Seven Contexts in the Communication Field

In order to make the communication field and the communication process more understandable and manageable we now look at the various contexts of communication. What is a context? **Contexts** are environments in which communication takes place. Contexts provide a backdrop against which researchers and theorists can analyze phenomena. Contexts also provide clarity. Our discussion of context focuses on **situational contexts.** To suggest that a context is situationally based means that the communication process is limited by a number of factors—namely, the number of people, the degree of space between interactants, the extent of feedback, and the available channels.

Earlier we noted that the communication field is very diverse and offers various research opportunities. This can be a bit cumbersome, and at times even communication scholars lament the wide array of options. Still, there seems to be some universal agreement on the fundamental contexts of communication. In fact, most communication departments are built around some or all of the following seven communication contexts: intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, organizational, public/rhetorical, mass/media, and cultural (Figure 2.2). Keep in mind, however, that communication departments in colleges and universities across the United States divide themselves uniquely. Some, for instance, include mass communication in a department of communication whereas others may have a separate department of mass communication. Some schools have a department of interpersonal communication and include every context therein. This diversity underscores that the discipline is permeable, that boundary lines among the contexts are not absolute.

Intrapersonal Communication

As you review theories in this book, keep in mind that a theory may focus on how individuals perceive their own behavior. At the root of this thinking is intrapersonal communication. Intrapersonal communication theorists frequently study the role that cognition plays in human behavior. **Intrapersonal communication** is communication with oneself. It is an internal dialogue and may take place even in the presence of another individual. Intrapersonal communication is what goes on inside your head even when you are with someone.

contexts
environments in which communication takes place

situational contexts
environments that are limited by such factors as the number of people present, the feedback, the space between communicators, among others

intrapersonal communication
communication with oneself

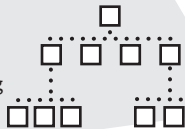| CONTEXT		SOME RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL CONCERNS
INTRAPERSONAL Communication with oneself		Impression formation and decision making; symbols and meaning; observations and attributions; ego involvement and persuasion
INTERPERSONAL Face–to–face communication		Relationship maintenance strategies; relational intimacy; relationship control; interpersonal attraction
SMALL GROUP Communication with a group of people		Gender and group leadership; group vulnerability; groups and stories; group decision making; task difficulty
ORGANIZATIONAL Communication within and among large and extended environments		Organizational hierarchy and power; culture and organizational life; employee morale; opinions and worker satisfaction
PUBLIC/RHETORICAL Communication to a large group of listeners (audience)		Communication apprehension; delivery effectiveness; speech and text criticism; ethical speechmaking; popular culture analysis
MASS/MEDIA Communication to a very large audience through mediated forms		Use of media; affiliation and television programming; television and values; media and need fulfillment; effects of social networking sites
CULTURAL Communication between and among members of different cultures		Culture and rule–setting; culture and anxiety; hegemony; ethnocentrism

Figure 2.2
Contexts of Communication

Intrapersonal communication is usually more repetitive than other communica-tion; we engage in it many times each day. This context is also unique from other contexts in that it includes those times when you imagine, perceive, daydream, and solve problems in your head. Intrapersonal communication is much more than talking to oneself. It also includes the many attributions you may make about another person's behavior. For instance, an employer may want to know why an employee arrives late to work and looks disheveled each day. The super-visor may believe that the worker's tardiness and demeanor are a result of some domestic problems. In reality, the employee may have another job in order to pay for his or her child's college tuition. We all have internal dialogues, and these internalized voices can vary tremendously from one person to another.

Intrapersonal communication is distinguished from other contexts in that it allows communicators to make attributions about themselves. People have

the ability to assess themselves. From body image to work competencies, people are always making self-attributions. You may have thought seriously about your own strengths and shortcomings in a number of situations. For example, do you find that you are an excellent parent but not so excellent as a statistics student? Are there times when you feel that you are a trusted friend, but not so trusted in your own family?

Although some people may believe that talking to oneself is a bit peculiar, Virginia Satir (1988) believes that these internal dialogues may help individuals bolster their **self-esteem**—the degree of positive orientation people have about themselves. Often, intrapersonal communication is difficult; it requires individuals to accept their accomplishments and confront their fears and anxieties. Looking in a mirror can be both enlightening and frightening. Of course, mirrors can also be distorting. Jenny Yamato, for example, may think that her world is over once her daughter leaves for college. The reality for the vast majority of parents, however, is that they survive the "loss." As a single parent, Jenny may think that she is incapable of moving on without Lee. Once Lee leaves, however, Jenny may find that she is more empowered living alone.

The research in intrapersonal communication centers a great deal on the cognitions, symbols, and intentions that individuals have. To this end, researchers in this area have examined attitudes toward specific behaviors and events, including dating (Guerrero & Bachman, 2008), father–daughter relationships (Punyanunt-Carter, 2007), dreaming (Ijams & Miller, 2000), imagination (Engen, 2002), self-embarrassment (Sharkey, Park, & Kim, 2004), and motivation of business executives (Millhous, 2004).

Our discussion of intrapersonal communication has focused on the role of the self in the communication process. Recall from Chapter 1 that as individuals communicate with themselves, the process may be either intentional or unintentional. Intrapersonal communication is at the heart of a person's communication activities. Without recognizing oneself, it is difficult to recognize another.

Interpersonal Communication

From its beginnings, **interpersonal communication** referred to face-to-face communication between people. Contemporary views of interpersonal communication incorporate a technological lens (e.g., dating websites, etc.). Several theories that you will read about in this book have their origins in the interpersonal context. This context is rich with research and theory and is perhaps the most expansive of all of the contexts. Investigating how relationships begin, the maintenance of relationships, and the dissolution of relationships characterizes much of the interpersonal context.

One reason researchers and theorists study relationships is that relationships are so complex and diverse. For instance, you may find yourself in dozens of relationship types right now, including physician–patient, teacher–student, parent–child, supervisor–employee, and so forth. Interacting within each of these relationships affords communicators a chance to maximize the number of channels (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory) used during an interaction. In

self-esteem
the degree of positive orientation people have about themselves

interpersonal communication
face-to-face communication between people

this context, these channels function simultaneously for both interactants: A child may scream for his mom, for instance, and as she is able to calm him with her caress, she touches the child, looks in his eyes, and listens to his whimpering subside.

The interpersonal context itself comprises many related subcontexts. Interpersonal researchers have studied the family (Metts & Lamb, 2006), friendships (Patterson, 2007), long-term marriages (Hughes & Dickson, 2006), physician–patient relationships (Richmond, Smith, Heisel, & McCroskey, 2001), and relationships in the workplace (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004). In addition, researchers are interested in a host of issues and themes (for example, risk, power, teasing, gossip, liking, attraction, emotions, and so forth) associated with these relationships.

Researchers have also examined the link between interpersonal communication and mass media, organizations, and the classroom (Frymier & Houser, 2002). Finally, relationships that have not been studied enough, including gay and lesbian relationships, cohabiting relationships, and computer network relationships, are gaining researchers' attention (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Galvin, 2004; Peplau & Beals, 2004). As you can see, researchers have framed some very diverse and exciting work within the interpersonal communication context, and studying relationships and what takes place within them has broad appeal.

Small Group Communication

A third context of communication is the small group. Small groups are composed of a number of people who work together to achieve some common purpose. Small group research focuses on task groups as opposed to the friendship and family groups found in the interpersonal context. Communication theory centering on small groups frequently concerns the dynamic nature of small groups, including group roles, boundaries, and trust.

Researchers disagree about how many people make up a small group. Some scholars argue that the optimal number for a small group is five to seven members, whereas others put no limit on the maximum number of members. Nearly all agree, however, that there must be at least three people for a small group to exist (Schultz, 1996; Poole, 2007). For our purposes, then, **small group communication** is defined as communication among at least three individuals.

The number in a group, is not as important as the implications of that number. The more people, the greater the opportunity for more personal relationships to develop. This may influence whether small groups stay focused on their goals and whether group members are satisfied with their experiences (Shaw, 1981). A classic study (Kephart, 1950) revealed that as the size of the group increases, the number of relationships increases substantially. With a three-person group, then, the number of potential relationships is 6; with a seven-person group, there are 966 possible relationships! When there are too many group members, there is a tendency for cliques to form (Mamali & Paun, 1982). However, large numbers of group members may result in additional resources not present in smaller groups.

small group communication communication among at least three individuals

cohesiveness
the degree of togetherness between and among communicators

synergy
the intersection of multiple perspectives in a small group

networks
communication patterns through which information flows

roles
positions of group members and their relationship to the group

People are influenced by the presence of others. For example, some small groups are very cohesive, which means having a high degree of togetherness and a common bond. This **cohesiveness** may influence whether the group functions effectively and efficiently. In addition, the small group context affords individuals a chance to gain multiple perspectives on an issue. That is, in the intrapersonal context, an individual views events from his or her own perspective; in the interpersonal context there are more perspectives. In the small group context, many more people have the potential to contribute to the group's goals. In problem-solving groups, or task groups in particular, many perspectives may be advantageous. This exchange of multiple perspectives results in **synergy,** and explains why small groups may be more effective than an individual at achieving goals.

Networking and role behavior are two important components of small group behavior. **Networks** are communication patterns through which information flows, and networks in small groups answer the following question: Who speaks to whom and in what order? The patterns of interaction in small groups may vary significantly. For instance, in some groups the leader may be included in all deliberations, whereas in other groups members may speak to one another without the leader. The small group context is made up of individuals who take on various **roles,** or the positions of group members and their relationship to the group. These roles may be very diverse, including task leader, passive observer, active listener, recorder, and so forth.

Before we close our discussion of small groups, we should point out that as with the interpersonal communication context, research on small groups spans a variety of areas. Small group communication scholars have studied power in small groups (Boulding, 1990), juries (Gastil, Leighter, Deess, & Black, 2008), gossip in public school classrooms (Jaworski & Coupland, 2005), conflict (Gross, Guerrero, & Alberts, 2004), creativity (Sabatine, 1989), and cultural diversity (Brooks & Ward, 2007). Much theory and research today continues to underscore the fact that groups exist to meet certain needs (Adams & Galanes, 2009).

Working in small groups seems to be a fact of life in society. At times, it may seem as if we cannot go anywhere without some sort of small group forming. From peer groups to task groups to support groups, the small group experience is a ubiquitous one. Very few students can receive their degree without working in small groups. From study groups to presentations, you may feel as if you are immersed in small group activities. Company supervisors relish team approaches to problem solving. Some families have weekly or monthly family meetings, at which the group discusses such issues as vacations, sibling rivalry, and curfew.

The United States will continue to rely on small groups, even as we increase our reliance on technology. Although we have reached a point at which nearly 71 percent of all U.S. adults are Internet users (www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Broadband%202007.pdf), we're confident that person-to-person contact will never go out of style. Computers may crash and break down, but people will continue to function and communicate in small groups.