Defining Communication

Our first task is to create a common understanding for the term *communication*. Defining *communication* can be challenging. Katherine Miller (2005) underscores this dilemma, stating that "conceptualizations of communication have been abundant and have changed substantially over the years" (p. 3). Sarah Trenholm (1991) notes that although the study of communication has been around for centuries, it does not mean communication is well understood. In fact, Trenholm provocatively illustrates the dilemma when defining the term. She states "Communication has become a sort of 'portmanteau' term. Like a piece of luggage, it is overstuffed with all manner of odd ideas and
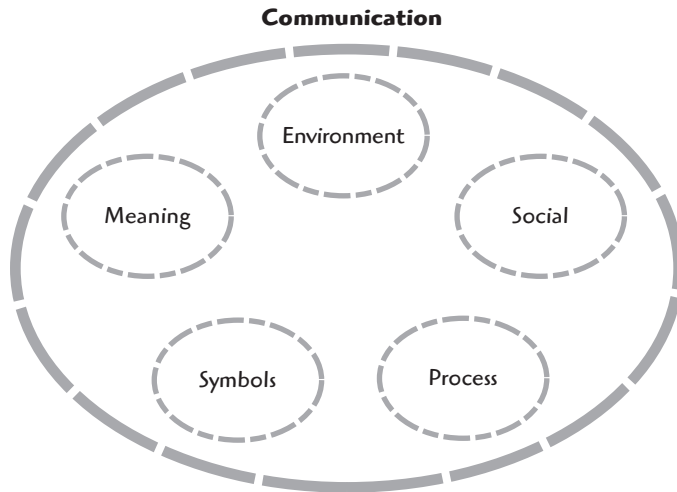
Communication

Figure 1.1
Key Terms in Defining Communication

meanings. The fact that some of these do fit, resulting in a conceptual suitcase much too heavy for anyone to carry, is often overlooked" (p. 4).

We should note that there are many ways to interpret and define *communication*—a result of the complexity and richness of the communication discipline. Imagine, for instance, taking this course from two different professors. Each would have his or her way of presenting the material, and each classroom of students would approach communication theory in a unique manner. The result would be two exciting and distinctive approaches to studying the same topic.

This uniqueness holds true with defining *communication*. Scholars tend to see human phenomena from their own perspectives, something we delve into further in the next chapter. In some ways, researchers establish boundaries when they try to explain phenomena to others. Communication scholars may approach the interpretation of communication differently because of differences in scholarly values. With these caveats in mind, we offer the following definition of *communication* to get us pointed in the same direction. **Communication** is a social process in which individuals employ symbols to establish and interpret meaning in their environment. We necessarily draw in elements of mediated communication as well in our discussion, given the importance that communication technology plays in contemporary society. With that in mind, let's define five key terms in our perspective: *social, process, symbols, meaning,* and *environment* (Figure 1.1).

First, we believe that communication is a social process. When interpreting communication as **social,** we mean to suggest that it involves people and interactions, whether face-to-face or online. This necessarily includes two people, who act as senders and receivers. Both play an integral role in the communication process. When communication is social, it involves people who come to an interaction with various intentions, motivations, and abilities. To suggest that communication is a **process** means that it is ongoing and unending. Communication is also dynamic, complex, and continually changing. With this view of

communication
A social process in which individuals employ symbols to establish and interpret meaning in their environment

social
the notion that people and interactions are part of the communication process

process
ongoing, dynamic, and unending occurrence

communication, we emphasize the dynamics of making meaning. Therefore, communication has no definable beginning and ending. For example, although Jimmy and Angie Bollen may tell their son that he must leave the house, their discussions with him and about him will continue well after he leaves. In fact, the conversation they have with Eddy today will most likely affect their communication with him tomorrow. Similarly, our past communications with people have been stored in their minds and have affected their conversations with us.

The process nature of communication also means that much can happen from the beginning of a conversation to the end. People may end up at a very different place once a discussion begins. This is exemplified by the frequent conflicts that roommates, spouses, and siblings experience. Although a conversation may begin with absolute and inflexible language, the conflict may be resolved with compromise. All of this can occur in a matter of minutes.

Individual and cultural changes affect communication. Conversations between siblings, for example, seem to have shifted from the 1950s to today. Years ago, siblings rarely discussed the impending death of a parent. Today, it's not uncommon to listen to children talking about nursing home care, home health care, and even funeral arrangements. The 1950s was a time of postwar euphoria; couples were reunited after World War II and the baby boom began. Today, with an ongoing U.S. troop presence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere around the world, Americans rarely experience the euphoria they once had. The tensions and uncertainties are too vivid. As you can see, perceptions and feelings can change and may remain in flux for quite some time.

Some of you may be thinking that because the communication process is dynamic and unique it is virtually impossible to study. However, C. Arthur VanLear (1996) argues that because the communication process is so dynamic, researchers and theorists can look for patterns over time. He concludes that "if we recognize a pattern across a large number of cases, it permits us to 'generalize' to other unobserved cases" (p. 36). Or, as communication pioneers Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson (1967) suggest, the interconnectedness of communication events is critical and pervasive. Thus, it *is* possible to study the dynamic communication process.

To help you visualize this process, imagine a continuum where the points are unrepeatable and irreversible. Frank Dance (1967) depicts the communication process by using a spiral, or helix (Figure 1.2). He believes that

Figure 1.2
Communication Process as a Helix
Source: Reprinted by permission of Frank E. X. Dance.
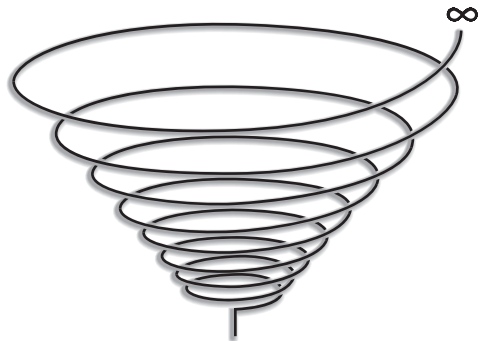
communication experiences are cumulative and are influenced by the past. He notes that present experiences inevitably influence a person's future, and so he emphasizes a nonlinear view of the process. Communication, therefore, can be considered a process that changes over time and among interactants.

A third term associated with our definition of communication is *symbols*. A **symbol** is an arbitrary label or representation of phenomena. Words are symbols for concepts and things—for example, the word *love* represents the idea of love; the word *chair* represents a thing we sit on. Labels may be ambiguous, may be both verbal and nonverbal, and may occur in face-to-face and mediated communication. Symbols are usually agreed on within a group but may not be understood outside of the group. In this way, their use is often arbitrary. For instance, most college students understand the phrase "this course has no prereqs"; those outside of college may not understand its meaning. Further, there are both **concrete symbols** (the symbol represents an object) and **abstract symbols** (the symbol stands for a thought or idea).

Robin Toner (2008, May 4) of the *New York Times* underscored the importance of symbols during presidential elections. She states that in 1988, presidential candidate Michael Dukakis vetoed legislation that would have required students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. This veto was later used by George H.W. Bush to question the patriotism of Dukakis. In much the same way, as a 2008 presidential candidate, Barack Obama's earlier decision to campaign without wearing a lapel pin depicting the American flag drew questions about his patriotism. Despite Obama's assertion, that the "pins had become a substitute for true patriotism" (Rutenberg & Zeleny, 2008), he eventually wore the flag lapel pin. Clearly, symbolic meaning can be significant.

In addition to process and symbols, meaning is central to our definition of communication. **Meaning** is what people extract from a message. In communication episodes, messages can have more than one meaning and even multiple layers of meaning. Without sharing some meanings, we would all have a difficult time speaking the same language or interpreting the same event. Judith Martin and Tom Nakayama (2008) point out that meaning has cultural consequences:

> [W]hen President George W. Bush was about to go to war in Iraq, he referred to this war as a 'crusade.' The use of this term evoked strong negative reactions in the Islamic world, due to the history of the Crusades nearly 1,000 years ago . . . While President Bush may not have knowingly wanted to frame the Iraq invasion as a religious war against Muslims, the history of the Crusades may make others feel that it is (p. 70).

Clearly, not all meaning is shared, and people do not always know what others mean. In these situations, we must be able to explain, repeat, and clarify. For example, if the Bollens want to tell Eddy to move out, they will probably need to go beyond telling him that they just need their "space." Eddy may perceive "needing space" as simply staying out of the house two nights a week. Furthermore, his parents will have to figure out what communication "approach" is best. They might believe that being direct may be best to get their son out of the house. Or they might fear that such clear communication is not the most

symbol
arbitrary label given to a phenomenon

concrete symbol
symbol representing an object

abstract symbol
symbol representing an idea or thought

meaning
what people extract from a message

effective strategy to change Eddy's behavior. Regardless of how Jimmy and Angie Bollen communicate their wishes, without sharing the same meaning, the family will have a challenging time getting their messages across to one another.

The final key term in our definition of communication is *environment*. **Environment** is the situation or context in which communication occurs. The environment includes a number of elements, including time, place, historical period, relationship, and a speaker's and listener's cultural backgrounds. You can understand the influence of environments by thinking about your beliefs and values pertaining to socially significant topics such as same-sex marriage, physician-assisted suicide, and immigration into the United States. If you have had personal experience with any of these topics, it's likely your views are affected by your perceptions. Or, consider the time in history as another influential factor. Less than fifteen years ago, the idea that gay men and lesbians could marry was unthinkable. With the 2004 law in Massachusetts, the rights of gay and lesbian Americans to marry were affirmed in that state. Clearly, the environment and all of its components influence communication and behavior.

The environment can also be mediated. By that, we mean that communication can take place with technological assistance. It's highly likely that all of you have communicated in some sort of mediated environment; namely, through e-mail, chat rooms, or social networking sites. These mediated environments influence the communication between two people in that people in electronic relationships are not able to observe each other's eye behavior, listen to vocal characteristics, or watch body movement. This mediated environment has received a great deal of attention over the years as communication theory continues to develop (Aakhus, 2007).

environment
situation or context in which communication occurs