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THE NATURE OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

A Message-Centered Approach

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The first edition of the *Handbook of Communication Science* included a chapter that focused on definitions and fundamental questions about interpersonal communication (Cappella, 1987). In this handbook's second edition, I continue this tradition. In the sciences, definitions of central concepts (and the models these imply) are core theoretical equipment. Differences in opinion about definitions crop up even in mature sciences, and these disagreements may be healthy, serving as the harbinger of significant conceptual advances. However, a radical lack of consensus about fundamental conceptual matters undermines coherence in research areas, creating confusion and discord. At present, little consensus exists about the meaning of *interpersonal communication.* This is not a good situation—scientifically, pedagogically, or politically.

To address this situation, I propose a new definition grounded in the idea that interpersonal communication fundamentally involves an exchange of messages. Although this notion hardly seems novel, some of the most influential definitions of interpersonal communication

downplay or even exclude this necessary feature. To make the case for the new definition, I begin by describing the current state of dissensus about the fundamental nature of interpersonal communication and detail the undesirable consequences that follow from this. Next, I review and critique three popular definitions of interpersonal communication. I then present my message-centered definition and explicate its key terms. A subsequent section demonstrates how the conceptual model implied by this definition can serve as an organizing framework for theory and research on communication processes, structures, functions, and contexts. Finally, I comment on several potential objections to the proposed definition and consider directions for further conceptual development.

♦ *Dissensus in Conceptualizations of Interpersonal Communication*

Since "interpersonal communication" emerged as a recognizable area of theory, research, and teaching in the early 1970s, its scholarship has been reviewed in three editions of the *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (most recently, Knapp & Daly, 2002). Other edited volumes in the 1970s (e.g., Miller, 1976a), 1980s (e.g., Roloff & Miller, 1987), 1990s (e.g., Daly & Wiemann, 1994), and the current decade (e.g., Smith & Wilson, 2009) provide important research reviews. In addition, numerous articles have (a) described the historical development of interpersonal communication as a distinguishable area of teaching and research (e.g., Delia, 1987; Knapp, Daly, Fudge, & Miller, 2002; Rawlins, 1985), (b) explored the concept of interpersonal communication (e.g., Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000; Cappella, 1987; Miller, 1978; Motley, 1990; Sillars & Vangelisti, 2006), and (c) reviewed prominent theories and research findings in this area of study (e.g., Berger, 1977, 2005; Hallsten, 2004; Roloff & Anastasiou, 2001).

Although there is some overlap among scholars in how interpersonal communication is conceptualized, there are also substantial differences. For example, consider some of the definitions of interpersonal communication that appear in recent textbooks:

- "Interpersonal communication [refers] to dyadic communication in which two individuals, sharing the roles of sender and receiver, become connected through the mutual activity of creating meaning" (Trenholm & Jensen, 2008, p. 29).
- "Interpersonal communication is a distinctive form of human communication that . . . is defined not just by the number of people who communicate, but also by the quality of the communication. Interpersonal communication occurs not when you simply interact with someone, but when you treat the other as a unique human being" (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2002, p. 6).
- "Interpersonal communication refers to the exchange of messages, verbal and nonverbal, between people, regardless of the relationship they share. . . . Thus, interpersonal communication includes the exchange of messages in all sorts of relationships, ranging from functional to casual to intimate" (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2007, p. 11).

These definitions all represent interpersonal communication as involving some form of mutual activity, interaction, or exchange, but they also differ significantly. For Beebe et al. (2002), interpersonal communication occurs in close relationships; for Trenholm and Jensen (2008), it transpires within dyads—any two-person system. Guerrero et al. (2007) are even less restrictive; for them,

interpersonal communication is any exchange of messages between people, where a "message" can be any feature or behavior of another, intended or not, interpreted by a receiver (p. 12), with no restriction on the number of persons involved in the exchange.

The lack of consistency and consensus in definitions of interpersonal communication has been noted regularly by reviewers of this area over the past 30 years. For example, Berger (1977) observed, "While no attempt will be made here to define interpersonal communication, it should be stressed that this definitional problem remains unresolved" (p. 217). In subsequent years, other reviewers made similar observations (Cappella, 1987; Roloff & Anastasiou, 2001).

Does this lack of definitional consensus really matter? After all, as analytic propositions, definitions can never be "right or wrong" or "true or false"; definitions are, in some sense, arbitrary. But all definitions are NOT equally good. Definitions differ in their clarity, coherence, degree to which they explicate and illuminate, and especially their utility for given ends. Thus, to evaluate the worth of particular definitions, we need to know about the tasks for which these definitions are formulated. Roloff and Anastasiou (2001) suggest that definitions "set the central focus and boundaries" for research areas. So, definitions detail the logical elements of an entity and thus suggest the objects of study within a domain, as well as questions to be pursued with respect to those objects.

Moreover, science is a social enterprise and, as such, is maximally effective at producing knowledge when its practitioners form a community around shared understandings of the objects of study, relevant questions about these objects, and research exemplars focused on those objects. Thus, theorists and researchers need not only *good* definitions of central concepts (i.e., those that are clear, coherent, and enlightening), but also *shared* definitions of those concepts—definitions that have earned consensus among the practitioners in that scholarly community. The history of science indicates that rapid progress in an area is most likely to be achieved when there is community harmony about core concepts and research practices, not cacophony.

There have been three broad responses to this definitional dissensus. Some scholars simply seem to accept the lack of consensus, seeing definitional dissensus as inevitable. Others respond to the definitional dissensus by offering broad, inclusive definitions that attempt to synthesize different conceptualizations and models (e.g., defining communication as a "process of acting upon information"); unfortunately, such definitions are so abstract that they are all but useless in directing theory and research. A third group has forwarded specific definitions of interpersonal communication, arguing for their merits and demonstrating their implications for theory and research. This is the most productive response to definitional dissensus, as it presents a concrete conceptualization of interpersonal communication that can be evaluated. Of course, the definition, as well as the theory and research that follow from it, may ultimately be replaced by an alternative. But offering bold conjectures that invite focused refutations is the path of progress in the sciences (Popper, 1963); I next examine several such bold conjectures about the nature of interpersonal communication.

♦ *Three Popular Definitions of Interpersonal Communication*

Although little consensus about the definition of interpersonal communication currently exists, three broad definitional perspectives are often identified: the situational, the developmental, and the interactional.

THE SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Miller (1990) contends that the situational perspective was the first substantive perspective on the nature of interpersonal communication to emerge (probably in the late 1960s) and was the most influential viewpoint on interpersonal communication until at least the mid-1970s. Although quite influential, the origins of the situational approach are unclear.

The situational perspective distinguishes types of communication on the basis of features of the communicative context, the most important of which include the number of communicators, the physical proximity of those communicators, the availability of sensory or communication channels (especially nonverbal ones), and the immediacy of feedback received by communicators (see Miller, 1978; Trenholm, 1986). Thus, interpersonal communication typically transpires between two people engaged in face-to-face interactions who use both verbal and nonverbal channels and have access to immediate feedback. Group, organizational, public, and mass communication involve increasing numbers of persons and decreasing levels of physical proximity, channel availability, and feedback immediacy. *Dyadic communication* often serves as a synonym for interpersonal communication in this perspective. The definition by Trenholm and Jensen (2008) presented at the outset of this chapter embodies the situational perspective on interpersonal communication.

The situational perspective leads to research on ways that contextual factors, especially features of the physical setting, influence processes and outcomes of interaction. Research questions consistent with the situational perspective include the following: Do dyads or groups make better decisions? Does the greater availability of nonverbal cues in dyadic interaction enhance communication fidelity? Does the use of emoticons in the "impoverished" environment of computer-mediated communication increase communicator satisfaction?

The situational perspective has been criticized extensively for highlighting less central interaction features (numbers of actors and qualities of the physical setting) while ignoring more substantive features, such as the relationship between the interactants and the content of their exchange. Miller (1978) maintains that "situational views of interpersonal communication imply a static, nondevelopmental perspective rather than a dynamic, developmental viewpoint of the process" (p. 166). Thus, for example, the situational view equates a face-to-face conversation between a postal clerk and a customer with a conversation between a pair of longtime lovers. Perhaps even more problematic, the situational view maintains that the interaction between the postal clerk and customer is *more* "interpersonal" than a letter from a soldier to his family that details his deepest thoughts and feelings. More generally, Miller contends that the situational perspective invites an ahistorical concern with the number of people in a context, excludes consideration of other features of the context (such as the quality of the relationship among participants) that may more profoundly influence communication processes and outcomes, and leads to pursuing trivial questions such as "how many people can participate in an interaction before it is no longer 'interpersonal.'" Furthermore, the situational perspective provides little guidance for research "save for suggesting that researchers manipulate this or that situational variable to determine its impact on the communication process" (Miller, 1976b, p. 10).

THE DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

In response to the inadequacies of the situational perspective, Miller (Miller, 1976b, 1978, 1990; Miller & Steinberg, 1975) proposed an alternative: the developmental

perspective of interpersonal communication (also see Stewart, 1973). This perspective begins by distinguishing between "impersonal" and "interpersonal" communication. In impersonal communication, interactants relate to one another as social roles rather than as distinct persons and base their predictions about how message options will affect the other on general cultural and sociological knowledge rather than psychological information. In contrast, in interpersonal communication, interactants relate to one another as unique persons and base their predictions about message options on specific psychological information about the other (e.g., the other's distinguishing traits, dispositions, attitudes, or feelings). Impersonal and interpersonal communication form a continuum; when people initially meet, they can only engage in impersonal communication, but if interaction continues and the participants reveal and exchange more personalizing information about each other, their relationship and interactions may become progressively more interpersonal in character. As Roloff and Anastasiou (2001) note, this perspective "makes the study of intimate relationships the central context for studying interpersonal communication" (p. 53; see Solomon & Vangelisti, Chapter 19, this volume). The definition by Beebe et al. (2002) presented at the outset of this chapter embodies the developmental perspective.

The developmental perspective has informed considerable research on processes of relationship development, including research on interpersonal attraction, uncertainty reduction, and self-disclosure, as well as research on other aspects of interaction such as compliance gaining, social exchange, and empathy (see reviews by Hallsten, 2004; Miller, 1990). The developmental perspective continues to enjoy broad acceptance and guides several lines of contemporary theory and research on interpersonal communication.

Despite its popularity, the developmental perspective has been the target of increasing criticism. Several critics argue that intimate relationships are not the only significant associations in life and that "role-specific interactions should be as much a part of the domain of interpersonal inquiry as are more personalized interactions" (Cappella, 1987, p. 186). Even more problematic, although the developmental perspective illuminates the processes that lead to the formation of intimate relationships and the nature of these relationships, it does not provide any analysis of communication per se. Thus, within the developmental perspective, it is unclear what people are doing when they communicate with each other, whatever their degree of knowledge about each other. Indeed, both the developmental perspective and the situational perspective promote the view that there is a qualitatively distinct form of communication that exists in, respectively, interpersonal relationships or interpersonal settings; the focus of these perspectives is thus on clarifying the character of "interpersonal-ness." Contrary to this view, Swanson and Delia (1976) argue, "There is one basic process of communication. . . . *The basic process of communication operates in every context in fundamentally the same way, even though each context requires slightly different skills or special applications of general communication principles*" (p. 36).

The critiques of the developmental perspective and its limited view of interpersonal communication appear to be increasingly influential. Indeed, no less a proponent of the developmental perspective than Charles Berger (2005) recently observed, "Because the domain encompassed by the term *social interaction* is considerably more expansive than the one represented by the interpersonal communication-as-close-relationship-development formulation, it seems wise to adopt the broader and more diverse purview afforded by the social interaction term" (p. 431). We next examine an approach that defines interpersonal communication in terms of social interaction.

THE INTERACTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Unlike the situational and developmental perspectives, the interactional perspective treats most, if not all, cases of social interaction as instances of interpersonal communication. Thus, this perspective focuses on unpacking the nature and implications of human interaction rather than attempting to identify a distinguishing essence of interpersonal communication. The origins of the interactional perspective can be traced to the analysis of communication provided by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967). Cappella (1987) provides the most systematic articulation of the interactional perspective, defining interpersonal communication as *mutual adjustment or influence* (see Roloff & Li, Chapter 18, this volume). Cappella explains that the essential commitment of this perspective "is to the interactional character of interpersonal communication, emphasizing that for interpersonal communication to occur, each person must affect the other's observable behavior patterns relative to their typical or baseline patterns" (p. 189). Cappella further underscores that "all encounters that are interactions are interpersonal" (p. 189). The definition by Guerrero et al. (2007) presented at the outset of this chapter embodies this interactional perspective.

Clearly, interpersonal communication involves interaction, but there is disagreement about whether interaction is a sufficient condition for interpersonal communication or simply a necessary one. For example, Delia, O'Keefe, and O'Keefe (1982) maintain that "interaction is not communication, although all communication is a form of interaction and thus shares the characteristics of interaction in general" (p. 159). There are obvious instances of interaction that appear to have little to do with interpersonal communication. For example, people routinely engage in mutual adjustments to the presence and movements of others on a crowded sidewalk, as well as on a crowded freeway. Most would not refer to such interaction as "interpersonal communication."

Missing from the interactional perspective is the idea of a *message*—behavioral expressions typically consisting of symbols that are intended convey internal states, create shared meanings, and accomplish goals (see Motley, 1990). Cappella (1987) anticipates this objection and counterargues that even if features such as the intentional use of symbols in messages "are required, it is premature for us to make our definitions so narrow and it is unproductive for us to debate issues [about the nature, existence, and assessment of intentions and similar internal states] that are unresolvable on empirical grounds" (p. 191). But a major purpose of definitions is to narrow the domain of concepts such as "interpersonal communication" by excluding phenomena that fall outside a desired range (such as interactions that lack any exchange of messages). Moreover, overly broad definitions may be even more unproductive than overly narrow definitions; their inclusion of extraneous phenomena creates confusion and obscures essential distinctions. Furthermore, unless one is willing to treat human communication only as a series of emitted noises, twitches, and squiggles, one must allow meanings, goals, symbols, and intentions as *necessary* features of communicative interactions and develop a conceptual apparatus that accommodates these (see Fay & Moon, 1977).

In sum, although the situational, developmental, and interactional perspectives each contribute important insights about the nature of interpersonal communication, they all have significant limitations, and none provides an optimal foundation for theory, research, and teaching. Missing from all three of these perspectives is a focus on what seems central to the idea of communication: the production and interpretation of messages.

♦ *A Message-Centered Approach to Defining Interpersonal Communication*

The message-centered perspective developed here maintains that interpersonal

communication is productively conceptualized as a particular type of social interaction centered on the processes of producing and interpreting messages. I show that a definition focused on this species of interaction provides a framework for coordinating theory and research on the fundamental processes, structures, functions, and contexts associated with interpersonal communication. The current analysis refines some of my previous efforts to characterize essential characteristics of interpersonal communication (Burleson, 1992; Burleson et al., 2000) and is indebted to early conceptual work on the nature of the communication process by Delia and his associates (Delia et al., 1982; Swanson & Delia, 1976).

I offer the following definition: *Interpersonal communication is a complex, situated social process in which people who have established a communicative relationship exchange messages in an effort to generate shared meanings and accomplish social goals.* In what follows, I seek to clarify this definition by explicating its key terms.

A precondition for interpersonal communication is the establishment of a *communicative relationship* between interactants. This relationship is constituted by a peculiar structure of reciprocal expressive and interpretive intentions among interactants. An *expressive intention* is the aim by one party (a source) to convey (make accessible) some internal state (an idea, thought, feeling, etc.) to a second party (the recipient), whereas an *interpretive intention* is the aim by a recipient to comprehend the source's expressions. Thus, a communicative relationship comes into being when (a) a source has the intention to convey some internal state to a recipient, (b) the recipient recognizes the source's expressive intention and signals the complementary intention to attend to the source's expressions, and (c) the source recognizes that his or her expressive intention has been recognized and accepted by the recipient.[1]

With the establishment of a communicative relationship, interactants can engage in an exchange of messages in the effort to create shared meanings and achieve social goals. *Meanings* are the internal states (thoughts, ideas, beliefs, feelings, etc.) that communicators seek to express or convey in a message and interpret a message as expressing or conveying. When communicating, persons strive to align their expressions and interpretations of messages with one another so as to achieve shared meaning—a common understanding of the internal states associated with messages.

Messages are sets of behavioral expressions, typically consisting of shared symbols, which are produced in the effort to convey some internal state. Although the connection between symbols and that which they signify is arbitrary, communication is possible, in part, because most symbols used by interactants have a conventional interpretation within a community. However, the conventional (denotative) meaning associated with symbols is rarely sufficiently precise to convey adequately a source's contextually specific (connotative) meanings. So, the symbols composing a message must be interpreted by recipients in a contextually sensitive manner. Communication thus has a fidelity characteristic (Motley, 1990); the interpretations by source and recipient given to the symbols composing a message can differ to a greater or lesser extent, affecting the degree of shared meaning achieved.

A message is more than symbols that compose words and sentences; a message is fundamentally a *speech act*—the performance of an action through the expression of words and gestures (see Tracy, 2002). Indeed, Searle (1969) maintains that in using symbols to produce a message, a source actually performs a whole set of actions, including one or more illocutionary acts (e.g., declaring, asserting, directing, expressing, or committing), as well as multiple propositional acts (e.g., referring and predicating) and utterance acts (e.g., generating words, sentences, and gestures). All of the actions performed by a source through a message must be interpreted by the recipient, and each represents a potential source

of misunderstanding; a recipient may not understand what was said (confusion about words or sentences), what was meant (confusion about reference or predication), what was done (confusion about the speaker's illocutionary act), what the speaker wanted to achieve (confusion about the intended outcome), or the speaker's underlying motivation for these interrelated actions.

In interpersonal communication, achieving a shared understanding about the meaning of a message is primarily a means to an end. That is, people do not produce and interpret messages as ends in themselves; rather, they engage in these activities to accomplish particular *social goals*—goals that in some way focus on, include, or require the participation of others. As discussed in detail below, sources may pursue a variety of instrumental objectives through the messages they produce (e.g., entertaining, informing, persuading, supporting), while recipients pursue a variety of objectives with regard to these messages (e.g., understanding what messages mean, do, imply, and request). Moreover, both message sources and recipients typically pursue multiple goals pertaining to the management of identities and relationships throughout the course of an interaction, as well as goals related to managing the interaction itself (e.g., changing topics, moving to close the interaction). Although people sometimes say they are "just talking to pass the time," phrases like these generally refer to communicative activity focused on social goals such as recreating or relationship enhancement.

Of course, people are not always consciously aware of the goals they pursue when communicating and typically have even less awareness of the strategic process through which they pursue goals (Motley, 1990); although communicative behavior is inherently strategic, it is also primarily automatic (Kellermann, 1992). Furthermore, people may pursue goals that are harmful to self and other, as well as pursue those that are beneficial. Of particular importance, messages vary enormously in their effectiveness or success with respect to goal attainment; a given message may be fully successful, partially successful, or wholly unsuccessful in achieving its pragmatic objectives. Thus, a central objective of communication research lies in identifying the features of messages that are reliably associated with greater (and lesser) degrees of goal achievement, and a central task of communication theory lies in developing testable explanations about why certain message features more consistently lead to goal attainment than do others.

To sum to this point: To the extent that the recipient recognizes the source's intention to convey an internal state, and the source recognizes the recipient's intention to interpret, the source and receiver enter into a communicative relationship; to the extent that the recipient interprets the symbols and context of the source's message in a manner similar to the source, communication occurs; and to the extent that the recipient responds to the message in a manner consistent with the source's goal, the message is effective.

There are several other notable properties of interpersonal communication. First, it is a *complex process.* That is, interpersonal communication is not a single process but rather is composed of several interrelated processes that need to be carefully coordinated. These processes include message production, message processing (or reception), interaction coordination, and social perception; each of these processes receives additional consideration later in this chapter. This viewpoint implies that the character of interpersonal communication will be illuminated by distinct theories of particular processes rather than by one general theory.

Second, interpersonal communication is a *situated process;* it never occurs in the abstract but always in a specific, concrete situation. This is highly consequential since particular communicative situations substantially influence roles and identities, goals, selections and interpretations of specific message elements, expectations for self and other, availability of expressive and interpretive resources (e.g., sensory channels,

communicative media), and a host of related factors. Moreover, as symbolic interactionists emphasize (e.g., McCall & Simmons, 1978), situations are fluid and the factors that compose them are dynamic; thus the nature of the situation and its underlying components may evolve over the course of an interaction, sometimes substantially. What remains invariant across situations is the fundamental nature of the interpersonal communication process (as described above); of course, many of the factors that influence the manner, substance, and outcomes of interpersonal communication *do* vary as a function of the situation.

Third, interpersonal communication is a *social process*. Its component processes are executed and coordinated by two or more beings that are mutually oriented toward each other in the unfolding situation. As a species of social interaction, communication necessarily involves mutual influence and joint action.

♦ Implications of the Message-Centered Definition for the Study of Interpersonal Communication

The terms in the message-centered definition, as well as the underlying conceptual model they imply, point to several key aspects of interpersonal communication that have been the focus of considerable research, including fundamental communication processes, structures, functions, and contexts. Thus, this definition, as well as its underlying model, offers an integrative conceptual framework for organizing theory and research on central aspects of interpersonal communication.

PROCESSES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Interpersonal communication is composed of the interrelated processes of message production, message processing, interaction coordination, and social perception. *Message production* is the process of generating verbal and nonverbal behaviors designed to convey an internal state to another to accomplish social goals. *Message processing* (sometimes called "message reception" or "decoding") involves interpreting the communicative behavior of others in the effort to understand the meaning and implications of their behavior. *Interaction coordination* is the process of synchronizing message production and message-processing activities (along with other behaviors) over the course of a social episode so as to achieve smooth and coherent interchanges. Finally, *social perception* is the set of processes through which we make sense of the social world, including experiences of ourselves, other people, social relationships, and social institutions.

Research on these processes has sought to clarify the nature of each of them by (a) specifying the component structures and processes through which each proceeds, (b) describing different modes of operation for each (e.g., automatic vs. controlled) and the factors that invoke particular modes, (c) detailing essential features of their characteristic outputs (i.e., messages for production, interpretations for processing, interactions for coordination, and various perceptions and inferences for social perception) and how these vary as a function of operating mode, and (d) identifying factors (such as emotional arousal) that generally affect their operation and outputs.

Numerous theoretical models of the message production process have been proposed, including Berger's (2007) planning theory, Dillard's (2008) goals-plans-actions theory, Greene's (2007) action assembly theory, and several other variants (for review, see Berger, 2003, and Chapter 7, this volume). Although these theories differ in important ways, they provide similar analyses of the message production process: (a) Interpretation of a situation, in conjunction with enduring values and motivational orientations, gives rise to a set of interaction

goals; (b) these goals, in conjunction with representations of the ongoing situation, lead to the retrieval from memory of existing message plans or schemes that might be adaptable to current needs, if such exist; (c) if a suitable plan is not located in memory, a new plan is generated; and (d) the abstract message plan (either retrieved or generated) is concretized and populated with appropriate content and subsequently articulated. The enacted plan is (e) monitored for its impact and may subsequently be (f) modified and rearticulated if that appears desirable. Message production has been a very active research area for more than two decades, with the accumulated findings leading to increasingly more sophisticated understandings of this process (see review by Berger, 2005, and Chapter 7, this volume).

Although message processing is an understudied phenomenon (see Berger, 2005), the broad outlines of the process can be sketched: The message recipient (a) detects physical signals carrying what is interpreted to be a message from a source, and (b) these signals are parsed into words and phrases, which form the basis for inferences about what the source (c) has said (syntactic analysis), (d) means (semantic analysis), (e) is doing (pragmatic analysis), and (f) wants to accomplish (motivational analysis). The recipient may also (g) evaluate various aspects of the message (e.g., its truth, its appropriateness) and the source (e.g., his or her sincerity) and (h) respond internally to this set of inferences and judgments. Certain aspects of message processing have received detailed theoretical attention (e.g., Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, Chapter 8, this volume; Wyer & Adaval, 2003), and research has examined phenomena such as how recipients correct for what they view as bias in a message (Hewes, 1995), are taken in by deceptive efforts (McCornack, 2008), and either closely scrutinize message content or process it superficially (Bodie & Burleson, 2008).

Burgoon (1998) compares the coordinated exchange of messages between interactants to a dance, with "each dancer's movement seeming to anticipate that of the partner" (p. 53). Achieving such fine coordination requires, at a minimum, learning and developing facility with the social rules governing particular interchanges (e.g., the rules for turn and topic management in face-to-face conversations, the rules for interaction in classroom discussions, the rules for contributions and comments in instant messenger exchanges; see Tracy, 2002). More generally, interaction adaptation theory (see Burgoon, Floyd, & Guerrero, Chapter 6, this volume; White, 2008) details how individuals achieve highly synchronous interactions through both behavioral reciprocity and matching, while communication accommodation theory (Giles & Ogay, 2007; Soliz & Giles, Chapter 5, this volume) describes how interactants mutually alter their verbal and nonverbal behaviors so that these converge to express solidarity and diverge to express distinctness (for a recent review of these and related theories, see Berger, 2005).

Strictly speaking, social perception is not a communicative process per se since it does not necessarily involve the production, processing, or coordination of messages; rather, it is an aspect of social cognition. However, social perception enters into communication in numerous ways, such as through defining the social situation, including who is in the situation, what their roles are, and what actions they are performing; inferring relevant cognitive, affective, and behavioral qualities of others in the situation on the basis of their dress, movements, expressions, and spontaneous (i.e., symptomatic) nonverbal behavior; ascertaining whether a potential message recipient appears cognizant of one's communicative intentions; evaluating whether a message has been comprehended and accepted and is likely to be acted upon in the desired manner; assessing how the parties to the transaction are feeling about each other; and so forth. In service of these ends, people employ a variety of distinguishable social perception processes, including identifying

affect states, making attributions for actions, forming impressions, integrating information, and taking the perspective of the other; all of these processes have been the subject of extensive research (see Fiske & Taylor, 2007).

STRUCTURES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The message-centered conception of interpersonal communication focuses on messages—a particular type of behavioral structure that is generated, interpreted, and coordinated through numerous cognitive, linguistic, social, and behavioral structures. Linguists and psychologists study the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic message structures that enable people to produce comprehensible, informationally adequate, and pragmatically relevant messages (see Clark & Bly, 1995). Communication scholars (along with a few social and educational psychologists) give particular attention to the strategic plans people use to shape discourse that aims to achieve desired goals. Research has focused on the nature and constituents of these plans, how they are generated or learned initially, how they are stored in and retrieved from memory, how abstract plans get concretized and applied in specific situations, and how people alter or change message plans when their initial plans prove inadequate (see review by Berger, 2003). Researchers and educators have also identified a host of strategic plans that are (or can be) used in the pursuit of numerous communicative objectives (e.g., "advance organizers," the inverted pyramid, and the "5Ws" in informative communication; the motivated sequence and two-sided arguments in persuasive communication; the support-analyze-advise sequence when giving advice).

Structures implicated in social perception processes, interactional coordination, and message production and processing have been examined by scholars from several different disciplines. For example, social psychologists have identified a variety of cognitive structures (e.g., schemas, scripts, constructs, prototypes, exemplars) used in the interpretation of the self, other people, social actions, and social situations (see Fiske & Taylor, 2007).

Conversational analysts detail how various behavioral structures (e.g., the turn-taking system, adjacency pairs, repair structures for managing overlap and gap) generate coherent, smoothly flowing conversational interactions (e.g., Mandelbaum, 2008). A related set of structures governs social uses and forms of talk, such as rules that specify who may say what to whom when and where. These structures are typically studied by sociolinguists, sociologists, anthropologists, and others interested in the ethnography of communication since investigation of these rule systems necessarily involves examining larger systems of social roles, norms, power, and organization (Tracy, 2002). Researchers working within these traditions emphasize that communicative interactions not only are constrained by these structures but also serve to generate or reproduce these structures. That is, communication is a *constitutive activity* that both creates and is constrained by myriad social structures (Seibold & Myers, 2006).

FUNCTIONS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The message-centered definition of interpersonal communication emphasizes its fundamentally pragmatic character; people produce and interpret messages to accomplish social goals or functions. Multiple typologies of communication functions have been proposed by theorists (see Robinson, 2001); here, I describe three broad classes of function: interaction management functions, relationship management functions, and instrumental functions (see Burleson et al., 2000).

Interaction management functions are those associated with establishing and maintaining coherent conversation. Goals here include (a) initiating and ending conversational interactions, as well as maintaining them by directing their topical focus and turn distribution (Slugoski & Hilton, 2001); (b) producing comprehensible, informationally adequate, and pragmatically relevant messages that fit appropriately into the turn structure of conversation (Clark & Bly, 1995); (c) defining social selves and situations (McCall & Simmons, 1978); (d) managing impressions and maintaining face (Metts & Grohskopf, 2003); and (e) monitoring and managing affect (see Planalp, Metts, & Tracy, Chapter 21, this volume; Saarni, 2000). Accomplishment of these generally tacit and nonproblematic goals forms a "background consensus" within which other goals may be pursued.

Relationship management functions are associated with the initiation, maintenance, and repair of a relationship. These goals focus on establishing the relationship, achieving desired levels of privacy and intimacy, managing tensions, dealing with threats to the relationship's integrity and endurance (e.g., geographic separations, jealousy), resolving conflicts, and ending the relationship or altering its basic character. The need for relationship management arises from routine differences between individuals, competition between partners over limited resources, natural "bumps" in the course of relationship development, and strains inherent in balancing "dialectical tensions" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2007; see Solomon & Vangelisti, Chapter 19, this volume).

Instrumental functions are those that typically define the focus of an interaction and serve to distinguish one interactional episode from another (Dillard, 2008). Common instrumental goals include gaining or resisting compliance, requesting or presenting information, soliciting or giving support, and seeking or providing amusement. The *manner* in which instrumental tasks are communicatively addressed will typically reflect—albeit implicitly—the speaker's feelings about the relationship with the recipient and how the self is viewed in regard to the other. Research suggests that this "relational" level of communication is especially important in expressing feelings regarding control, trust, and intimacy (Courtright, 2007).

Research on communicative functions generally addresses the following groups of questions:

- What is the nature of the particular communicative function? That is, what does it mean to comfort, entertain, inform, persuade, manage conflict, and so on? What are the dimensions or aspects of these? What are the outcomes of interest associated with various functions?

- What message structures are generally more and less effective at pursuing particular functions, what are the key features of these message structures, why are some structures more effective than others, and what factors moderate or qualify the effects of specific message structures for various outcomes?

- What abilities and motivations do individuals need to control if they are to reliably enact message strategies likely to achieve desired outcomes? What do communicators need to know about their topic, audience, and occasion to generate messages that will be appropriate and effective? Furthermore, what motivations underlie the expenditure of effort to produce messages likely to be effective? How do individuals acquire these competencies over the course of development, and what training can enhance these competencies?

Extensive programs of research have addressed these questions for some functions, including emotional support (Burleson,

2003), informing (Rowan, 2003), and persuading (Dillard, 2003, and Chapter 12, this volume), among others. In other areas (e.g., initiating and managing romantic relationships), research has identified some relevant goals and strategies but has yet to detail the effectiveness of different strategies and the factors that affect their use and outcomes (e.g., Dindia & Timmerman, 2003).

CONTEXTS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The message-centered definition emphasizes the situatedness of interpersonal communication. Communication context turns out to be a complex construct, and several theorists (e.g., Knapp et al., 2002) have proposed typologies of its dimensions. Applegate and Delia (1980) suggest five dimensions of context for communication situations: the physical setting (the space, environment, and channels employed), the social/relational setting (e.g., friends, spouses, coworkers, neighbors), the institutional setting (e.g., home, work, school, church), the functional setting (the primary goal pursued, e.g., informing, persuading, supporting), and the cultural setting (including ethnicity, nationality, social class, and other relevant groupings). Any specific instance of interpersonal communication occurs in the intersection of these multiple dimensions of context; this intersection is commonly called a situation.

Context matters because it influences the operation and outcomes of the four basic interpersonal communication processes. Aspects of context affect what people do and the form and content of the messages they produce. The roles people play with each other in a particular situation (along with the channels, norms, rituals, rules, codes, etc., associated with particular situations and roles) shape and may even mandate the pursuit of various goals, the strategies used in pursuing particular goals, the manner or style in which these strategies are instantiated (e.g., language styles, communication channels), the competencies needed to realize particular goals, and criteria for effective performance (see Berger, 2007). Context powerfully influences the interpretation and outcome of messages, affecting which features of the message and situation receive attention, how these features get processed (e.g., superficially vs. systematically), what these features are taken to mean or imply, and how the recipient can allowably respond (Bodie & Burleson, 2008). Context shapes how people coordinate their interactions, influencing (and sometimes determining) the typical turn and topic structure for interactions (e.g., board meetings vs. bull sessions) and the devices that can be used for controlling turns and topics (e.g., raising a hand in the classroom to signal interest in having a turn at talk; see Tracy, 2002), the degree of convergence versus divergence attained (Giles & Ogay, 2007), and the modes and extent of reciprocity and compensation exhibited (White, 2008). Finally, context profoundly influences virtually every aspect and process of social perception, from schema activation to attention, memory, and inference (Fiske & Taylor, 2007).

Context also matters because it and many of the elements composing it are created, maintained, and transformed through the communicative activities of participants (Burleson et al., 2000). Communication is often the critical process in defining the nature of a social situation (McCall & Simmons, 1978). The messages and interactions that people produce sustain, re-create, and reinforce a multitude of social structures, including those that intimately influence communicative conduct (e.g., roles, rules, norms, rituals) and, more fundamentally, those that underlie the very possibility of communication itself (e.g., verbal and nonverbal codes, systems of speech acts, the turn structure of interaction, plans and strategies for messages, schemes for interpreting others and their messages). Moreover,

contexts are both mutable and fluid, which means that communicative practices can modify or even transform contexts through a variety of means (e.g., changing the physical or institutional setting, altering the relationship between the participants, shifting the functions pursued, and modifying the relevance of particular cultural rules and understandings). This understanding of the relationship between communication and context has led to research exploring the interactional tensions that motivate redefinitions of situations (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2007), how interactants use talk to redefine the situations in which they find themselves (e.g., Tracy, 2002), and the message structures most likely to accomplish a redefinition of the situation effectively (O'Keefe, 1988).

♦ *Conclusion*

Definitions of a discipline's core concepts matter, and this is particularly true in areas where there is widespread dissensus about these definitions. In an effort to address the inadequacies of extant definitions, deepen our understanding of interpersonal communication, and perhaps decrease the degree of definitional dissensus in this area, I proposed a message-centered definition of interpersonal communication. This definition appears to provide a useful organizing framework for much current theory and research on interpersonal communication by connecting diverse lines of work on communication processes, structures, functions, and contexts. Although the approach taken here has strengths, several criticisms can be directed at it; for some, the definition will be too broad, for others too narrow, for still others it will be too psychological, and for some it will completely miss the essential character of communication. In concluding, I briefly describe and address some of these criticisms.

The message-centered perspective treats "interpersonal communication" as communication *between people*. Miller (1976b) criticized this idea, observing that such a definition "captures the etymology of the terms 'inter' and 'personal' but does nothing to distinguish interpersonal communication from all other human communicative transactions" (p. 10). To this indictment I must plead guilty as charged. But Miller's criticism appears premised on the false assumption that there really are different kinds of communication that show up in different contexts. Unfortunately, this assumption is given credence by the accepted nomenclature for describing the domains of study in our discipline (i.e., interpersonal communication, group communication, organizational communication)—locutions that certainly suggest that there are different underlying substances examined in each of these areas. This, however, is an unproductive way of conceptualizing communication; I agree with Swanson and Delia (1976) that there is *one* underlying nature of communication, the character of which I seek to capture in my message-centered definition. Thus, rather than using misleading labels such as *interpersonal communication* and *group communication,* perhaps we should refer to communication in dyadic settings, communication in group settings, and so forth. This latter terminology emphasizes that what varies is the context in which communication transpires but not the fundamental nature of communication itself.

While the message-centered definition of interpersonal communication is likely to be viewed as overly broad by proponents of the situational and developmental perspectives, advocates of the interactional perspective are likely to view it as overly narrow in that it excludes phenomena they regard as significant. Although the message-centered perspective certainly is more exclusive than Cappella's (1987) interactional perspective and is vastly more exclusive than the even more encompassing interactional view advocated by Watzlawick et al. (1967), there is considerable merit in focusing on

instances of interaction characterized by the exchange of messages. This does not mean that phenomena falling outside the exchange of messages are unimportant and should not be examined by communication scholars; indeed, I have emphasized the vital role in communication played by numerous social perception processes and the phenomena on which these focus. Moreover, I recognize that there are numerous borderline cases of "quasi-communicative" behavior in which neither the interactants nor observers are clear about whether a communicative relationship has been established, shared meaning has been achieved, or goals have been accomplished; these borderline cases are interesting and need to be examined. But these borderline cases are brought into relief and given texture, in part, by the message-centered conception of communication, which provides conceptual tools for exploring problems associated with the establishment of a communication relationship, achieving shared meaning, and accomplishing functional goals. These all represent areas that will benefit from further conceptual development, as well as focused empirical research (e.g., how do potential interactants recognize and respond to difficulties encountered with establishing a communicative relationship?).

For some, the message-centered perspective on interpersonal communication will be problematic because it includes and requires analyses of numerous psychological states, including intentions, goals, plans, meanings, and so forth. This is a concern to some because these entities are notoriously slippery, and it has not always been made clear how these mental entities arise, function, and change in the course of communicative interactions (e.g., Bavelas, 1991). I acknowledge the legitimacy of this concern and further admit that I do not provide precise treatments of these constructs here. But this is not a principled objection against the inclusion of mental or intentional states, and there are sophisticated treatments of these concepts available (e.g., Kellermann, 1992) that can be drawn upon in further refining the framework proposed here.

A more radical critique of the message-centered perspective holds that its concern with psychological states is symptomatic of a fundamentally flawed approach to conceptualizing communication as a process in which individuals transmit information, share meanings, and accomplish goals. In particular, proponents of social constructionist and postmodernist approaches to interpersonal communication (Cronen, 1998; Deetz, 1994) maintain that psychological approaches to communication fail to recognize the fundamentally constitutive character of communication. On this view, communication is not so much a vehicle for sharing meaning and accomplishing goals as it is the medium in which meanings and their attendant social structures (roles, norms, rules, rituals, codes, etc.) are constituted. Communication *is* a constitutive activity; it produces (and reproduces) a host of social and interactional structures while being constrained by these structures. Although this is an extremely important (albeit usually unintentional) effect of communication, it is but one of *many* effects (e.g., achieving instrumental goals, managing relationships, managing interactions). Importantly, approaches that focus on the constitutive properties of communication almost never provide any analysis of the communication process; they do not explain what communication is, how it works, and how it manages to generate its myriad effects. But there is no necessary incompatibility between viewing communication as an intentional activity grounded in psychological processes through which individuals seek to achieve goals and viewing it as a social activity that, among other outcomes, constitutes social structures, including some of the structures that regulate and make possible the very activity of communication itself.

As a 35-year member of the cantankerous group that constitutes the communication discipline, I do not expect (or desire) that the definition of interpersonal communication

offered here will end deliberation about the fundamental nature of this subject matter. Indeed, given the history of debates in our discipline about its essential concepts, I would be surprised if the approach advocated here generates more consensus than controversy. Regardless of whether the definition offered here wins widespread acceptance, my hope is that the analysis presented in this chapter helps clarify some core issues in conceptualizing interpersonal communication and aids readers in developing an understanding of this phenomenon that promotes theory, research, and teaching.

♦ Note

1. Some modification of this formulation is needed when considering communication between parties separated by time or space (e.g., writing a letter to someone far away; reading an essay written by a long-dead author). In such cases, the source may *assume* that his or her expressive intentions *will be* recognized and accepted by the recipient, and the recipient may recognize the source's expressive intentions and attend to them but *not* signal his or her interpretive intention. Communication between parties separated by time or space is possible because the participants are intimately familiar with the nature of communication in shared time and space and thus can make the necessary accommodations to adjust for temporal or spatial separation.

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