

Figure 1.3
Linear Model of
Communication

Source: Adapted from
Shannon & Weaver,
1949.

Communication theorists create **models**, or simplified representations of complex interrelationships among elements in the communication process, which allow us to visually understand a sometimes complex process. Although there are many communication models, we discuss the three most prominent ones here. In discussing these models and their underlying approaches, we wish to demonstrate the manner in which communication has been conceptualized over the years.

Communication as Action: The Linear Model

In 1949, Claude Shannon, a Bell Laboratories scientist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Warren Weaver, a consultant on projects at the Sloan Foundation, described communication as a linear process. They were concerned with radio and telephone technology and wanted to develop a model that could explain how information passed through various channels. The result was the conceptualization of the **linear model of communication**.

This approach to human communication comprises several key elements, as Figure 1.3 demonstrates. A **source**, or transmitter of a message, sends a **message** to a **receiver**, the recipient of the message. The receiver is the person who makes sense out of the message. All of this communication takes place in a **channel**, which is the pathway to communication. Channels frequently correspond to the visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory senses. Thus, you use the visual channel when you see your roommate, and you use the tactile channel when you hug your parent.

models

simplified representations of the communication process

linear model of communication

one-way view of communication that assumes a message is sent by a source to a receiver through a channel

source

originator of a message

message

words, sounds, actions, or gestures in an interaction

receiver

recipient of a message

channel

pathway to communication

noise

distortion in channel not intended by the source

semantic noise

linguistic influences on reception of message

physical (external) noise

bodily influences on reception of message

psychological noise

cognitive influences on reception of message

physiological noise

biological influences on reception of message

Communication also involves **noise**, which is anything not intended by the informational source. There are four types of noise. First, **semantic noise** pertains to the slang, jargon, or specialized language used by individuals or groups. For instance, when Jennifer received a medical report from her ophthalmologist, the physician's words included phrases such as "ocular neuritis," "dilated fundusoscopic examination," and "papillary conjunctival changes." This is an example of semantic noise because outside of the medical community, these words have limited (or no) meaning. **Physical**, or **external**, **noise** exists outside of the receiver. **Psychological noise** refers to a communicator's prejudices, biases, and predispositions toward another or the message. To exemplify these two types, imagine listening to participants at a political rally. You may experience psychological noise listening to the views of a politician whom you do not support, and you may also experience physical noise from the people nearby who may be protesting the politician's presence. Finally, **physiological noise** refers to the biological influences on the communication process. Physiological noise, then, exists if you or a speaker is ill, fatigued, or hungry.

Although this view of the communication process was highly respected many years ago, the approach is very limited for several reasons. First, the model presumes that there is only one message in the communication process. Yet we all can point to a number of circumstances in which we send several messages at once. Second, as we have previously noted, communication does not have a definable beginning and ending. Shannon and Weaver's model presumes this mechanistic orientation. Furthermore, to suggest that communication is simply one person speaking to another oversimplifies the complex communication process. Listeners are not so passive, as we can all confirm when we are in heated arguments with others. Clearly, communication is more than a one-way effort and has no definable middle or end (Anderson & Ross, 2002).

Communication as Interaction: The Interactional Model

The linear model suggests that a person is only a sender or a receiver. That is a narrow view of the participants in the communication process. Wilbur Schramm (1954), therefore, proposed that we also examine the relationship between a sender and a receiver. He conceptualized the **interactional model of communication**, which emphasizes the two-way communication process between communicators (Figure 1.4). In other words, communication goes in two directions: from sender to receiver and from receiver to sender. This circular process suggests that communication is ongoing. The interactional view illustrates that a person can perform the role of either sender or receiver during an interaction, but not both roles simultaneously.

One element essential to the interactional model of communication is **feedback**, or the response to a message. Feedback may be verbal or nonverbal, intentional or unintentional. Feedback helps communicators to know whether or not their message is being received and the extent to which meaning is achieved. In the interactional model, feedback takes place after a message is received, not during the message itself.

interactional**model of communication**

view of communication as the sharing of meaning with feedback that links source and receiver

feedback

communication given to the source by the receiver to indicate understanding (meaning)

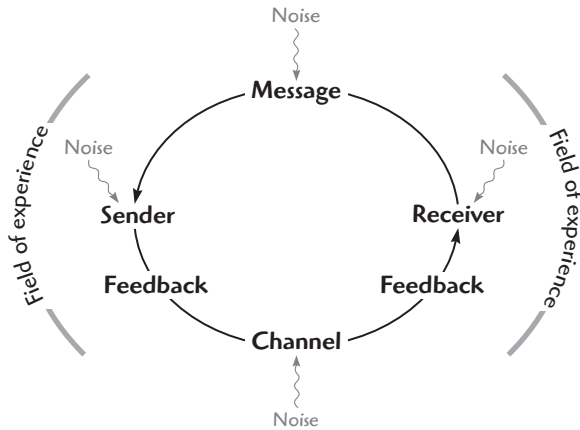


Figure 1.4
Interactional Model of
Communication

To illustrate the critical nature of feedback and the interactional model of communication, consider our opening example of the Bollen family. When Eddy’s parents find him on the couch drunk, they proceed to tell Eddy how they feel about his behavior. Their outcry prompts Eddy to argue with his parents, who in turn, tell him to leave their house immediately. This interactional sequence shows that there is an alternating nature in the communication between Eddy and his parents. They see his behavior and provide their feedback on it, Eddy listens to their message and responds, then his father sends the final message telling his son to leave. We can take this even further by noting the door slam as one additional feedback behavior in the interaction.

A final feature of the interactional model is a person’s **field of experience**, or how a person’s culture, experiences, and heredity influence his or her ability to communicate with another. Each person brings a unique field of experience to each communication episode, and these experiences frequently influence the communication between people. For instance, when two people come together and begin dating, the two inevitably bring their fields of experience into the relationship. One person in this couple may have been raised in a large family with several siblings, while the other may be an only child. These experiences (and others) will necessarily influence how the two come together and will most likely affect how they maintain their relationship.

field of experience
overlap of sender’s
and receiver’s culture,
experiences, and
heredity in
communication

Like the linear view, the interactional model has been criticized. The interactional model suggests that one person acts as sender while the other acts as receiver in a communication encounter. As you have experienced, however, people communicate as both senders and receivers in a single encounter. But the prevailing criticism of the interactional model pertains to the issue of feedback. The interactional view assumes two people speaking and listening, but not at the same time. But what occurs when a person sends a nonverbal message during an interaction? Smiling, frowning, or simply moving away from the conversation during an interaction between two people happens all the time. For example, in an interaction between a mother and her daughter, the mother may be reprimanding her child while simultaneously “reading” the

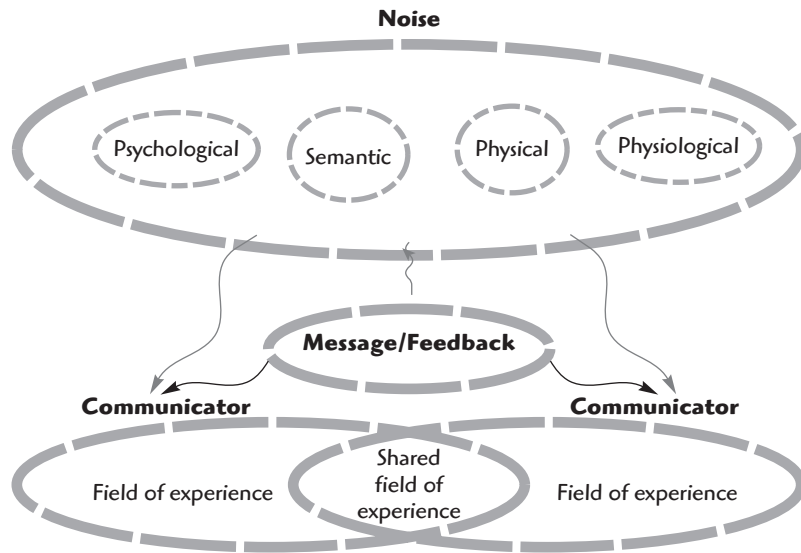


Figure 1.5
Transactional
Model of
Communication

child's nonverbal behavior. Is the girl laughing? Is she upset? Is she even listening to her mother? Each of these behaviors will inevitably prompt the mother to modify her message. These criticisms and contradictions inspired development of a third model of communication.

Communication as Transaction: The Transactional Model

The transactional model of communication (Barnlund, 1970; Frymier, 2005; Wilmot, 1987) underscores the simultaneous sending and receiving of messages in a communication episode, as Figure 1.5 shows. To say that communication is transactional means that the process is cooperative; the sender and the receiver are mutually responsible for the effect and the effectiveness of communication. In the linear model of communication, meaning is sent from one person to another. In the interactional model, meaning is achieved through the feedback of a sender and a receiver. In the transactional model, people build shared meaning. Furthermore, what people say during a transaction is greatly influenced by their past experience. So, for instance, at a college fair, it is likely that a college student will have a great deal to say to a high school senior because of the college student's experiences in class and around campus. A college senior will, no doubt, have a different view of college than, say, a college sophomore, due in large part to his or her past college experiences.

Transactional communication requires us to recognize the influence of one message on another. One message builds on the previous message; therefore, there is an interdependency between and among the components of communication. A change in one causes a change in others. Furthermore, the transactional model presumes that as we simultaneously send and receive messages, we attend to both verbal and nonverbal elements of a message. In a sense, communicators negotiate meaning. For instance, if a friend asks you about

transactional model of communication
view of communication as the simultaneous sending and receiving of messages

your family background, you may use some private language that your friend doesn't understand. Your friend may make a face while you are presenting your message, indicating some sort of confusion with what you've said. As a result, you will most likely back up and define your terms and then continue with the conversation. This example highlights the degree to which two people are actively involved in a communication encounter. The nonverbal communication is just as important as the verbal message in such a transactional process.

Earlier we noted that the field of experience functions in the interactional model. In the transactional model, the fields of experience exist, but overlap occurs. That is, rather than person A and person B having separate fields of experience, eventually the two fields merge (see Figure 1.5). This was an important addition to the understanding of the communication process because it demonstrates an active process of understanding. That is, for communication to take place, individuals must build shared meaning. For instance, in our earlier example of two people with different childhoods, the interactional model suggests that they would come together with an understanding of their backgrounds. The transactional model, however, requires each of them to understand and incorporate the other's field of experience into his or her life. For example, it's not enough for Julianna to know that Paul has a prior prison record; the transactional view holds that she must figure out a way to put his past into perspective. Will it affect their current relationship? How? If not, how will Julianna discuss it with Paul? The transactional model takes the meaning-making process one step further than the interactional model. It assumes reciprocity, or shared meaning.

You now have a basic understanding of how we define communication, and we have outlined the basic elements and a few communication models. Recall this interpretation as you read the book and examine the various theories. It is likely that you will interpret communication differently from one theory to another. Remember that theorists set boundaries in their discussions about human behavior, and, consequently, they often define *communication* according to their own view. One of our goals in this book is to enable you to articulate the role that communication plays in a number of different theories.

Thus far, we have examined the communication process and unpacked the complexity associated with it. We have identified the primary models of communication, trying to demonstrate the evolution and maturation of the communication field. We now explore a component that is a necessary and vital part of every communication episode: ethics.

Ethics and Communication

In the movie *The Insider*, which was based on a true story, the lead character's name is Jeffrey Wigand, a former tobacco scientist who violated a contractual agreement and exposed a cigarette maker's efforts to include addictive ingredients in all cigarettes. The movie shows Wigand as a man of good conscience with the intention of telling the public about the company and its immoral