# Interpersonal Communication and the Communication Process

Interpersonal communication is a complex process of creating meaning in the context of an interpersonal relationship. To better understand interpersonal communication as a distinct form of communication, it is useful to examine the basic communication process.[27]

## Elements of the Communication Process

The most basic components of communication include these elements: source, message, channel, receiver, noise, feedback, and context. Understanding each of these elements can help you analyze your own communication with others as you relate to them in interpersonal situations as well as other communication contexts. Let's explore these elements in greater detail.

- *Source.* The **source** of a message is the originator of the ideas and feelings expressed. The source puts a message into a code, a process called **encoding.** The opposite of encoding is the process of **decoding;** this occurs when the receiver interprets the words or nonverbal cues.

- *Message.* **Messages** are the written, spoken, and unspoken elements of communication to which people assign meaning. You can send a message intentionally (talking to a professor before class) or unintentionally (falling asleep during class); verbally ("Hi. How are you?"), nonverbally (a smile and a handshake), or in written form (this book).

- *Channel.* The **channel** is the means by which the message is expressed to the receiver. If you're typical, you receive messages through a variety of channels that include mediated channels such as text messaging, e-mail, phone, video conference, Facebook, or Twitter.

- *Receiver.* The **receiver** of the message is the person or persons who interpret the message and ultimately determine whether your message was understood and appropriate. As we emphasize in this book, effective communicators are other-oriented; they understand that the listener ultimately makes sense of the message they express.

- *Noise.* **Noise** is anything that interferes with the message being interpreted as it was intended. Noise happens. If there were no noise, all of our messages would be interpreted accurately. But noise is always present. It can be literal—such as beeps coming from an iPad or iPhone that signal incoming e-mail—or it can be psychological—such as competing thoughts, worries, and feelings that capture our attention.

- *Feedback.* **Feedback** is response to the message. Think of a Ping-Pong game. Like a Ping-Pong ball, messages bounce back and forth. We talk; someone listens and responds; we listen and respond to this response. This perspective can be summarized using a physical principle: For every action, there is a reaction.

    Without feedback, communication is rarely effective. When your roommate says, "Would you please pick up some milk at the store?", you may say, "What kind— 1 percent, 2 percent, organic, or chocolate?" Your quest for clarification is feedback. Further feedback may seek additional information, or simply confirm that the message has been interpreted: "Oh, some 1 percent organic milk would be good." Like other messages, feedback can be intentional (your mother gives you a hug when you announce your engagement) or unintentional (you yawn as you listen to your uncle tell his story about bears again); verbal ("That's a pepperoni pizza, right?") or nonverbal (blushing after being asked to dance).

**source** Originator of a thought or emotion, who puts it into a code that can be understood by a receiver.

**encode** To translate ideas, feelings, and thoughts into code.

**decode** To interpret ideas, feelings, and thoughts that have been translated into a code.

**message** Written, spoken, and unspoken elements of communication to which people assign meaning.

**channel** Pathway through which messages are sent.

**receiver** Person who decodes a message and attempts to make sense of what the source has encoded.

**noise** Anything literal or psychological that interferes with accurate reception of a message.

**feedback** Response to a message.

- *Context*. **Context** is the physical and psychological environment for communication. All communication takes place in some context. As the cliché goes, "Everyone has to be somewhere." A conversation on the beach with your good friend would likely differ from a conversation the two of you might have in a funeral home. Context encompasses not only the physical environment but also the people present and their relationships with the communicators, the communication goal, and the culture of which the communicators are a part.[28]
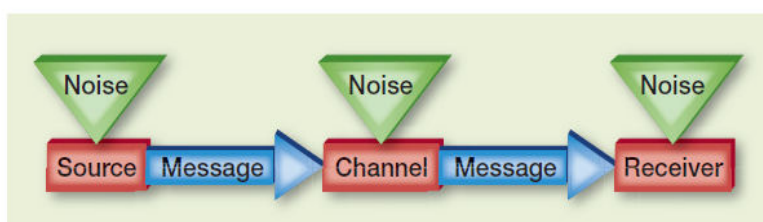
## Models of the Communication Process

The elements of the communication process are typically arranged in one of three communication models, showing communication as action, as interaction, or as transaction. Let's review each model in more detail to see how expert thinking about human communication has evolved.

**Communication as Action: Message Transfer.** The oldest and simplest model, shown in Figure 1.1, is *communication as action*—a transferring of meaning. "Did you get my message?" This sentence reflects the communication-as-action approach to human communication. Communication takes place when a message is sent and received. Period.
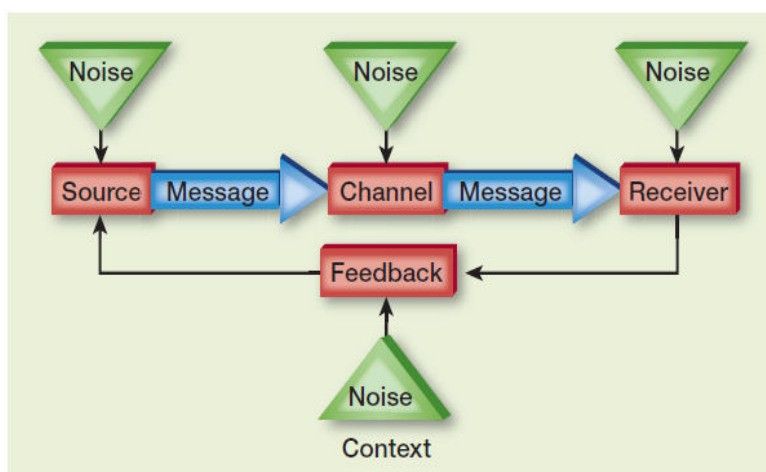
**Communication as Interaction: Message Exchange.** The perspective of communication as interaction adds two elements to the action model feedback and context. As shown in Figure 1.2, the interaction model is more realistic than the action perspective, but it still has limitations. Although it emphasizes feedback and context, the interaction model does not quite capture the complexity of simultaneous human communication. The interaction model of communication still views communication as a linear, step-by-step process. But in interpersonal situations, both the source and the receiver send and receive messages at the same time.
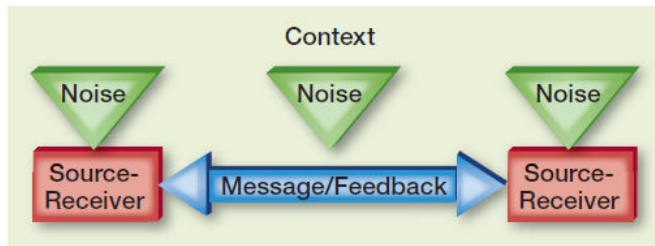
**context** Physical and psychological environment for communication.

**FIGURE 1.1**

**A Simple Model of Human Communication as Action**



**FIGURE 1.2**

**A Model for Communication as Interaction**

Interaction models of communication include feedback as a response to a message sent by the communication source and context as the environment for communication.

**Communication as Transaction: Message Creation.** Today, the most sophisticated and realistic model views communication as transaction, in which each element influences all of the other elements in the process at the same time. This perspective acknowledges that when you talk to another person face to face, you are constantly reacting to your partner's responses. In this model, all the components of the communication process are simultaneous. As Figure 1.3 indicates, even as you talk, you are also interpreting your partner's nonverbal and verbal responses.

The transactional approach to communication is based on **systems theory.** A system is a set of interconnected elements in which a change in one element affects all of the other elements. Key elements of any system include *inputs* (all of the variables that go into the system), *throughputs* (all of the things that make communication a process), and *outputs* (what the system produces). From a transactional communication perspective, a change in any aspect of the communication system (source, message, channel, receiver, noise, context, feedback) potentially influences all the other elements of the system. From a systems theory point of view, each element of communication is connected to all other elements of communication.

**systems theory** Theory that describes the interconnected elements of a system in which a change in one element affects all of the other elements.

A transactional approach to communication suggests that no single cause explains why you interpret messages the way you do. In fact, it is inappropriate to point to a single factor to explain how you are making sense of the messages of others; communication is messier than that. The meaning of messages in interpersonal relationships evolves from the past, is influenced by the present, and is affected by visions of the future.

One researcher says that interpersonal communication is "the coordinated management of meaning" through **episodes,** sequence of interactions between individuals during which the message of one person influences the message of another.[30] Technically, only the sender and receiver of those messages can determine where one episode ends and another begins.

**RECAP** An Evolving Model for Interpersonal Communication

**Human Communication as Action**

Human communication is linear, with meaning sent or transferred from source to receiver.

**Human Communication as Interaction**

Human communication occurs as the receiver of the message responds to the source through feedback. This interactive model views communication as a linear action–reaction sequence of events within a specific context.

**Human Communication as Transaction**

Human communication is mutually interactive. Meaning is created based on a concurrent sharing of ideas and feelings. This transaction model most accurately describes human communication.