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# 1

## USING MESSAGING AND CHANNELS

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- 1.1 Explain the process of messaging and its associated elements.
- 1.2 Compare the different models of communication.
- 1.3 Describe the variety of communication contexts.
- 1.4 Discuss how competent messaging creates and contextualizes community.

*Ivy and Shanice have been friends since elementary school, bonding on the first day when they both refused to play tag with the class because the boys were being too aggressive. After having been close through high school and being roommates during their years at the local community college, Ivy and Shanice both attended rival universities about an hour's drive from one another, seeing each other frequently and going to social events at each other's school. Things changed a little when they each started dating people more seriously because Shanice and her boyfriend Trey really liked staying out late, while Ivy and her girlfriend Sarah were definitely morning people as they trained for their first half-marathon together. Despite the significant differences in their schedules, Ivy and Shanice were great at keeping in touch, using texting and social media to keep each other caught up—and regularly getting together each Saturday with their respective partners to have a late brunch. Even though one couple was just waking up while the other couple was halfway through their day, the time spent together not only maintained their closeness with one another but also allowed their partners to feel like they were part of the friendship as well. Although Ivy and Shanice had changed greatly since those early years, they worked hard to make sure the relationship was just as much a priority to them as it had been almost twenty years before. Even though Ivy and Shanice had parted ways physically, their friendship stayed solid because of their intentional use of messaging to maintain connection. As their lives changed and their worlds diverged, the ability to share important information about themselves with one another gave them the opportunity to remain close friends. Even the additions of new social scenes and significant romantic relationships were unable to stop them from using verbal and nonverbal communication to maintain their ties with one another, and—despite the distance—forming successful new friendships with each other's partners and friends.*

## INTRODUCING COMMUNICATION AND MESSAGING

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- 1.1 Explain the process of messaging and its associated elements.

How does messaging function? Consider the variety of people you have encountered over the course of the week. From the late-night conversation you had with a roommate to the speeding car you shook your fist at on the freeway, every interaction involves a process of communication between one or more people. At its root, society not only depends on the messaging that happens between humans but also actually *exists because* of the communication process that allows social interaction to occur. Without social interaction, relationships don't develop, or—for that matter—start in the first place. Ultimately, the process of communication is the most fundamental building block of society. Many scholars debate whether humans would even *be human* if we had

not developed the ability to send and receive messages. If communication is so important, we must begin our exploration with a clear understanding of its essential nature. The process of **communication** can be described as the transmission of messages that convey information or create understanding, admittedly to varying degrees of success.<sup>1</sup> Not all communication processes result in a message being successfully transmitted to another person, as you may have personally experienced when you tried to send a sarcastic text message to a friend who accidentally interpreted it literally. For example, while making a stir fry Cyrus tried to describe a fish sauce for his partner to pick up at the grocery store on the way home. Not knowing the brand name but remembering the drawing of brightly colored jumping fish that were illustrated on the item's label, Cyrus hoped that he would end up with the perfect finishing ingredient for the evening's dinner. Instead, he ended up with a can of salmon-flavored cat food. Similar to Cyrus's experience, sometimes a person's best attempts at understanding a message are unsuccessful despite attention and effort.



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### Content versus Relationship Levels of Communication

When sending messages to a friend, co-worker, family member, or really *any* interaction partner, a communicator not only conveys information but also helps to define the nature of the relationship between the interactants.<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, the way you might try to get someone to do you the favor of driving you to the airport to catch an early morning flight. On the one hand, you want to express that you need a ride to the airport and that you want that person to be the one to take you to the airport. That represents the **content level** of communication, the basic information that you want to convey to another person. At the same time, the way you convey that information can reveal your attitude toward that person and your beliefs about your association with them, information known as the **relationship level** of communication. The question “Would you do me a huge favor and take me to the airport at 5:00 a.m. next Monday?” feels quite different than the command “Hey, man, I’m gonna need you to drive me to the airport next Monday. Pick me up no later than 5:00 a.m.” In the first request, it’s clear the speaker is aware of the imposition caused by asking for such a huge favor and is working to positively manage the relationship with their interaction partner. In the command the speaker conveys they perceived themselves in a position of power over the speaker, or at least that they have the sort of relationship where issuing such commands is unlikely to cause lasting problems between the two. Some scholars have focused on the difference between the *content level* and *relationship level* of communication as a situation where a speaker is navigating the **report** and the **command** aspects of communication. They argue that all messages contain basic information that a sender wants to report, but at the same time they also convey an overt or implied command about how both parties are meant to view and treat one another.<sup>3</sup> It’s interesting to consider how much information is conveyed about how speakers see themselves and how they see their audience or interaction partners, and it can often cause people to rethink how they might relate to the speaker in the future. In an example of that happening, initially Imani enjoyed collaborating with a colleague on an upcoming client presentation, excited that she had been assigned to work with Rodney and his team on a very prestigious advertising campaign for the regional government. With a huge production budget across multiple platforms, Imani thought she had finally made progress in a male-dominated industry. When the client meeting came around, one of the account holders



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asked if they could have something to drink. Rodney mentioned that they'd be happy to accommodate, and then turned to Imani and told her to run downstairs and grab them all some macchiatos from the lobby coffee bar. At first, she was a bit taken aback by this, but she chalked it up to her being the lowest-ranking member of the team. However, on returning to the meeting with a tray full of drinks, Imani was shocked when Rodney told her to "run back downstairs and grab some snacks or something as well, because this meeting is going to take a while." Although Rodney was not her supervisor, he was certainly treating her like an assistant—definite reflection of his attitude toward their interpersonal and collegial dynamics.

### Key Elements of the Communication Process

To understand how people communicate with one another, it's helpful to know the components of the communication process and how they relate to the interactions we have with friends, family members, romantic partners, co-workers, service providers at shops and restaurants, and all other members of the public that we might interact with or send messages to. Perhaps the most obvious elements of the communication process are the people involved. Let's start with the person who communicates something to others and the very nature of that communication itself.

#### Sender

Every instance of communication involves a **sender**, or the originator or creator of the idea or content being sent to another person.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, one can be a sender of a message without intending to do so.<sup>5</sup> For example, when Kaitlyn yawned widely during a staff meeting at a local nonprofit organization's internship program, her supervisor was irritated, assuming that Kaitlyn was trying to get people to move things along because the meeting was getting boring. In fact, Kaitlyn was simply exhausted from being up all night because her neighbors had been playing their music too loud. The ways an individual might communicate often rely on the sender's ability to successfully engage in **encoding** a message, the process where we assign meaning to something based on our thoughts. For example, when you have an uncomfortable conversation with

someone during a particularly difficult breakup, you are spending time encoding your thoughts and feelings into the words that might help your (former) partner understand your meaning and intent.

#### Message

The content of the communication process—that is, the intentional or unintentional verbal or nonverbal information being transmitted from a particular person to one or more others<sup>6</sup>—is known as the **message**. The content of a message can be as specific as the numbers on a credit card to as abstract as an emotion, like anger. For example, when Simu had to pay to get his car released from the impound lot after being towed for street cleaning, his messaging



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toward the staff person not only conveyed the important information that he had just submitted an online payment but also let the tow lot’s staff know that he was very unhappy about his car being towed.

### Channel

Every message we send or receive can be conveyed in nearly infinite ways, each of which relies on our senses. Each way of *receiving* a message is known as a **channel**—whether it is a long-distance text or a face-to-face hug—and the use of channels to send messages depends on our ability to perceive sight, sound, touch, smell, or even taste. Even our technology has been adapted to include as many of the senses as possible. For example, one’s mobile device allows a communicator to view an emoji or gif via text, listen to a voicemail, talk during a phone call, enable a video chat function to see and listen, or even use tactile feedback on some mobile devices to send a message that the other person can feel using the sense of touch. If mobile devices can figure out taste and smell, then texting will be almost as multi-channeled as a face-to-face interaction.

Sending messages through face-to-face, in-person interactions affords a variety of possible channels to be opened up to communicators, where every movement we make has the potential to be understood by another person as a potential message. Scholars have even noted the role of the senses of smell in these situations, such as when an individual puts on perfume or cologne to make themselves more desirable to a potential partner. While one might wonder how much possibility there is for messaging in the choice of a personal scent, think about how long people agonize over selecting just the right a scent.<sup>7</sup> Consider, for example, Rashaad and Matías, who had been dating for about six months when Rashaad’s work as a consultant took him abroad for two months. Upon his return home, Rashaad ran over and gave Matías a huge bear hug, engulfing him completely while breathing in the warm, familiar vanilla smell of the scented candles they used in their shared apartment. In that moment, the comforting smell of their scented candles was just as affirming for their relationship as any words would have been.



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## INCLUDE OTHER PERSPECTIVES: CHANNEL SELECTION AND AUDIENCE ACCESS

*Embrace difference! Read the scenario below and think of how to apply it in your own life.*

*Bryce and Kilian spearheaded their fraternity’s philanthropic activities, serving as liaisons to the national organization’s efforts on access to housing. After a very successful fundraising*

campaign that included a silent auction and 5K fun run, Bryce and Kilian decided to brainstorm ways to implement the recruiting of local people who might benefit from the parent organization's efforts. Bryce focused on social media, intending to seek unhoused people who might self-nominate for the selection process. Kilian, on the other hand, went old-school; he focused on classic print advertising in the local paper and local magazines. Both perspectives proved fruitful, however, when it was pointed out that a portion of the target audience might not have consistent access to social media as a source of news and advertising. Bryce and Kilian appreciated the feedback, realizing that they made suggestions based upon their own privileged understanding of how the world worked.

Even though Bryce and Kilian's suggestions seemed useful in, they were each making assumptions about the access that their unhoused audience had to certain channels of communication. As middle-class students at a U.S. university, they had many opportunities and limitless accessibility to a wealth of channels and means of expression. Bryce quickly realized that the unhoused individuals that he wanted to reach may not have viable internet access, so his social media efforts would need to focus more on the people who worked with those unhoused folks. Kilian noted that although the events magazines were free, they were often only made available in the coffee shops and clubs that surrounded the more affluent areas surrounding the tourist district of their city. After much conversation and strategic planning, each of them realized it's sometimes hard to best reach the individuals they want to serve.

**include:** *It's not always easy to perceive the different characteristics and backgrounds that shape our communications. Indeed, our culture and our finances can often dictate the general availability of a variety of communication channels and technologies, features that may help or hinder one's ability to send and receive certain messages. What features of your life have influenced your ability to communicate? Who in your greater community might not have the same level of access or privilege to message others across a variety of channels? How do you imagine you might try to better engage members of your own community given these limitations of access?*

## Receiver

The audience of a message is known as the **receiver**, the person or persons who perceive a sent message and assign meaning to it through a process known as decoding. It is important to note that just because someone has received a message doesn't mean they understand it in the same way the sender intended it. There are many communication **disfluencies**, which are a variety of problems that might arise during sending and receiving that ultimately impact the shared

understanding between a sender and a receiver. For example, Ibrahim wanted to let his mother Ruth know he wasn't planning on coming home for the evening because he was spending the night gaming with friends at a shared house near the university. Ruth called out as he closed the door that she'd put some leftovers in the fridge for later tonight. When it got late, Ruth started phoning him frantically, leaving voicemails saying she was worried because he hadn't returned yet. It wasn't until Ibrahim eventually called her back to clarify that he was staying at a friend's house spending the whole night gaming and wouldn't return until morning that she understood his original message as he'd intended all along.



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## Context

The messaging that happens as a normal part of human interaction always occurs within some sort of **context**, which can be described as the environment in which communication occurs. This environment can be either a specific physical context, such as a hushed gothic cathedral that inspires visitors to whisper quietly to one another or a raucous football stadium where people feel free to shout with abandon. Alternatively, the environment can be a conceptual context, like a long-term romantic partnership or a collegial rapport with one's boss on the first day of work. Physical and conceptual contexts add layers of meaning and understanding to communication, not only the messages that are sent between people but also the ways that people send and receive those messages. The contexts that surround a message can have significant impact on how people interpret and respond to it. For example, Darcy was really excited about the project that she and her group had completed for a seminar she was taking at her university. After getting an email from one of her group members that their group had received an "A" on the project, she excitedly replied to all of her group members how much they deserved the high grade and how lucky they were that their professor had finally recognized their genius. Pleased with both her grade and her sense of humor, she was taken aback when she looked at the email list and realized she had forgotten to remove her professor from the email chain. What had seemed like a silly throwaway comment moments earlier now took on a whole new sense of gravity when she realized that the audience had multiple types of relationships, some of which involved individuals who may or may not understand her intended humor in the sarcastic comment.

## Noise

Although contexts influence communication, those contexts also include a great deal of extraneous information and competing messaging that can serve to impede messaging rather than facilitate it. In each context, such so-called **noise** can inhibit someone's ability to successfully understand the messages that may be intended by a message sender. Although the word *noise* makes us think of sound, there are actually four distinct types of noise, each with their own unique causes and potential outcomes. **Physical noise** refers to sensory stimuli, like sounds or lighting, that compete with our ability to receive a message. For example, Lacey was trying to pay attention during class, but the sound of the gardener's leaf blower outside the classroom window was making it difficult to hear. Looking at her notes after class, she realized she probably only heard every other word, which severely limited her understanding. **Psychological noise** describes those thoughts in a person's mind that distract them from being able to listen to and receive the messages that a sender encodes. For example, Geraldo really wanted to pay attention during a meeting with an important client, but his fiancé had just called off their wedding earlier in the day; all he could think about was how to get his fiancé back and what he would tell his friends and family if he didn't succeed in doing so.

**Physiological noise** refers to those messages we receive from our own bodies that help regulate functioning. These messages can include being hungry, needing sleep, or really any bodily function-related messaging that distracts us from being able to engage with a message.



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For example, Chloe and Concha scheduled a study session for an upcoming nursing exam, but when the day came, both women were exhausted from working long work shifts at the hospital. That evening, when they settled in on Chloe's couch with their books and notes, they found themselves drifting off to sleep instead of studying. The message from their own bodies that



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they needed sleep ended up being louder than their message to one another that they needed to study if they wanted to pass the nursing exam. **Semantic noise** describes any time words or sounds get in the way of understanding. For example, some listeners might find a speaker's accent distracting or hard to understand. Other times, a speaker might use words you've never heard before—or use familiar words in new ways—and you struggle to understand them. For example, after Ederic and William unpacked at their residence hall room the first day of college, they asked an upper-class student where they could go to have fun on campus. The reply—“Hit the SLP, turn right at the MU, then go down to the AS space.”—sounded like nonsense to their uninitiated ears.

### Feedback

A final element of the communication process is one that does not apply to every messaging situation, but it seems to be available across more and more channels as communication technology advances. A fundamental part of any interactive communication process, **feedback** includes the verbal and nonverbal responses communicators receive in reaction to a message, specifically, responses that influence or alter their future messaging attempts.<sup>8</sup> When a teacher is upset to notice that their students look bored or a preacher giving a sermon feels gratified to hear the congregation yell out “Amen!” the teacher or preacher may choose to craft their future communication accordingly to get a different (or the same) result. For example, Sarabeth and Grace were having difficulties with their son Aidan as he entered his teenage years. While Aidan used to be attentive and respectful, he now seemed very likely to roll his eyes or even sigh loudly at whatever they said to him. As a result, Sarabeth and Grace felt like they were walking on eggshells around him; they worried about saying the wrong thing and were desperately looking forward to the end of this unpleasant phase Aidan was going through. Neither parent welcomed receiving Aidan's negative feedback, yet, unfortunately, neither considered altering the way they spoke to Aidan based on his clear feedback that their current communications were not working for him.

## APPLY WHAT YOU'D DO: COMPETENCE IN FOCUSING ATTENTION

*Take action! Apply what you have learned to the situation below.*

*As anyone can attest, we are surrounded by a great variety of things competing for our attention. From the notifications on our mobile devices to the people and pets that we encounter as part of daily life, it seems like we can't avoid being approached by someone or something that wants our attention. Do you find yourself overwhelmed by the increasing amounts of things that get added to your “to-do” list without others being crossed out? Each type of noise that we allow*



*into our environment—from the music we hear to the emotions we engage—has the ability to distract us or to even cause us to disengage from important tasks or relationships that we encounter. Sometimes, unplugging from this noise can feel restorative or even instructive in allowing us to seek what is truly important. Sometime this week, take a moment to turn off notifications from all apps and social media for a single day, leaving on only those crucial notifications that you might need in case of emergency. At the same time, set your phone to “do not disturb” or “silent” so that only mild vibrations can capture your attention if totally needed. How does this simple technology cleanse impact your experience for that day? Do you find yourself able to better engage with the world around you? Consider the impact on your personal relationships. How does your experience of community change with even a simple removal of the noise that typically assaults your senses?*

### Communicating for Justice

Even though the situations may look different, at its core human communication essentially happens much the same way regardless of culture and experience. At the same time, across every cultural context and within every socioeconomic group, opportunities emerge for increased justice and equity. Although these concepts might seem abstract right, over the course of this book we’ll unpack the ways that each person can use the basic aspects of human communication to make their world a better place. We’ll often talk about the importance of **social justice**, which is the equitable distribution of advantages and burdens in a society.<sup>9</sup> In essence, when someone is communicating in order to pursue social justice, they are using messaging to try to make sure that both the good and bad parts of society are shared equally by all. Taking it a step further, a social justice advocate is also trying to help people take action to reduce inequities or injustice throughout society, as well. Sometimes this means giving a speech about racial equality; other times it means advocating for housing opportunities for the homeless. Perhaps this might look like standing up to someone who is taking advantage of an older person in a public place; perhaps it might look like standing in solidarity with an individual who was treated in a sexist manner. It might even mean speaking up about reducing waste, so that the plastic garbage that people throw away doesn’t end up transported to poor neighborhoods around the world. Each of these examples involves communication, but the ways that the communication occurs looks very different in each one. In the next section, we’ll explore the commonalities and differences in how each example relates to a model of communication behavior.

## FOUNDATIONAL MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

**1.2** Compare the different models of communication.

What are the different models of communication and how do they differ? Over the course of human history, scholars have worked to understand how people communicate. Some of the earliest public thinkers, like Plato or Socrates, laid the foundations for our understanding of communication and messaging in the public sphere, while the work of less famous women and men studied the ways we can best use messaging in unofficial or private communication.<sup>10</sup> The attempt to understand how a carefully constructed message can persuade individuals and change behaviors is known as the study of **rhétoric**, and it is often considered one of the earliest

attempts to understand what it means to be human in relation to one another. In Chapters 13, 14, and 15, we'll explore the ways that we can use words to accomplish goals in public speaking endeavors, following in a tradition of discourse that has lasted literally thousands of years. Many different models have emerged that utilize the foundational elements (e.g., senders and receivers) discussed earlier in this chapter. The earliest models were relatively simple and focused on the communication that emerged in certain contexts, while more recent models of communication are relatively complex and can be applied to most communication interactions that an average person might engage throughout their day.

### Linear Model of Communication

The most important of these earliest models is known as the **Linear Model of Communication**, popularized by Shannon & Weaver in 1949.<sup>11</sup> This model focused on the one-way transmission of a message from one person to another, highlighting the idea that one person can create

a message and send it to other people using a variety of different channels. Noteworthy about this early model is that it's particularly well-suited to explain the way messages are sent using radio, television, and film, industries that dominated the public landscape of communication during the twentieth century.

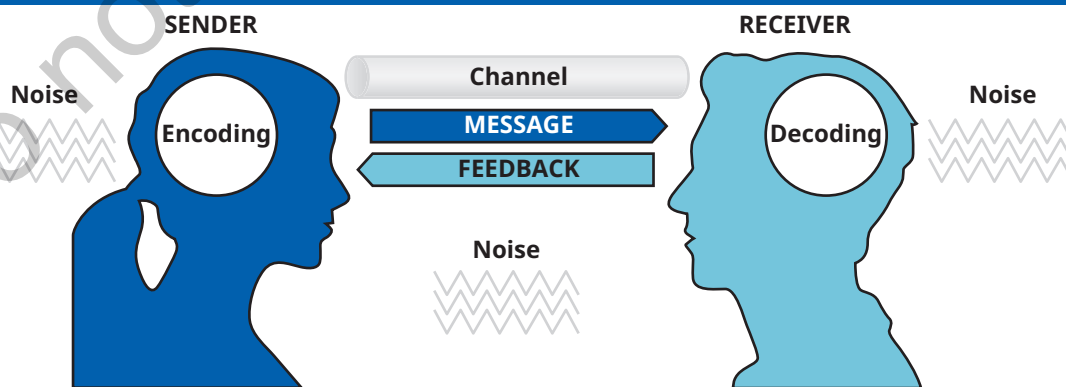
The linear model of communication shown in Figure 1.1 focuses on the one-way communication between a sender and a receiver, with the message being sent through some channel of communication. This all occurs in a context where noise can impact the quality of the message transmission. A key focus of the linear model is that the sender **encodes** the message, which is a process of putting their thoughts and ideas into a message they believe

can be successfully perceived by the receiver. The sender then **decodes** the received message, attempting to derive meaning from it. Interestingly, the process of encoding and decoding is subjective, meaning that each person might have a different idea of what the message content means.



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FIGURE 1.1 ■ The Linear Model of Communication

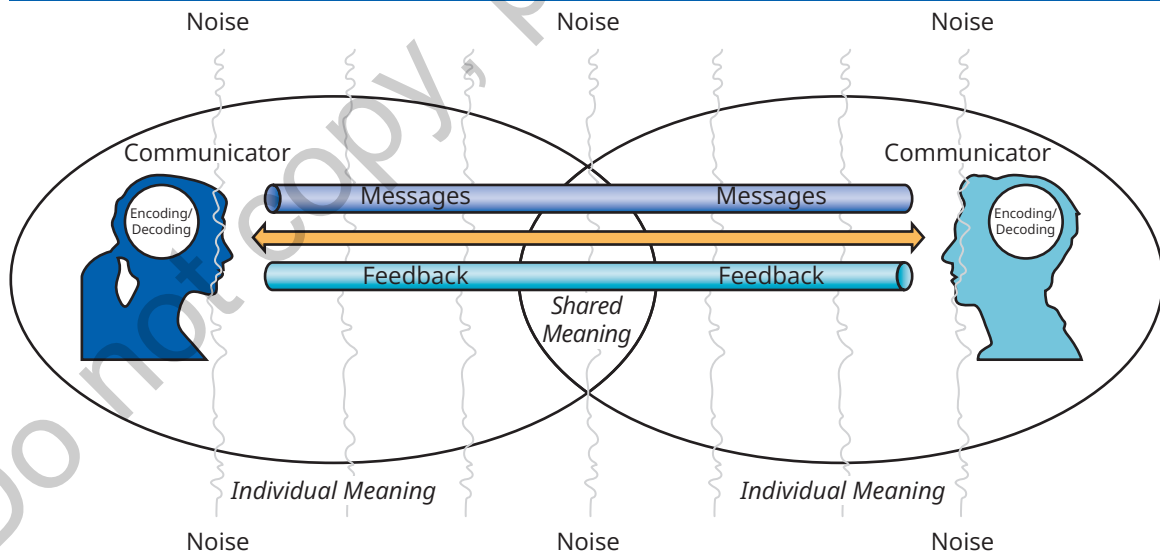


A close look at the linear model of communication may cause readers to realize that the model delivers only a part of the complete picture of human interaction. On the one hand, this model does an excellent job capturing the communication process experienced when a news broadcaster reads a script on a major network television channel that is being watched by thousands of viewers at home. On the other hand, it doesn't exactly capture the way communication occurs among friends sharing a meal at the busy local brewpub. Later models began to incorporate the idea that people could switch between the role of sender and receiver,<sup>12</sup> but still highlighted a **unidirectional** understanding of communication where information flowed from one source to one receiver at a single point in time. More recent models of communication better explain the complexities of most people's daily lives while still faithfully representing the process across contexts.

### Transactional Model of Communication

One of the most recent conceptualizations of the messaging process, the **Transactional Model of Communication**, is a model that retains the basic ideas of the linear model while adding the interactivity that is common in our social lives and the modern media landscape.<sup>13</sup> Focusing on the give-and-take that characterizes a conversation, the transactional model can account for much of the messaging that we experience in our daily social contexts. As shown in Figure 1.2, the transactional model of communication removes the designations "sender" and "receiver" to account for the fact that people send and receive messages simultaneously, a **multidirectional** process. Because of this, multiple messages are exchanged at the same time, some through spoken word, others nonverbally like messages through facial expression, eye contact, or other physical displays. In addition, conversation partners can give each other feedback in real time, highlighting the ways that people come together to collectively create meaning and understand each other.

**FIGURE 1.2** ■ The Transactional Model of Communication



A key component of the transactional model is the idea that each party in an interaction context assigns their own set of meanings to the world around them. At its core, communication is the process of people creating shared meaning. In the transactional model, communication is

successful to the extent that both parties have developed increased understanding of the meanings people share between them. For example, at the start of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Rhonda and Katie didn't necessarily see eye-to-eye. Katie was not Black, and her father was a police officer, so she had interpreted the movement as being anti-police and therefore in opposition to her own family experience. As a biracial woman who largely identifies as Black, Rhonda had become familiar with Katie across a variety of contexts and was concerned that her friend didn't seem to understand an issue that was so close to Rhonda's own experience. Rhonda and Katie had several conversations about their own lived experiences and those of their families over multiple interactions, and each conversation seemed to help them better understand one another. While Katie can never know what it means to be Black, she can now better understand why it is important for people of all backgrounds to work towards empowering Black people. At the same time, Rhonda has learned to change the way she talks about the movement in general, describing that the system of policing in the United States is often problematic while at the same time acknowledging that most people who select law enforcement careers are likely to be well intentioned in doing so. Although the women's experiences and perspectives are different, the opportunity to engage one another meaningfully has allowed them to create shared meaning.

### Communication and Voice

Each model of communication can be used with great effectiveness in certain contexts. The linear model of communication is effective for capturing some limited forms of messaging that are mostly one-way and focus on one person distributing their message to one or more others. Unfortunately, in such situations there is often a privileged party that is able to more easily make their message heard. As we move towards a more just and equitable world, the features of such a one-sided linear model become less and less useful in representing the necessary back-and-forth that occurs when people are treated fairly. The transactional model is a much better representation of the back-and-forth that emerges when people are in dialogue with one another, trying to understand and interact around important ideas and issues. In this way, the transactional model best represents an interaction where both parties have **voice**, meaning that they have access to share their own attitudes or opinions about an issue in a way that is heard by other parties. In the next section, we'll explore the contexts where people might be able to use their voices.

## TYPES OF COMMUNICATION CONTEXTS

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- 1.3** Describe the variety of communication contexts.

What are the different contexts where communication occurs? Think about the variety of individuals you have communicated with today. Perhaps you had a conversation one-on-one with a roommate or a loved one before you left your home this morning. Maybe you logged onto your favorite social media site to post something funny about your neighbor's dog, or to catch up on the latest information about your favorite celebrities. Did you stop at a coffee shop or deli and make a purchase? Over the course of your day, you certainly read something written by someone else, like this text, and you might have even sent a message to others around you by putting on a t-shirt that highlighted a cause or nonprofit organization that you care deeply about. Later today you might chat with a co-worker or classmate before giving a presentation at school or

work. You might even meet up with a study group to get some work done on a group project, and then hopefully you can close the day with a good conversation with someone special. Throughout the day you'll find yourself communicating with a variety of people, and often each of those interactions are characterized by differences in interaction contexts. Each communication context carries some distinguishing characteristics, while still sharing the basic elements that we discussed at the beginning of this chapter. For communication to occur, there must be a sender and a receiver of a message, although many other characteristics might look different depending on the context.



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### Interpersonal Contexts

Most of the earliest interactions in our lives occur when a caretaker nurtures us throughout our earliest days, forming the basis for how we communicate with the world around us. As we get older, the most common context for communication is still one where messaging occurs directly between people,<sup>14</sup> with a **dyad** of two people who are sending and receiving messages with one another. A toddler practicing words with a parent, two teens holding hands while watching a movie, a college student sharing a room with their first roommate—each of these are contexts where messaging occurs. However, these examples of dyadic interactions have more meaning than the simple exchange of money for coffee with a local barista or a smile for someone holding open a door at a classroom building. Most scholars describe **interpersonal** contexts as those contexts where people have a mutual understanding based on a unique relationship that helps them predict their interaction partner's responses.<sup>15</sup> While all dyadic interactions can technically be considered interpersonal at their most basic level, the most significant interpersonal contexts are those where relationships have emerged between partners. We'll explore the relational communication that occurs in this kind of interpersonal context in more detail in Chapter 7.

### Group Contexts

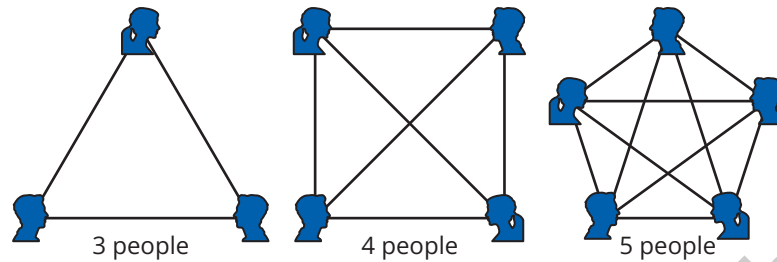
Another common communication setting is found when people are in a **group** context, which is typically characterized by around three to ten people interacting. Unlike the interpersonal context, which typically has two people communicating exclusively, the group communication context is unique because people are managing interactions with multiple others at the same time. When communicating with a group, there are many potential avenues for both verbal and nonverbal messages to be sent within that group communication context.

Interestingly, as a group becomes larger, the potential interactions can get increasingly complicated. As shown in Figure 1.3, a pair of two people



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**FIGURE 1.3** ■ Potential connections dramatically increase in number as groups get larger



can interact with one another exclusively. However, when a group of three people interacts, each person can choose to message both other group members simultaneously or to message each group member separately, which effectively turns those communication attempts into interpersonal interactions. As a result, communication that occurs within a larger group context becomes more and more complex as additional members are added to the group setting. In Chapter 8, we'll explore even more some features of the group context that can influence your practice and participation in messaging within small groups and teams.

### Organizational Contexts

When people communicate with a larger number of people who share a general goal or mission in common, we typically refer to that type of communication context as an **organizational** context. When people who are part of the same workplace or club communicate, they often follow a set of rules set by the workplace or organizational culture. In addition, there is often a hierarchical structure of some sort within the organization, one which determines who is allowed to communicate with whom across the group of potential interactants. Some organizations have a very tall hierarchical structure where there are clear paths of communication among members, while others have very open lines of communication in order to function and/or accomplish the organization's goals and tasks. For instance, Ava was excited to have joined an exclusive social club on her college campus, even though she admittedly didn't know much about it. She had

watched movies about secret societies as a young person, and now the opportunity to be in a social club that had some secret elements was really appealing to her. However, as she spent more time in the organization, Ava wondered why she only was getting to know other new joiners like herself. It's not like she didn't *know* that there were other people who were part of the organization, but there were strict rules for newbies like herself in terms of whom she could and could not socialize with until she became a full member. Ava found herself wondering if this was the best fit for her personality after all. In Chapter 10, we'll explore some aspects of organizational communication that may occur in these larger formal contexts like the one that Ava experienced here.



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## Public Contexts

Communication can also occur when people send messages to a large group of (potentially) unknown others, a context known as a **public context**. Although the public context can be varied and complex, typically it is a situation where someone delivers a message in real time to a larger group of people who are geographically near to one another, typically through a face-to-face format. When public speaking occurs, the message sender might use microphones and speakers in order to reach the larger group; those technologies also serve to distance the sender from the audience, reducing the interactivity of the message delivery. Communication within the public context is explored much more practically in Chapters 13, 14, and 15, focusing on the most effective ways to craft a speech and deliver it effectively.

## Mass Contexts

A final major type of communication context is when people prepare a message and send it through a variety of mediated channels to a large and geographically dispersed audience, known as the **mass context**.<sup>16</sup> The mass communication context differs from the public messaging context because it requires mediated communication. Since the audience in the mass context consists of people who are widely dispersed rather than concentrated in one specific area, we must use mediated communication through electronic screens (e.g., television, computers, mobile devices) or audio devices (e.g., radios, podcast apps) in order to ensure our audience receives our message. First flourishing in the twentieth century when there were far fewer choices for media consumption, the idea of mass communication is based on the notion that one person or organization can prepare a message and distribute it widely to people across a nation or around the world. However, recent advances in media technology have changed this narrative in interesting ways, as people are no longer necessarily consuming the same message at the same time. Gwendolyn, for example, likes to watch the monologues of her favorite late-night talk show hosts in the evening, just before bed. Her daughter Stacia is more likely to catch clips of the funniest parts of the monologues from various talk shows over the course of the next day as they are released by the social media managers of the major networks. Stacia's brother Josh rarely if ever even hears about those monologues because his media consumption is mostly driven by online gamers streaming on specific platforms.



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### ACTIVATE YOUR LEARNING: COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXT

*Do something with what you've read! Take action based upon the discussion below.*

*People often find that interaction partners might have some amazing communication abilities in one area of their life while being relatively lackluster in others. Most people have specific strengths and weaknesses across the many parts of their lives, and one's own communicative abilities also vary by individual and by context. For example, someone can be a dedicated and communicative romantic*

partner but terrible at communicating with business associates. In this activity, you'll take four steps to learn about your own experiences with your own communication abilities. *Step One: Brainstorm a list of contexts where you feel most experienced in sending and receiving messages. Research has demonstrated that everyone has some messaging ability that comes more naturally than others,<sup>17</sup> although training and practice can ensure that people are likely to experience more successes than failures in terms of communication competence. Carefully considering a message and rehearsing its delivery can go far in sending the desired message. In what situations are you most practiced at using your own style to get something accomplished?*

*Step Two: Journal about a time when you tried to have a difficult conversation with a loved one. What were the things you considered in trying to create a message that was not only effective but also sensitive to your loved one's feelings? What did you avoid saying? How did each message impact their understanding?*

*Step Three: Make a to-do list of the ways that you can best navigate difficult conversations, perhaps with an employer or a work colleague. How might you imagine changing your messaging to fit the new relational context? What elements of communication do you think you should keep the same across most of your relationships?*

*Step Four: Go and try to start a casual conversation in three different relational contexts, and note which context is the easiest or the most difficult. For example, was it harder to visit your professor during their office hours or to hang out with your roommate on the couch? Why?*

### Practice and Privilege in Contexts

It's no secret that people feel much more confident in contexts where they have had more experience. After all, one of the first rules of becoming a successful public speaker is to practice, practice, practice your speech, preferably in a context similar to the one where you'll actually deliver your message. The same advice goes for communication that occurs across contexts—the more experience you have engaging a particular context, the greater ease you'll have in being successful within that context. If you are hoping to engage your world to work towards making it a better place, you can actively engage in the contexts that you already find yourself and work to gain access to other contexts. The biggest initial difference that a person can make is in their own neighborhoods, cities, and spheres of influence. The success and confidence that you build by working for change in a comfortable context can equip and engage you to be more successful working for change beyond that context. Never underestimate the importance of taking little steps to being a long journey of positive impact. In the next section, we explore some of the best ways to engage the community in which you already find yourself.

## COMPETENCE AND CONNECTION

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

**1.4** Discuss how competent messaging creates and contextualizes community.

Why is successful messaging an essential element of community formation? Even though human communication has many constitutive parts (as evidenced by the models presented earlier in the chapter), most people manage their interactions without thinking about each of those parts. After all, we begin learning how to communicate during our earliest years, sending messages about our needs and desires as a baby and continuing throughout the course of our life span. At



the same time, it is clear that there are differences in message quality, as evidenced by those times you accidentally misspoke. For example, as a young student Henry helped inspire a canned food drive in his elementary school class because he wanted to “help out poor people who don’t have anything,” a sentiment which was ultimately very successful at getting a lot of food donations from many of the other students and their families. Unfortunately, Henry and the teachers at his school failed to consider the fact that people in their community who needed some help might not respond well to the idea of being called “poor.” Alternately, some people might not feel like they deserved to take any food because they *did* have *something*, just not enough to be able to make ends meet. Fortunately, one of the community members who was struggling financially talked to Henry and his parents at the farmer’s market one Sunday, describing some of the concerns she had heard from other people like herself who would have otherwise benefited from the canned food drive. Revised messaging went out to the community later that day, and the school was overwhelmed with messages of gratitude and thanks that they received from people who really needed some help during a difficult economic time for their families.

### Competent Messaging in Community

When an individual sends a message to a friend or family member, they likely have some idea about how the person is likely to respond and can make a guess about the impact their words may have. However, when an individual messages an unknown other—a casual acquaintance or even a stranger—there is less confidence about how the other person is likely to interpret a message, in part because you don’t have enough information to make a guess about what the other person might be thinking or feeling. Messages can get even more difficult to convey with larger groups, because each person who might receive a message has their own set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and experiences that influence how they understand a message. The best communicators think about the audience who could ultimately receive a message, deciding in advance how to send and receive messages effectively. Some of the best communicators focus on the composition of their audience, particularly when they’re messaging groups or even communities. At the same time, good communicators will practice messaging behaviors intended to enhance the feelings of inclusion and connection among groups and communities. They do so in some very specific ways.

*Removing offensive language* – As obvious as it might sound to someone enrolled in a communication course, good communicators take care to avoid language that is offensive to any possible audience member. While blatant forms of offensive language like swearing or slurs against individuals or groups can be more easily avoided because they are so obvious, it is also essential to consider *all* your language in advance to determine if you have any blind spots in your own understanding that might make people less likely to listen to your message. In Chapter 9, we’ll explore this idea in more depth, discussing how to avoid those unintentional offenses that can occur when using careless language that hurts others. While avoiding hurtful language is an important practice for communicating, it is also good citizenship. Amitola was proud to be an indigenous North American; growing up in a native community afforded her some unique insight into the ways the world could work better. However, attending college in a large city hundreds of miles



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away made her encounter very different thoughts about her own community. For example, one of Amitola's economics professors was discussing the housing bubble and how its bursting caused many economists to "go off the reservation" without considering that this expression, referring to reacting outside the norm, is derogatory to Native American individuals. While Amitola knew that the expression was not intended to be racially charged, she had a very productive conversation with her professor after class, explaining her own perspective in a way that allowed her professor to see that the expression's use was unacceptable.

*Using inclusive terminology* – Because any given group might include a variety of individuals from many different backgrounds, a good communicator will make sure to use words that include people in the conversation rather than exclude them. Instead of using gendered language (e.g., "ladies and gentlemen"), a good communicator might use gender-neutral terms (e.g., "people" or "everyone"). In addition, terms that assume all people have the same sexuality can be problematic, excluding individuals who don't fit the majority demographic of the group. William was excited to be attending a Pride event with Jacob, happy that his buddy brought him along as an ally and close friend. The DJ yelled out a joke about how everyone in the room was a gay guy looking for their next boyfriend, and as a straight ally William suddenly paid more attention to his status as an outsider, albeit a welcome one. He wondered if the women and non-binary people in the room also felt a little excluded by the DJ's throwaway comment that implied everyone present was a gay man. *Avoiding monolithic observations* – A good communicator will also take pains to ensure that groups and communities of people are treated as individuals with differences and diverse perspectives. Instead of treating groups like a monolith—that is, an assembly of people who all share the same characteristics—it is important to remember that not all assumptions about a group or community necessarily apply to all members of that community. Corrie was proud to be an excellent musician, despite some people's stereotypical expectation that she would probably be great at math and engineering because of her Asian American facial features. Time and time again, she found that club owners assumed she was showing up early to a gig as an assistant sent to help run a sound check. The first few times, she found it quite funny. After a while, however, Corrie began to feel uncomfortable and wanted to just ignore the comments. After all, she herself needed to get ready to perform herself as the show opener. *Avoiding "centrism"* – Although every communicator brings their own experiences, biases, and perspectives to an interaction, a good communicator is able to recognize that their own views might not always be the best way or the only way to see things. In interaction with groups and communities, it's

important to avoid **egocentrism**—an excessive focus on one's self—and to avoid **ethnocentrism**—an excessive focus on one's own group.<sup>18</sup> For example, Rachael's religious organization served hot meals to the city's unhoused population each weekend, a civic project for which Rachael had been pivotal in securing her religious organization's funding. When invited to observe the local synagogue's mid-week efforts with that same unhoused population, Rachael saw similarities with Jewish culture that she believed would benefit any group hoping to work with people in need of support. She quickly realized that no single religious or civic organization had the one best method to provide service and support to the unhoused in her community.



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*Practicing Flexibility* – Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a good communicator that is engaging with a group of people or a larger community needs to practice flexibility. Because successful messaging is in part about being responsive and adaptive to interaction partners and audiences, communicators must not hold too tightly to preconceived ideas about how an interaction or encounter might go. Requiring a temporary release of one’s own ego and carefully laid plans, being flexible allows community members to observe one another, develop an understanding of the context and situation, and ultimately adapt one’s own messaging to be inclusive and more successful at accomplishing one’s own goals. Harrison prepared a PowerPoint presentation about an upcoming building project in the downtown village of his medium-sized town, excited to present some progressive ideas about what might go into the space. However, after realizing that there was going to be community pushback against *any* development, Harrison decided that the best idea was to instead hold a listening session where he could really connect with community members and they could collectively bounce ideas off each other.

## EXCHANGE NEW IDEAS: CULTURES AND COACHING

*Learn from experienced professionals. How might you take action on their ideas?*

**Ryan Sidhoo is a documentary filmmaker, but also a son, history lover, and sports fan. Ryan has won awards for his film work, but also is quick to point out that the North American norm of defining oneself by one’s career doesn’t give people the full picture of a person’s essence. Ryan joins us to talk about filmmaking’s use of messaging to tell stories.**

**Documentary films are an interesting way to tell a story. Why are you drawn to documentary filmmaking, as compared to other forms of storytelling?**

*During my studies I was fascinated by film criticism. I thought about pursuing a PhD in this field, but ultimately I felt that I could still make critiques and pose questions while also exercising my creative side. I must admit, I am not a huge fan of writing long papers, so I find film editing and directing a better fit for my expression.*

**You have a diverse set of topics for your work from following counterculture communities to the polarizing front-lines of competitive amateur sport. What do you think is the “through line” that interests you about each of these stories?**

*I don’t think there is a through line because I have many curiosities. Being a documentarian gives you a cultural passport to go as deep as you want into a topic. Based on my upbringing, studies, and travel, my interests are a bit all over the place. So, if I find a question that I am driven to answer about the former Yugoslavia, I might get so involved in the idea that I build a pitch around it and try to raise funds. However, what you will see is a consistency in artistic approach, style, and methodology.*

**Your award-winning series True North focused on the paths of Canadian basketball players hoping to make it big in the NBA. What is the take-home message you hope an audience understands after having watched that series?**

*As a society, we put too much emphasis on a young athlete’s quest to “make it” to the big leagues. You can still make it to the big leagues as a team owner, announcer, doctor, or team trainer. For example, I got to make a living hanging out in basketball gyms being immersed in the sport I love. I feel I “made it” in basketball because the sport paid my bills – you don’t need to be a “player” to get there. Sadly, there is not a lot of money (or incentive) for big companies invested in the sport to promote clipboards over sneakers. They have to pump out messaging that playing the sport is the only path to success because that sells tickets and shoes and boosts television viewership.*

**What is the most important thing that you have learned about using film to tell the stories of a diverse group of people?**

*Show the subjects of the film—the people who are the documentary’s “stars”—the work before it’s public. As filmmakers, we have someone’s private life and image in our hands. I believe there is a social contract at play—we owe it to those on screen to show them the film. Now, that doesn’t necessarily mean we are going to change it if they hate it, but at least a dialogue can be created and concerns can be addressed.*

**What is one thing that you wish other people would know about you?**

*I often want to throw my cell phone in the ocean.*

**What is a piece of advice about communication/messaging that you would give to someone who wants to follow your path?**

*Film school is not the only way to break into the industry. You might unnecessarily waste your time and money if you are not sure it’s the right fit for yourself and your financial situation. Get a gig as a production assistant on set. Whether it’s a scripted film or documentary, this could save you time, money, and get you where you want to go.*

## Changing Communities

As we move throughout our communities, it is important to communicate in ways that honor all types of people and all varieties of perspectives on what makes that community special. At the same time, community members can often become aware of opportunities to increase the opportunities for some groups of community members and to relieve the burdens of any groups and/or others who are struggling. In each community context, the composition of those underprivileged groups may look different, requiring us to gather information and be open-minded as we find ourselves moving through community throughout our lives. Given that effective communication is one of the most important tools that we can use to impact situational social justice, the chapters that follow will equip us to engage people not only *within* but also *beyond* our communities as we work to craft effective messages that highlight inequity and injustice. As careful communicators, we will then use those skills we have learned to make changes in our own perspectives and the perspectives of those people that we may be fortunate enough to influence.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Communication is the primary social process, allowing for relationships to emerge, society to form, and humans to live in community with one another. As scholars have studied the messaging that comes with our social lives, individuals have increased the complexity of our understanding of what communication looks like and how best to model human interaction. Certainly, people communicate differently depending upon the relationship context, whether one-on-one intimate conversations or large public speaking forums or anything in between. At its core, however, messaging is a process that allows people to take the ideas in their minds and transform them into verbal and nonverbal forms that can increase the shared meaning between people. Although people may differ in their own attitudes, values, beliefs, and experiences, a good communicator can constantly be developing their own messaging abilities in order to better welcome others into listening to and understanding a message—and ultimately towards being impacted by quality encounters with communication. Over the next 14 chapters, we will explore how communication can actively impact lives and change communities as we learn about best practices for crafting messaging, strategies for taking action, better understanding about the connections that sustain us, and about the contexts in which we find ourselves where we can advocate for personal and social change.

## KEY TERMS

channel	multidirectional
command	noise
communication	organizational
content level	physical noise
decodes	physiological noise
disfluencies	psychological noise
dyad	public context
egocentrism	receiver
encodes	relationship level
ethnocentrism	report
exchange new ideas	rhetoric
feedback	semantic noise
group	sender
interpersonal	social justice
linear model of communication	transactional model of communication
mass context	unidirectional
message	

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you describe a time when you noticed the same message having different impacts across multiple contexts?
2. Thinking of the ways that you typically communicate, what model of communication best describes your own messaging?
3. What communication contexts do you consider most comfortable for yourself?
4. How can you help your own community by improving your communication style?

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## 2

## OUR AUDIENCE: THE SELF AND OTHERS

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- 2.1 Distinguish the concepts that comprise identity.
- 2.2 Describe the key influences on an individual's identity.
- 2.3 Compare some different identity theories.
- 2.4 Discuss the ways that people manage their identities with others.
- 2.5 Explain the ways that identity shapes human interaction.

*Having just decided to reenter the job market, Alonzo found himself in conversation with a wide range of people from very different backgrounds. When people asked him to describe himself during interviews, Alonzo had a difficult time knowing what to say. After all, he considered himself to be a pretty complicated individual. Alonzo was raised as a devout Catholic in a suburban area, where he and his siblings were the only biracial Black and Latino students at his school. During his high school years, Alonzo realized that, unlike his peers, he wasn't yet sexually interested in anyone, a characteristic that has so far proven relatively stable while at the same time seemingly confusing people who developed a sexual interest in him. Even though his imposing build and his sports-related hobbies often make people think that he must be a star athlete, Alonzo desperately wants to pursue a career in the visual arts, enjoying expressing himself without words. In addition, Alonzo has always been well liked because he always seems to know the right thing to say in casual social situations—as long as he doesn't have to talk about himself. Although he was socially skilled and likable, Alonzo often found himself drawn to solitary pursuits; he often claimed he was never alone as long as he had a good book. Like Alonzo, each of us has an idea of who we are, and this idea may or may not fit the perceptions others hold about us. In this chapter, we'll explore how we see ourselves and the impact that has on our lives. Just as Alonzo developed an understanding of who he was based on his characteristics and abilities, we also come to discover who we are as we navigate the close relationships and cultural norms that shape our social worlds. As a result, we'll better understand how we present ourselves to others and also how those presentations influence our own behaviors and self-esteem.*

### ELEMENTS OF IDENTITY

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- 2.1 Distinguish the concepts that comprise identity.

How do people talk about their own identity in understandable ways? It's easy to learn new things about people in our lives, since we can discover their attitudes or interests through conversation or observation. At the same time, it can be surprising when we find out something new about ourselves, perhaps discovering a new hobby or finding ourselves attracted to someone we never expected to be attracted to. Even though each individual thinks they know themselves very well, there is always something new to learn, adding to our complicated perceptions about who we are. Michael, for example, spent his whole life assuming he would not like sushi, even though he had



never tried it. The idea of eating raw fish was so repugnant to him that he overlooked the fact that it was an esteemed culinary tradition lasting thousands of years, meaning that there must be *something* good about it. While on a family cruise, however, he popped a roll into his mouth without taking the time to find out what it was. Looking at the shocked expressions on his family's face, Michael was surprised to realize that he had just eaten *and enjoyed* the very sushi that he had always thought he'd hate. Although discovering a new food is a relatively minor part of one's understanding of oneself, it is still a small piece of information that helps us to create an image of who we are.



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### Identity and Self-Concept

Although we can add new tastes or supporting information to our understanding of the self, we rarely change our broader overall idea of who we are. Each person's idea of their own self is a combination of perceptions that rarely change over time, known as a person's **identity** or **self-concept**.<sup>1</sup> Although we may add to or clarify our identity over time in minor ways, our self-concept is generally a relatively stable set of ideas. Those stable ideas about the self form an understanding of who we are and how we should relate to other people. Indeed, each person's identity constantly influences how they think they should navigate their social world. Whether you think of yourself as a risk-taker, as someone outgoing, as a loyal friend, or perhaps all or none of these, each element of your identity helps you decide how to navigate your daily experience. In another example, Meilin was surprised to find out that one of her study group members couldn't afford to eat a nutritious meal more than once a day. After learning more about just how common food insecurity can be on American college campuses, Meilin was really interested in trying to make some changes to ensure that students had easier access to low- and no-cost food options if they needed them. At the same time, Meilin was relatively quiet and reserved, unlikely to put herself in the spotlight or to draw attention to herself. However, it seemed that the best way to make changes was to get involved in her campus student government, a process that would require her to put herself out there in ways that she never expected. Filling out the online application to run for office was easy, but Meilin wasn't sure that she was ready to take the next step. After all, someone campaigning for a position as a campus senator didn't seem much like the person she saw in herself, but it seemed to be the best way to advocate on behalf of those struggling with food insecurity on her campus. Meilin's finger hovered over the "submit" button on the student government website as she struggled to come to terms with the way she saw herself. Like many of us might feel, Meilin's understanding of herself had not changed much in recent years, and she was hesitant to rethink her own sense of self and whom she was becoming.



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### Self-Esteem

While our self-concept is all about our ideas about ourselves, it is also more than just a list of neutral beliefs that we hold about the self. For example, if you see yourself as an introvert, is that necessarily a good thing or a bad thing? Some people are ashamed to be introverted, wishing they could walk into a room and effortlessly win over the attention and interest of everyone assembled.



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Others are proud to be introverted, happy that they have the ability to spend time with themselves and know themselves well, unafraid to be who they really are across contexts. While almost all personality characteristics have helpful attributes as well as drawbacks, we use them to help develop a general understanding of how we see ourselves. If a person's self-concept is the relatively stable set of perceptions they have about themselves, a person's **self-esteem** is the subjective positive or negative way a person chooses to evaluate their perceptions about themselves. A person's self-concept might include that they are extroverted; their self-esteem reflects whether they see their extroversion as a good thing or a bad thing. Self-esteem is a complex attitude that impacts our daily experiences,

one which is often influenced by a variety of factors in one's life. At its core, one's self-esteem is an evaluation of one's own overall worth, an evaluation often related to one's general self-acceptance and self-respect.<sup>2</sup> Age is a huge factor, as a child's relatively stable self-esteem often drops dramatically during their adolescent years.<sup>3</sup> As one ages from adolescence through young adulthood, increases in self-esteem are relatively consistent as one comes to terms with their sense of self, but that increase in self-esteem can be influenced by a variety of personality and individual characteristics that, in part, determine whether someone feels relatively better or relatively worse about themselves.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of our lives, we have many varying attitudes about ourselves that may influence not only how we see ourselves but also how we interact with others.

### Egocentrism Revisited

Although we briefly discussed the topic in Chapter 1, let's take a moment to explore egocentrism in a little more depth as we talk about identity. As discussed, egocentrism is an excessive focus on the self (as compared to ethnocentrism, which is an excessive focus on one's group). As we talk about identity and self-concept, we begin to get a picture of just how difficult it is to change perspectives about who one thinks one is. Consider your own use of social media, and whether you are more likely to randomly change your picture (which shows your surface level style and/or context) than your more stable verbal description of yourself. Psychologists have studied identity for decades, looking at how unlikely people are to think of themselves differently once they have an established view of who they are. For example, James decided in kindergarten that he wanted to become a doctor, and his family members and teachers all affirmed that career goal as a wise choice. James might have even gotten better access to opportunities because the people in his life knew that he planned to pursue a career in medicine. Now that James is a college student, he realizes he would prefer not to work in a career helping sick or chronically ill people. Just to make sure, during his first year of college James did an internship at a regional hospital, an opportunity which only confirmed his suspicion that he doesn't want to become a physician. Still, James struggles with the idea of changing his major to fit his true passion. James had built much of his identity on achieving academic success so he could go to college and eventually attend a top medical school. Now that his plans have changed, he feels conflicted about his future. It can be very difficult to rethink one's identity, and people often resist doing so because it involves change. James's situation is not an example of egocentrism; however, it is a great example of how difficult it can be for someone to reconsider their own self-concept, even when there is tangible evidence to the contrary. Consider situations in your life that stem from your own sense of self. From the way you dress, to the charities you donate money to, to the topics that you tweet on X,

to the ways you spend your time on the weekends, many of our behaviors are rooted in how we see ourselves. Because of this, we can become attached to our own opinions in ways that are not necessarily helpful. Whether it be a politician who is convinced the opposing political party cannot hold *any* good opinions, or a customer who is sure they're right and throws a public tantrum when told otherwise, sometimes people are egocentric and refuse to acknowledge other perspectives. Throughout this book, we'll explore this concept as we challenge some ideas that might even run up against some of your own opinions about how the world should operate.



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### Egocentrism and Inequality

While it is problematic to be egocentric or excessively focused on oneself, it is even worse for those around you if you are excessively focused on your own group, an attitude known as **ethnocentrism**. While we will cover this topic in greater depth in the next chapter, it is important to note that some folks often use *egocentrism* as a means to hurt or bully individuals, and they use *ethnocentrism* as a means to oppress or abuse whole groups of people. A healthy consideration of the self—including but not limited to the groups and cultures that we belong to and interact with—can go a long way to improve our interpersonal relationships with one another as well as our experiences with difference and equity across the larger society as a whole. In the next section, we'll explore many of those things that influence our sense of self and of our group memberships, influences that ultimately shape what kind of people we're likely to become.

## INFLUENCES ON IDENTITY

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

2.2 Describe the key influences on an individual's identity.

What factors influence how each person develops a sense of self? With one's identity being identified as a primary source for how people think about their lives and evaluate their choices, we have to wonder how we get this identity in the first place. After all, it's not like people are simply handed their identities after birth, complete and intact. Parents and caretakers cannot simply select a preferred identity for their children like one might select the toppings for a pizza. In fact, one's identity is formed from a variety of influences over the course of the lifespan, each of them contributing insight and information to one's self-concept that may or may not be helpful in developing a healthier sense of self-esteem.

### Family

The first and most primary way that we begin to establish a sense of self is in relation to our earliest interactions with family members or significant caretakers. From their first moments of life, infants begin to develop an understanding of the people who take care of them—and even whether they are worthy of being cared for.<sup>5 6</sup> Over the course of those early years the primary social influences in one's life are the people in one's family unit and/or their caregivers. Siblings

and their rivalries, caretakers providing sustenance and physical support, parental figures providing emotional and intellectual stimulus, and even the pets and extended family that interact with young children help them develop an early understanding of who they are. It's not unusual for children to have already developed an early identity before they ever even interact with anyone outside their primary family unit.

### Race and Ethnicity

Another way people develop an understanding of who they are involves the people who look or act in similar ways that themselves. People often look to the specific racial background or ethnic heritage they inhabit, learning to identify with groups they believe might have similar experiences to their own. Admittedly, much of the racial and ethnic information we encounter during our early years is also a result of our own family situations as well,<sup>7</sup> but as people grow older they begin to observe and identify with people who look and/or behave similarly to the ways they are accustomed to. People often struggle to understand the difference between the terms *race* and *ethnicity*, but both are distinct, and both are relevant to understanding the self. **Race** is a term used to describe the socially constructed categories of people based upon physical or biological features.<sup>8</sup> That is, because someone is genetically of Japanese descent, their race might be described using the catch-all racial grouping of "Asian," even though they might physically have much more in common with someone from Korea than would someone from the southern part of India and also considered to be Asian. So while there is a heritable, biological component embedded within the construction of race (in that people can inherit the features that others then use to categorize them) the specific categories of race themselves are socially constructed and arbitrary. In the United States, the U.S. Census Bureau typically defines the main categories of race using at least five categories, as follows: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.<sup>9</sup> This, of course, excludes a large number of people whose actual physical traits are much more nuanced. For example, recent changes to some government classifications are beginning to more accurately categorize people who come from multiple lineages who often self-describe as biracial or multiracial. **Ethnicity**, on the other hand, refers to shared traditions that include language and celebrations, as well as shared beliefs and even a common history.<sup>10</sup> In this case someone might have physical features that visually distinguish them from another person, even though they have the same ethnic background and otherwise live much in the same manner. For example, Seamus and Todd both looked to be unambiguously White, but aside from that, when observing them from



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afar on a bus or trolley car, one might not be able to characterize them in much detail. However, once you talk to them you immediately recognize their Irish brogues and unique turns of phrase, immediately identifying them as recent immigrants to their South Boston neighborhood. Although their race is widely considered to be White, their ethnicity is decidedly Irish, including their holiday traditions and favorite family meals that seem more normal to them than those generic North American traditions they encounter in their workplace or other parts of the city. They see the world through their Irish-Catholic heritage, and each part of their core sense of self is influenced by the stories and ways of life they learned from a very young age.

## Sex and Gender

One of the most influential factors in an individual's identity is based on how they understand and engage their own sex and gender. **Biological sex** has historically been described as a genetic continuum established at birth, one which includes genital, hormonal, and chromosomal displays of maleness and femaleness.<sup>11</sup> **Gender**, on the other hand, has been described as a cultural continuum learned over time, one which includes social, preferential, and constructed displays of masculinity and femininity.<sup>12</sup> While technically the term *sex* is often considered most commonly as a biologically rooted concept that is clinically used to describe genetic heredity and the sexual reproductive system, gender has to do with the representation of the self as it pertains to the traditional senses of masculinity and femininity—and also pertaining to the amount of conformity or nonconformity to a culture's traditional norms. *Masculinity* is a term used to describe the culturally determined norms for a specific culture's social roles associated with biological maleness, and *femininity* is a similar term used to describe those same culturally determined norms for a specific culture's social roles associated with biological femaleness.<sup>13</sup> Historically, in North America masculinity has been associated with independence and assertive characteristics, while femininity has been associated with interdependent (communal) and nurturing characteristics.<sup>14</sup> Although these ideas may be outdated (or even irrelevant) views in many ways, many of the widespread attitudes about what it might look like to live as a man or a woman still linger in cultural norms. A person's understanding of sex and gender are rooted in one's earliest experiences. Typically, the strongest influence in how a child perceives issues related to sex and gender is related to the roles and norms expressed in that child's family. While there is a great deal of debate and discussion about the extent of the familial role in forming people's attitudes around their own gender identity, it is clear that families certainly influence one's understanding of what is "good" and "bad" in terms of expressing gender, and what are acceptable and unacceptable ways of behaving, manner of dress, and even career or educational goals based upon one's understood maleness and/or femaleness.<sup>15</sup> For example, as a child, Chuck used to take his younger sister's Barbie dolls and use them to serve as additional troops when playing with G.I. Joe action figures. Sure, the weapons and uniforms didn't fit the Barbies, but they probably made the infantry seem larger and more indomitable to the unseen enemies that Chuck imagined. The tableaux were so intricate that Chuck's mom used to post pictures of the battle scenes on Instagram to share with her friends. However, Chuck's father was livid once he found out through social media that Chuck had "played with girls' stuff," and he spanked Chuck as a punishment to drive home the idea that such behaviors weren't tolerated. Many years later, Chuck expresses his gender in a traditionally masculine way but is determined not to try to influence his own children's gender identity in such a coercive manner. Some people don't see themselves as fitting into the traditional masculine or feminine roles prescribed by a traditional cultural perspective on gender. Although people talk about recent changes in gender norms, countless individuals throughout history have been relatively androgynous—that is, traditionally masculine in terms of assertiveness and leadership ability and yet traditionally feminine in terms of being nurturing and relationship-focused. Famous figures like Jesus, Gandhi, and Joan of Arc, who expressed masculine and feminine traits simultaneously, can be described as **androgynous**—they don't fit a culture's perspective on traditional masculinity or femininity.<sup>16</sup> Another group of people often describe themselves or are described as being **gender-fluid**. They don't identify with rigid models of masculinity or femininity and might see themselves outside (or in-between) those models and therefore not limited to a particular fixed gender expression. For example, singer Harry Styles is known for his gender-fluid fashion choices and likes to play with people's expectations of fashion, often choosing to express a fluid gender identity in his own personal style.<sup>17</sup>

## INCLUDE OTHER PERSPECTIVES: MARGINALIZATION AND LANGUAGE

*Embrace difference! Read the scenario below and think about how to apply it in your own life.*

Maximillian had finally been elected to serve as one of the captains of his school's large marching band. He had made his case based upon his ability to engage the community and to plan for activities that band members can do without needing to bring their instruments. One of the first things he planned was a major clean-up event downtown, where the city had agreed to let them clear a rubbish-strewn lot and put in walkways, benches, and potted plants. Maximillian's ideas were ambitious, and they'd require the help of everyone in the band to make them happen. He explained this to the band. "Guys, I'm so excited that we got approval to work on this project. It's going to make a huge difference. I need your brute strength, and I hope all you guys can come out this weekend for the first stage of making a difference in our community." Unfortunately for Maximillian, only about a third of the marching band actually showed up, even though everyone had seemed really excited about the idea. Maximillian texted one of his closest friends to ask her why she hadn't come to help out, and she immediately responded with an abrupt text saying that she was never invited in the first place, so why should she or any other woman show up?

Even though Maximillian had worked really hard on a great plan to get people involved, he messed up his actual communication with the people that he needed to motivate. By using language that resonated only with people like himself—talking about the activity using gendered language and masculine-charged imagery of brute strength—he accidentally implied that the first stage of the community project was only for those people in the band who identified as male. Sure, some people use the term "guys" to refer to anyone, but even saying "guys and girls" might have turned off some potential participants. After all, since the project could be accomplished by a group of people regardless of their gender, why bring gender into the conversation at all? Perhaps using a generic word like "folks" would have made a variety of people more likely to think that the band announcement was aimed at people like themselves.

**include:** *People struggle with the use of inclusive language all the time, from referring to the expected gender of people's partners (i.e., not all women are necessarily looking to find a male partner—or any partner, for that matter) to using terminology for careers that seems to imply something about the types of people who are qualified for a position (e.g., stewardess or fireman). Typically, those people who fall into a privileged majority position are those who are most likely to fall into the trap of using exclusive language, whether from a place of ignorance or even of intentional exclusion. What areas of your own life might you be in a majority group? How can you ensure that you aren't defaulting to language that might seem familiar but is in fact making life difficult for others? How do you think you can take steps to combat exclusive language usage in your own community?*

### Group Membership

A key factor that influences one's self-concept is the groups that one belongs to. Are you involved in your campus's student government, or maybe perform in the arts through choir or theatre or even an improv troupe? Are you involved in a Greek-letter organization on your college campus? Do you play for an athletic team or participate in a campus religious fellowship? Do you follow certain organizations on social media that you feel a part of? Do you have a core group of friends that almost seems to have an identity of its own? Each of those potential group memberships can influence the ways that we see ourselves. In addition, our family unit serves as a group that influences our self-concept; so does the college or university we attend and even the majors and minors we choose. Add to those our cultural group memberships, our civic and social volunteer organizations, and sometimes even our neighborhoods or homeowners' associations. In short, there are many potential

group memberships—formal or informal—a person can use to define their self-concept. For example, Carlos wanted to be a financial planner, so he really got involved in the investment club on campus. In addition, his Portuguese heritage was incredibly important, and he was involved in a Portuguese men's social club back home that was loosely philanthropic while staunchly focused on having fun. In his college town, he played co-ed intramural soccer. Playing that team sport took a surprising amount of his time, and he found himself thinking of his soccer teammates with the same regard that he reserved for his family, another group of people with whom he felt really close. As with Carlos, each person's group memberships contribute to their understanding of themselves.



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## Religion

A final major influence on a person's identity is related to religion in two different ways. First, the religion that someone grew up with and/or currently ascribes to (if any) has a strong impact on how that person sees themselves and their place in the world. In addition, the **religiosity** or degree of adherence to a religion also affects the degree to which that religion (if any) impacts their self-identity. Religions often tackle big questions about what it means to be human, what the purpose of life might be, and how people should ultimately live. Religions may also teach that certain thoughts and behaviors are more desirable than others. Such teachings can impact how people view themselves in relation to not only the larger world around them but also to bigger abstract concepts that can dramatically shape the way people choose to live. Shondra had a church-based upbringing; her particular congregation was relatively accepting of diverse sexual orientations. For example, even though Shondra knew of other local churches that would have probably judged her harshly, when Shondra came to understand that she wasn't heterosexual it didn't impact her faith. In fact, Shondra really wanted to share with her community how accepting and caring some congregations of faith could actually be. Although she felt fortunate to know that her particular church background affirmed every part of her identity, she knew how heart-wrenchingly difficult it might be for people who did not have the benefit of an affirming faith community like hers. For Shondra, her own experiences with a religious identity helped to influence the way she saw herself and the ways she related to others around her.

## Characteristics and Character

Many significant influences on our identity strongly shape how we think about ourselves. At the same time, for people to have inclusive ideas and to work well with others from different backgrounds, sometimes we need to think outside of our own identities. Once we can better understand where we get our identities from and why we might hold the beliefs that we have, we can also begin to better understand that people who are different from ourselves might simply have experienced different things over the course of their lives that led them to appear significantly distinct from us but perhaps quite normal in their own contexts. A recognition of the similarities and differences that emerge among people and that characterize each of us can help us to better navigate our social worlds, while at the same time affording others the needed grace to be unique and accepted on their own terms. In the next section, we explore some of the ways people might live out their own identities, with each component of one's self-concept contributing to a slightly nuanced interpretation about how the world might possibly work.

## IDENTITY THEORIES

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

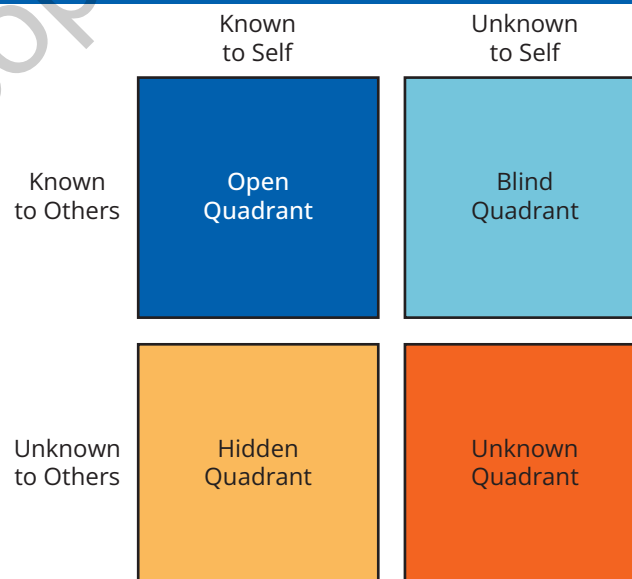
**2.3** Compare some different identity theories.

With all the different ideas of identity formation, how do we describe our own unique self? Given the huge importance a person's self-concept has in their life, it makes sense that people have been studying and theorizing about identity for years. After all, a person's identity not only represents the sum of a person's ideas that they hold about themselves but also likely influences most of the actions and attitudes they exhibit for the rest of their life. Some perspectives about identity may create a better understanding of how we think about our own identity and how we display our identity to others. Others might cause us to think more deeply about what components make up our identity. In exploring these ideas, there are many different perspectives that can offer insight into how and why we have created such a complex understanding of our selves.

### Johari Window

The first perspective on identity focuses on the interplay between a person's self-understanding and the variety of perspectives that other people hold about them. This perspective takes into account the idea that we are always growing in our understanding of ourselves, adding new information about our physical/psychological/social selves, and gaining new perspectives about who we are with each new experience and social encounter that we have. The **Johari window** focuses on highlighting the information that we and others possess about ourselves.<sup>18 19</sup> As shown in Figure 2.1, the Johari window is a representation of the four possible combinations of information that we may or may not know about ourselves and also the information that others may or may not know about us.

**FIGURE 2.1** ■ The Four Quadrants of the Johari Window



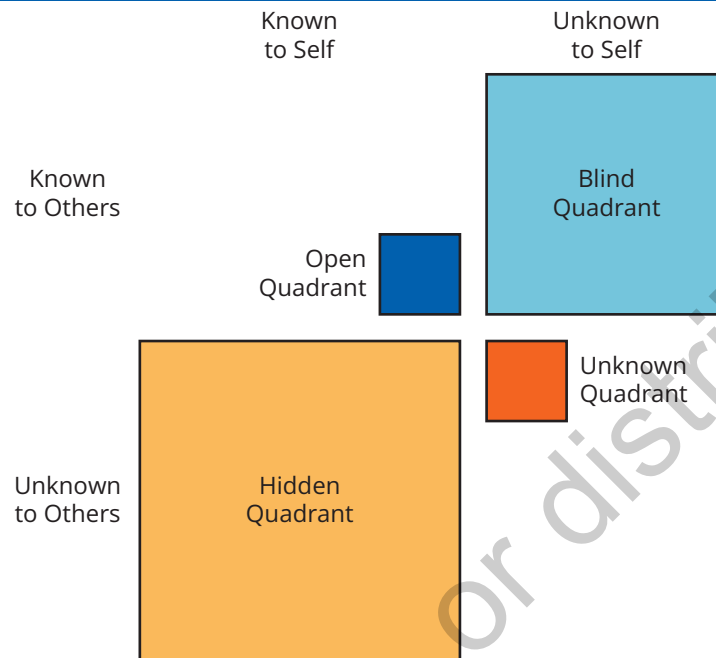


Each of the four “window panes” of the Johari window is called a quadrant, as described below.

- **Open Quadrant** – This first quadrant of the Johari window is comprised of the information we know about ourselves and also the information other people know about us. Typically, this quadrant includes information that others can learn about us through observation (e.g., approximate age or displayed gender) or through interaction (e.g., attitudes, values, and beliefs). For example, Marc is terrified of clowns and spiders and is very vocal about these fears on social media. While these fears aren’t among the first things that someone might learn about him if you don’t know him from his online persona, both of Marc’s specific fears are certainly revealed pretty early in a relationship compared to what might be expected.
- **Blind Quadrant** – This second quadrant of the Johari window includes the information others know about us but that we do not know about ourselves. This information might be relatively obvious to others, or perhaps it might be learned over the course of multiple interactions. For example, Olivia often absentmindedly sings to herself while she works on paintings at her shared studio. Although she is totally oblivious to the fact that she is even singing out loud, much less having thought about the quality of her own singing, other people who share the studio space often talk amongst themselves about how she is quite a good singer and likely has that rare quality of perfect pitch.
- **Hidden Quadrant** – This third quadrant of the Johari window is comprised of the information we know about ourselves but that we don’t share with others. Even though Brian is seen as confident and attractive by the majority of people around him, for example, almost no one knows that he secretly hates the way he looks and has struggled with an eating disorder for years. If it wasn’t for an accidental drunken disclosure to a former roommate, Brian might never have been encouraged to seek the professional help that is proving to have a positive impact on his life.
- **Unknown Quadrant** – This fourth and final quadrant of the Johari window is comprised of information we don’t know about ourselves and that others don’t know either. In fact, it’s possible that no one may *ever* know some of this information about a person. For example, as a trans woman learning to live out her own truth, Marilou is relatively modest and doesn’t wear clothing that exposes much of her body, even while swimming. Unbeknownst to Marilou, she has a concerning mole on her lower back that will be discovered by her chiropractor next week, an important catch that will save her from future problems that could have emerged if she hadn’t caught it in time.

One thing that often confuses people about the Johari window perspective on identity is that the visual representation often makes it seem like each quadrant has a fixed size, with each person only knowing about half the information that could possibly be known about their own self. In fact, the quadrants don’t represent a fixed amount of information, but instead they can change over time as people learn or even forget things about themselves. In Figure 2.2, we see a hypothetical representation of Mia, someone who is relatively private but also spends a lot of time in self-reflection and meditation trying to learn more about herself.

**FIGURE 2.2** ■ The Four Quadrants of the Johari Window Adjusted for Size



## ACTIVATE YOUR LEARNING: DEALING WITH EGOCENTRISM AND IGNORANCE

*Do something with what you've read! Take action based upon the discussion below.*

We can often find ourselves in situations where people don't take the time to listen to our explanations or to hear our perspectives. As a result, they miss out on learning important information that makes us who we are. While this can be irritating in the short term, it can be infuriating when it happens time and time again. In this activity, you'll take four steps to learn how you might keep your cool in a situation where you feel like you were wronged.

**Step One:** Brainstorm a list of the times in your typical day where you are focused on yourself.

These are often times when you are not fully paying attention to the people in your own lives who might end up feeling like you don't care about their experiences and perspectives. What features do each of these moments have in common?

**Step Two:** Journal about a time when you felt unheard or misunderstood. People are often likely to put more faith in their own perspectives, even when confronted with the truth that their perspective might be only one way to look at a situation or even factually incorrect. How did you feel in this situation? What is the impact on your interactions with those people moving forward?

**Step Three:** Make a to-do list of some of the ways that you might take steps to deal with a situation where someone accused you of something that you didn't do. In such situations, people might be aware of themselves but very unaware of the people that they find themselves surrounded by. List some ways that you can make yourself better known and, ultimately, better heard.

**Step Four:** Go and try to have a follow-up conversation with a close friend or partner who you feel didn't fully understand your side of an issue, or who perhaps focused on their own expectations about a situation. What would be a fruitful thing to say in hopes of getting your perspective better understood?

### Looking-Glass Self

Another idea about identity focuses on the way that we use other people to inform our own understanding of the self-concept we are building. The **looking-glass self** perspective claims that we perform our identities to others through both in-person and online contexts, and then use the perceived reactions of those others to alter and refine our understanding of our selves.<sup>20</sup> We use these others as a “mirror” where we can see how others see us and react accordingly, drawing upon their **reflected appraisals** of our self in order to decide the parts of our identity performance that are going well or—alternately—that may need some fine-tuning.

Our performance can include any aspect of the self that is experienced by others and evaluated, whether it be interpersonal interactions or even visual markers of identity like athleisure clothing or a new tattoo. For example, as a college student in the late 1990s, Jean-Michel went through a phase of trying out different identities over the course of a couple months. From getting frosted tips for his hairstyle and then cutting them off, to wearing chunky men’s jewelry and various styles of facial hair, it seemed like Jean-Michel had a different look each week. Not only that, he also played around with the way he acted toward people in his life as well. By observing how people reacted to him—either **confirming** his portrayal of himself by reacting positively or **disconfirming** his portrayal of himself by reacting negatively or with skepticism—Jean-Michel eventually settled on a look and a style that seemed to be the one most favorably viewed by others.



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### Social Identity Theory

One final major theory about identity even goes so far as to claim that our identity *is comprised of* the groups we belong to and that we form our identity directly out of the combination of groups to which we belong. This **social identity theory** says that we define our self-concept based upon the people that surround us in our groups, seeing ourselves as similar to the people who share our group memberships.<sup>21</sup> So, as we discussed earlier in this chapter, not only are our social groupings an important influence on our identity but also constitute or create our identity. Using this perspective, in order to understand a person’s identity one would need to know all the social groupings that person sees as important to who they are. For example, as a gay Asian man, Kenny identified strongly with his sexuality, his race and ethnicity, and his gender. At the same time, he also thought of himself in terms of his social groups—his friends and family, his online followers, and the organizations he belonged to both on and off campus, with his Buddhist temple and his campus Pride Club being among the most influential. At the same time, a few other groups also influenced his sense of self, even though he never really thought much about them.



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Having overcome childhood leukemia at a very young age put him in a category of people who overcame obstacles during their early years. Also, his ongoing struggle with his own body weight also made him think of himself as a member of a group to which he would rather not belong; it's not that Kenny even saw himself as overweight, he just didn't like to be the kind of person that was constantly obsessed with how he looked, so he avoided posting full-body selfies as a result. Most of the groups that comprised his identity made him feel unique and strong. Some of them, however, revealed aspects of himself that he wished he could change. The various group memberships a person identifies with also directly influence how they see themselves.

### Identity and Community Action

Each of these theories gives us greater insight into the ways we construct our own identities and live in community with one another. At the same time, we move throughout others' communities, learning about who they are and how we all fit into our larger shared social context. In so doing, we can recognize problems and pain points in others' communal lives while being somewhat blind to those in our own communities and contexts. By seeking to facilitate a just and equitable society, sometimes we need to roll up our sleeves and get to work in getting to know and laboring alongside dissimilar others while also confronting any uncomfortable truths we might discover about our own contexts. Interestingly, the first step is often communication—listening carefully to the identity experiences of folks who might initially seem very different from ourselves. At the same time, we are also constantly managing our own identities in our own communities and beyond through our interpersonal interactions and our online presence. In the next section, we'll explore the ways that individuals can use this learned information to successfully curate a responsible public sense of self to both known and unknown others.

## IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

2.4 Discuss the ways people manage their identities with others.

What are the ways that people present themselves to known and unknown others? Social relationships are incredibly important to an individual's identity, and we aren't able to fully give others a useful picture of ourselves unless we work to share our identity with them. As we discussed earlier in the chapter when talking about self-esteem, each person may evaluate certain aspects of their own self more highly than they do other aspects. As a result, people can be motivated to highlight certain aspects of themselves in some situations and to highlight (or even hide) other aspects of themselves in other situations. Interestingly, it's not always our best features that we want to highlight all the time, because sometimes we want to appear in a less positive light in order to manage our relationships with certain people in very specific ways. For example, Catalina was thrilled to invite her whole family to her

quinceañera, but she was most excited that her sixteen-year old crush, Rico, was going to be one of her *chambelanes* at the event. Because of this, however, Catalina tried a little too hard to act older and more mature, even going as far as rebuffing some of her younger cousins because she “didn’t have time to do kid stuff anymore.” Even though her goal was to put some distance between herself and her cousins, Catalina accidentally ended up distancing Rico when he saw how rude she was acting. Apparently, Catalina played “off-putting” a little too well for his tastes. Sometimes, the very behaviors that we use to try to act differently end up limiting our success in performing a specific identity.

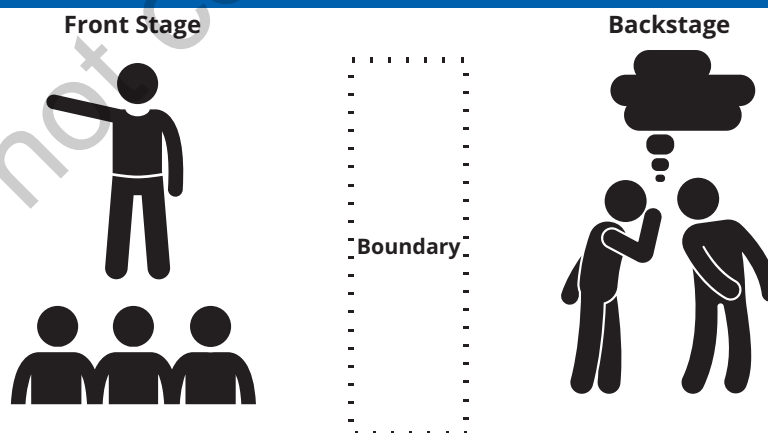


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### Dramaturgical Perspective

The most widely known perspective on how people manage their identities was first popularized during the mid twentieth century, using the theatre as a metaphor. The **Dramaturgical Perspective** argues that one’s identity is a performance made up of a variety of roles.<sup>22</sup> We play those roles as part of our **impression management**, behaving in a manner that causes other others to see us the way we want to be seen. As shown in Figure 2.3, the dramaturgical perspective uses the metaphor of a theatrical performance, where each individual person is playing their role(s) much like an actor might play a character on stage to an **audience**. In an online mediated environment, such a perspective becomes even more obvious, where people are only posting information that supports the roles they have selected. According to this perspective, an individual actively manages an audience’s impressions of them when they present themselves with **front stage** behaviors. These behaviors include activities and even ways of changing one’s physical appearance to help play a role within a specific context. Aleksandra, for instance, desperately wants other people to think she is friendly and trustworthy, so she is constantly smiling and talking about how loyal a friend she can be to those people that she cares about.

FIGURE 2.3 ■ The Dramaturgical Perspective



Source: Holmberg, C., et al. (2018). Self-presentation in digital media among adolescent patients with obesity: Striving for integrity, risk-reduction, and social recognition. *DIGITAL HEALTH*, 4, 205520761880760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2055207618807603>



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An individual can let go of their front stage behaviors when they are in a **backstage** situation, one where they feel as though they don't have to pretend anymore and can somewhat relax their behavior. For some people, a backstage situation only occurs when they are alone and unworried that their behavior might be observed (or posted about). For others a backstage situation might occur with certain relationships where they feel they can set aside most (if not all) of their performances, only playing the role of the relational partner to that person who makes them feel comfortable. For example, Darren has a tough job where he feels as though he needs to present himself as macho and in control of every situation,

but his employees would likely never imagine that when he gets home at the end of the day he likes the ritual of relaxing in a bath with a glass of wine and a good book to take his mind off work.

Finally, the **wings**—a term describing the hidden sides of the stage that an audience cannot see—include those things that can support one's successful performance of a role, having those **props** (or even people) that can aid in the successful performance of a role. For example, Kristin wears a smart blazer and an updo that she styles to seem most professional, and she has hired an assistant to handle a variety of additional mundane details so that she can appear extra competent in her career. When she gets home from work, she takes a minute to decompress in the car before walking in to greet her family, usually taking down her hair and leaving her briefcase in the car to retrieve later, plastering her face with a smile in order to look warm and caring as she manages her relationship with her family the minute she walks through the door.

### Self-Monitoring

One of the ways we can work to ensure that people see us in the ways that we want to be seen is by paying extra attention to the way that we present ourselves and whether we are successful in so doing. By engaging in what is known as **self-monitoring**, we focus some of our energy towards attending to the social messages that we make available to people, including visual messages, auditory messages, and any other sense-related messages or cues that can be perceived by people around us.<sup>23</sup> Although almost everyone engages in self-monitoring to some degree, people can vary widely in the amount of attention and effort they put towards presenting themselves in the way they desire. A person who is a “high self-monitor,” for example, often puts a great deal of attention into observing and engaging the people around them, looking for any possible opportunity to present themselves in the way they want to be seen.

Take Zach, for instance, who just became a part owner of a gym and is always looking for new members. While his social media is always pristinely curated, he takes just as much care in the way he looks and acts in everyday life. After all, to him every interaction is an opportunity to sell another gym membership. Cherylynn, on the other hand, is a “low self-monitor,” seeming to care hardly at all about how people see her. As a longtime teacher with adult children, she feels she has no one left to impress. In some ways, she's not wrong: people are not impressed with her in early interactions, and she only lets her warm personality take center stage once she really knows someone well.



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## APPLY WHAT YOU'D DO: COMPETENCE IN MONITORING

*Take action! Apply what you have learned to the situation and the characters below.*

*Have you ever acted on an impulse when you shouldn't have? Have you ever written an email in a burst of anger that you regretted as soon as you clicked "send"?*

*It is well-documented that people tend to send or post messages in the heat of the moment that they would otherwise never say to someone in a typical face-to-face context. How can people using electronic communication do a better job of monitoring their own self-presentation online? Unfortunately, most communication is irreversible, even if it is ultimately forgivable. What thoughts do you have about how to ensure that you don't find yourself in a situation where you communicate in the heat of the moment without taking time to monitor your own messaging?*

*The next time you receive frustrating news via email or text, take a deep breath and walk away for a while to clear your head. Once you're in a calmer place, you can compose your response. But instead of sending your response right away, put it aside for a short while, then reread it with fresh eyes, considering how you might react if you received the very email or text you're about to send. Based on what you learned by using those fresh eyes, modify your messaging to avoid the problems that often arise from impulsive communication.*

### Curated Connections

Many of us are very good at talking about the benefits of diverse connections and embracing difference. Interestingly, one way we can learn about our own inclusivity is by scrolling through our photos on our mobile phones, or looking at the photos we have recently posted on Instagram. While we may present ourselves in a variety of ways online, take a moment to look at who else might be visible in those photos. A careful inspection of our own contexts might be one way that we can quickly learn about how much diversity we actually embrace in our daily lives. If your feed is mostly dominated by people who have the same characteristics as yourself, maybe you need to reconsider not only how you see yourself but also how you live out your values. In the next section, we move beyond our desires to present ourselves in a particular way and actually confront the specific ways that our self-concept can influence the daily experiences we have with one another.

## PERCEIVING AND ENGAGING OTHERS

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

**2.5** Explain the ways that identity shapes human interaction.

Why does identity shape the ways we interact with other people? Human socialization forms the basis for our understanding of who we are and who we might become. From our earliest interactions with families and caretakers at a very young age, we begin to build an understanding of who we are in relation to the people around us. Scholars have even highlighted that it is this ability to engage others socially that has led to the survival of our species—the ability to learn about ourselves and our environment from others allows us to develop a rich and complex set of values, beliefs, skills, and behaviors that could not be acquired by one person over the course of a

lifetime spent without others.<sup>24</sup> Part of this important knowledge relates to our understanding of ourselves and others, both an individual identity and social identity that emerges through communication with the very people we encounter in our daily lives.

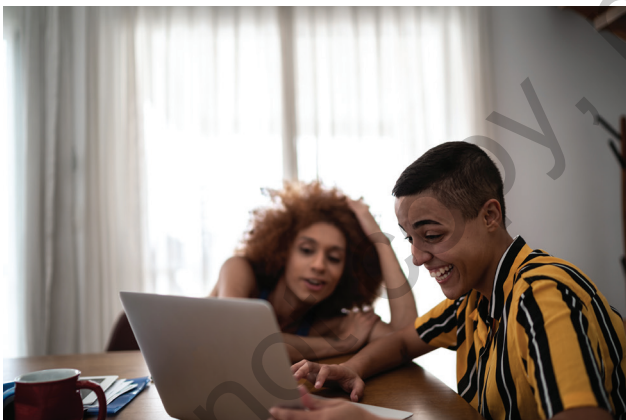
### Schemata

As we embody our identity through the normal rituals of everyday life, we are able to create increasingly nuanced understandings of that identity.<sup>25</sup> Each interaction with people gives us small amounts of additional information that help us better understand who we are, who others perceive us to be, and how to best present ourselves in future interactions with diverse others.



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At the same time, we are also developing a complex understanding of those other people as well, creating additional **schemata** that serve as frameworks of understanding ourselves, others, and how those others relate to ourselves. As someone who lives next to an international border, for example, Xavier has had limited contact with the English-speaking world. However, much of his understanding of European Americans is based on the somewhat harried and abrupt individuals who are ending their long vacations by interacting with his local community. As a result, Xavier has a complex understanding of what to expect from those exhausted tourists, despite rarely encountering one directly. He'll likely follow that cultural script he has created until he learns otherwise through direct experience.



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Something particularly unique about the schemata we create is our ultimate reliance on them. Clearly, we build these complex understanding of others to help us navigate our social and online worlds, but then we can become reliant upon those schemata regardless of how tested or true they may actually be. If we find ourselves in a situation, we often resort to relying on stereotypes created by these schemata, behaving in ways we imagine to be correct regardless of the actual truth of the interaction. For instance, Timothy and Petra have been roommates for years, and they both share a romantic interest in women that allows them to have frank and honest conversations about their dating lives. Because of their close relationship and positive attitudes towards one

another, each roommate finds that their frameworks for understanding larger groups of people who are different from themselves are subtly influenced by the other. Petra, for example, tends to make a lot of assumptions about men's dating lives based on her roommate Tim's views, thus viewing all men as bumbling and clueless even though that may not always be accurate or fair. Tim, on the other hand, has created a schemata for understanding lesbian relationships based on his roommate's interpersonal experiences, a schemata that he incorrectly assumes is normal when observing Petra in relationships. In fact, those behaviors might actually prove really quite idiosyncratic to Petra herself and not represent the larger community.



## Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

A final interesting phenomenon that can emerge as a result of individuals living out their identities in social contexts involves a focus on those expectations we hold about the likely reactions of others. A **self-fulfilling prophecy** is what happens when someone has expectations about their own abilities or identities, and the simple act of having those opinions or ideas ultimately leads those expectations to become realized. Put simply, we think something is going to happen so we subconsciously work to confirm our presuppositions. An excellent example of a self-fulfilling prophecy can happen in the public speaking situations that we will discuss later in Chapters 13, 14, and 15. When people give a speech feeling well-prepared, confident, and excited about the opportunity, they are more likely to succeed. Similarly, people who are terrified and certain of their failure are actually likely to do more poorly than those who have created a sense of confidence. Why might this be? Someone who is confident appears more relaxed and relatable to an audience, allowing for a connection to develop which actually aids in the successful performance of a speech. On the other hand, someone who has convinced themselves that they are going to fail are probably going to interpret every single situation that arises during a speech as evidence of failure, leading to a visible downward spiral of fear and anxiety that ultimately hurts their overall performance and connection with an audience.



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We can experience a similar self-fulfilling prophecy when dealing with the performance of our own identities, as well. Using positive self-talk to have more confidence and a more favorable sense of self can result in a positive self-portrayal that ultimately makes one seem more likable and charismatic. Acting confident and self-assured can make people think more highly of you and your opinion. Curating your online presence to highlight your best characteristics can help you eventually come to terms with the parts of yourself that you are less comfortable with. Even something as simple as appearing to be confident (e.g., making oneself larger, thrusting out one's chest, and using big gestures) before encountering someone can actually make you feel and behave more confidently.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the rest of this textbook, we'll highlight simple strategies you can take to enhance your skills at communication and competent messaging. We'll also discuss specific strategies for self-presentation that can aid in you in embodying your desired self-concept.

### EXCHANGE NEW IDEAS: RECENT AND RESILIENT

*Learn from experienced professionals. How might you take action on their ideas?*

**Lisa Nunn is a sociologist who studies college students and how different colleges create their own particular campus culture. She interviews both first-generation and continuing-generation college students to learn if they feel at home, if it was easy to find true friends, and if they feel comfortable in their classes. Colleges and universities all across the United States have been eager to hear about her research findings, inviting her to visit campus and give talks and workshops for their faculty and staff. She joins us to talk about the importance of being in a place where we feel like we belong.**

**What was your experience like as a first-generation college student? What do you know now that you wish you had known during your college years?**

*I'm glad you asked this. Technically I'm not a first-generation college student because my mom has a BS, but I share a lot of the typical traits that first-gen students have. That might be because although my mom has a college degree, she wasn't around or available very much when I was applying to college and going to college. I didn't have her knowledge and experiences to learn from. Many continuing-generation college students get lots and lots of advice from their parents on everything from filling out their applications to how to talk to professors to how to handle a roommate who is a jerk. I wish I would have known how to ask more questions, especially about my financial aid. Now I know you can just walk into the financial aid office and talk to someone who has all the answers. But I never did that. I didn't know that I could and I felt intimidated in those offices. My loans and scholarship package allowed me to buy not just textbooks but other supplies at the bookstore too, all on the account. But I didn't know that until my second year. I was spending my precious waitressing tip money on paper, pens, folders, ink. Money that could've gone to gas or summer rent or fresher food. Like many first-gen students my first impulse was always to try and figure things out on my own rather than finding someone else to help me. If I needed more notebooks, I just picked up an extra shift at work; it never occurred to me to go ask some office whether my loans would cover it.*

**How is being the first person in a family to go to college tied to one's identity?**

*Most first-gen students I interviewed for my research were extremely proud to be the first in their families to go to college. Their body language even showed it: they sat up taller and smiled wider and spoke more confidently when they talked about it. They described feeling like a role model for their younger siblings and cousins. Paving the way for their whole family to get to college too. Some happily told me that their parents brag to their friends and neighbors about them. First-gen students in general are incredibly motivated and eager to be successful in college, and it's partly because they want to make their families proud. They also want to honor the sacrifices many of their parents made to get them where they are, to be able to prioritize their education. It means everything to be in college.*

**How can people of all backgrounds work to better prepare students for adjusting to college life?**

*We can simply assume that students don't know how to navigate college. Not in an insulting way, but in a helpful way, in a welcoming way. We should pepper students with unsolicited advice, such as: "Did you know you can take an extra class for no extra cost if you stay under 18 units? You can even take a rec class for fun like dance or swimming or yoga." Or "Did you know there is a tutoring center just for math classes?" Or "Did you know the career center will look over your resume for free?" or "Did you know the library is having an event tonight? Learn how to look up references easily for your next paper and eat some free pizza." Just advice on anything and everything, especially things that we think students already know because those are the things they'll never think of to ask.*

**How can a first-generation student use their communication skills to better navigate those first months/years in college?**

*I would recommend trying to develop a habit of checking in with others. Try to get comfortable with asking: "Hey, am I doing this right?" Someone might be able to save you a whole lot of time and energy by pointing you in the right direction when you are trying to figure things out. That includes roommates and friends as people to check in with. It includes professors and TAs. "Am I doing this right?" is an excellent thing to ask in office hours about an assignment or the way you take notes and study for tests. It also includes all the people who work in all the offices on campus. Remember that colleges only exist because students exist. You will not be bothering them if you email or go in with a question. That's what they do. That's what they are there for: you.*

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Whether confronting people who think differently from ourselves, navigating new cultures and communities, or standing in solidarity with people who see themselves much differently, we can each take small steps towards creating opportunity for each person to live out their

own truths more freely. We all have different ideas about who we are, and this self-concept influences the ways that we communicate and interact with the people we encounter during our daily life. From our earliest years, our sense of self is constructed based upon our understanding of our families, our racial and ethnic heritage, how we relate to our sexual identity and gender, and the groups and communities we belong to. Because of the significance of our identities across the course of the lifespan, scholars have developed complex ways to help us understand and interpret not only the behaviors of others but also of ourselves. Living in community with other people gives us opportunities to test and refine our understanding of who we are. It also allows us the opportunity to present ourselves in the ways we want to be seen. Importantly, we can each take positive steps to affirm the ways others want to be seen, as well. Each person has the right to their own sense of self, and it is a good practice to not only tolerate but also frequently affirm many of the individual choices that people make in understanding the diversity of their own experiences. Communication is all about how we present ourselves to our audience, and that includes not only the others we encounter but also our own selves.

### KEY TERMS

androgynous	Johari window
audience	looking-glass self
backstage	open quadrant
biological sex	props
blind quadrant	race
confirming	reflected appraisals
disconfirming	religiosity
dramaturgical perspective	schemata
ethnicity	self-concept
front stage	self-esteem
gender	self-fulfilling prophecy
gender-fluid	self-monitoring
hidden quadrant	social identity theory
identity	unknown quadrant
impression management	wings

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is your own self-esteem? What experiences have contributed to your understanding of yourself?
2. What factors do you think were most influential in creating your understanding of who you are?
3. Based on the reading of this chapter, which identity theory most resonates with you?
4. What steps can you take to present yourself in the way you want to be seen?
5. How are other people likely being impacted by your identity in the ways they interact?

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