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Constructivism: A General Theory of Communication Skill

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about communication skills and one particular theory of these skills—constructivism. As you've probably discovered in your reading of this book, communication is a broad term that encompasses lots of different things. So, I will begin by presenting some examples of what I mean by "more and less skilled communication."

Consider two young adults, each of whom is trying to comfort a friend who has recently been "dumped" by a long-term dating partner:

Mary: Ben broke up with you? He's an idiot! But, this isn't the end of the world, you know. I mean, it's not the worst thing that could happen to you, and to be honest, I think you'll be better off without Ben. Anyway, there are tons of cute guys on this campus, you know, lots of fish in the sea. You just gotta get out there and catch another one! Keep in mind that no guy is worth getting all worked up about. I mean, it's just not that big a deal, not at this point in life. You can do a lot better than Ben. Just remember that Ben isn't worth any heartache and you'll stop being so depressed about the whole thing.

Michael: Barb broke up with you? Oh man! I'm really sorry; I know you must be hurting right now. Do you want to talk about it? You were together a long time and were really involved with her, so you must have some real heartache. This just sucks; I'm really sorry, man. The same thing happened to me last year, and I remember how rotten it makes you feel. It's especially tough when it's sudden like that. It's probably gonna take some time to work through it—after all, breaking up is a really hard thing. I know it may not mean very much right now, but keep in mind

that you've got some good friends here—people who really care about you. I'm here whenever you want to talk about things.

Who does the better job of comforting their distressed friend, Mary or Michael? Why?

The second instance represents what most of us intuitively recognize as a more sensitive, sophisticated, and effective performance—in a word, more skillful communication. Why do most of us regard the second instance as more skillful conduct? That is one of the questions this chapter seeks to answer.

Across a broad set of situations, some people consistently communicate more skillfully than do others. You probably know some really skillful communicators—people who with great regularity are able to recognize quickly what is going on in social situations, who can understand the meanings and messages of others, who are able to convey their ideas to others in effective and appropriate ways, and who can smoothly enter and manage conversations. You also almost certainly know people who seem clueless about the social situations they enter, who never seem to get the point of another's message, who can't convey their own ideas in ways understandable by others, and who always seem abrasive, if not rude, in conversation.

What is it that some people know that enables them to be highly successful and effective communicators? What qualities, abilities, and knowledge do they have? And how did they come by or acquire these qualities and abilities? These are some of the questions this chapter tries to answer.

I begin this chapter by previewing different kinds of communication competencies and describing in some detail the type of competency with which this chapter is most concerned—*functional communication competence*. I then present a brief overview of the theory that will guide our exploration of different kinds of functional communication competence, a theory known as *constructivism*. Most of the chapter examines skilled behavior with respect to three major communication processes: social perception, message production, and message reception.[1] For each of these processes, we will explore two questions: (a) What counts as skilled behavior with respect to this process? (b) Why are some people more skilled than others with respect to this process? In the last part of the chapter, I describe some of the background factors that lead some people to emerge "naturally" as highly skillful communicators and others as less skilled. Overall, this chapter should help you think about your own communication skills, why you communicate as you do in various situations, and what you can do if you want to improve your functional communication skills.

SKILLFUL FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION: ITS NATURE, SIGNIFICANCE, AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

Types of Communication Competence

Successful communication is a complicated matter that requires the mastery of several different types of knowledge or competencies (Clark & Delia, 1979). First, to communicate

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[1]Due to space limitations, a fourth skill—conversational management—is not discussed in this chapter. The ability to manage face-to-face conversations is an essential skill that involves such components as allocating conversational turns, directing the topic of the conversation, and adjusting one's own plans for the conversation to take account of other participants' plans. Unfortunately, comparatively few theoretical models of skill in conversational management have been proposed to date. A brief review of research on individual differences in conversational management skill is presented by Burleson and Caplan (1998).

successfully, people must know the linguistic or grammatical rules that enable them to produce and comprehend sentences in a particular language (such as English or Chinese). Such knowledge is referred to as *linguistic competence*; this kind of competence is studied mostly by linguists and psycholinguists (psychologists who are especially interested in how people generate and process grammatical sentences).

Second, successful communicators must know the social rules that govern the appropriate use of language for different situations and groups of people. Knowing how to use and interpret expressions in socially correct or appropriate ways (as determined by the rules of a relevant community or group) is referred to as *sociolinguistic competence.* This kind of competence is studied mostly by sociologists and anthropologists who try to identify the rules for "correct speaking" in various groups.

Third, successful communicators must know how to generate and process messages in ways that enable them to accomplish their personal and social goals efficiently and effectively. Skillful communicators must know how to produce messages that inform others clearly, persuade others convincingly, and comfort others sensitively. Skillful communicators must also be able to appreciate the nuances in others' messages and must even be capable of "reading between the lines" to extract intended (and sometimes unintended) meanings. Knowing how to produce messages and interpret the messages of others in ways that enable you to accomplish your goals is referred to as *functional* or *rhetorical competence.* This kind of competence is studied mostly by researchers in the communication discipline and is the kind of competence with which this chapter is concerned.

Functional communication competence includes more than the ability to produce messages that effectively achieve personal goals. Successful functional communication requires mastering skills associated with several distinguishable communication processes, including interpreting people and social situations (*social perception*), producing messages (*message production*), and receiving and processing messages generated by others (*message reception*). Skillful communicators do all of these things well. But why should you care about these skills?

The Personal and Social Significance of Functional Communication Skills

There are several good reasons why you should care about functional communication skills. First, skillful functional communicators are more likely to achieve success both personally and professionally. At work or in professional life, skillful communicators are upwardly mobile—they are more likely to earn promotions, raises, and professional advancement (e.g., Sypher & Zorn, 1986; Zorn & Violanti, 1996). At home or in private life, skillful communicators enjoy higher quality personal relationships, including more satisfying friendships (Burleson & Samter, 1994) and marriages (Burleson & Denton, 1997).

Second, skilled functional communicators usually are sensitive to the personal characteristics and goals of others. Thus, they often communicate in ways that contribute to other people being able to achieve their goals (including identity and relationship goals). As you might imagine, this can contribute to enhanced liking for skilled communicators; people generally like those who help them achieve their goals (e.g., B. J. O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1989). This can also lead to enhanced personal relationships with others.

Third, skillful functional communication can contribute to the physical health of others. For example, skillful communicators can effectively present information regarding healthy behaviors and lifestyles. They may also be more effective at persuading people to comply with treatment regimens (Lambert & Gillespie, 1994) or reduce risky behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking, drug use, unprotected sexual activity). Other research has found that people

who regularly receive sensitive, skillful, emotional support from caring others suffer less from life stress and, as a result, exhibit better physical and emotional health (Burleson, 2003).

Finally, skillful functional communicators may indirectly (and probably unintentionally) enhance the communication skills of others. They may do this by exhibiting or modeling skilled forms of communicative behavior that others can then imitate (Burleson & Kunkel, 2002). In addition, the skilled communication behaviors of those such as parents may "exercise the mind" of the child, thereby fostering the development of psychological abilities and motivational orientations required for effective social interaction (Hart, Newell, & Olsen, 2003).

I hope you are convinced that functional communication skills are important and that you should be interested in learning more about them as a first step toward improving your own skills. What do you need to help you learn more about the nature of these skills, how they work, and how they can be improved? You need the same thing that professional researchers and educators who are interested in learning about these skills need: *a good theory*. Good theories help scientists explain, predict, and control the things that interest them. Let's get acquainted with one theory of functional communication skills.

Constructivism: A Brief Overview

Constructivism is a communication theory that seeks to explain individual differences in the ability to communicate skillfully. Jesse Delia and his associates at the University of Illinois initially developed the theory of constructivism in the communication discipline during the 1970s (see Delia, O'Keefe, & O'Keefe, 1982). I am one of those "associates"—I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois in 1970s and worked closely with Delia and several others who contributed to the development of constructivism. Those of us who developed the constructivist approach to human communication were interested in understanding how people's interpretations of the social world influenced their communicative behavior. Much of our early theorizing was influenced by scholars such as the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget (1896–1980), and the American philosopher, George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), both of whom believed that effective communication depended on the ability to "take" (or imaginatively construct) the perspective of others. Because we viewed communication as a skill—as a practical art for accomplishing social purposes—we were particularly interested in understanding how individual differences in the perception of people and social events were related to the use of more and less effective forms of communication.

Constructivist theory has been applied successfully to a great many communication events and behaviors during the past 30 years and has generated one of the largest bodies of empirical findings in the communication discipline (see reviews by Burleson & Caplan, 1998; Coopman, 1997). Today, constructivist theory continues to be refined and applied in new settings, leading to improved understandings of many communication events and behaviors. For example, in recent years the constructivist framework has served as a foundation for theories of relationship development and maintenance, cultural influences on communication, language acquisition and communicative development, socialization processes, and communication instruction, as well as examinations of communication processes in business, educational institutions, health care contexts, the mass media, and political settings.

Despite its many elaborations and extensions, at base constructivism remains a general theory of communication skill. That is, constructivism aims to provide descriptions and explanations of individual differences in communication skill. It does this by presenting models or accounts of several things. First, constructivism identifies what counts as skillful conduct with respect to several processes, including *social perception* (the ability to acquire,

retain, manipulate, and use information about the social world), *message production* (the ability to generate verbal and nonverbal messages that efficiently and effectively accomplish various personal and social goals), and *message reception* (the ability to fully comprehend the meaning of others' messages and, when appropriate, go beyond those messages to understand the source's intentions and motives). Second, constructivism explains why there are individual differences in these communication skills. That is, constructivism specifies the characteristics and qualities people must possess if they are to communicate in a skillful way. Third, constructivism explains the source or origin of individual differences in the characteristics that lead some people to be more skillful communicators than others. The rest of this chapter explores the explanations of communication skill generated by constructivist theory. Because constructivism maintains that the interpretive or perceptual processes of individuals play a central role in all communicative conduct, I first examine social perception skill.

SOCIAL PERCEPTION SKILL

Perception, Social Perception, and Social Perception Skills

Perception is the mental process of noticing, identifying, and interpreting things in the world. Perception is an active process. That is, we do not passively receive information about the world; the world does not directly impose itself on our senses and brain. Rather, we actively make sense out of the world: We selectively direct our attention to particular aspects of the world at any given time; we classify the things we notice in terms of the mental categories we have acquired; we retrieve information about similar experiences from memory and view current experiences in terms of those memories; and we make inferences (guesses) about the nature of a current experience, its causes, and its possible consequences. Even though we are rarely consciously aware of these mental activities, they are quite real and absolutely necessary; they keep us connected to the world.

   Social perception refers to the process through which we make sense of the human or social world, including our experiences of ourselves, other people, social relationships, and social institutions (for an overview of research on social perception, see Barone, Maddux, & Snyder, 1997). In most social encounters, the actions and qualities of other people are especially important, so much of our mental energy and attention is focused on them. Quite spontaneously, we seek answers to a range of questions about the others around us: who they are, how they stand in relation to us, the type of situation they currently occupy, what they are doing, their intentions and motivations, and their personal qualities.

   Social perception is particularly important for communication because (as shown in other sections of this chapter) people base their communicative behaviors on their perceptions of others' conduct, qualities, roles, intentions, and dispositions. Put another way, much of your own communicative conduct toward others, as well as your understanding of others' communicative efforts, is grounded in your perceptions of these others.

   Researchers have examined many different *social perception processes*, including affect recognition (identifying the emotional states experienced by others), causal attribution (inferring the causes for another's behavior), nonverbal decoding (determining the meaning of nonverbal behaviors), impression formation (organizing diverse information about others into an overall impression), information integration (recognizing and reconciling potentially inconsistent information about others), social evaluation (making evaluative judgments about others), and social perspective taking (inferring the thoughts and feelings of another). These

are all "input-oriented" cognitive activities through which we define and make sense of social situations and the qualities, thoughts, and behaviors of others.

People can engage in these processes more or less well; thus, social perception represents a *skill* (or, more precisely a set of skills) on which people *differ*. You know that some people have more developed athletic skills than others, some have more developed musical or artistic skills than others, and some have more developed mathematical skills than others. Quite similarly, some people have more developed *social perception skills* than others.[2] For example, people differ in the richness and organization of the impressions they form of others. Consider the impressions that Beth and Brian formed of their partners, "Chris" and "Jamie":

Beth: My partner, Chris, is a generally happy person. I think Chris has a great smile. Chris works hard in school and I really admire that. I think Chris is concerned about physical appearance and is really good-looking. Chris is caring and a good friend. We have lots of fun together. One of my favorite things to do with Chris is to go out to dinner and a movie. Chris likes to be the center of attention, but also has a good sense of humor. I think Chris' jokes are really funny. Chris treats people with respect. We are a lot alike in many ways.

Brian: My partner, Jamie, is self-confident, outgoing, friendly, and curious about the world in general. Jamie is open-minded and is always willing to learn new things. Jamie has a definite sense of what's right and wrong and sticks to beliefs that have been well thought out. However, Jamie is open to constructive criticism and new ways of thinking. Sometimes Jamie gets frustrated and tends to show some temper, but usually manages to channel that negative energy into a positive form of expression. Jamie gets along well with others due to a caring and supportive nature. Overall, Jamie is an independent and compassionate individual.

Each of these impressions contains about the same number of words. However, while the impression of Chris is rather superficial, fragmented, and unorganized, the more systematically organized impression of Jamie strikes most people as more revealing and insightful.

Here's another example of individual differences in a social perception process: Some people have difficulty understanding and explaining the apparently inconsistent actions of others; others can explain these actions relatively easily. Let's say a fellow named Walt displays both some positive behaviors (befriending a new kid in the dorm, preventing panic when a fire breaks out at a party) and some negative behaviors (making fun of a friend's low grades the previous semester, indicating a willingness to cheat on exams if he has to). How can we explain the kind of person Walt is? Some people will explain Walt by deciding that he is either a good guy or bad guy, essentially ignoring half of the information about him (the behaviors that don't "fit" with the overall judgment). Some people will use all the information, but not be able to really explain what leads Walt to act in such different ways, and conclude that Walt must be very "moody." Still other people will make use of all the information about Walt and be able to explain the variations in his behavior, perhaps in terms of an underlying trait such

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[2]Some writers use the term emotional intelligence when referring to the abilities this chapter calls social perception skills (Goleman, 1995). I am not favorably disposed toward the emotional intelligence terminology because it is vague (see Russell & Barchard, 2002) and, for some, connotes a genetically based ability (see Zeidner, Matthews, Roberts, & MacCann, 2002). In contrast, the term skill denotes an acquired ability, and this better corresponds with my understanding of the character of individual differences associated with social perception (i.e., that such differences result largely from learning and experience rather than genetics).

as "insecurity" ("Walt is a pretty insecure guy, and this means that he always is trying to look good to others. So sometimes he does positive, helpful things but sometimes he cuts others down or takes short cuts just so he looks good by comparison"). Accounts that consider all the information about Walt and explain variations in his behavior are more complete and satisfying than accounts that ignore some of the information or fail to explain the variability in this behavior (Press, Crockett, & Delia, 1975). These accounts do a better job of integrating information about others than do the less sophisticated accounts.

There are many other examples of individual differences in social perception skills. For instance, some people have difficulty understanding another person's point of view on a situation, especially when that point of view is different from their own. Dealing with such people can be difficult, especially if you need them to appreciate the perspectives of others. Or, when it comes to making attributions about the causes of another's behavior, some people only focus on the personality traits or dispositions of the actor whereas other people not only consider the actor's personal qualities but also assess how characteristics of the situation may have influenced the actor's behavior. Generally speaking, the more sources of information people consider, the more accurate their attributions will be (Wilson, Cruz, & Kang, 1992).

Interpersonal Constructs, Cognitive Complexity, and Social Information Processing Capacity

What makes some people more skilled than others at social perception? According to constructivist theory, all social perception processes occur through the application of the cognitive elements termed *interpersonal constructs*. Interpersonal constructs are cognitive schemes or mental templates that apply to the thoughts, behaviors, characteristics, and qualities of people. It might be useful to think of interpersonal constructs as analogous to muscles in the body. Our muscles are flexible structures that enable us to engage in a variety of different physical activities (running, jumping, throwing, dancing, cycling). Similarly, interpersonal constructs are flexible mental structures that enable us to engage in a variety of cognitive activities—the various social perception processes discussed previously (e.g., attribution, impression formation, information integration, perspective taking).

As you know, certain properties of the muscular system (strength, flexibility, stamina) determine an individual's general level of athletic skill. Similarly, three properties of the interpersonal construct system are particularly important in determining our general level of social perception skill: differentiation, abstractness, and integration. *Differentiation* refers to the number of interpersonal constructs in a person's cognitive system; people with more differentiated interpersonal construct systems have more schemas available for use as they interpret the activities of others. *Abstractness* refers to the conceptual quality of a construct. Some constructs are comparatively concrete, focusing on the more superficial aspects of others such as their physical characteristics (e.g., body size, hair color), specific behaviors (e.g., smiles a lot, takes walks in the evenings), and particular social roles (e.g., part-time bartender, graduate student in English). Other constructs are comparatively abstract in character, focusing on deeper, underlying psychological qualities such as traits and dispositions (e.g., intelligent, compassionate). *Integration* refers to the extent to which the constructs in a system are organized, interconnected, and hence, easily accessible.

Systems of constructs that are more differentiated, abstract, and integrated are considered to be more complex. Thus, people who have lots of constructs (high differentiation) that are well organized (high integration) and typically reference psychological characteristics of others (high abstractness) are considered to have a high level of *interpersonal cognitive complexity*.

A common method of assessing cognitive complexity is via the Role Category Questionnaire (Crockett, 1965), where people generate impressions of others they know; these impressions are then scored by trained coders for qualities such as construct system differentiation, abstractness, and organization (for details concerning RCQ, see Burleson & Waltman, 1988).

Because interpersonal constructs are the basic cognitive structures through which we perceive and understand the social world, people with higher levels of cognitive complexity are better able than those with lower levels of complexity to acquire, store, retrieve, organize, and generate information about other persons and social situations. For example, when researchers have compared people having more and less complex systems of constructs, they have found that those with complex systems of interpersonal constructs (a) form detailed and organized impressions of others, (b) are better able to remember impressions of others, (c) are better able to resolve inconsistencies in information about others, (d) learn complex social information quickly, (e) use multiple dimensions of judgment in making social evaluations, and (f) are better able to "take" or understand the perspective of others (see review by Burleson & Caplan, 1998). These findings suggest that it is useful to view people with a high level of interpersonal cognitive complexity as having a greater *capacity to process social information* than do people with lower levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity. This is why people with a high level of interpersonal cognitive complexity are better able to carry out various social perception processes and exhibit higher levels of social perception skill. In a very important sense, people with high levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity are experts when it comes to understanding people and events in the social world; they know more, understand more, and can do more with their knowledge of the social world than less complex perceivers.

Summary

Social perception skill refers to the ability to acquire, retain, manipulate, and use information about aspects of the social world, especially other people. There are many different social perception processes and, hence, many different social perception skills. However, because all social perception processes make use of the individual's interpersonal constructs, we can get a general idea about someone's social perception skill by examining the complexity of his or her interpersonal construct system. People with high levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity have a greater capacity to acquire and process social information; thus, they are also particularly good at producing effective messages.

MESSAGE PRODUCTION SKILL

Message production is the process of generating verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are intended to obtain a desired response from those to whom they are directed. When successful, the message production process enables individuals to smoothly and effectively accomplish various personal and social goals. Message production is a complicated process and, just as there are many different social perception skills, so there are many different message production skills (for review, see Berger, 2003). Here, I am concerned with only one general message production skill: the ability to produce *highly person-centered messages*.

Some of our communicative efforts are directed at accomplishing simple, routine tasks (saying hi to an acquaintance, asking or answering straightforward questions about the time or the weather, etc.). When communicating to accomplish these simple, routine tasks we do not typically give much attention to the unique characteristics of the specific person or audience

with whom we are communicating. Rather, we can rely on standard, "scripted" message forms that fit the occasion.

However, in many other circumstances the successful accomplishment of our communicative goals requires that we produce messages that show awareness of, and accommodation to, the particular psychological characteristics of our specific target audience and features of the specific social situation. Comforting someone upset about a recent loss, disciplining an employee about a rule violation, persuading a romantic partner to accept our ideas concerning future joint actions, entertaining a family gathering through jokes and stories, or explaining how some machine or drug works to someone with little background are all fairly complicated communicative tasks that require (among other things) that we carefully consider the goals, traits, feelings, knowledge, and desires of our audience.

The Nature of Person-Centered Messages

Person-centered messages take into account and adapt to the subjective, emotional, and relational aspects of communicative contexts (for a detailed discussion of the person-centered construct, see Burleson, 1987), . Person centeredness is an important quality of functional communication; such messages are more responsive to the aims and utterances of an interactional partner, are tailored to the characteristics of the partner and situation, attend to the identity-relevant features of communicative contexts, and may encourage reflection about persons and social situations.

Person-centeredness is a general quality of messages that takes on a somewhat different form depending on the primary communicative goal pursued (e.g., persuading, comforting, informing). For example, highly person-centered persuasive messages exhibit greater concern with the goals and desires of the persuasive target than do less person-centered persuasive messages. Consider the following persuasion efforts by two teenagers, both aimed at securing parental permission to host an overnight party:

Albert: Hey mom, can I have an overnight party this weekend? Please! Oh, please say yes! I really want to have my friends over! Please, mom! Is it OK? A party would be so cool! That's what I really want this weekend, OK?

Angela: Hey mom, you know how you've been saying how you want to get to know my friends better—you know, get to know the kids I hang out with? Well, I've been thinking about that, and I think you're right. It's really important that you know who my friends are. Plus, I have some really cool friends, and I'd like for you to get to know them, and them to know you. So, I've been thinking that maybe I could have an over-night party this weekend for some of my friends. That way, they'd be here in the house for a while and you'd have a chance to see them and talk to them and get to know them. Does that sound like a good idea?

Notice that Albert's message focuses only on his goals and wants. His message shows no consideration of the concerns or interests of his audience (here, his mother). Rather, he merely emphasizes how much he wants the party. In contrast, Angela cleverly frames her request so that the goals and interests of her audience (her mother) are given priority; Angela presents hosting the party as a means of achieving her mother's goal of getting to know her daughter's friends.

When disciplining or regulating the behavior of others, highly person-centered messages seek to induce the other's understanding of and compliance with behavioral rules by getting the

other to reflect on and reason through the consequences of the problematic behavior. In contrast, less person-centered regulative messages seek compliance by threatening punishment or engaging in other exercises of power. For example, consider the disciplinary efforts of two mothers, each of whose 7-year-old child misbehaved by calling another child a hurtful name:

Donna: Amy, you are a naughty little girl! We don't ever call other children bad names, not ever, and not for any reason. That's wrong, and you are going to be punished. I won't tolerate that kind of behavior from a child of mine. Do you understand me? Now, you march right over to William and apologize to him and then go to your room. Children who don't play nice don't get to play at all.

Susan: Alice, what happened here? Can you tell me why you called Bonnie a name? When you get upset with someone, does that make it OK to hurt them? Do you remember how you felt last week when you got called names at school? Pretty bad, huh? How do you think Bonnie feels right now? Pretty bad, too? Do you really want her to feel bad? Do you want Bonnie to be your friend and play with you again sometime? Well, what do you think you should do here? Do you need to say something to Bonnie or apologize to her? What are you going to do next time you get upset with someone?

Both of these messages are likely to get a child's compliance in the immediate situation (in the sense of getting the misbehaving child to apologize to the victim). However, Donna's message implicitly teaches her child that "name calling" is bad behavior because she says so. It further creates a negative identity for her daughter, implying that Amy is a bad person for engaging in bad behavior. In contrast, Susan's message encourages her child to focus on the social consequences of bad behavior but does not imply that Alice is a bad person for having acted inappropriately. Susan's message also invites her child to reason through what should be done to "repair" the situation whereas Donna's message directly tells her child what must be done. Donna's message implicitly teaches her child that certain behavior is wrong when authorities say it is wrong and are present to detect and punish bad behavior. Susan's message implicitly teaches her child that certain behavior is wrong because of how it affects others, so we need to be sensitive to the effects of our behavior on others. Whose child is least likely to engage in "name calling" when parents (or other adults) are *not* present to keep the peace? And, in the long term, whose child is most likely to develop an internalized moral code for social relations with others?

In the context of providing comfort to those experiencing emotional upset, highly person-centered messages acknowledge, elaborate, and legitimize the feelings of distressed others and encourage them to express and explore their feelings. Look back at the comforting effort by Michael at the beginning of this chapter. He acknowledges his friend's feelings and legitimizes them by stating that they are understandable. Michael lets his friend know that it is OK to be upset in this situation; he further invites his friend to talk about his upset feelings when he is ready to do so. In contrast, less person-centered comforting messages challenge the legitimacy of the distressed other's feelings and perspective (at least implicitly), often telling the other how he or she *should* feel about or act in the troubling situation. Look back at the comforting effort by Mary at the beginning of this chapter. Mary is sympathetic, but her message largely tells her friend how she should feel and act in this situation. Further, whether she intends it or not, Mary is implicitly critical of her friend's feelings (and her taste in boyfriends), telling her that she didn't lose much in losing Ben. However true that may be, it is not a particularly relevant or helpful observation in this immediate situation.

These are some of the many ways in which person-centeredness is exhibited in the messages people produce. However, it is important to realize that highly person-centered

messages are not necessarily "nicer" or always more prosocial; for example, some highly person-centered messages are designed to be particularly effective at hurting or embarrassing others (see Adams, 2001). Overall, highly person-centered messages are comparatively sophisticated forms of behavior in that they respond to a relatively large number of features in the communicative situation (e.g., the goals of the audience as well as the goals of the speaker), more subtle features of the situation (e.g., "face" concerns such as maintaining personal autonomy and the regard of others), and more fundamental features of the situation (e.g., the other's perceptions and feelings about a situation rather than "objective" aspects of the situation).

Beyond being comparatively sophisticated forms of conduct, there are several reasons for regarding person-centered messages as more *skillful* forms of communicative behavior. First, the use of person-centered message forms increases steadily with age over the course of childhood and adolescence (e.g., Burleson, 1982; Delia, Kline, & Burleson, 1979). This suggests that person-centered messages are more developed, mature forms of behavior. Second, people who have a lot of experience at pursuing a particular communication goal (e.g., comforting upset others) are more likely to use highly person-centered messages whereas those with less experience are more likely to use messages exhibiting a low level of person-centeredness (MacGeorge, Clark, & Gillihan, 2002). Third, people are more likely to use highly person-centered messages when they are strongly motivated to achieve their communicative goals (Samter & Burleson, 1984). This suggests that many people intuitively sense that person-centered message forms are comparatively effective at attaining desired communicative outcomes. Fourth, and perhaps most important, quite a bit of research indicates that highly person-centered messages are, in fact, more effective than less person-centered messages with respect to several different outcomes. Studies indicate that highly person-centered messages are more likely to attain desired goals than less person-centered messages in contexts such as comforting (e.g., Jones & Guerrero, 2001), persuading (e.g., B. J. O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1989), and disciplining or regulating (e.g., Adams & Shepherd, 1996). Moreover, the use of person-centered messages has been found associated with such long-term outcomes as personal acceptance (e.g., Burleson, Delia, & Applegate, 1992) and professional success (e.g., Sypher & Zorn, 1986). For all these reasons, it makes good sense to view highly person-centered messages as more advanced, sophisticated, and skillful forms of behavior.[3]

Factors Influencing the Production of Person-Centered Messages

What enables people to produce highly person-centered messages? You probably won't be surprised to learn that one of the most important factors contributing to the use of highly

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[3]It is important to keep in mind that most of the communicative situations we routinely encounter do not call for highly person-centered messages. Rather, person-centered messages are most appropriate and effective in comparatively challenging communicative situations, such as comforting a distraught friend, persuading a romantic partner who has his or her own agenda and ideas, or reprimanding an employee who also happens to be a friend. Even in these challenging circumstances, a highly person-centered message may not always be the most effective way of handling the situation. For example, a teenager seeking his or her mother's permission to host an overnight party may know that all he or she needs to do is make a simple request such as, "Hey mom, can I have a few of the girls over for a sleepover this weekend?" Such simple requests can be quite effective under the right circumstances; as one teen explained: "This is my last year at home; I'll be leaving for college in the fall. So, right now, I'm getting pretty much whatever I want from my parents, as long as it isn't too outrageous. It's cool, all I have to do is ask." Although the message strategy used by this teen was quite simple, note that the reasoning leading to the use of the simple message form was quite sophisticated, and reflected a good understanding of the psychological state of the audience.

person-centered messages is social perception skill. Scores of studies have found that people with advanced social perception skills, and the complex systems of interpersonal constructs that underlie these skills, are considerably more likely than those with less advanced social perception skills (and less complex systems of interpersonal constructs) to use highly person-centered messages in a variety of settings (for review, see Burleson & Caplan, 1998).

Complex interpersonal constructs contribute to the production of highly person-centered messages in several ways. First, and probably most important, people with high levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity are more sensitive to varied aspects of communicative situations than are people with less advanced social perception skills. In particular, people with complex systems of interpersonal constructs are more likely to recognize and appreciate what others are thinking and feeling, what their goals are, how they see themselves in relation to others in the situation, and how they want to be viewed and treated by others in the situation. In a very real sense, people with high levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity form more detailed, complex views of social situations than do those with less advanced construct systems.

Cognitively complex people also frequently have deeper insights into the dynamics of human thought, feeling, and behavior. For example, complex perceivers appear to understand intuitively that they cannot help emotionally distressed people feel better about a significant loss just by telling them that they should feel better or distracting them from the loss. Rather, complex perceivers appear to know that people will generally feel better about a loss only after they have had the chance to work through their feelings about that loss, often talking about the loss and their feelings at length. Complex perceivers also better understand how to hurt and embarrass others; for example, studies have found that cognitively complex communicators are more skilled at inducing guilt in others (Bacue & Samter, 2001) and making them unhappy (Burleson & Denton, 1997).

Because people with high levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity see more features of social situations as potentially relevant to their communicative efforts, and further have deeper and richer understandings about human nature and behavior, they tend to develop more complex and sophisticated goals for many social situations, especially those that appear challenging or demanding. Thus, having a comparatively complex system of interpersonal constructs helps people to perceive social situations more acutely, which, in turn, leads them to formulate more complex and sophisticated goals for these situations. But how does having such goals for social situations contribute to the production and use of highly person-centered messages? One must have some way of putting advanced goals and knowledge into words. How does this happen?

Scholars of the message production process assume that all people have a *procedural memory system* (e.g., see chap. 9, this volume). Procedural memories are recollections about how to do something; they are the building blocks of complex actions, like messages. Each procedural memory connects recollections about an action, outcomes of that action, and situations in which that action has been used in the past. Procedural memories are "activated" (retrieved from long-term memory) when a person's current goals and features of the current situation match those stored in the memory. These activated memories are then sorted, selected, and assembled to generate an "output representation," which you can think of as a message plan or behavioral program.

Some people have larger, better organized sets of procedural memories pertinent to certain communicative goals than do others. For example, people who get lots of practice with a particular communicative goal (e.g., a teacher informing, a salesman persuading, a counselor comforting) are likely to develop more numerous and richer sets of procedural memories relevant to the goal than people who rarely engage in these activities.

Having a large set of procedural memories relevant to a particular communicative goal facilitates the production of highly person-centered messages. People who can generate a lot of different ideas about how to achieve a communicative goal (i.e., display a large procedural memory) are more likely to use highly person-centered messages when pursuing that goal (e.g., Delia et al., 1979; Kline, 1991). This finding makes sense: Highly person-centered messages are complicated forms of behavior that do a lot of work; they reflect the integration of many distinguishable goals. Typically, highly person-centered messages pursue a primary goal (such as informing, persuading, or comforting a target) while also addressing many secondary goals (e.g., letting the target know that he or she is liked, that he or she is respected, that the speaker sees the target as an equal, that the speaker would like to deepen his or her relationship with the target). In contrast, a message low in person-centeredness may pursue only a primary goal. Accomplishing the larger set of goals associated with highly person-centered messages is assisted by having a larger and more interconnected system of relevant procedural memories.

As we have seen, however, if our procedural memories are to contribute to the messages we produce, those memories must be activated or recalled from long-term storage. This is where a person's perceptions and goals come into play. Goals and perceptions of relevant situation features activate procedural memories, so the more goals generated and features noticed in a given episode, the greater the number of procedural memories that are likely to be activated. And the larger the number of relevant procedural memories that are activated, the more likely it is that the speaker will generate and use highly person-centered messages (see Kline, 1991; Waldron & Applegate, 1994; Wilson).

Summary

Message production is the process of generating verbal and nonverbal behaviors designed to obtain a desired response from those to whom they are directed. Many of our everyday communicative efforts don't require much skill; they are routine and comparatively simple. However, some of our efforts require messages that show awareness of, and accommodation to, the particular psychological characteristics of our specific target audience. In such instances, highly person-centered messages have been found particularly effective.

Figure 6.1 summarizes the linkages that lead to the production of person-centered messages. Complex construct systems facilitate skilled social perception processes which generate rich, detailed representations of social situations. These more comprehensive, multifaceted views of social situations lead to the development of more complex communicative intentions and goals. Goals activate procedural memories. If a sufficient number and the right type of procedural memories are activated, they will be assembled into a representation or plan for a highly person-centered message strategy, and when that plan is executed, we see a highly person-centered message.

MESSAGE RECEPTION SKILL

As you have seen, constructivism has quite detailed theories of social perception and message production. Another core communication process, message reception, has thus far been given less theoretical and research attention by constructivist scholars. Thus, this section of the chapter contains more speculation, and less hard evidence, than the two preceding sections. If the ideas presented here interest you, perhaps you will help conduct some of the research needed to improve our understanding of the process of message reception.
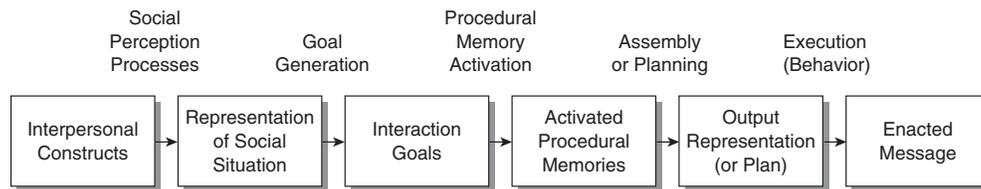
Social Perception Processes	Goal Generation	Procedural Memory Activation	Assembly or Planning	Execution (Behavior)

| Interpersonal Constructs | → | Representation of Social Situation | → | Interaction Goals | → | Activated Procedural Memories | → | Output Representation (or Plan) | → | Enacted Message |

Fig. 6.1.   A model of the goal formation and message production process.

Note: Rectangles represent structures; arrows represent processes.

The Nature of Message Reception

Message reception (what some call "decoding") is the process of interpreting the communicative behavior of others in the effort to understand the meaning and implications of that behavior.[4] Message reception is a special kind of social perception process that focuses on comprehending and contextualizing what we take to be the intentional communicative expressions of others. Skill in message reception is evidenced by grasping the meaning of another's messages and, when appropriate, going beyond these messages to understand more fully the other's intentions and motivations.

Like message production, message reception is a complex process that is made up of several distinguishable components (for reviews, see Wyer & Adaval, 2003). Typically, when people receive and interpret a message from another, they seek to understand the *meaning* of the other's words (what the other said), the *intention* associated with those words (what the other was trying to do in saying what he or she did), and the *motive* underlying the other's intention (why the other was trying to accomplish what he or she was trying to do). For example, suppose your roommate asks you, "Hey, do you want to walk to the library with me tonight?" You understand the words here; you know what a library is and the particular library to which your roommate is referring; you know what it is to walk to some place; you know that "tonight" refers to a time later in this day, probably after sunset; and you know that your roommate is asking you a question about your interest in accompanying him or her to the library. You also understand your roommate's intention; by speaking these words, your roommate is, in effect, inviting you to accompany him or her to the library. And you probably have an adequate understanding of the motives underlying your roommate's invitation; for example, you know that your roommate enjoys your company or enjoys engaging in light exercise (such as walking) with you, and that's why he or she invited you to join him or her for a walk.

Usually, our interpretations of the other's meanings, intentions, and motives are accomplished very quickly and automatically with little conscious awareness on our part. It feels like we almost immediately grasp what the other is saying, doing, and wanting. Most of the time, this is all the understanding we need; if we understand this much, we will be able to communicate smoothly with others and engage in cooperative actions with them.

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[4]The analysis of message reception developed in this section has not been presented previously. As will become apparent, my analyses of message reception and message processing owe much to several sources, including Habermas's (1998) explication of the conditions underlying the possibility of communicative action and discourse, Hewes's (1995) discussion of the processing of "problematic messages," and dual process theories of responses to persuasive messages (see Chaiken & Trope, 1999).

What I have described to this point might be characterized as *standard, surface-level processing* of messages. In such processing, the receiver assumes that the source's messages can be accepted at "face value" and that an adequate understanding of these messages (and the source) does not require searching for deeper, underlying meanings. More specifically, when engaged in standard, surface-level message processing, the receiver takes for granted that the source (a) is engaged in straightforward, honest communication; (b) wants his meanings, intentions, and motives to be transparent to the recipient; and (c) will readily provide any clarifications or explications needed to ensure such transparency. When such assumptions can be made—and they routinely *are* made in the vast majority of the cases in which we receive messages—then message reception is not a particularly challenging task. Surface-level processing of messages proceeds automatically and makes comparatively small demands on our cognitive system. Almost everyone possesses a reasonable level of skill when it comes to standard, surface-level processing of messages.

Of course, we do not always immediately and fully understand the other's meanings, intentions, or motives. On occasion, we do not understand what the other has said; we either do not hear or do not comprehend a particular word, phrase, or statement. This kind of problem is usually easy to fix; we can ask the other to repeat the message or clarify it.

However, the "rough and ready" understanding of the other's words generated by standard surface-level processing may not always be adequate for the purpose at hand. Sometimes, we may feel a need to have a very thorough understanding of the other's statements, including all the nuances and fine shades of meaning. Then, there are those occasions when we have a perfectly adequate understanding of what the other has said, but do not understand what the other is trying to do in saying certain things to us (the other's intentions) or why the other is seeking to realize these intentions (the other's motives). Something about the message, the source, or the situation is peculiar, special, or just doesn't "feel right" to us. For example, some aspect of the message content may strike us as untrue or may contradict what we already believe. Or perhaps the situation and what gets said in it is of great consequence to us (e.g., we are negotiating a deal for an expensive new car or trying to resolve a serious conflict with our long-term romantic partner).

On these special occasions, we may engage in *depth processing* of the messages we receive. Depth processing involves a motivated, systematic, and mindful scrutiny of the message, the source of the message, or the communicative situation, the aim of which is answering some concern. The specific concerns directing this systematic, mindful scrutiny will vary with the occasion. For instance, if the recipient senses that the message reflects source bias or contains questionable (i.e., false) information, the depth processing may be directed at "unbiasing" the message (i.e., adjusting the content of the message to correct for the suspected bias or untruth). This unbiasing process involves generating one or more alternative interpretations of the message, each of which adjusts the message for the perceived bias or deception; the alternative interpretations are then assessed and a candidate alternative is selected (for a detailed description of this unbiasing process, see Hewes, 1995). When bias or deception is suspected, depth processing may also aim at developing explanations about why the source appears to be biased or acting deceptively in this situation. The recipient may seek to infer the motives of the source, an understanding of which may provide guidance about how to view the source and his or her messages in the current situation, as well as other situations (past, present, and future). Thus, depth processing may generate one or more hypotheses about the "real" intentions and motivations of the source (for details, see McCornack, 1992).

There are occasions when, although we do not suspect the message source of bias or deception, the intentions or motivations of the source will not be clear to us: We may understand

what has been said to us but be uncertain about how we should take the message (the source's intention) or the character of source's underlying motivations. For example, consider the following conversation between two acquaintances:

Ashley: Hi Laura! It's been a while since I've seen you. What's new?
Laura: Hi Ashley. Yes, it has been a while. Well, the big news is that Mark T. and I started dating a couple of weeks ago. Everything is going great so far.
Ashley: Oh yeah, I know Mark. He really likes women.

Just how should Laura take Ashley's statement that Mark "really likes women?" Is this statement intended as an encouragement or a warning? In either case, is Ashley's statement motivated by concern for Laura's welfare or does it reflect some other motive? In cases such as these, depth processing aims at resolving the intentional or motivational ambiguity associated with a source's message. In the effort to resolve such ambiguity, the recipient typically generates and then assesses several alternative interpretations of the source's intentions or motivations. In this process, the recipient will likely give scrutiny not only to the source's message and conduct in the current context but also to recalled interactions with the source.

On still other occasions, depth processing may be triggered by the recipient's concern with the content or topic of the message (rather than by some ambiguity or cue emitted by the source). In such cases, processing focuses on the significance or implications of what has been said. For example, when thoughtfully processing persuasive messages about a matter of personal import, we typically carefully scrutinize the merits of the arguments in the message and generate many distinct thoughts about that message (see Petty & Wegener, 1999). If processing regulative messages disciplining us or correcting some action of ours, we may scrutinize the message for the fairness of the invoked regulation and the degree of respect we are shown by the regulator. If processing comforting messages intended to console us about an emotionally upsetting situation, we may scrutinize them for the extent to which they help us more fully understand or make sense of the hurtful situation (see Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). In each case, depth processing is indicated by the extensiveness and detail of the thoughts generated by the message.

Depth processing is a cognitively demanding activity, so we do not always expend the effort needed to deeply process another's message, even when that might be appropriate. Sometimes we ignore cues inviting depth processing, assuming that the "problem" we have sensed is not very significant or will be resolved in the course of further routine communication. Sometimes our ability to engage in depth processing is limited by other demands on our attention and information processing capacity. And sometimes we act directly to resolve the matter concerning us, perhaps asking the source to clarify his or her intentions and motivations.

We are most likely to engage in depth processing of a message when (a) multiple cues in the message, the source's conduct, or other aspects of the situation suggest that the message should not be taken at face value, (b) the matter addressed in the message has great personal relevance, or (c) we strongly desire accurate information about or a full understanding of the matter at hand (Hewes, 1995; Petty & Wegener, 1999).[5] Although depth processing is a

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[5]An addition to increasing the likelihood of engaging in depth processing, personal relevance of the topic and the desire for accurate information may also increase the message recipient's sensitivity to cues that the message should not be accepted at face value (see Hewes, 1995).

cognitively "expensive" activity, it has some real payoffs. Research indicates that depth processing is often quite effective at correcting for source bias and deception, can resolve puzzling ambiguities, assists with determining the strength of arguments, and results in more informed, optimized decisions (see Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Hewes, 1995).

Factors Influencing the Ability to Deeply Process Messages

As you might guess, depth processing of messages is a mentally demanding activity that places a significant load on a person's attention, memory, and other cognitive resources. Although everyone can engage in depth processing to an extent, some people can do so better (more easily, elaborately, and thoroughly) than others. What factors contribute to differences in the ability to engage in depth processing?

Both situational and personal factors influence the ability to engage in depth processing. Distraction and other forms of interference in the communication situation have been shown to undermine the ability to process messages deeply; if one's attention is being distracted by noise, flashing lights, or another task, the ability to process a message deeply will suffer (see D. J. O'Keefe, 2002, p. 144). Another factor influencing the ability to process a message deeply is preexisting knowledge about the message topic or source. Put simply, the more you already know about the topic or source of a message, the easier it is to deeply process new information about that topic or source made available in the current message or communicative situation (Hewes, 1995; D. J. O'Keefe, 2002, pp. 144–145).

Research showing that preexisting knowledge influences the ability to engage in depth processing suggests that individual differences in the ability to *acquire* knowledge about the message topic or source from the ongoing communicative situation might contribute to skillful depth processing. We are already familiar with one factor that influences the individual's ability to acquire information about other people and social situations: *interpersonal cognitive complexity*. The advanced social perception skills enabled by a complex system of interpersonal constructs provide the individual with a basis for extracting comparatively large amounts of information from messages, the conduct of the source, and other features of the communicative situation. The information so acquired should facilitate the depth processing of messages.

So far, no studies have directly examined whether interpersonal cognitive complexity underlies the ability to deeply process messages. However, several lines of research indirectly suggest a connection between cognitive complexity and skillful depth processing. First, some studies have found a statistical association between measures of cognitive complexity and listening comprehension. In one such study, Beverly Sypher and her colleagues (Sypher, Bostrom, & Seibert, 1989) had employees from various ranks in a business organization complete a measure of interpersonal cognitive complexity (the RCQ) and the Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Test, an instrument assessing five aspects of listening. Cognitive complexity was associated with better performance on three of the five listening measures.

Second, deeply processed messages are more likely to be remembered than messages that receive only surface-level processing. Consistent with the idea that cognitive complexity facilitates depth processing, Stacks and Murphy (1993) found that people with high levels of cognitive complexity reported that they had better memories for conversations than did people with low levels of complexity. More directly, Neuliep and Hazelton (1986) found that people with high levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity were better able than those with low complexity levels to recall details of a conversational interaction they had recently witnessed.

Third, sophisticated, complex messages (like highly person-centered messages) that pursue multiple goals may be most effective at attaining their various aims when they are deeply

processed by recipients. Depth processing of these message forms may be needed to maximally extract their multiple meanings and nuances. Several studies have found that although highly person-centered messages tend to be more effective than low-person-centered messages with all recipients, cognitively complex recipients get more information from and respond more favorably to highly person-centered messages than do less complex recipients (see reviews by Burleson & Caplan, 1998). These findings suggest that cognitively complex recipients are processing highly person-centered messages more deeply than are less complex recipients.

Summary

Message reception is the process of interpreting the communicative behavior of others in the effort to understand the meaning and implications of that behavior. Most of the messages we receive in everyday life can be taken at face value, and thus are adequately understood when subjected to standard, surface-level processing. However, some of the messages we receive demand deeper processing, either because of our personal concerns or because we detect cues that suggest the source is biased or acting deceptively. Depth processing involves (a) subjecting the message and other elements of the communicative situation (such as the conduct of the source) to intense scrutiny, (b) generating multiple thoughts about or interpretations of the message, and (c) reaching some decision about the truth, significance, or implications of the message.

Several motivational factors affect the likelihood of engaging in depth processing; several ability factors influence the skillfulness of depth processing. In particular, some research suggests that having a high level of interpersonal cognitive complexity contributes to skill in the depth processing of messages. However, more research is needed that directly examines the connection between cognitive complexity and depth processing.

BECOMING A SKILLED COMMUNICATOR: ANTECEDENTS AND TRAINING

By now, you may be convinced that having a high level of interpersonal cognitive complexity is a pretty good thing, especially if communicating effectively is important to you. People with comparatively high levels of cognitive complexity have more acute social perception skills, can produce more effective messages in challenging circumstances, and appear to process others' messages more deeply when needed, getting more out of these messages.

Two questions have probably occurred to you as you have read this chapter: (a) How do people get to be more or less cognitively complex to begin with? That is, what are the *antecedents* of interpersonal cognitive complexity and the skills associated with it? (b) What can you do to improve your own level of cognitive complexity? What kind of *training* facilitates the growth of interpersonal cognitive complexity and the skills associated with it? Our current knowledge permits a more complete answer to the first question than the second, so I initially discuss antecedents of cognitive complexity and functional communication skills.

Antecedents of Social-Cognitive and Communicative Development in Childhood

Cognitive complexity and communication skills increase naturally over the course of childhood and adolescence (just as body size and intellectual skills do). Thus, young adults typically have much higher levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity and communication skills

than do children. However, at every stage of the life cycle, some people possess higher levels of cognitive complexity and communication skills than do others (just as some people are physically stronger than others at every stage of the life cycle). Thus, there are both developmental and individual differences in cognitive complexity and associated communication skills. Why do these differences exist?

Growing evidence indicates that the social environment in which a youngster is raised has an important influence on the development of social skills across childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. Two caregiver practices appear particularly important: (a) the use of language that explicitly mentions intentions, feelings, and other internal states and (b) the use of person-centered messages when disciplining and nurturing the child.

Explicit talk with young children about feelings, intentions, and related internal states appears to contribute substantially to the development of complex interpersonal constructs and sophisticated social perception skills (Dunn, 1998). Such talk helps make the child aware of the nature and range of internal states, leads to an appreciation of the circumstances that motivate various states, and implicitly teaches the child that internal states are significant and need to be taken into account. This is important because young children spontaneously think about others in concrete, physical, and behavioral terms. Explicit talk about internal states thus draws the child's attention to "invisible" features of others, makes them a more prominent part of the child's world, and thereby helps create the interpersonal constructs that children come to use in interpreting and acting upon their world. Caregivers may talk to children about the internal states of others in a wide variety of contexts, including while playing, observing others, reading stories, regulating behavior, and watching television.

Caregiver use of highly person-centered message forms when disciplining (regulating) and nurturing (comforting) also has been shown to contribute to the development of complex interpersonal constructs and advanced social perception skills (for review, see Burleson & Kunkel, 1996). Highly person-centered disciplinary and comforting efforts typically involve a good deal of emotion talk which, as just discussed, can foster the development of interpersonal constructs. These message forms also model the use of social perception skills such as perspective taking (e.g., "What do you think Billy felt when you took his toy?") and situation-based causal attributions (e.g., "Did something happen before that to make Jill mad?"). Additionally, caregiver use of highly person-centered messages appears to foster the child's own communication skill development, especially the use of comparatively person-centered messages (Applegate, Burleson, & Delia, 1992). Children regularly exposed to person-centered messages may learn how to use them by observing and imitating their caregiver models.

In addition to these caregiver practices, frequent social interaction with peers appears to facilitate the child's development of complex construct systems, social perception skills, and sophisticated communication skills (e.g., Strayer & Mashal, 1983). Peer interactions create opportunities for children to exercise their social perception and communication skills; these peer interactions also provide feedback to children about the effectiveness of their skills (Buhrmester, 1996). In addition, some research (e.g., Burleson & Kunkel, 2002) indicates that children may use peers as models for the messages they produce. This suggests that children who interact with highly skilled peers are more likely to develop a high level of communication skills themselves; of course, this also implies that regular interaction with low-skilled peers may suppress the child's skill development. There is a tendency for children (as well as adults) to befriend peers who have skill levels similar to their own (Burleson, 1998); this tendency may further foster skill development by relatively advanced children and slow skill development by less advanced children. Thus, teachers and other caregivers may find it

desirable to create contexts where highly skilled children regularly interact with their less skilled peers.

Many other factors probably influence the development of construct systems and communication skills over the course of childhood and adolescence. Much more research is needed to better understand the antecedents of interpersonal cognitive complexity and associated social perception, message production, and message reception skills.

Training Programs Designed to Enhance Cognitive Complexity, Social Perception, and Communication Skills

Studying the antecedents of cognitive complexity and related abilities helps us understand why some people "naturally" emerge as more (or less) skilled communicators. But past childhood, what can people do to improve their communication skills? What can YOU do to become a more skilled communicator? Unfortunately, only a little research has directly addressed these questions.

Professional counselors, therapists, and other clinicians who work with people that have problems should benefit from having their levels of cognitive complexity enhanced. Two recent studies (Brendel, Kolbert, & Foster, 2002; Duys & Hedstrom, 2000) found that students enrolled in basic counseling skills-training courses developed significantly higher levels of cognitive complexity than did similar students in a control condition. Thus, certain counseling education programs appear to be somewhat successful at increasing the cognitive complexity levels of counselor trainees. Of course, counselor trainees represent a rather specialized group and we don't yet know whether the training programs effective with them also help increase cognitive complexity in other, more diverse populations.

Several training programs have been developed to enhance the social perspective-taking skills of children (e.g., Marsh, Serafica, & Barenboim, 1980), but most of these programs have met with only mixed success. Few programs aimed at enhancing the social perspective-taking skills of adults have been developed (for one example, see Pelias, 1984), and little is known about whether these programs achieve any lasting improvements in skill levels. Similarly, only a few studies have evaluated specific programs for teaching message production skills to children (Clark, Willihnganz, & O'Dell, 1985) or adults (Rowna, 1984), and the results of these studies are far from conclusive. On the whole, then, we know little about the best ways to systematically enhance social perception, message production, and reception skills through training programs and educational interventions.

As a communication researcher and educator, I find this situation embarrassing and unacceptable. We researchers now know a lot about cognitive complexity and advanced social perception and communication skills, but thus far there have been few efforts to translate what we know into *proven* programs that effectively enhance these skills. Clearly, *much* more research is needed in this area.

Until the necessary research is completed, we must make do with some educated guesses about how best to improve your functional communication skills. The research on childhood antecedents of social skills suggests several ways that adults may be able to improve their skills:

1. Expose yourself to as many different types of people and social experiences as you can. Embrace diversity. Travel broadly if you can, and mix as much as possible with others, especially those different from you. View unexpected events as opportunities to learn something new about yourself and others.

2. Focus on the internal states of others (their thoughts, feelings, motives, etc.). Try to figure people out—what they want, why they want the things they do, and what will happen if they get the things they want. Share your ideas with others and talk often about people and their motivations.

3. Try to understand others' moods and feelings. Pay attention to the circumstances associated with certain emotional reactions and the thought patterns about these circumstances that result in specific emotional reactions. Try to understand why different people may have very different emotional reactions to similar events.

4. Spend as much time as you can with people you think are really effective communicators. Pay attention to what they say and do. If you can, talk with them about how they handle various social situations and problems. Ask their advice about how you might handle challenging communication problems.

5. Think before you talk, especially in important or "high stakes" situations. Focus not only on what you feel and want, but also on what others are likely to be feeling and wanting. Try to imagine how others will respond if you say certain things. Imagine how their responses would change if you said something different.

6. Try to process messages you receive from the viewpoint of the source, especially when those messages are problematic in some way. Generate alternative interpretations about what the source might mean and think carefully about the criteria you should use to select among the alternative interpretations.

7. Cultivate complexity in your thinking about people, social situations, and messages. Internalize the idea that in many important situations, messages are (or should be) constructed in the effort to achieve multiple goals. Try to identify the various goals that people should pursue in challenging communication situations and think about alternative ways in which these goals can be achieved efficiently and effectively.

Although none of these self-improvement methods has yet been shown by research to be effective at enhancing skills, each is consistent with what is known about the nature and acquisition of communication skills, so each holds at least some promise of helping you develop your skills.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overview of one theory of communication skill, constructivism. Constructivism is largely focused on functional communication skills, which concern producing messages and interpreting the messages of others in ways that facilitate goal achievement. Functional communication skills are very important in everyday life, and mastery of these skills leads to several forms of personal and professional success.

Constructivism maintains that people actively interpret their experiences, and these interpretations are the major influence on their behavior. People differ in the complexity of their interpretive schemes (or constructs), and these differences in cognitive complexity have important implications for social perception skills, message production skills, and message reception skills. In general, people with higher levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity possess more advanced social perception and communication skills, but the connections between cognitive complexity and various skills can be quite complicated (review Figure 6.1). Researchers have learned quite a bit about childhood socialization factors that influence the development of cognitive complexity and associated communication skills. Unfortunately,

much less is known about how adults can reliably improve their levels of cognitive complexity and communication skills. Much more research is needed on communication skill training; perhaps some of you will make contributions in this area some day.

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QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. What is cognitive complexity? What is the connection between cognitive complexity and various social perception skills? Why should theories of communication skill be concerned with social perception processes?

2. What is person-centeredness and how is person-centeredness manifested in different types of messages? Why are highly person-centered messages viewed as more skilled forms of behavior? What factors influence the ability to produce highly person-centered messages?

3. What is involved in the depth processing of messages? What costs and benefits are associated with depth processing? When and why are people likely to engage in depth processing? What factors contribute to skill at depth processing?

4. Why are some people more cognitively complex and socially skilled than others? If you want to raise children who are cognitively complex and have good functional communication skills, what should you do?

5. Suppose you get a job in the human resources division of a large corporation. Management wants you to develop a training program designed to enhance the social perception and communication skills of employees. What exercises would you include in your program?

Person-centered messages can have a huge impact on someone, depending on how cognitively complex the deliverer is. I have a practical relationship example to help to make sense of constructivism. Let's say two people, Mike and Eric, are best friends.

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