Survey of Communication – "Chapter 9: Interpersonal Communication"
Author (Year)

Chapter Objectives:

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

• Define interpersonal communication.
• Explain self-disclosure.
• Understand the role of communication climate on interpersonal communication.
• Be aware of the role of dialectical tensions in interpersonal communication.
• Understand the unique dynamics of friendship.
• Understand the unique dynamics of romantic relationships.
• Understand the unique dynamics of family.
• Understand the various ways of interpreting and responding to conflict in interpersonal communication.

Think about your relationships in the last few years. You may have just transitioned from high school to a community college or university. Perhaps you and your friends from high school went to different colleges and are now living far apart from each other. If you have recently been separated by distance from friends or family, you have noticed that it is more difficult to stay connected and share all of the little things that go on in your day. As you continue to grow and change in college, it is likely that you will create relationships along the way. Being away from your family, you will probably notice changes to your relationships with them. All of these dynamics, and many more, fall under the scope of interpersonal communication.

Before going any further, let us define interpersonal communication. "Inter" means between, among, mutually, or together. The second part of the word, "personal" refers to a specific individual or particular role that an individual may occupy. Thus, **interpersonal communication** is *communication between individual people*. We often engage in interpersonal communication in **dyads**, which means *between two people*. It may also occur in small groups such as you and your housemates trying to figure out a system for household chores.

We believe it is important for you to know that the definition of interpersonal communication is not simply a quantitative one. What this means is that you cannot define it by merely counting the number of people involved. Instead, Communication scholars view interpersonal communication qualitatively; meaning that it occurs when people communicate with each other as unique individuals. It occurs when we communicate to "build knowledge of one another and create shared meanings" (Wood, 1999, p. 24). Thus, **interpersonal communication is a process of exchange where there is desire and motivation on the part of those involved to get to know each**

other as individuals. We will use this definition of interpersonal communication to explore the three primary types of relationships in our lives—friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships. Given that conflict is a natural part of interpersonal communication, we will also discuss multiple ways of understanding and managing conflict. But before we go into detail about specific interpersonal relationships, let's examine two important aspects of interpersonal communication: self-disclosure and climate.

Self Disclosure

Because interpersonal communication is the primary means by which we get to know others as unique individuals, it is important to understand the role of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is the process of revealing information about yourself to others that is not readily known by them—you have to disclose it. In face-to-face interactions, telling someone "I am a white woman" would not be self-disclosure because that person can perceive that about you without being told. However, revealing, "I am an avid surfer" or "My favorite kind of music is hip-hop" would be examples of self-disclosure because these are pieces of personal information others do not know unless you tell them. Given that our definition of interpersonal communication requires people to "build knowledge of one another" to get to know them as unique individuals, the necessity for self-disclosure should be obvious.

There are degrees of self-disclosure, ranging from relatively safe (revealing your hobbies or musical preferences), to more personal topics (illuminating fears, dreams for the future, or fantasies). Typically, as relationships deepen and trust is established, self-disclosure increases in both breadth and depth. We tend to disclose facts about ourselves first (I am a Biology major), then move towards opinions (I feel the war is wrong), and finally disclose feelings (I'm sad that you said that). An important aspect of self-disclosure is the rule of reciprocity. This rule states that self-disclosure between two people works best in a back and forth fashion. When you tell someone something personal, you probably expect them to do the same. When one person reveals more than another, there can be an imbalance in the relationship because the one who self discloses more may feel vulnerable as a result of sharing personal information while the other person has not.

One way to visualize self-disclosure is the Johari Window which comes from combining the first names of the window's creators, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham. The window is divided into four quadrants: the arena, the blind spot, the facade, and the unknown (Luft, 1969).

	Known To Self	Not Known To Self
Known To Others	Arena/Open Self	Blind Self
Not Known To Others	Facade/Hidden Self	Unknown Self

The arena area contains information that is known to us and to others, such as our height, hair color, occupation, or major. In general, we are comfortable discussing or revealing these topics with most people. Information in the blind spot includes those things that may be apparent to others, yet we are unaware of it in ourselves. The habit of playing with your hair when nervous may be a habit that others have observed but you have not. The third area, the façade, contains information that is hidden from others but is known to you. Previous mistakes or failures, embarrassing moments, or family history are topics we typically hold close and reveal only in the context of safe, long-term relationships. Finally, the unknown area contains information that neither others, nor we, know about. We cannot know how we will react when a parent dies or just what we will do after graduation until the experience occurs. Knowing about ourselves, especially our blind and unknown areas, enables us to have a healthy, well-rounded self-concept. As we make choices to self-disclose to others, we are engaging in negotiating relational dialectics.

Relational Dialectics

One way we can better understand our personal relationships is by understanding the notion of relational dialectics. Baxter (1990) describes three relational dialectics that are constantly at play in interpersonal relationships. Essentially, they are a continuum of needs for each participant in a relationship that must be negotiated by those involved. Let's take a closer look at the three primary relational dialectics that are at work in all interpersonal relationships.

- **Autonomy-Connection** refers to our ***need to have close connection with others as well as our need to have our own space and identity***. We may miss our romantic partner when she or he is away but simultaneously enjoy and cherish that alone time. When you first enter a romantic relationship, you probably want to be around the other person as much as possible. As the relationship grows, you likely begin to desire fulfilling your need for autonomy, or alone time. In every relationship, each person must balance how much time to spend with the other, versus how much time to spend alone.
- **Novelty-Predictability** is the idea that ***we desire predictability as well as spontaneity in our relationships***. In every relationship, we take comfort in a certain level of routine as a way of knowing what we can count on the other person in the relationship. At the same time, too much routine gets boring so we like to mix it up a bit. Friends who get together every Saturday for brunch, and make a commitment to always try new restaurants, are balancing these opposing tensions; they have both novelty and predictability.

- **Openness-Closedness** refers to *the desire to be open and honest with others while at the same time not wanting to reveal every thing about yourself to someone else*. One's desire for privacy does not mean they are shutting out others. It is a normal human need. We tend to disclose the most personal information to those with whom we have the closest relationships. However, even these people do not know everything about us. As the old saying goes, "We all have skeletons in our closet," and that's okay.

How We Handle Relational Dialectics

Understanding that these three dialectical tensions are at play in all relationships is a first step in understanding how our relationships work. However, awareness alone is not enough. Couples, friends, or family members have strategies for managing these tensions in an attempt to meet the needs of each person. Baxter identifies four ways we can handle dialectical tensions.

The first option is to **neutralize** the extremes of the dialectical tensions. Here, *individuals compromise, creating a solution where neither person's need (such as novelty or predictability) is fully satisfied*. Individual needs may be different, and never fully realized. For example, if one person seeks a great deal of autonomy, and the other person in the relationship seeks a great deal of connection, neutralization would not make it possible for either person to have their desires met. Instead, each person might feel like they are not getting quite enough of their particular need met.

The second option is to *favor one end of the dialectical continuum and ignore the other, or alternate between the extremes*. This strategy is called **separation**. A couple in a commuter relationship in which each person works in a different city may decide to live apart during the week (autonomy) and be together on the weekends (connection). In this sense, they are alternating between the extremes by being completely alone during the week, yet completely together on the weekends.

When people decide to *divide their lives into spheres* they are practicing **segmentation**. For example, your extended family may be very close and choose to spend religious holidays together. However, members of your extended family might reserve other special days such as birthdays for celebrating with friends. This approach divides needs according to the different segments of your life.

The final option for dealing with these tensions is **reframing**. This strategy requires creativity not only in managing the tensions, but understanding how they work in the relationship. For example, *the two ends of the dialectic are not viewed as opposing or contradictory* at all. Instead, they are understood as supporting the other need, as well as the relationship itself. A couple who does not live together, for example, may agree to spend two nights of the week alone or with friends as a sign of their autonomy.

The time spent alone or with others gives each person the opportunity to develop themselves and their own interests so that they are better able to share themselves with their partner and enhance their connection.

In general, there is no one right way to understand and manage dialectical tensions. However, to always satisfy one need and ignore the other may be a sign of trouble in the relationship (Baxter, 1990). It is important to remember that relational dialectics are a natural part of our relationships and that we have a lot of choice, freedom, and creativity in how we work them out with our relational partners. It is also important to remember that dialectical tensions are negotiated differently in each relationship. The ways we self disclose and manage dialectical tensions contributes greatly to what we call the communication climate in relationships.

Communication Climate

Do you feel organized, or confined, in a clean workspace? Are you more productive when the sun is shining than when it's gray and cloudy outside? Just as factors like weather and physical space impact us, so does the communication climate influence our interpersonal interaction. Communication climate is the "overall feeling or emotional mood between people" (Wood, 1999, p. 245). If you dread going to visit your family during the holidays because of tension between you and your sister, or you look forward to dinner with a particular set of friends because they make you laugh, you are responding to the communication climate—the overall mood that is created because of the people involved and the type of communication they bring to the interaction. Let's look at two different types of communication climates: Confirming and Disconfirming climates.

Interpersonal Communication Now

"Sticks and Stones Can Beak my Bones But Words Can Hurt Me Too"
In a study published in the journal Science, researchers reported that the sickening feeling we get when we are socially rejected (being ignored at a party or passed over when picking teams) is real. When researchers measured brain responses to social stress they found a pattern similar to what occurs in the brain when our body experiences physical pain. Specifically, "the area affected is the anterior cingulated cortex, a part of the brain known to be involved in the emotional response to pain" (Fox, 2003). The doctor who conducted the study, Matt Lieberman, a social psychologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, said, "It makes sense for humans to be programmed this way. . .Social interaction is important to survival."

Confirming and Disconfirming Climates

Positive and negative climates can be understood along three dimensions—recognition, acknowledgement, and endorsement. We experience **confirming climates** when we

receive **messages that demonstrate our value and worth from those with whom we have a relationship**. Conversely, we experience **Disconfirming Climates** when we receive **messages that suggest we are devalued and unimportant**. Obviously, most of us like to be in confirming climates because they foster emotional safety as well as personal and relational growth. However, it is likely that your relationships fall somewhere between the two extremes. Let's look at three types of messages that create confirming and disconfirming climates.

- **Recognition Messages**: Recognition **messages either confirm or deny another person's existence**. For example, if a friend enters your home and you smile, hug him, and say, "I'm so glad to see you" you are confirming his existence. If you say "good morning" to a colleague and she ignores you by walking out of the room without saying anything, she is creating a disconfirming climate by not recognizing you as a unique individual.
- **Acknowledgement Messages**: Acknowledgement messages go beyond recognizing another's existence by **confirming what they say or how they feel**. Nodding our head while listening, or laughing appropriately at a funny story, are nonverbal acknowledgement messages. When a friend tells you she had a really bad day at work and you respond with, "Yeah, that does sound hard, do you want to go somewhere quiet and talk?", you are acknowledging and responding to her feelings. In contrast, if you were to respond to your friend's frustrations with a comment like, "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me today," you would be ignoring her experience and presenting yours as more important.
- **Endorsement Messages**: Endorsement messages go one step further by **recognizing a person's feelings as valid**. Suppose a friend comes to you upset after a fight with his girlfriend. If you respond with, "Yeah, I can see why you would be upset" you are endorsing his right to feel upset. However, if you said, "Get over it. At least you have a girlfriend" you would be sending messages that deny his right to feel frustrated in that moment. While it is difficult to see people we care about in emotional pain, people are responsible for their own emotions. When we let people own their emotions and do not tell them how to feel, we are creating supportive climates that provide a safe environment for them to work though their problems.

Now that you understand that we must self-disclose to form interpersonal relationships, and that self-disclosure takes place in communication climates, we want to spend the rest of the chapter briefly highlighting some of the characteristics of the three primary interpersonal relationships in which we engage: Friendships, Romantic Relationships, and Family Relationships.

Developing and Maintaining Friendships

A common need we have as people is the need to feel connected with others. We experience great joy, adventure, and learning through our connection and interactions

with others. The feeling of wanting to be part of a group and liked by others is natural. One way we meet our need for connection is through our friendships. Friendship means different things to different people depending on age, gender, and cultural background. Common among all friendships is the fact that they are interpersonal relationships of choice. Throughout your life, you will engage in an ongoing process of developing friendships. Bill Rawlins (1981) suggests that we develop our friendships through a series of six steps. One way to visualize these steps is through Frank Dance's Helical Model of Communication (1967). While we may not follow these six steps in exact order in all of our relationships, these steps help us understand how we develop friendships.

The first step in building friendships occurs through **Role-Limited Interaction**. In this step, we *interact with others based on our social roles*. For example, when your meet a new person in class, your interaction centers around your role as "student." The communication is characterized by a focus on superficial, rather than personal topics. In this step we engage in limited self-disclosure, and rely on scripts and stereotypes. When one of your authors first met her best friend Robin, they interacted according to the roles they played in the context of their initial communication. They met at a health club and began a conversation because they were regulars at the same aerobics class. Their initial conversation was about how much they liked being members of the club and a participant in that particular aerobics class.

The second step in developing friendships is called **Friendly Relations**. This stage is characterized by *communication that moves beyond initial roles as the participants begin to interact with one another to see of there are common interests, as well as an interest to continue getting to know one another*. As Robin and Laura shared their appreciation for their workout time they discovered a wealth of shared interests. Each of them was writing her dissertation at the time they met, and they discovered that going to an aerobics class allowed them a community of people with whom to engage in vigorous physical exercise. The development of this friendship occurred as they identified with each other as more than a workout partner. They saw each other as women of the same age, with similar goals, ambitions, and interests. Moreover, as one of them studied Communication and the other Psychology, they appreciated the differences as well as similarities in their collegiate pursuits.

The third step in developing friendships is called **Moving Toward Friendship**. In this stage, participants *make moves to foster a more personalized friendship*. They may begin meeting outside of the setting in which the relationship started, and begin increasing the levels of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure enables the new friends to form bonds of trust. When Robin and Laura entered this stage it was right before Laura was leaving for a teaching job in China. As she was busy with travel preparations, she was also aware of this developing relationship. She was worried that since the relationship was so new, and that she would be away for months, the friendship might die out before it really began. As a way of getting close to Robin and including her in the travel

preparations, Laura invited Robin to help her shop for needed items. They also talked of writing letters and emailing while she was away in China.

The fourth step in developing friendships is called **Nascent Friendship**. In this stage individuals *commit to spending more time together*. They also may start using the term "friend" to refer to each other as opposed to "a person in my history class" or "this guy I work with." The interactions extend beyond the initial roles as participants work out their own private communication rules and norms. For example, they may start calling on a regular basis or reserving certain times and activities for each other such as going on evening runs together. While in China, Laura and Robin wrote once a week. When Laura returned, they quickly fell into a regular pattern of calling each other every afternoon to see how the dissertation writing was progressing and to make plans for meeting at the gym to work out.

The fifth step in developing friendships is **Stabilized Friendship**. In this stage, friends *take each other for granted as friends, but not in a negative way*. Because the friendship is solid, they assume each other will be in their lives. There is an assumption of continuity. The communication in this stage is also characterized by a sense of trust as levels of self-disclosure increase and each person feels more comfortable revealing parts of him or herself to the other. This stage can continue indefinitely throughout a lifetime. When Robin and Laura became friends in 1997 they were both living in Ohio. After finishing school in 1998, they both left to take jobs—Laura moved to California and Robin to Virginia. While they were sad to move away from one another, they knew the friendship would continue. To this day they continue to be best friends.

The final step in friendship development is **Waning Friendship**. As you know, friendships do not always have a happy ending. *Many friendships come to an end*. Perhaps the relationship is too difficult to sustain over large geographic distances. Or, sometimes people change and grow in different directions and have little in common with old friends. Sometimes friendship rules are violated to a degree beyond repair. We spoke earlier of trust as a component of friendships. One common rule of trust is that if we tell a friend a secret, he or she is expected to keep it a secret. If that rule is broken, and a friend continually breaks your trust by telling your secrets to others, you are likely to stop thinking of them as your friend.

Challenges for Friendships

While the above steps are a general path toward friendship, they are not always smooth. As with any relationship, challenges exist in friendships that can strain their development. Three of the more common challenges to friendships are gender, cultural diversity, and sexual attraction. As we emphasize throughout the book, factors such as our gender identities and cultural backgrounds always play a role in our interactions with others.

- **Gender**

Research suggests that both women and men value trust and intimacy in their friendships and value their time spent with friends (Mathews, Derlega & Morrow, 2006; Bell, 1981; Rose, 1985). However, there are some differences in the interactions that take place within women's and men's friendships (Burleson, Jones & Holmstrom, 2005; Coates, 1986; Harriman, 1985). It is quite common among female friends to get together simply to talk and catch up with one another. When calling her close friend, Antoinette might say, "Why don't you come over to my place so we can talk?" The need to connect through verbal communication is explicitly stated and forms the basis for the relationship. In contrast, among male friends a more common approach to interaction is an invitation to engage in an activity as a means of facilitating conversation. For example, John might say to his friend, "Hey, Mike, let's get out surfing this weekend." The explicit request is to engage in an activity (surfing), but John and Mike understand that as they engage in the activity, they will talk, joke around, and reinforce their friendship ties.

- **Culture**

Cultural values shape how we understand our friendships. In most Western societies that emphasize individualism (as opposed to collectivism), friendships are seen as voluntary in that we get to choose who we want in our friendship circle. If we do not like someone we do not have to be friends with him/her. Contrast this to the workplace, for example, where we may be forced to get along with colleagues even though we may not like them (Bell & Coleman, 1999). In many collectivist cultures, such as Japan and China, friendships carry certain obligations that are understood by all parties (Carrier, 1999). These may include gift giving, employment and economic opportunities, and cutting through so-called 'bureaucratic red tape.' Although these sorts of connections, particularly in business and politics, may be frowned upon in the United States because they contradict our valuing of individualism, they are a natural, normal, and logical result of friendships in collectivist cultures.

- **Sexual Attraction**

The classic film, When Harry Met Sally, highlights how sexual attraction can complicate friendships. In the movie Harry quotes the line, "Men and women can't be friends because the sex always gets in the way." Levels of sexual attraction or sexual tension may challenge friendships between heterosexual men and women, gay men, and lesbian women. This may arise from an internal desire of one of the friends to explore a sexual relationship, or if someone in the relationship indicates that he/she wants to be "more than friends." These situations might place strain on the friendship and require the individuals to address the situation if they want the friendship to continue. One approach has been the recent definition of friendships called, "Friends with Benefits." This term implies an understanding that two people will identify their relationship as a

friendship, but will be open to engaging in sexual activity without committing to the other characteristics common in romantic relationships.

Developing and Maintaining Romantic Relationships

Like the other relationships in our lives, romantic relationships play an important role in fulfilling our needs for intimacy, social connection, and sexual relations. Like friendships, romantic relationships also follow general stages of creation and deterioration. Before we explore these stages, let's look at our definition of romantic relationships.

In many Western cultures, romantic relationships are voluntary. We are free to decide whom to date and form life-long romantic relationships. In some Eastern cultures these decisions may be made by parents, or elders in the community, based on what is good for the family or social group. Even in Western societies, not everyone holds the same amount of freedom and power to determine their relational partner. Parents or society may discourage interracial, interfaith, or interclass relationships. People whose relational preference is for the same sex suffer legal, political, economic, and social restrictions when making choices about marrying and having children. Given that much of the research on how romantic relationships develop is based on relationships in the West, we use Wood's definition to define **romantic relationships** as, *"voluntary relationships between unique individuals that the partners assume will be primary and continuing parts of their lives"* (p. 343).

Interpersonal Communication and You
 How Do You Love?
The Greeks had six distinct words for love depending on the context, whereas we often use the single term "love" to describe many things. I love pizza. I love my mother. I love my dog. Look at the table below to see what Greek word for love you would use in these sentences.

Type of Love	Definition
Eros	Passion and Commitment
Ludus	Game Playing
Storge	Love and Friendship
Pragma	Pragmatic Love
Mania	Emotional Intensity
Agape	Selfless Caring

Think about your own romantic relationships for a moment. To whom are you attracted? Chances are they are people with whom you share common interests and encounter in your everyday routines such as going to school, work, or participation in hobbies or sports. In other words, self-identity, similarity, and proximity are three powerful

influences when it comes to who we select as romantic partners. We often select others that we deem appropriate for us as they fit our self-identity; heterosexuals pair up with other heterosexuals, lesbian women with other lesbian women, and so forth. Social class, religious preference, and ethnic or racial identity are also great influences as people are more likely to pair up with others of similar backgrounds. Logically speaking, it is difficult (although not impossible with the prevalence of email and online dating services) to meet people outside of our immediate geographic area. In other words, if we do not have the opportunity to meet and interact with someone at least a little, how do we know if they are a person with whom we would like to explore a relationship? We cannot meet, or maintain a long term relationship, without sharing some sense of proximity.

We are certainly not suggesting that we only have romantic relationships with carbon copies of ourselves. Over the last few decades, there have been some dramatic shifts when it comes to numbers and perceptions of interracial marriage. From 1960-1990 the number of white-Asian couples increased tenfold, and the number of black-white couples quadrupled. According to Steve Sailer, "The reasons are obvious: greater integration and the decline of white racism. More subtly, interracial marriages are increasingly recognized as epitomizing what our society values most in a marriage: the triumph of true love over convenience and prudence" (1997).

Just like the steps we examined for developing friendships, there are general stages we follow in the development and maintenance of romantic relationships. Let's look at these six stages of growth in romantic relationships.

The first stage in the development of romantic relationships is **No Interaction**. As the name suggests, the initial stage of a romantic relationship *occurs when two people have not interacted*. For example, you may see someone you are attracted to on the first day of class and think to yourself, "I really want to meet her." Our attraction for someone may motivate us to move beyond the no interaction stage to see if there is a possibility of developing a romantic relationship.

Interpersonal Communication and You
 Dating Today

• According to the U.S. Census, 44% (100 million) of Americans are single.**
• Only one in eight will call for a second date after more than one day has passed since the first date.*
• 79% of men will decide how interested they are in a woman within the first 15 minutes of a date. Women take a little longer—about an hour.**
• 17% of people like dates set up by friends.*
• 40 million Americans use online dating services.**
• On average there are 86 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women.**

The second stage for developing romantic relationships is **Invitational Communication**. When we are attracted to someone, we may *signal or invite him/her to interact with us*. For example, you can do this by asking them to dinner, to dance at a club, or even, "I really liked that movie. What did you think?" The significance here is in the relational level (how the people feel about each other) rather than the content level (the topic) of the message. As the poet, Maya Angelou, explains, "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning." The 'shades of deeper meaning' are the relational level messages that invite others to continue exploring a possible romantic relationship. Quite often, we strategize how we might go about inviting people into communication with us so we can explore potential romantic development.

The third stage of developing romantic relationships is **Explorational Communication**. When *individuals respond favorably to our invitational communication* we then engage in explorational communication. In this stage we share information about ourselves, looking for mutual interests, shared political or religious views, and similarities in family background. In this stage self-disclosure increases so we can give and receive personal information in a way that fosters trust and intimacy. Common dating activities in this stage include going to parties or other publicly structured events, such as movies or a concert, that foster interaction and self-disclosure.

The fourth stage of romantic relationships is **Intensifying Communication**. If we continue to be attracted (mentally, emotionally, and physically) to one another, we begin engaging in intensifying communication. *This is the happy stage (the "relationship high") where we cannot bear to be away from the other person*. It is here that you might plan all of your free time together, and begin to create a private relational culture. Going out to parties and socializing with friends takes a back seat to more private activities such as cooking dinner together at home or taking long walks on the beach. Self-disclosure continues to increase as each person has a strong desire to know and understand the other. In this stage, we tend to idealize one another in that we down-play faults (or don't see them at all), seeing only the positive qualities of the other person.

Interpersonal Communication and You

Do you call each other "sweetie," "pooker," "honey," or "sweatpea"?
While these affectionate names may seem silly and can be embarrassing when uttered in a public setting, they are important in tying the individuals in a romantic relationship together. They are part of a couple's relational culture, "a private world of rules, understandings, meanings, and patterns of acting and interpreting that partners create for their relationship" (Wood, 1982, 1995). As part of a relational culture, couples work out how they will manage dialectics, signal attraction, and establish rituals.

The fifth stage of romantic relationship development is **Revising Communication**. When the "relational high" begins to wear off, couples begin to have *a more realistic perspective of one another, and the relationship as a whole*. Here, people may recognize the faults of the other person that they so idealized in the previous stage. Also, couples must again make decisions about where to go with the relationship—do they stay together and work toward long-term goals, or define it as a short-term relationship? A couple may be deeply in love and also make the decision to break off the relationship for a multitude of reasons. Perhaps one person wants to join the Peace Corps after graduation and plans to travel the world, while the other wants to settle down in their hometown. Their individual needs and goals may not be compatible to sustain a long-term commitment.

Commitment is the sixth stage in developing romantic relationships. This occurs when a couple makes the *decision to make the relationship a permanent part of their lives*. In this stage, the participants assume they will be in each other's lives forever and make joint decisions about the future. While marriage is an obvious sign of commitment it is not the only signifier of this stage. Gay and lesbian couples in the United States are legally prohibited from marrying in most states, so they may mark their intention of staying together in a commitment ceremony, or by registering as domestic partners. Likewise, not all heterosexual couples planning a future together legally marry. Some may lose economic benefits if they marry, such as the loss of Social Security for seniors or others may oppose the institution (and its inequality) of marriage.

Obviously, simply committing is not enough to maintain a relationship through tough times that occur as couples grow and change over time. Like a ship set on a destination, a couple must learn to steer though rough waves as well as calm waters. A couple can accomplish this by learning to communicate through the good and the bad. **Navigating** is when a couple continues to *revise their communication and ways of interacting to reflect the changing needs of each person*. Done well, life's changes are more easily enjoyed when viewed as a natural part of the life cycle. The original patterns for managing dialectical tensions when a couple began dating, may not work when they are managing two careers, children, and a mortgage payment. Outside pressures such as children, professional duties, and financial responsibilities put added pressure on relationships that require attention and negotiation. If a couple neglects to practice effective communication with one another, coping with change becomes increasingly stressful and puts the relationship in jeopardy.

Case In Point
Legal Marriage for Same-Sex Couples
The Netherlands became the first country (4/1/01), and Belgium the second (1/30/03), to offer legal marriage to same sex couples. Since then Canada (6/28/05) and Spain (6/29/05) have also removed their country's ban against same-sex marriage. The state of Massachusetts (5/17/04) is the first U.S. state to do so and California passed a law in 2008 allowing for same-sex marriages.

Domestic Partnerships

The status of domestic partner along with benefits for same-sex couples is recognized in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greenland, Iceland, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and in parts of the United States (California, Hawaii, and Vermont).

For more on Marriage Traditions in Various Times and Cultures, see www.buddybuddy.com/mar-trad.html

Getting Married In Canada

According to the Joint Advisory From Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund, National Center for Lesbian Rights, ACLU Lesbian & Gay Rights Project, and Freedom to Marry
www.freedomtomarry.org/ftm_marriageadvisory.htm
June 10, the high court of Ontario, Canada's most populous province, ruled that the exclusion of same-sex couples from civil marriage infringes human dignity, harms families, and violates the constitution. The court ordered an immediate end to this cruel discrimination. Within hours, same-sex couples began marrying.

American couples, different-sex or same-sex, may go to Canada to marry. Canada, like the United States, has no residency requirement for marriage (though it does have a one-year residency requirement for divorce.) When couples that marry in Canada come home—although they might face uncertainties and discrimination -- they will be as married as any people on the planet. That means, for example, the couples will identify as married on applications/forms for jobs, apartments, credit, mortgages, insurance, medical treatment, and taxes.
While many marriages will be respected to varying degrees in various places, and even in surprising places, many married couples will also experience discrimination. Some but not all businesses, states, and others will refuse to honor these lawful marriages, along with the federal government. And couples with a member in the military, or on public assistance, or in the U.S. on a visa will face particular complexities. Couples must be prepared to live with a level of uncertainty while we continue our work to end marriage discrimination here.

Not only do romantic couples progress through a series of stages of growth, they also experience stages of deterioration. Deterioration does not necessarily mean that a couple's relationship will end. Instead, couples may move back and forth from deterioration stages to growth stages throughout the course of their relationship.

The first stage of deterioration, **Dyadic Breakdown**, occurs when *romantic partners begin to neglect the small details that have always bound them together*. For

example, they may stop cuddling on the couch when they rent a movie and sit in opposite chairs. Taken in isolation this example does not mean a relationship is in trouble. However, when intimacy continues to descrease, and the partners feel dissatisfied, this dissatisfaction can lead to worrying about the relationship.

The second stage of deterioration, the **Intrapsychic Phase**, occurs when *partners worry that they do not connect with one another in ways they used to, or that they no longer do fun things together*. When this happens they may begin to imagine their life without the relationship. Rather than seeing the relationship as a given, the couple may begin to wonder what life would be like not being in the partnership.

The third stage of deterioration, the **Dyadic Phase**, occurs when *partners make the choice to talk about their problems*. In this stage, they discuss how to resolve the issues and may seek outside help such as a therapist to help them work through the reasons they are growing apart. This could also be the stage where couples begin initial discussions about how to divide up shared resources such property, money, or children.

The fourth stage of deterioration, **Social Support**, occurs when *termination is inevitable and the partners begin to look outside the relationship for social support*. In this stage couples will make the news public by telling friends, family, or children that the relationship is ending. As family members listen to problems, or friends offer invitations to go out and keep busy, they provide social support. The couple needs social support from outside individuals in the process of letting go of the relationship and coming to terms with its termination.

The fifth stage of deterioration, **Grave Dressing**, occurs when *couples reach closure in a relationship and move on with life*. Like a literal death, a relationship that has ended should be mourned. People need time to go through this process in order to fully understand the meaning of the relationship, why it ended, and what they can learn from the experience. Going through this stage in a healthy way helps us learn to navigate future relationships more successfully.

Case In Point
Divorce Rate: It's Not as High as You Think
By DAN HURLEY
The New York Times, April 19, 2005

How many American marriages end in divorce? One in two, if you believe the statistic endlessly repeated in news media reports, academic papers and campaign speeches.

The figure is based on a simple - and flawed - calculation: the annual marriage rate per 1,000 people compared with the annual divorce rate. In 2003, for example, the most recent year for which data is available, there were 7.5 marriages per 1,000 people and 3.8 divorces, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

But researchers say that this is misleading because the people who are divorcing in any given year are not the same as those who are marrying, and that the statistic is virtually useless in understanding divorce rates. In fact, they say, studies find that the divorce rate in the United States has never reached one in every two marriages, and new research suggests that, with rates now declining, it probably never will.

The method preferred by social scientists in determining the divorce rate is to calculate how many people who have ever married subsequently divorced. Counted that way, the rate has never exceeded about 41 percent, researchers say. Although sharply rising rates in the 1970's led some to project that the number would keep increasing, the rate has instead begun to inch downward.

About 60 percent of all marriages that eventually end in divorce do so within the first 10 years, researchers say. If that continues to hold true, the divorce rate for college graduates who married between 1990 and 1994 would end up at only about 25 percent, compared to well over 50 percent for those without a four-year college degree.

"The government has dropped the ball on data collection," said Dr. David Popenoe, professor of sociology and co-director of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University.

Joshua R. Goldstein, associate professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton's Office of Population Research, said the loss of detailed government data, coming at a time when divorce rates were at their highest, might have distorted not only public perception, but people's behavior.

"Expectations of high divorce are in some ways self-fulfilling," he said. "That's a partial explanation for why rates went up in the 1970's."

As word gets out that rates have tempered or actually begun to fall, Dr. Goldstein added, "It could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in the other direction."

You can probably recognize many of these stages from your own relationships or from relationships you've observed. Experience will tell you that we do not always follow these stages in a linear way. A couple, for example, may enter counseling during the dyadic phase, work out their problems, and enter a second term of intensifying communication, revising, and so forth. Other couples may skip some stages all together. Whatever the case, these models are valuable because they provide us with a way to recognize general communicative patterns and options we have at each stage of our relationships. Knowing what our choices are, and their potential consequences, gives us greater tools to build the kind of relationships we desire in our personal lives.

Attributed to: Laura K. Hahn, Lance Lippert, and Scott T. Paynton

Family Relationships

The third primary type of interpersonal relationship we engage in is that of family. What is family? Is family created by legal ties, or the bond of sharing common blood? Or, can a family be considered people who share commitment to one another? In an effort to recognize the diversity of families we define **family** as, ***"an organized, relational transactional group, usually occupying a common living space over an extended time period, and possessing a confluence of interpersonal images that evolve through the exchange of meaning over time"*** (Pearson, 1993). Let's take a few moments to unpack this definition.

- **Families Are Organized**. All of us occupy and play fairly predictable roles (parent, child, older sibling) in our family relationships. Similarly, communication in these relationships can be fairly predictable. For example, your younger brother may act as the family peacemaker, while your older sister always initiates fights with her siblings.
- **Families Are a Relational Transactional Group**. Not only is a family made up of the individual members, it is largely defined by the relationships between the members. Think back to our discussion of Systems Theory in Chapter Five. A family that consists of two opposite-sex parents, an older sister, her husband and three kids, a younger brother, his new wife, and two kids from a first marriage is largely defined by the relationships among the family members. All of these people have a role in the family and interact with others in fairly consistent ways according to their roles.
- **Families Usually Occupy a Common Living Space Over an Extended Period of Time**. One consistent theme when defining family is recognizing that family members typically live under the same roof for an extended period of time. We certainly include extended family within our definition, but for the most part, our notions of family include those people with whom we share, or have shared, common space over a period of time. Even though you may have moved away to college, a large part of your definition of your family is the fact that you spent a great deal of your life sharing a home with those you call your family.
- **Families Possess a Mixture of Interpersonal Images that Evolve Through the Exchange of Meaning Over Time**. From our families, we learn important values concerning intimacy, spirituality, communication, and respect. Parents and other family members model behaviors that shape how we interact with others. As a result, we continually form images of what it means to be a family, and try to maintain that image of family in our lives. You may define family as your immediate family, consisting of your parents and a sibling. However, your romantic partner may see family as consisting of parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Each of you perform different communication behaviors to maintain your image of family.

Most of us in the U.S. citizens are involved in families that have parents and children. Olson and McCubbin (1983) discuss seven stages that families with children go through as they progress through life. Families without children will not follow all of these stages, and blended families, where one parent does not have primary custody of children, may experience less extreme shifts between stages. The first stage of family development is **Establishing a Family**. In this stage *couples settle into committed or married life and make necessary changes in acknowledgement of their new legal, relational, and social status*. If they did not live together prior to marriage they may need to work out details of sharing space, money, and time. Often, this stage involved establishing a first home together as a couple.

The second stage of family development is **Enlarging a Family**. In this stage a couple decides to *expand their family with the addition of children*. While a time of joy and celebration, this is also a period of great stress and change for parents as they figure out new roles as parents. Time for friends, work, and one another is often decreased as the demands of a new child become the primary concern and focus of the couple's attention and resources. In this stage, the relationship is no longer defined in terms of two people, but includes the children that are now part of the family.

The third stage of family development is **Developing a Family**. As children grow, their needs change from primarily physical (feeding, changing diapers, and sleep) to more cognitive and emotional ones. *Parents become the primary source of instilling cultural and spiritual values, as well as fostering a child's individual personality*. This period takes a tremendous amount of time and commitment from parents as the children remain the focus of daily interactions. Think of the family that runs around taking children to soccer, baseball, piano lessons, church, and guiding their educational development. In this stage, the personal development of children is of high importance to the family.

The fourth stage of family development is **Encouraging Independence**. Around the teen years *children begin the process of naturally pulling away from their parents as a means of establishing and securing an independent identity*. You might recall that this period contained periods of stress and frustration for your parents, as well as you. Children may feel their parents are being overly protective or nosy about their friends and activities, while parents may feel abandoned and concerned for their child's safety as they spend more time away from home. These are often referred to as the rebellious years in which children engage in behaviors for the purpose of establishing independence from their parents.

The fifth stage of family development is **Launching Children**. Over the course of raising children couples experience a relationship with one another where children are often the central focus rather than each other. In the Launching Children stage, *each member of the couple must now relearn his/her roles as grown children eventually leave home for college, a career, or their own marriage and family*. If

one of the parents gave up a career to raise children he/she may wonder what to do with the free time. While the empty nest syndrome can be stressful it is also a chance for new possibilities as parents have more time, money, freedom, and energy to spend on each other, hobbies, travel, and friends. For example, when one of your authors moved out of the house at age 18, his parents told him explicitly, "We will help you in any way we can, but you're not moving back in with us." While this may sound harsh, your author and his parents have a very close relationship. What his parents were expressing was their excitement about being able to focus on each other as a couple after 22 years of raising two children in the home.

The sixth stage of family development is **Post-Launching of Children**. Depending on how a couple handles stage five, the post-launching of children can be *filled with renewed love, or can produce great strain on the marriage as a couple learns that they do not know how to relate with one another outside the context of raising children*. Some couples fall in love all over again and may renew their wedding vows as a signal of this new phase in their relationship. Some parents who may have decided to stay in a marriage for the sake of the children may decide to terminate the relationship after the children have left the family home. In the case of your author, his parents picked up new hobbies, traveled around the world, and maintained multiple "date days" each week. None of these behaviors occurred while children were in the house, but happened as they committed themselves to each other after the children left.

The seventh stage of family development is **Retirement**. Similar to the launching of children, *freedom from work can be an opportunity for growth and exploration of new relationships and activities. Simply having more time in the day can facilitate travel, volunteer work, or continuing education*. Conversely, people in this stage might experience a reduction in income and the loss of identity that came with membership in a profession. The family may also experience new growth during this stage as grown children bring their own relational partners and grandchildren in as new members of the family.

Communication patterns within the family, and between a couple, are continually changed and revised as a family progresses through the above stages. The fact that a couple generally spends less time together during stages two and three, and more time together in stages five through eight, requires that they continually manage dialectical tensions such as autonomy/connection. Management of these tensions may manifest itself as conflict. All relationships have conflict. Conflict is natural. It's how we think about and manage conflict that is important.

Thinking About Conflict

When you hear the word "conflict," do you have a positive or negative reaction? Are you someone who thinks conflict should be avoided at all costs? While conflict may be uncomfortable and challenging it doesn't have to be negative. Think about the social

and political changes that came about from the conflict of the civil rights movement during the 1960's. There is no doubt that this conflict was painful and even deadly for some civil rights activists, but the conflict resulted in the elimination of many discriminatory practices and helped create a more egalitarian social system in the United States. Let's look at two distinct orientations to conflict, as well as options for how to respond to conflict in our interpersonal relationships.

Conflict as Destructive

When we shy away from conflict in our interpersonal relationships it could be that we do so because we conceptualize it as destructive to our relationships. As with many of our beliefs and attitudes, they are not always well-grounded and lead to destructive behaviors. Augsburger (1992) outlined four assumptions of viewing conflict as destructive. 1. Conflict is a destructive disturbance of the peace. 2. The social system should not be adjusted to meet the needs of members; rather, members should adapt to the established values. 3. Confrontations are destructive and ineffective. 4. Disputants should be punished.

When we view conflict this way, we believe that it is a threat to the established order of the relationship. Think about sports as an analogy of how we view conflict as destructive. In the U.S. we like sports that have winners and losers. Sports and games where a tie is an option often seem confusing to us. How can neither team win or lose? When we apply this to our relationships, it's understandable why we would be resistant to engaging in conflict. I don't want to lose, and I don't want to see my relational partner lose. So, an option is to avoid conflict so that neither person has to face that result.

Conflict as Productive

In contrast to seeing conflict as destructive, it is possible, even healthy, to view conflict as a productive natural outgrowth and component of human relationships. Augsburger described four assumptions of viewing conflict as productive. 1. Conflict is a normal, useful process. 2. All issues are subject to change through negotiation. 3. Direct confrontation and conciliation are valued. 4. Conflict is a necessary renegotiation of an implied contract—a redistribution of opportunity, release of tensions, and renewal of relationships.

From this perspective conflict provides an opportunity for strengthening relationships, not harming them. It is a chance for relational partners to find ways to meet the needs of one another, even when these needs conflict. Think back to our discussion of dialectical tensions. While you may not explicitly argue with your relational partners about these tensions, the fact that you are negotiating them points to your ability to use conflict in productive ways for the relationship as a whole, and the needs of the individuals in the relationship.

Types of Conflict

Understanding the different ways of valuing conflict is a first step toward engaging in productive conflict interactions. Likewise, knowing the various types of conflict that occur in interpersonal relationships also helps us to identify appropriate strategies for managing certain types of conflict. Cole (1996) states that there are five types of conflict in interpersonal relationships: Affective, Conflict of Interest, Value, Cognitive, and Goal.

- **Affective conflict**. Affective conflict arises when we have *incompatible feelings with another person*. For example, if a couple has been dating for a while, one of the partners may want to marry as a sign of love while the other decides he/she wants to see other people. What do they do? The differences in feelings for one another are the source of affective conflict.
- **Conflict of Interest**. This type of conflict arises when people *disagree about a plan of action or what to do in a given circumstance*. For example, Julie, a Christian Scientist, does not believe in seeking medical intervention, but believes that prayer can cure illness. Jeff, a Catholic, does believe in seeking conventional medical attention as treatment for illness. What happens when Julie and Jeff decide to have children? Do they honor Jeff's beliefs and take the kids to the doctor when they are ill, or respect and practice Julie's religion? This is a conflict of interest.
- **Value Conflict**. A *difference in ideologies or values between relational partners* is called value conflict. In the example of Julie and Jeff, a conflict of interest about what to do concerning their children's medical needs results from differing religious values. Many people engage in conflict about religion and politics. Remember the old saying, "Never talk about religion and politics with your family."
- **Cognitive Conflict**. Cognitive conflict is *the difference in thought process, interpretation of events, and perceptions*. Marsha and Victoria, a long-term couple, are both invited to a party. Victoria declines because she has a big presentation at work the next morning and wants to be well rested. At the party, their mutual friends Michael and Lisa notice Marsha spending the entire evening with Karen. Lisa suspects Marsha may be flirting and cheating on Victoria, but Michael disagrees and says Marsha and Karen are just close friends catching up. Michael and Lisa are observing the same interaction but have a disagreement about what it means. This is an example of cognitive conflict.
- **Goal Conflict**. Goal conflict occurs when people *disagree about a final outcome*. Jesse and Maria are getting ready to buy their first house. Maria wants something that has long-term investment potential while Jesse wants a house to suit their needs for a few years, and then plans to move into a larger house. Maria has long-term goals for the house purchase and Jesse is thinking in more immediate terms. These two have two different goals in regards to purchasing a home.

Strategies for Managing Conflict

When we ask our students what they want to do when they experience conflict, most of the time they say "resolve it." While this is understandable, it is important to understand that conflict is ongoing in all relationships, and our approach to conflict should be to manage it instead.

One way to understand options for managing conflict is by knowing five major strategies for managing conflict in relationships. While most of us probably favor one strategy over another, we all have multiple options for managing conflict in our relationships. Having a variety of options available gives us flexibility in our interactions with others. Five strategies for managing interpersonal conflict include dominating, integrating, compromising, obliging, and avoiding (Rahim, 1986; Rahim & Magner, 1995; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). One way to think about these strategies, and your decision to select one over another, is to think about whose needs will be met in the conflict situation. You can conceptualize this idea according to the degree of concern for the self and the degree of concern for others.

When a person selects the **dominating strategy**, or win-lose approach, he/she exhibits *high concern for the self and low concern for the other person*. The goal here is to win the argument or debate. This approach is often characterized by loud, forceful, and interrupting communication. Again, this is analogous to sports. Too often, we avoid conflict because we believe the only other alternative is to try to dominate the other person. In relationships where we care about others, it's no wonder this strategy can seem unappealing.

The **obliging style** shows a *moderate degree of concern for self and others, and a high degree of concern for the relationship itself*. In this approach the individuals are less important than the relationship as a whole. Here, a person may minimize the differences or a specific issue in order to emphasize the commonalities. The comment, "The fact that we disagree about politics isn't a big deal since we share the same ethical and moral beliefs," exemplifies an obliging style.

The **compromising style** is evident when *both parties are willing to give up something in order to gain something else*. When environmental activist, Julia Butterfly Hill agreed to end her two-year long tree sit in Luna as a protest against the logging practices of Pacific Lumber Company (PALCO), and pay them $50,000 in exchange for their promise to protect Luna and not cut within a 20-foot buffer zone, she and PALCO reached a compromise. If one of the parties feels the compromise is unequal they may be less likely to stick to it long term. When conflict is unavoidable, many times people will opt for compromise. One of the problems with compromise is that neither party fully gets their needs met. If you want Mexican food and your friend wants pizza, you might agree to compromise and go someplace that serves Mexican pizza. While this may seem like a good idea, you may have really been craving a burrito

and your friend may have really been craving a pepperoni pizza. In this case, while the compromise brought together two food genres, neither person got his/her desire met.

When one **avoids** a conflict they may suppress feelings of frustration or walk away from a situation. While this is often regarded as expressing a *low concern for self and others* because problems are not dealt with, the opposite may be true in some contexts. Take, for example, a heated argument between Ginny and Pat. Pat is about to make a hurtful remark out of frustration. Instead, she decides that she needs to avoid this argument right now until she and Ginny can come back and discuss things in a more calm fashion. In this case, temporarily avoiding the conflict can be beneficial. However, conflict avoidance over the long term generally has negative consequences for a relationship because neither person is willing to participate in the conflict management process.

Finally, **integrating** demonstrates a *high level of concern for both self and others*. Using this strategy, individuals agree to share information, feelings, and creativity to try to reach a mutually acceptable solution that meets both of their needs. In our food example above, one strategy would be for both people to get the food they want, then take it on a picnic in the park. This way, both people are getting their needs met fully, and in a way that extends beyond original notions of win-lose approaches for managing the conflict. The downside to this strategy is that it is very time consuming and requires high levels of trust.

Summary

Interpersonal communication is communication between individuals that view one another as unique. Quite often, interpersonal communication occurs in dyads. In order for interpersonal communication to occur, participants must engage in self-disclosure, which is the revealing of information about oneself to others that is not known by them. As we self-disclose, we manage our relationships by negotiating dialectical tensions, which are opposing needs in interpersonal relationships. We use a variety of strategies for navigating these tensions, including neutralization, separation, segmentation, and reframing.

As we navigate our interpersonal relationships, we create communication climates. Communication climates are the overall feelings and moods people have for one another and the relationship. When we engage in disconfirming messages, we produce a negative relational climate, while confirming messages can help build a positive relational climate by recognizing the uniqueness and importance of another person.

The three primary types of interpersonal relationships we engage in are friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships. Each of these relationships develop through a series of stages of growth and deterioration. Friendships and romantic relationships differ from family relationships in that they are relationships of choice.

Each of these relationships requires commitment from participants to continuously navigate relational dynamics in order to maintain and grow the relationship.

Finally, all relationships experience conflict. Conflict is often perceived as an indicator that there is a problem in a relationship. However, conflict is a natural and ongoing part of all relationships. The goal for conflict is not to eliminate it, but to manage it. There are five primary approaches to managing conflict which include dominating, obliging, compromising, avoiding, and integrating.

Discussion Questions

1. Select an important person in your life and pay attention to your communication climate. How do you and this other person demonstrate recognition, acknowledgement, and endorsement?
2. Reflect on one of your important friendships and trace its development through Rawlins' six stages. How was it affected by important transitions in your life, sexual attraction, and diversity?
3. Reflect on a current or past romantic relationship. How did you communicate attraction, or needs for connection and separateness?
4. Does Pearson's definition of family fit your own? Why? Why not?
5. Interview one or both of your parents about how their communication has changed as they have moved along the family life cycle. How did their relational culture change? How did they manage relational dialectics?
6. How was conflict managed in your family while growing up? Was it viewed as positive or negative? How did those early messages and lessons about conflict shape your current attitudes?

Key Terms

- committed romantic relationships
- conflict
- content level of message
- domestic partners
- dyad
- dyadic breakdown
- dyadic phase
- family
- family life cycle
- grave dressing
- intrapsychic phase
- interracial marriage
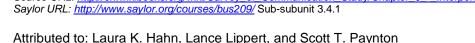- proximity
- relational culture
- relational level of message

- self-disclosure
- self-identity
- similarity
- social support

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