit different audiences and situations.

## TRANSACTIONING IDENTITIES: SELF-DISCLOSURE

Another way that people establish identities is by telling people about themselves. If you ask people to tell you who they are, they will tell you their names and start revealing information about themselves, usually with stories that place them in various contexts, but they will tend to use socially recognized criteria about identity. Here, we are dealing with self-disclosure.

We will begin by telling you a bit about Steve Duck. *Steve Duck* is a proper name—a first requirement socially for identifying oneself—and it indicates to someone in your culture that the person is male and has to put up with many very unoriginal jokes about his name. Although he has lived in the United States of America for more than 30 years, he is a Brit, or English as he prefers to think of it. His family comes from Whitby in North Yorkshire, England, where the first recorded Duck (John Duck) lived in 1288. John Duck and Steve Duck share the same skeptical attitude toward authority figures. John is in the historical record because he sued the Abbot of Whitby over ownership of a piece of land. John was descended from the Vikings who sacked and then colonized Whitby in exactly 867 CE (*Duck* is a Viking nickname-based surname for a hunchback. Have you ever ducked out of the way of anything? If so, you have crouched like a hunchback).

Steve Duck is also relatively short for a man (though taller than Julius Caesar), is relatively bald (like Caesar) but bearded, has two tattoos related to his love of Roman history, likes watching people but is quite shy, and can read Latin. Steve likes the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams, enjoys doing cryptic crosswords, knows about half the words that Shakespeare knew, and has occasionally lied. He resents his mother’s controlling behavior, was an Oxford College rowing coxswain (cox’n), loves reading Roman history, and is gluten intolerant. He thinks he is a good driver and is proud of his dad, who was a Quaker pacifist (that antiauthority thing again) who won three medals for bravery in World War II for driving an unarmed ambulance into the front line of a war zone to rescue two seriously wounded (armed) comrades. Steve has had two marriages and four children, carries a Swiss Army knife (and as many other gadgets as will fit onto one leather belt), and always wears two watches. He is wondering whether to get the new Swiss Army knife that has a data storage capacity, a laser pointer, and a fingerprint password.

### Self-Description or Self-Disclosure

Notice that some of this information about Steve’s identity involves characteristics people might use to describe him without knowing him personally (e.g., male, bearded, short, bald, two watches). This first-level **self-description** usually involves information about self that is obvious to others through appearance and behavior. If you wear your college T-shirt, talk with a French accent, or are tall, these characteristics are obvious even to strangers. In many cases, characteristics of self-description position a person within categories (e.g., national, racial, or ethnic groups). It is not really an individual identity but is more about group membership.

Some points in Steve’s description of himself count as **self-disclosure**, the revelation of information that people cannot know unless a person makes it known to them. In this example, these are the points that describe particular feelings and emotions that other people would

not know unless Steve specifically disclosed them. The *resents*, *is proud of*, *enjoys*, *thinks*, *loves*, and *is wondering* parts give you a view of his identity that you could not directly obtain any other way, though you might work it out from what Steve says or does. As to his tattoos, if you know not only what they are but where they are, then *te salutamus* and we know who you are. Self-disclosure often involves the revelation of private, sensitive, and confidential information. Values, fears, secrets, assessments, evaluations, and preferences all count as such confidences that you share with only a few people.

Self-disclosure enables people to talk about themselves, which establishes value to who they are and reinforces how they view themselves (or how they want to view themselves). It also enables people to influence how they might be seen by other people.

### Dynamics of Self-Disclosure

So far, self-disclosure might sound favorable and fairly straightforward. In fact, it has traditionally been viewed that way. Like most things, though, it is more complicated than one might originally think and more complicated than traditionally understood.

### The Value of Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure was traditionally seen as beneficial to identity construction. Sidney Jourard (1964, 1971) originally wrote about self-disclosure as making your identity “transparent” to others. People who are transparent in this way are acting in the most psychologically healthy manner, according to Jourard.

Self-disclosure was also traditionally seen as beneficial to personal relationships, especially in the development of relational closeness (Altman & Taylor, 1973). If someone shares something personal, you might feel valued and trusted because that person let you into an inner life. You might also feel safe in sharing something about your life in return. As disclosure continues, people increase levels of closeness, and the relationship is strengthened.

### Good, Bad, or Nothing

As you read this next section, we do not want you to think that disclosure is unnecessary or without value. However, simply engaging in disclosure does not guarantee that good or intended results will happen.

When someone self-discloses information, three possibilities may occur. First, you might feel honored that someone trusts you with secrets. That person may be successfully creating a desired identity and a desired connection with you.

Another possibility is that you do not like what people are telling you—or they disclose too much information (TMI; Lee et al., 2024). You do not appreciate the fact, astonishing though it may be, that they can burp the alphabet after taking a single drink of Mountain Dew. Or, they might tell you other information you deem too intimate or private, given how you view your relationship with them.

The third possibility is that you simply do not care about what you are being told. In this case, disclosure has little to no impact on identity construction. Disclosure itself has no absolute value, and what may be important to a discloser may be of no value to the audience. (C'mon! We have all met bores.) So, in the real world, disclosure does not make a difference to a relationship;



How many people in this photo are performing a social role and its accompanying identity requirements? Be sure to justify your answer.

iStock.com/Rich Legg

the relationship makes a difference to the value of disclosure. Ultimately, if you feel the relationship is enhanced by self-disclosure, it is. If you do not, then the relationship does not grow in closeness.

## Disclosure and Privacy

Just because information is available to disclose does not mean that it will be disclosed. You choose to disclose some things to some people. There may be some things about yourself that you have never disclosed to anyone. As such, privacy is an issue of disclosure. Fortunately, there is a communication theory that deals with just that topic.

Communication privacy management (Petronio, 1991, 2002, 2013) theory explains how people manage the need to maintain privacy by negotiating boundaries of privacy with others. You possess information about yourself. Some of this information is stuff about which you would *not* care if other people knew. Some of this information is stuff about which you *definitely would* care. Such information might make you feel quite vulnerable. People, therefore, tend to feel very strongly about controlling who has access to information about them and how that information might be shared.

Boundaries are developed to protect this information, with some people being allowed access and some people being prevented from access. These boundaries are determined partly by the relationship. One difference between friendship and mere acquaintance, for instance, is that you have stronger boundaries around your identity for acquaintances than you do for friends.

Boundaries are also established to protect certain information or topics. When it comes to romantic relationships, for instance, sex-related topics are met with privacy considerations (Brannon & Rauscher, 2019), and communication challenges represent boundary stresses that make communication into “work” (Donovan & Hazlett, 2024). Your closest friend may know you better than anyone else but not have access to certain information you possess about yourself, and you probably do not know everything about them either. People in personal relationships tend to cooperate when it comes to maintaining these boundaries. Your best friend, for example, may know not to ask you about a particularly sensitive topic.

Of course, just because such boundaries exist, that does not mean that they will remain intact in their present form. These boundaries may experience *turbulence*, the term used within communication privacy management. Turbulence is said to occur when boundaries are reshaped and revised in some way.

Turbulence may occur when boundaries come under attack. For instance, someone might ask you a personal question, and you make it clear to that person that you do not intend to disclose that information. You might also make additional moves, such as avoiding future contact with that individual.

Turbulence may also occur when boundaries are revised due to changes in how a person evaluates the need for privacy about a particular topic. Lesbian, gay, and queer teachers often experience tension about disclosing or concealing their sexual orientations to their students (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015), while children with LGBTQ+ parents have to navigate hidden communication challenges while growing up (Goldberg et al., 2024).

Turbulence may further occur due to changes in how a relationship is perceived. A person might determine an acquaintance to now be more of a friend and share information with that individual. Interestingly, such changes in determination might occur after a boundary attack is recognized. A personal question is asked, and a person might determine to let that person through



based on recognizing that relational changes have taken place. Traditional-aged college students often experience turbulence with their parents (Ledbetter, 2019), especially over the matter of personal privacy and perceived “invasion” of it by parents (Wang & Hawk, 2024). The relationship between parents and adolescents is different from the one they had when the adolescents were just children, but it is not always clear to either side just what relationship actually exists. Quite often disagreement exists in how this new relationship is defined and understood.

### Narratives

Self-disclosure may be accomplished through story form. People often use stories to tell others something about themselves and help shape a sense of who they are for others. Actually, people tell stories about themselves all the time. When doing so, they pay special attention to what they say, particularly depending on the occasion and on the audience.

Consider narratives that might be shared during a job interview. If asked about your experience at your previous place of employment, you are essentially being asked to share the story (or stories) of your experience at your previous place of employment. Chances are pretty good that people will tell the story about the time they saved their employer a lot of money and not the time they trashed the place after a big fight with their boss.

Narratives about the same event will also be told in different ways depending on the audience. If teenagers are asked about a party they attended, the story they tell their parents will likely be vastly different from the story they tell their friends.

### Constructing the Story

Stories you tell are generally organized according to Kenneth Burke’s Pentad, discussed in Chapter 3, on verbal communication. As you will learn, the elements of the Pentad reveal what a speaker deems to be most important, what the speaker wants the listener to focus on. These elements are *act* (what happened), *scene* (situation or location of the act), *agent* (who performed the act), *agency* (how the act was accomplished), and *purpose* (why the act took place).

When you tell someone a story about yourself, the elements you deem most important—by focusing on them in the story—provide people with a guide for understanding who you are. More specifically, the elements you deem most important provide people with a guide for understanding how you *want* them to understand who you are.

## TRANSACTIONING IDENTITIES: OTHER PEOPLE

The shaping of stories to suit a particular audience highlights the importance of other people in the transaction of identities. Actually, we could get philosophical and consider, similar to whether a tree falling in the woods without anyone around makes any sound, whether someone attempting to construct an identity without anyone around is really constructing an identity. For example, is the Broadway musical fan mentioned previously creating an identity when humming



How do you explain the fact that a person can experience different sides of self and hold different views simultaneously?

curtoicurto/iStockPhoto



What is meant by a symbolic self, and why do we have to account to other people for who we are?

Wavebreakmedia/iStockPhoto

along to show tunes alone in the car? Or does the development of identities require someone else being there?

Essentially, it is communication with others that enables you to exist as a unique person capable of interacting within society. You become a “you” because other people treat you as a you through communication! That actually makes things a lot more confusing than it needs to be, though, and we will simplify it a bit in the next section. Discussing the symbolic self will reinforce the importance of symbolic activity and the importance of other people in the creation of identities.

We will continue by discussing how identity construction takes place through the ways in which people treat you. We will also talk specifically about the notion of altercasting.

### Symbolic Self

Your identity is shaped by culture and the people you interact with, and this affects the way you communicate, how people communicate with you, and how you perceive the communication of others. This is because you can reflect that your “self” is an object of other people’s perceptions.

In short, your identity is a **symbolic self**, a self that exists for other people and goes beyond what it means to you; it arises from social interaction with other people. As a result, you fit identity descriptions into the form of narratives that you and your society know about and accept. Hence, any identity that you offer to other people is based on the fact that you all share meanings about what is important in defining a person’s identity.

Another way of thinking about identity, then, is in terms of how broad social forces affect or even transact an individual’s view of self. This set of ideas is referred to as **symbolic interactionism**. In particular, George Herbert Mead (1934) suggested that people get their sense of self from other people and from being aware that others observe, judge, and evaluate their behavior. How many times have you done (or not done) something because of how you would look to your friends if you did (or didn’t do) it? Has your family ever said, “What will the neighbors think?”

Mead (1934) called this phenomenon the human ability to adopt an **attitude of reflection**. You think about how you look in other people’s eyes or reflect that other people can see you as a social object from their point of view. Guided by these reflections, you do not always do what you want to do; instead, you do what you think people will accept. You may end up doing something you don’t want to do because you cannot think of how to say no to another person in a reasonable way. You cannot just stamp your foot and shout, “I *won’t*!”

Your identity, then, is not yours alone but is partly adopted from society and so affects your credibility. Indeed, Mead (1934) also saw self as a transacted result of communicating with other people: You learn how to be an individual by recognizing the way that people treat you. You come to see your identity through the eyes of other people, for whom you are a meaningful object. People recognize you and treat you differently from everyone else.

### Self as Others Treat You

How people perceive themselves and their attempts to construct identities is influenced by the ways in which they are treated by others. Both directly and indirectly, your interactions and communication with other people shape your views of yourself.

Relationships connect through communication to the formation of your identity. If other people treat you with respect, you come to see yourself as respected, and self-respect becomes part of your identity. If your parents treated you like a child even after you had grown up, they might have drawn out from you some sense that you were still a child, which might have caused you to feel resentment. If you are intelligent and people treat you as interesting, you may come to see yourself as having a different value to other people than does someone who is not treated as intelligent. You get so used to the idea that it gets inside your “identity” and becomes part of who you are, but it originated from other people, not from you.

## ETHICAL ISSUE

### Altercasting for Right or Altercasting for Wrong?

Consider situations in which imposing an identity onto someone might be considered unethical. Is it unethical to tell people that they are strong when attempting to get their assistance with lifting a heavy object? Is that situation unethical if you really do not believe they are strong? Is encouraging your classmates by telling them that they are smart and will do well on an upcoming exam unethical if you really do not believe either to be true but are saying it to help?

### Questions to Consider

1. What criteria would you use to determine whether altercasting is ethical or unethical?
2. How might someone else oppose the criteria you suggest?

If you are tall, tough, and muscular (not short, bald, and carrying a Swiss Army knife), perhaps people habitually treat you with respect and caution. Over time, you get used to the idea, and identity is enacted and transacted in communication as a person who expects respect and a little caution from other people (Duck, 2023). Eventually, you will not have to act in a generally intimidating way to make people respectful. Your manner of communicating comes to reflect expected reactions to you. Although your identity begins in the way you are treated by other people, it eventually becomes transacted in communication.

## Altercasting

**Altercasting** involves the work that someone’s communication does to impose, support, or reject identities of others (Jarvinen & Kessing, 2023; Tracy, 2002). *Altercasting* refers to how language can give people an identity and then force them to live up to the description, whether positive or negative (Marwell & Schmitt, 1967). For example, you are altercasting when you say, “As a good friend, you will want to help me here” or “Only a fool would do what they are suggesting to you.” These label the listener as a certain kind of person (or not) by positioning the person to respond appropriately (as a friend or not as a fool). Even such small elements of communication transact your identity and the identities of those people around you.

Altercasting may also refer to the rejection of someone’s identity. Just because someone attempts to create an identity does not mean that it will be accepted. It could just as easily be rejected by other people. You may know someone who attempts to come off as tough or dominant, but other people may reject this identity. Rather than trembling in this person’s presence, people may make fun of the person or do things to intimidate or mock them.



How is your sense of identity represented by connections to the past?

KidStock/Getty Images

Conversely, *altercasting* may also refer to communication that accepts and supports the identity of someone. Perhaps people do accept that person's tough and dominant identity. In this case, their communication may support this tough and dominant identity by giving that person more space or not making eye contact with that person.

In all these situations, the communication of other people is influencing the transaction of someone's identity. The construction of identity does not take place in isolation; rather, it depends partly on other people.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES REVISITED

After reading this chapter, you should now be able to:

- 2.1 Explain the basic assumptions of identity construction.  
People do not possess core, unchanging selves influencing actions and waiting to be disclosed. Cultural groups to which you belong provide you with ways to describe and evaluate identities. Identities are created in the context of personal relationships. People perform their identities with others.
- 2.2 Explain the processes of perceptions.  
Perceptions involve the processes of actively selecting, organizing, and evaluating information, activities, situations, and people, and essentially naming and giving significance to all the things that make up your world.
- 2.3 Explain how identities are transacted through communication and performance.  
Through their performance, identities can be understood as being transacted (created, maintained, reinforced, or transformed) symbolically through communication with others. Sometimes identities are performed without a great deal of purpose or strategy. They just sort of happen when people communicate. Other times, identity performance is very purposeful and strategic.

- 2.4** Explain how identities are transacted through self-disclosure.  
Self-disclosure enables people to talk about themselves, which establishes value to who they are and reinforces how they view themselves (or how they want to view themselves). It also enables people to influence how they might be seen by other people.
- 2.5** Explain how identities are transacted in connection with other people.  
Your identity is shaped by culture and the people you interact with, and this affects the way you communicate, how people communicate with you, and how you perceive the communication of others. This is because you can reflect that your “self” is an object of other people’s perceptions. Further, through altercasting, the communication of others can impose, support, or reject identities of others.

KEY TERMS

altercasting	schemata
attitude of reflection	selective exposure
back region	selective perception
front region	selective retention
identities	self-description
perception	self-disclosure
personal constructs	symbolic interactionism
prototype	symbolic self

COMMUNICATION AND YOU

- 1.** Beyond the fact that some of the identities we transact are based on relationships shared with others, much identity work takes place through relationships in general. Our relationships with others provide us with opportunities to develop who we are and how we want to be perceived by others. Through relationships, we develop trust so that we may disclose personal information about ourselves. And we come to understand ourselves through our interactions with others. We cannot have a concept of self without reflection on identities via the views of other people with whom we have relationships. How have your interactions with others allowed you to develop a particular identity? How have your identities been supported or challenged through your interactions with others?
- 2.** Beyond the fact that some of the identities we transact are based on cultural membership, such membership informs people about the value of identities and the proper ways of constructing those identities. And your identities are based partly on the beliefs and prevailing norms of the society in which you live. When you communicate with other people in your culture, you get information about what works and what does not, what is acceptable and what is not, and how much you count in that society—what your identities are worth. What types of identities are valued in some of the cultural groups to which you belong? In what ways does the same identity (e.g., friend) seem different in different cultural groups to which you belong?



3. Physically attractive people often act confidently because they are aware that other people find them attractive. Conversely, unattractive people have learned that they cannot rely on their looks to make a good impression. They need other ways of impressing other people (e.g., by developing a great sense of humor, conveying intelligence, or developing a talent). To what extent do you find that this research confirms your own experiences in life? Do you think this applies to other such characteristics as humor, intelligence, and talent?

### TECHNOLOGY CONNECTIONS

1. Your own identity work on social networking sites may not be something you have considered or realize that you even do. Have you ever spent time looking at two (or more) different photographs of yourself, trying to figure out which one to post? Have you ever edited text you have written because it did not convey what you wanted to convey about an experience you had? Have you ever untagged an unflattering photograph of yourself or untagged a photo of yourself doing something you should not have been doing? If so, you have engaged in identity work through these sites. What other things have you done through social networking sites to develop a particular identity?
2. Examine the social networking sites of some of your connections on those sites. Do their identities created through those sites match the identities they tend to transact offline?
3. Now go back to considering your own social networking sites. Have you ever struggled with a post because some people in your social network (friends, family, classmates, coworkers, etc.) would take it the wrong way? Perhaps it would show you in a different way from the one in which those people are used to seeing you. Or, do you have multiple accounts for different people in your social network? What might these struggles or multiple accounts tell you about the existence of multiple identities?