CHAPTER SIX

Understanding Interpersonal Relationships

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Truly interpersonal communication has several characteristics that makes it worth studying.

- It is qualitatively different from less personal relationships.
- Like all messages, qualitatively interpersonal communication has both content and relational dimensions.
- Interpersonal communication can address relational matters explicitly through metacommunication.

Intimacy is a special dimension of interpersonal relationships.

- It has several dimensions.
- Men and women sometimes value and express intimacy differently.
- Cultural background influences how we communicate intimacy.

Communication scholars have explored some forces that shape interpersonal relationships.

- Developmental models describe how communication in relationships changes over time.
- Dialectical models describe forces that always operate in relationships.
- No matter which model is used, relationships are constantly changing.

The subject of self-disclosure is an important one in the study of interpersonal relationships.

- People disclose (or withhold) personal information for a variety of reasons.
- Models can help us understand how self-disclosure operates.
- Regardless of the reason, self-disclosure in relationships possesses several characteristics.
- Several guidelines can help you decide whether or not to disclose personal information.

In this chapter we will take a first look at the vitally important topic of interpersonal relationships. We will begin by exploring what kinds of communication make a relationship interpersonal. Next, we will look at some ways—both subtle and obvious—that we show others how we regard them and what kind of relationship we are seeking with them. We will go on to explore two approaches that characterize how communication operates throughout the lifetime of relationships. Finally, we will look at the role of self-disclosure in interpersonal communication.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

What is interpersonal communication? How does it differ from other types of interaction? When and how are interpersonal messages communicated? Read on and see.

What Makes Communication Interpersonal?

The most obvious way to define *interpersonal communication* is by looking at the number of people involved. In this sense we could say that all communication between two people, or **contextually interpersonal communication,** is interpersonal. In many ways, contextually interpersonal communication *is* different from the kind that goes on in other contexts, such as the kinds of small groups discussed in Chapters 8 and 9 of this book. For example, unlike threesomes and other groups, dyads are complete and cannot be subdivided. If one person withdraws from the other, the relationship is finished. This indivisibility means that, unlike groups, the partners in a dyad can't form coalitions to get their needs met: They must work matters out with one another. Likewise, dyadic communication differs

"I'm your wife, Arthur. You talk to me. You don't touch base with me."

from the kinds of public speeches described in Chapters 10–14 and from most types of mass communication.

Although looking at communication by context is useful, this approach raises some problems. Consider, for example, a routine transaction between a sales clerk and customer, or the rushed exchange when you ask a stranger on the street for directions. Communication of this sort hardly seems interpersonal—or personal in any sense of the word. In fact, after transactions like this we commonly remark, "I might as well have been talking to a machine."

The impersonal nature of some two-person exchanges has led some scholars to say that quality, not quantity, is what distinguishes interpersonal communication. **Qualitatively interpersonal communication** occurs when people treat one another as unique individuals, regardless of the context in which the interaction occurs or the number of people involved.[1] When quality of interaction is the criterion, the opposite of interpersonal communication is *impersonal* interaction, not group, public, or mass communication.

The majority of our communication, even in dyadic contexts, is relatively impersonal. We chat pleasantly with shopkeepers or fellow passengers on the bus or plane; we discuss the weather or current events with most classmates and neighbors; we deal with coworkers in a polite way. Considering the number of people we communicate with, qualitatively interpersonal interaction is rather scarce. This scarcity isn't necessarily unfortunate: Most of us don't have the time or energy to create personal relationships with everyone we encounter—or even to act in a personal way all the time with the people we know and love best. In fact, the scarcity of qualitatively interpersonal communication contributes to its value. Like precious jewels and one-of-a-kind artwork, qualitatively interpersonal relationships are special because of their scarcity. You can get a sense of how interpersonal your relationships are by trying the Invitation to Insight exercise number 1 at the end of the chapter.

Half of all telephone calls do not involve a two-way conversation anymore. The human dimensions of the phenomenon are everywhere, suggested by a bizarre question surfacing in Hollywood where people often conduct business by voice mail, fax and modem rather than in person. "Do you need face on that?" people will ask.

Karen Brandon

Interpersonal Communication and the Internet

There's no question that mediated relationships conducted via e-mail, instant messaging, and telephone pass the test of being contextually interpersonal. But what about their quality? Is online communication a poor substitute for face-to-face contact, or is it a rich medium for developing close personal relationships? In one survey, approximately 25 percent of the respondents who used the Internet regularly reported spending less time talking in person and on the phone with friends and family members.[2] Another survey revealed that people who relied heavily on the Internet to meet their communication needs grew to rely less and less on their face-to-face networks. More significantly, they tended to feel more lonely and depressed as their online communication increased.[3]

Despite findings like these, a growing body of research disputes the notion that mediated communication lacks quality.[4] Writing (online, of course) in *CMC Magazine,* Brittney G. Chenault summarized research concluding that e-mail, chat rooms, Internet newsgroups, and computer conferences can and do allow electronic correspondents to develop a degree of closeness similar to what can be achieved in person.[5]

Research confirms the claim that mediated communication can *enhance,* not diminish, the quantity and quality of interpersonal communication. Over half of the respondents in one survey reported that the number of their personal rela-

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poured our hearts out: revealed our innermost thoughts and feelings

tionships has grown since they started to use the Internet. In another survey of over 3,000 adults in the United States (again, both Internet users and nonusers), 72 percent of the Internet users had communicated with a relative or a friend within the past day, compared with 61 percent for nonusers.[6] Surprisingly, the Internet users were also more likely to have phoned friends and relatives.

Even more significant than the amount of communication that occurs online is its quality: 55 percent of Internet users said that e-mail had improved communications with family, and 66 percent said that their contact with friends had increased because of e-mail. Among women, the rate of satisfaction was even higher: 60 percent reported better contact with family and 71 percent with friends. Over three-quarters of the Internet users polled said they never felt ignored by another household member's spending time online.[7] The majority of the Internet users said that e-mail Web sites and chat rooms had a "modestly positive impact" on their ability to communicate more with family members and make new friends. Among women, the rate of satisfaction was even high: 60 percent reported better contact with family and 61 percent with friends.

For some people, the lack of immediacy in online communication makes it easier to build close relationships. Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen describes a situation where e-mail enhanced a relationship that wouldn't have developed to the same degree in person:

> E-mail deepened my friendship with Ralph. Though his office was next to mine, we rarely had extended conversations because he is shy. Face to face he mumbled so I could barely tell he was speaking. But when we both got on e-mail, I started receiving long, self-revealing messages; we poured our hearts out to each other. A friend discovered that e-mail opened up that kind of communication with her father. He would never talk much on the phone (as her mother would), but they have become close since they both got on line.[8]

Stories like these suggest that, rather than weakening opportunities for communication, CMC provides rich opportunities for establishing and maintaining relationships. An Internet connection makes it possible to send and receive messages at any time of the day or night from people around the world. While face-to-face contact is impossible and telephone conversations difficult due to cost or time differences, computer-mediated messages are cheap, quick, and easy.

Content and Relational Messages

Virtually every verbal statement contains two kinds of messages. **Content messages,** which focus on the subject being discussed, are the most obvious. The content of such statements as "It's your turn to do the dishes" or "I'm busy Saturday night" is obvious.

Content messages aren't the only kind that are exchanged when two people interact. In addition, virtually all communication—both verbal and nonverbal—contains **relational messages,** which make statements about how the parties feel toward one another.[9] These relational messages express communicators' feelings and attitudes involving one or more dimensions:

AFFINITY One dimension of relational communication is **affinity:** the degree to which people like or appreciate one another. As the photo on the next page shows, you can get a good idea of how much each character likes the other, even if you don't know what is being discussed on the content level.

RESPECT **Respect** is the degree to which we admire others and hold them in esteem. Respect and affinity might seem identical, but they are actually different dimensions of a relationship.[10] For example, you might like a three-year-old child tremendously without respecting her. Likewise, you could respect a boss or teacher's talents without liking him. Respect is a tremendously important and often overlooked ingredient in satisfying relationships. It is a better predictor of relational satisfaction than liking, or even loving.[11]

IMMEDIACY Communication scholars use the term **immediacy** to describe the degree of interest and attraction we feel toward and communicate to others. Immediacy is different than affinity. It's easy to imagine four combinations of these dimensions: High affinity and high immediacy; high affinity and low immediacy; low affinity and low immediacy; and low affinity and high immediacy. Which of these conditions do you think exists in the photo on this page?

CONTROL In every conversation and every relationship there is some distribution of **control:** the amount of influence communicators seek. Control can be distributed evenly among relational partners, or one person can have more and the other(s) less. An uneven distribution of control won't cause problems as long as everyone involved accepts that arrangement. Struggles arise, though, when people disagree on how control should be distributed in their relationship.

You can get a feeling for how relational messages operate in everyday life by recalling the statements at the beginning of this section. Imagine two ways of saying "It's your turn to do the dishes": one that is demanding and another that is matter-of-fact. Notice how the different nonverbal messages make statements about how the sender views control in this part of the relationship. The demanding tone says, in effect, "I have a right to tell you what to do around the house," whereas the matter-of-fact one suggests, "I'm just reminding you of something you might have overlooked." Likewise, you can easily visualize two ways to deliver the statement "I'm busy Saturday night": one with little affection and the other with much liking.

Notice that in each of these examples the relational dimension of the message was never discussed. In fact, most of the time we aren't conscious of the relational messages that bombard us every day. Sometimes we are unaware of relational messages because they match our belief about the amount of respect, immediacy, control, and affinity that is appropriate. For example, you probably won't be offended if your boss tells you to do a certain job, because you agree that supervisors have the right to direct employees. In other cases, however, conflicts arise over relational messages even though content is not disputed. If your boss delivers the order in a condescending, sarcastic, or abusive tone of voice, you probably will be offended. Your complaint wouldn't be with the order itself but rather with the way it was delivered. "I may work for this company,"

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on the one hand: from one point of view

on the other hand: from the other point of view

you might think, "but I'm not a slave or an idiot. I deserve to be treated like a human being."

How are relational messages communicated? As the boss-employee example suggests, they are usually expressed nonverbally. To test this fact for yourself, imagine how you could act while saying, "Can you help me for a minute?" in a way that communicates each of the following attitudes:

superiority	aloofness	friendliness
helplessness	sexual desire	irritation

Although nonverbal behaviors are a good source of relational messages, remember that they are ambiguous. The sharp tone you take as a personal insult might be due to fatigue, and the interruption you take as an attempt to ignore your ideas might be a sign of pressure that has nothing to do with you. Before you jump to conclusions about relational clues, it's a good idea to practice the skill of perception checking that you learned in Chapter 2: "When you use that tone of voice to tell me it's my turn to do the dishes, I get the idea you're mad at me. Is that right?" If your interpretation was indeed correct, you can talk about the problem. On the other hand, if you were overreacting, the perception check can prevent a needless fight.

Metacommunication

As the preceding example of perception checking shows, not all relational messages are nonverbal. Social scientists use the term **metacommunication** to describe messages that refer to other messages.[12] In other words, metacommunication is communication about communication. Whenever we discuss a relationship with others, we are metacommunicating: "It sounds like you're angry at me" or "I appreciate how honest you've been." Metacommunication is an essential ingredient in successful relationships. Sooner or later there are times when it becomes necessary to talk about what is going on between you and the other person. The ability to focus on the kinds of issues described in this and the following chapter can be the tool for keeping the relationship on track.

Metacommunication is an important method of solving conflicts in a constructive manner. It provides a way to shift discussion from the content level to relational questions, where the problem often lies. For example, consider a couple bickering because one partner wants to watch television, whereas the other wants to talk. Imagine how much better the chances of a positive outcome would be if they used metacommunication to examine the relational problems that were behind their quarrel: "Look, it's not the TV watching itself that bothers me. It's that I imagine you watch so much because you're mad at me or bored. Are you feeling bad about us?"

Metacommunication isn't just a tool for handling problems. It is also a way to reinforce the good aspects of a relationship: "I really appreciate it when you compliment me about my work in front of the boss." Comments like this serve two functions: First, they let others know that you value their behavior. Second, they boost the odds that the other people will continue the behavior in the future.

Despite the benefits of metacommunication, bringing relational issues out in the open does have its risks. Discussing problems can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the other person might see it in a positive light—"Our relationship is working because we can still talk things out." On the other hand,

your desire to focus on the relationship might look like a bad omen—"Our relationship isn't working if we have to keep talking it over." Furthermore, metacommunication does involve a certain degree of analysis ("It seems like you're angry at me"), and some people resent being analyzed. These cautions don't mean verbal metacommunication is a bad idea. They do suggest, though, that it's a tool that needs to be used carefully.

> Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
> What I was walling in or walling out.
> And to whom I was like to give offense.
> Something there is that doesn't love a wall
> That wants it down.
>
> Robert Frost

INTIMACY IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Even the closest relationships involve a mixture of personal and interpersonal communication. We alternate between a "we" and a "me" orientation, sometimes focusing on connecting with others and at other times focusing on our own needs and interests. In the next few pages we will examine how our communication is affected by these apparently conflicting drives for intimacy and distance.

Dimensions of Intimacy

The dictionary defines *intimacy* as arising from "close union, contact, association, or acquaintance." This definition suggests that the key element of intimacy is closeness, one element that "ordinary people" have reported as characterizing their intimate relationships.[13] However, it doesn't explain what *kinds* of closeness can create a state of intimacy. In truth, **intimacy** can have several qualities. The first is *physical.* Even before birth, the developing fetus experiences a kind of physical closeness with its mother that will never happen again, "floating in a warm fluid, curling inside a total embrace, swaying to the undulations of the moving body and hearing the beat of the pulsing heart."[14] As they grow up, fortunate children are continually nourished by physical intimacy: being rocked, fed, hugged, and held. As we grow older, the opportunities for physical intimacy are less regular, but still possible and important. Some, but by no means all, physical intimacy is sexual. In one survey, only one-quarter of the respondents (who were college students) stated that intimacy necessarily contained a romantic or sexual dimension.[15] Other forms of physical intimacy include affectionate hugs, kisses, and even struggles. Companions who have endured physical challenges together—in athletics or emergencies, for example—form a bond that can last a lifetime.

In other cases, intimacy comes from *intellectual* sharing. Not every exchange of ideas counts as intimacy, of course. Talking about next week's midterm with your professor or classmates isn't likely to forge strong relational bonds. But when you engage another person in an exchange of important ideas, a kind of closeness develops that can be powerful and exciting.

A third quality of intimacy is *emotion:* exchanging important feelings. This chapter will offer several guidelines for disclosing your thoughts and feelings to

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fool around: spend time joking

others. If you follow those guidelines, you will probably recognize a qualitative change in your relationships.

If we define *intimacy* as being close to another person, then *shared activities* can provide another way to achieve this state. Shared activities can include everything from working side by side at a job to meeting regularly for exercise workouts. Although shared activities are no guarantee of intimacy, people who spend time together can develop unique ways of relating that transform the relationship from an impersonal one that could be done with anybody to one with interpersonal qualities. For example, both friendships and romantic relationships are often characterized by several forms of play. Partners invent private codes, fool around by acting like other people, tease one another, and play games—everything from having punning contests to arm wrestling.[16]

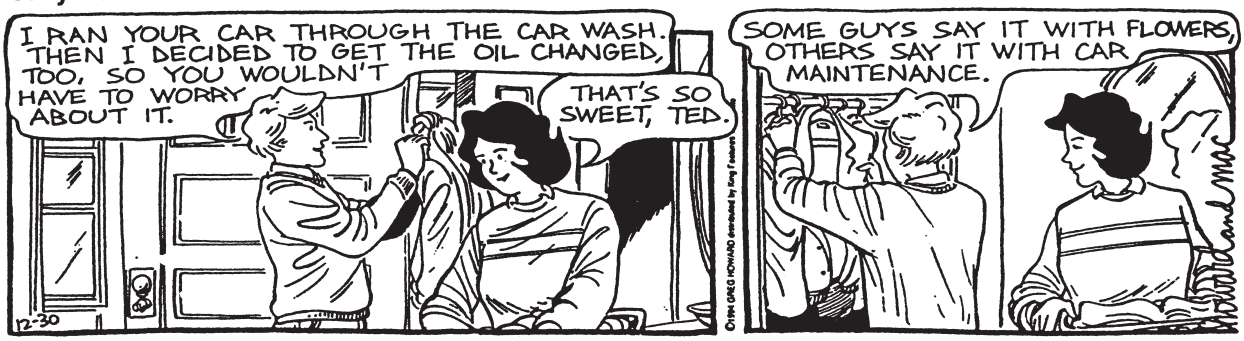
Some intimate relationships exhibit all four qualities: physical intimacy, intellectual exchanges, emotional disclosure, and shared activities. Other intimate relationships exhibit only one or two. Some relationships, of course, aren't intimate in any way. Acquaintances, roommates, and coworkers may never become intimate. In some cases even family members develop smooth but relatively impersonal relationships.

Not even the closest relationships always operate at the highest level of intimacy. At some times you might share all of your thoughts or feelings with a friend, family member, or lover; and at other times you might withdraw. You might freely share your feelings about one topic and stay more aloof in another one. The same principle holds for physical intimacy, which waxes and wanes in most relationships. The dialectical view of relational maintenance described later in this chapter explains how intimacy can wax and wane, even in the closest relationships.

Male and Female Intimacy Styles

Until recently most social scientists believed that women are better at developing and maintaining intimate relationships than men.[17] This belief grew from the assumption that the disclosure of personal information is the most important ingredient of intimacy. Most research *does* show that women (taken as a group, of course) are more willing to share their thoughts and feelings than men.[18] In terms of the amount and depth of information exchanged, female-female relationships are at the top of the disclosure list. Male-female relationships come in second,

Sally Forth



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whereas relationships between men have less disclosure than any other type. At every age, women disclose more than men, and the information they disclose is more personal and more likely to involve feelings. Although both sexes are equally likely to reveal negative information, men are less likely to share positive feelings.[19]

Through the mid-1980s many social scientists interpreted the relative lack of male self-disclosure as a sign that men are unwilling or even unable to develop close relationships. Some argued that the female trait of disclosing personal information and feelings makes them more "emotionally mature" and "interpersonally competent" than men. Personal growth programs and self-help books urge men to achieve closeness by learning to open up and share their feelings.

Scholarship conducted in roughly the last decade has begun to show that male-female differences aren't as great as they seem,[20] and emotional expression isn't the *only* way to develop close relationships. Unlike women who value personal talk, men grow close to one another by doing things. In one study more than 75 percent of the men surveyed said that their most meaningful experiences with friends came from activities other than talking.[21] They reported that through shared activities they "grew on one another," developed feelings of interdependence, showed appreciation for one another, and demonstrated mutual liking. Likewise, men regarded practical help from other men as a measure of caring. Research like this shows that, for many men, closeness grows from activities that don't depend heavily on disclosure: A friend is a person who does things *for* you and *with* you.

The difference between male and female measures of intimacy helps explain some of the stresses and misunderstandings that can arise between the sexes. For example, a woman who looks for emotional disclosure as a measure of affection may overlook an "inexpressive" man's efforts to show he cares by doing favors or spending time together. Fixing a leaky faucet or taking a hike may look like ways to avoid getting close, but to the man who proposes them, they may be measures of affection and bids for intimacy. Likewise, differing ideas about the timing and meaning of sex can lead to misunderstandings. Whereas many women think of sex as a way to express intimacy that has already developed, men are more likely to see it as a way to *create* that intimacy.[22] In this sense, the man who encourages sex early in a relationship or after a fight may not just be a testosterone-crazed lecher: He may view the shared activity as a way to build closeness. By contrast, the woman who views personal talk as the pathway to intimacy may resist the idea of physical closeness before the emotional side of the relationship has been discussed.

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to open up: to talk about subjects that otherwise might be withheld

Cultural Influences on Intimacy

The notion of how much intimacy is desirable and how to express it varies from one culture to another.[23] In one study, researchers asked residents of Britain, Japan, Hong Kong, and Italy to describe their use of thirty-three rules that governed interaction in a wide range of communication behaviors: everything from the use of humor to hand shaking to the management of money.[24] The results showed that the greatest differences between Asian and European cultures focused on the rules for dealing with intimacy: showing emotions, expressing affection in public, engaging in sexual activity, respecting privacy, and so on. Culture also plays a role in shaping how much intimacy we seek in different types of relationships. For instance, the Japanese seem to expect more intimacy in friend-

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

INTIMACY THROUGH THE AGES

The concept of intimacy—at least as we think of it—is a relatively new one. A time traveler who visited almost any era before the nineteenth century would not find much resembling today's notions of intimacy in either the physical or emotional sense.

If physical intimacy meant only close proximity and little privacy, then it was more common in the past than it is today, especially in less-privileged social classes. In many preindustrial societies, families usually used a common room for bathing, eating, and sleeping. Often a household lacked even a bed, and in one writer's phrase, an entire American colonial family "pigg'd lovingly together" on the floor.

Despite a high degree of physical proximity, in many other times and places there was little emotional intimacy, in even close relationships. Most communities—at least in North America, England, and northern Europe—were too concerned with meeting their economic needs to worry about feelings. The family was primarily an economic unit, with members bound together by the mutual task of survival. In seventeenth-century America and England, the customary level of communication among spouses was rather formal: not much different from the way acquaintances or neighbors spoke with one another. One might regard a husband or wife with affection, but the concept of romantic love as we know it did not flourish until the nineteenth century.

In nineteenth-century bourgeois society, extreme differences between public and private behavior emerged. In public, privacy was the rule. It was considered selfish to burden others with details of your personal life. By contrast, the home was viewed as a refuge from the outside world—a place where the family could support and nourish one another. Love and marriage changed from the pragmatic business they were a century earlier and became highly romanticized. Intimate self-disclosure was expected to be an ingredient in any loving partnership. Not only did sharing one's deepest feelings strengthen the marriage bond, but also it provided support that was lacking in the restrained, private public world.

Emotional intimacy may have become valued in nineteenth-century bourgeois society, but sexual relationships still were characterized by repression. In the early years of the century, "petting" was considered unacceptable. By the 1870s, sexual restraint had reached a peak: Some popular marriage manuals recommended female frigidity "as a virtue to be cultivated, and sexual coldness as a condition to be desired." The term *nymphomania* was used to describe degrees of sexual expression that would be considered commonplace today. One doctor even referred to his patient as a "virgin nymphomaniac."

The concept of emotional intimacy has also changed in the last hundred years. The nineteenth-century approval of self-disclosure has expanded considerably, so that the distinction between public and private relationships is a fuzzy one. As etiquette writer "Miss Manners" points out, we live in a time when waiters introduce themselves by name and sign our checks with a personal "thank you" and when clerks urge us to "have a nice day." In contemporary society it is common to share details of one's personal life with new acquaintances or even total strangers—behavior that would have astonished and offended our great-grandparents.

Understanding the changing concept of intimacy can help show us that notions we take for granted are not universal and are often shaped by economic and social conditions. A sense of perspective can also give us an appreciation for communication practices that are a part of everyday life and give us a sense of other possibilities.

The material in this reading was drawn from several sources: Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life* (New York: Verso, 1988); John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990); and Sarah Trenholm and Arthur Jensen, "The Guarded Self: Toward a Social History of Interpersonal Styles," a paper presented to the Speech Communication Association's meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico, December 1990.

ships, whereas Americans look for more intimacy in romantic relationships with a boy- or girlfriend, fiancée, or spouse.[25]

In some collectivist cultures such as Taiwan and Japan there is an especially great difference in the way members communicate with members of their "in-groups" (such as family and close friends) and with those they view as outsiders.[26] They generally do not reach out to strangers, often waiting until they are properly

introduced before entering into a conversation. Once introduced, they address outsiders with a degree of formality. They go to extremes to hide unfavorable information about in-group members from outsiders, on the principle that one doesn't wash dirty laundry in public. By contrast, members of more individualistic cultures like the United States and Australia make less of a distinction between personal relationships and casual ones. They act more familiar with strangers and disclose more personal information, making them excellent "cocktail party conversationalists." Social psychologist Kurt Lewin captured the difference nicely when he noted that Americans are easy to meet but difficult to get to know, whereas Germans are difficult to meet but then easy to know well.[27]

Within American culture, intimacy varies from one group to another. For example, working-class black men are much more disclosing than their white counterparts.[28] By contrast, upwardly mobile black men communicate more like white men with the same social agenda, disclosing less with their male friends.

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wash dirty laundry in public: disclose personal and private problems and concerns beyond one's family or group

RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE

Qualitatively interpersonal relationships aren't stable. Instead, they are constantly changing. Communication scholars have described the way relationships develop and shift in two ways. We will examine each of them now.

A Developmental Perspective

One of the best-known explanations of how communication operates in relationships was created by Mark Knapp, whose **developmental model** broke down the rise and fall of relationships into ten stages, contained in the two broad phases of "coming together" and "coming apart."[29] Other researchers have suggested that any model of relational communication ought to contain a third part of relational maintenance—communication aimed at keeping relationships operating smoothly and satisfactorily.[30] Figure 6–1 shows how Knapp's ten stages fit into this three-part view of relational communication.

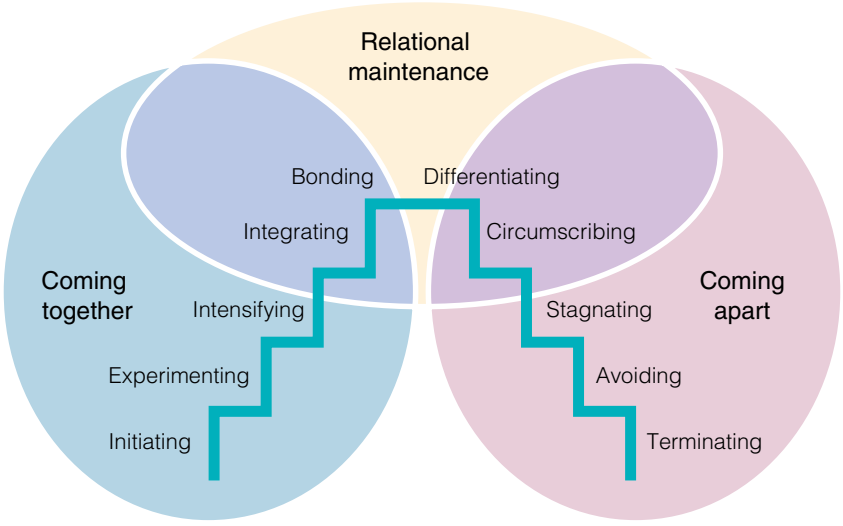

Figure 6-1 Stages of Relational Development

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to pick up: to make an acquaintance with sexual purposes in mind

"small talk": unimportant or trivial conversation

The following stages are especially descriptive of intimate, romantic relationships and close friendships. The pattern for other intimate relationships, such as families, would follow different paths. Some valuable relationships don't require a high level of intimacy. They are based on other, equally important foundations: career activities, shared political interests, and religion, to mention just a few.[31]

INITIATING The stage of initiation involves the initial making of contact with another person. Knapp restricts this stage to conversation openers, both in initial contacts and in contacts with acquaintances: "Nice to meet you," "How's it going?" and so on.

Although an initial encounter *is* necessary to the succeeding interaction, its importance is overemphasized in books advising how to pick up men and women. These books suggest fail-proof openers ranging from "Excuse me, I'm from out of town, and I was wondering what people do around here at night" to "How long do you cook a leg of lamb?" Whatever your preference for opening remarks, this stage is important because you are formulating your first impressions and presenting yourself as interested in the other person.

Initiating relationships in can be particularly hard for people who are shy. Making contact via the Internet can be helpful for people who have a hard time conversing in person. One study of an online dating service found that participants who identified themselves as shy expressed a greater appreciation for the system's anonymous, nonthreatening environment than did non-shy users.[32] The researchers found that many shy users employed the online service specifically to help overcome their inhibitions about initiating relationships in face-to-face settings.

EXPERIMENTING In the stage of experimenting, the conversation develops as the people get acquainted by making "small talk." We ask: "Where are you from?" or "What do you do?" or "Do you know Josephine Mandoza? She lives in San Francisco, too."

Though small talk might seem meaningless, Knapp points out that it serves four purposes:

- It is a useful process for uncovering integrating topics and openings for more penetrating conversation.
- It can be an audition for a future friendship or a way of increasing the scope of a current relationship.
- It provides a safe procedure for indicating who we are and how another can come to know us better (reduction of uncertainty).
- It allows us to maintain a sense of community with our fellow human beings.

The relationship during this stage is generally pleasant and uncritical, and the commitments are minimal. Experimenting may last ten minutes or ten years.

The willingness to pursue relationships with strangers is partly a matter of personal style. Some people are outgoing and others more shy. But culture also plays a role in orientations to newcomers, especially ones from a different background. Research suggests that members of some cultures—Chinese and Japanese, for example—are more cautious in their first encounters with strangers and make more assumptions about them based on their backgrounds than do North Americans and most Europeans.[33] This fact might explain why people from certain backgrounds appear unfriendly, when in fact they are simply operating by a set of rules different from those common in the outgoing United States.

INTENSIFYING At the next stage the kind of truly interpersonal relationship defined earlier in this chapter begins to develop. Several changes in communication patterns occur during intensifying. The expression of feelings toward the other becomes more common. Dating couples use a wide range of communication strategies to describe their feelings of attraction.[34] About a quarter of the time they express their feelings directly, using metacommunication to discuss the state of the relationship. More often they use less-direct methods of communication: spending an increasing amount of time together, asking for support from one another, doing favors for the partner, giving tokens of affection, hinting and flirting, expressing feelings nonverbally, getting to know the partner's friends and family, and trying to look more physically attractive. Touching is more common during this stage than in either earlier or later ones.[35] Other changes mark the intensifying stage. Forms of address become more familiar. The parties begin to see themselves as "we" instead of separate individuals. It is during the intensifying stage that we begin to express directly feelings of commitment to one another: "I'm sure glad we met." "You're the best thing that's happened to me in a long time."

INTEGRATING As the relationship strengthens, the parties begin to take on an identity as a social unit. Invitations begin to come addressed to the couple. Social circles merge. The partners begin to take on each other's commitments: "Sure, we'll spend Thanksgiving with your family." Common property may begin to be designated—our apartment, our car, our song.[36] Partners develop their own rituals for everything from expressing intimacy to handling daily routines.[37] They even begin to speak alike, using common words and sentence patterns.[38] In this sense, the integration stage is a time when we give up some characteristics of our old selves and become different people.

As we become more integrated with others, our sense of obligation to them grows.[39] We feel obliged to provide a variety of resources such as class notes and money, whether or not the other person asks for them. When intimates do make requests of one another, they are relatively straightforward. Gone are the elaborate explanations, inducements, and apologies. In short, partners in an integrated relationship expect more from one another than they do in less-intimate associations.

BONDING During the bonding stage, the parties make symbolic public gestures to show the world that their relationship exists. The most common form of bonding in romantic relationships is a wedding ceremony and the legal ties that come with it. Bonding generates social support for the relationship. Both custom and law impose certain obligations on partners who have officially bonded.

Bonding marks a turning point in a relationship. Up to now the relationship may have developed at a steady pace: Experimenting gradually moved into intensifying and then into integrating. Now, however, there is a spurt of commitment. The public display and declaration of exclusivity make this a critical period in the relationship.

Relationships don't have to be romantic to have a bonding stage. Business contracts form a bond, as does being initiated into a fraternity or sorority. Acts like these "officialize" a relationship and involve a measure of public commitment.

DIFFERENTIATING Now that the two people have formed this commonalty, they need to reestablish individual identities. This is the point where the "hold me tight" orientation that has existed shifts, and "put me down" messages begin to occur. Partners use a variety of strategies to gain privacy from one another.[40] Sometimes they confront the other party directly, explaining that they don't want to continue a discussion. At other times they are less direct, offering nonverbal cues, changing the topic, or leaving the room.

Differentiation is likely to occur when a relationship begins to experience the first, inevitable stress. This need for autonomy needn't be a negative experience, however. People need to be individuals as well as parts of a relationship, and differentiation is a necessary step toward autonomy. The key to successful differentiation is maintaining a commitment to the relationship while creating the space for being an individual as well.

CIRCUMSCRIBING So far we have been looking at the growth of relationships. Although some reach a plateau of development, going on successfully for as long as a lifetime, others pass through several stages of decline and dissolution. In the circumscribing stage, communication between members decreases in quantity and quality. Restrictions and restraints characterize this stage, and dynamic communication becomes static. Rather than discuss a disagreement (which requires some degree of energy on both parts), members opt for withdrawal: either mental (silence or daydreaming and fantasizing) or physical (where people spend less time together). Circumscribing doesn't involve total avoidance, which comes later. Rather, it entails a certain shrinking of interest and commitment.

STAGNATING If circumscribing continues, the relationship begins to stagnate. Members behave toward each other in old, familiar ways without much feeling. No growth occurs. The relationship is a shadow of its former self. We see stagnation in many workers who have lost enthusiasm for their job yet continue to go through the motions for years. The same sad event occurs for some couples

who unenthusiastically have the same conversations, see the same people, and follow the same routines without any sense of joy or novelty.

AVOIDING When stagnation becomes too unpleasant, parties in a relationship begin to create distance between each other. Sometimes this is done under the guise of excuses ("I've been sick lately and can't see you"), and sometimes it is done directly ("Please don't call me; I don't want to see you now"). In either case, by this point the handwriting about the relationship's future is clearly on the wall.

TERMINATING Characteristics of this final stage include summary dialogues about where the relationship has gone and the desire to dissociate. The relationship may end with a cordial dinner, a note left on the kitchen table, a phone call, or a legal document stating the dissolution. Depending on each person's feelings, this stage can be quite short, or it may be drawn out over time, with bitter jabs at one another.

The deterioration of a relationship from bonding to circumscribing, stagnating, and avoiding isn't inevitable. One of the key differences between marriages that end in separation and those that are restored to their former intimacy is the communication that occurs when the partners are unsatisfied.[41] Unsuccessful couples deal with their problems by avoidance, indirectness, and less involvement with one another. By contrast, couples who "repair" their relationship communicate much more directly. They confront one another with their concerns and spend time and effort negotiating solutions to their problems.

Relationships don't always move toward termination in a straight line. Rather, they take a back-and-forth pattern, where the trend is toward dissolution.[42] Regardless of how long it takes, termination doesn't have to be totally negative. Understanding each other's investments in the relationships and needs for personal growth may dilute the hard feelings. In fact, many relationships aren't so much terminated as redefined. A divorced couple, for example, may find new, less intimate ways to relate to each other.

CULTURAL IDIOM

handwriting . . . is clearly on the wall: an indication or foretelling of an unfortunate message

bitter jabs: unkind comments

CRITICAL THINKING PROBE

STAGES IN NONROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Knapp's model of relational development and decline offers a good description of communication stages in traditional romantic relationships. Some critics have argued that it doesn't characterize other sorts of relationships so well. Identify your position in this debate by following these steps:

1. Explain how well (or poorly) the model describes one other type of relationship: among coworkers, friends (either close or more distant), parent and child, or another relational context of your choosing.
2. Construct a model describing communication stages in the relationship type you just identified. How does this model differ from Knapp's?

A Dialectical Perspective

Developmental models like the one described in the preceding pages suggest that communication differs in important ways at various points in the life of a relationship. According to these stage-related models, the kinds of interaction that

[Porcupines] huddle together for warmth, but their sharp quills prick each other, so they pull away. But then they get cold. They have to keep adjusting their closeness and distance to keep from freezing and from getting pricked by their fellow porcupines—the source of both comfort and pain.

We need to get close to each other to have a sense of community, to feel we're not alone in the world. But we need to keep our distance from each other to preserve our independence, so others don't impose on or engulf us. This duality reflects the human condition. We are individual and social creatures. We need other people to survive, but we want to survive as individuals.

Deborah Tannen
That's Not What I Meant!

happen during initiating, experimenting, or intensifying are different from the interaction that occurs during differentiating, circumscribing, or avoiding.

Not all theorists agree that a stage-related model is the best way to explain interaction in relationships. Some suggest that communicators grapple with the same kinds of challenges whether a relationship is brand new or has lasted decades. They argue that communicators seek important but inherently incompatible goals throughout virtually all of their relationships. This **dialectical model** suggests that struggling to achieve these goals creates **dialectical tensions:** conflicts that arise when two opposing or incompatible forces exist simultaneously. In recent years, communication scholars have identified the dialectical tensions that make successful communication challenging.[43] They suggest that the struggle to manage these dialectical tensions creates the most powerful dynamics in relational communication. In the following pages we will discuss three powerful dialectical tensions.

CONNECTION VERSUS AUTONOMY No one is an island. Recognizing this fact, we seek out involvement with others. But, at the same time, we are unwilling to sacrifice our entire identity to even the most satisfying relationship. The conflicting desires for connection and independence are embodied in the *connection-autonomy dialectic.* Research on relational breakups demonstrates the consequences for relational partners who can't find a way to manage these very different personal needs.[44] Some of the most common reasons for relational breakups involve failure of partners to satisfy one another's needs for connection: "We barely spent any time together"; "He wasn't committed to the relationship"; "We had different needs." But other relational complaints involve excessive demands for connection: "I was feeling trapped"; "I needed freedom."

The levels of connection and autonomy that we seek can change over time. In his book *Intimate Behavior,* Desmond Morris suggests that each of us repeatedly goes through three stages: "Hold me tight," "Put me down," and "Leave me alone."[45] This cycle becomes apparent in the first years of life when children move from the "hold me tight" stage that characterizes infancy into a new "put me down" stage of exploring the world by crawling, walking, touching, and tasting. This move for independence isn't all in one direction: The same three-year-old who insists "I can do it myself" in August may cling to parents on the first day of preschool in September. As children grow into adolescents, the "leave me alone" orientation becomes apparent. Teenagers who used to happily spend time with their parents now may groan at the thought of a family vacation or even the notion of sitting down at the dinner table each evening. More time is spent with friends or alone. Although this time can be painful for parents, most developmental experts recognize it as a necessary stage in moving from childhood to adulthood.

As the need for independence from family grows, adolescents take care of their "hold me tight" needs by associating with their peers. Friendships during the teenage years are vital, and the level of closeness with contemporaries can be a barometer of happiness. This is the time when physical intimacy becomes an option, and sexual exploration may provide a new way of achieving closeness.

In adult relationships, the same cycle of intimacy and distance repeats itself. In marriages, for example, the "hold me tight" bonds of the first year are often followed by a desire for independence. This need for autonomy can manifest itself in a number of ways, such as the desire to make friends or engage in activities

that don't include the spouse, or the need to make a career move that might disrupt the relationship. As the discussion of relational stages later in this chapter will explain, this movement from closeness to autonomy may lead to the breakup of relationships; but it can also be part of a cycle that redefines the relationship in a new form that can recapture or even surpass the intimacy that existed in the past.

PREDICTABILITY VERSUS NOVELTY Stability is an important need in relationships, but too much of it can lead to feelings of staleness. The *predictability-novelty dialectic* reflects this tension. Humorist Dave Barry exaggerates only slightly when he talks about the boredom that can come when husbands and wives know each other too well:

> After a decade or so of marriage, you know *everything* about your spouse, every habit and opinion and twitch and tic and minor skin growth. You could write a seventeen-pound book solely about the way your spouse *eats*. This kind of intimate knowledge can be very handy in certain situations—such as when you're on a TV quiz show where the object is to identify your spouse from the sound of his or her chewing—but it tends to lower the passion level of a relationship.[46]

Although too much familiarity can lead to the risk of boredom and stagnation, nobody wants a completely unpredictable relational partner. Too many surprises can threaten the foundations upon which the relationship is based ("You're not the person I married!").

The challenge for communicators is to juggle the desire for predictability with the need for novelty that keeps the relationship fresh and interesting. People differ in their need and desire for stability and surprises, so there is no optimal mixture of the two. As you will read shortly, there are a number of strategies people can use to manage these contradictory drives.

OPENNESS VERSUS PRIVACY As Chapter 1 explained, disclosure is one characteristic of interpersonal relationships. Yet, along with the need for intimacy, we have an equally important need to maintain some space between ourselves and others. These sometimes-conflicting drives create the *openness-privacy dialectic*.

Even the strongest interpersonal relationships require some distance. On a short-term basis, the desire for closeness waxes and wanes. Lovers may go through periods of much sharing and times of relative withdrawal. Likewise, they experience periods of passion and then periods of little physical contact. Friends have times of high disclosure where they share almost every feeling and idea and then disengage for days, months, or even longer. Figure 6–2 illustrates some patterns of variation in openness uncovered in a study of college students' communication

"And do you, Rebecca, promise to make love only to Richard, month after month, year after year, and decade after decade, until one of you is dead?"

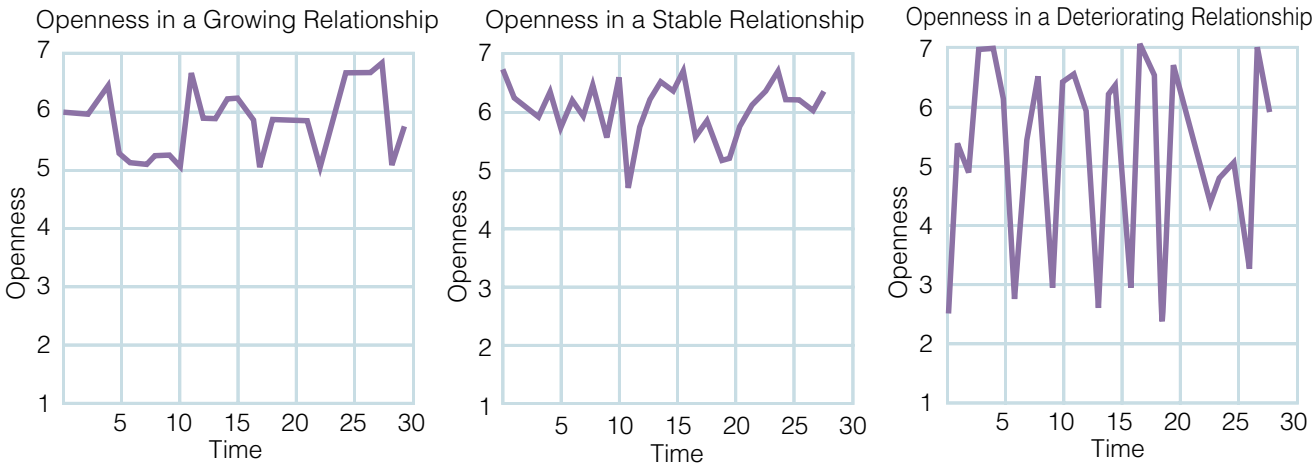

Figure 6-2 Cyclical Phases of Openness and Withdrawal in Relationships

patterns.[47] The students reported the degree of openness in one of their important relationships—a friendship, romantic relationship, or marriage—over a range of thirty conversations. The graphs show a definite pattern of fluctuation between disclosure and privacy in every stage of the relationships.

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING DIALECTICAL TENSIONS Managing the dialectical tensions outlined in these pages presents communication challenges. There are a number of strategies by which these challenges can be managed.[48] One of the least functional is *denial* that tensions exist. People in denial insist that "everything is fine," that the inevitable tugs of dialectical tensions really aren't a problem. For example, coworkers who claim that they're *always* happy to be members of the team and *never* see conflicts between their personal goals and the organization's are probably operating in a state of denial.

Disorientation is another response to dialectical tensions. In this response, communicators feel so overwhelmed and helpless that they are unable to confront their problems. In the face of dialectical tensions they might fight, freeze, or even leave the relationship. A couple who discover soon after the honeymoon that living a "happily ever after" conflict-free life is impossible might become so terrified that they would come to view their marriage as a mistake.

In the strategy of *selection,* communicators respond to one end of the dialectical spectrum and ignore the other. For example, a couple caught between the conflicting desires for stability and novelty might find their struggle to change too difficult to manage and choose to stick with predictable, if unexciting, patterns of relating to one another.

Communicators choose the strategy of *alternation* to alternate between one end of the dialectical spectrum at some times and the

> Love one another, but make not a bond of love:
> Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.
> Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.
> Give one another of your bread but eat not of the same loaf.
> Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,
> Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.
>
> Kahlil Gibran
> *The Prophet*

other end at other times. Friends, for example, might manage the autonomy-connection dialectic by alternating between times when they spend a large amount of time together and other times when they live independent lives.

A fifth strategy is *segmentation,* a tactic in which partners compartmentalize different areas of their relationship. For example, a couple might manage the openness-closedness dialectic by sharing almost all their feelings about mutual friends with one another but keep certain parts of their past romantic histories private.

Moderation is a sixth strategy. This strategy is characterized by compromises, in which communicators choose to back off from expressing either end of the dialectical spectrum. Adult children, for example, might manage the revelation-concealment dialectic with their inquisitive parents by answering some (though not all) unwelcome parental questions.

Communicators can also respond to dialectical challenges by *reframing* them in terms that redefine the situation so that the apparent contradiction disappears. Consider a couple who wince when their friends characterize them as a "perfect couple." On one hand, they want to escape from the "perfect couple" label that feels confining, but on the other hand, they enjoy the admiration that comes with this identity. By pointing out to their friends that "ideal couples" aren't always blissfully happy, they can both be themselves and keep the admiration of their friends.

A final strategy for handling dialectical tensions is *reaffirmation*—acknowledging that dialectical tensions will never disappear, accepting or even embracing the challenges they present. The metaphorical view of relational life as a kind of roller coaster reflects this orientation, and communicators who use reaffirmation view dialectical tensions as part of the ride.

CULTURAL IDIOM

on the one hand: from one point of view

on the other hand: from the other point of view

Characteristics of Relational Development and Maintenance

Whether you analyze a relationship in terms of stages or dialectical dynamics, two characteristics are true of every interpersonal relationship. As you read about each, consider how it applies to your own experience.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE CONSTANTLY CHANGING Relationships are certainly not doomed to deteriorate. But even the strongest ones are rarely stable for long periods of time. In fairy tales a couple may live "happily ever after," but in real life this sort of equilibrium is less common. Consider a husband and wife who have been married for some time. Although they have formally bonded, their relationship will probably shift from one dimension of a relational dialectic to another, and forward or backward along the spectrum of stages. Sometimes the partners will feel the need to differentiate from one another, and at other times they will seek intimacy. Sometimes they will feel secure in the predictable patterns they have established, and at other times one or both will be hungry for novelty. The relationship may become more circumscribed, or even stagnant. From this point the marriage may fail, but this fate isn't certain. With effort, the partners may move from the stage of stagnating to experimenting, or from circumscribing to intensifying.

Communication theorist Richard Conville describes the constantly changing, evolving nature of relationships as a cycle in which partners move through a se-