Interpersonal communication concerns the study of social interaction between people. Interpersonal communication theory and research seeks to understand how individuals use verbal discourse and nonverbal actions, as well as written discourse, to achieve a variety of instrumental and communication goals such as informing, persuading, and providing emotional support to others. Although interpersonal communication has been traditionally conceived of as a process that occurs between people encountering each other face to face, increasingly social interaction is being accomplished through the use of such communication technologies as computers and mobile phones, thus adding a new dimension to this area of communication inquiry.

RESEARCH HISTORY

The study of interpersonal communication developed during the years following World War II and grew out of two distinct areas of social-psychological research that appeared during and after the war. One of these areas concerned the role communication plays in the exercise of persuasion and social influence, while the other area, known as group dynamics, focused on social interaction within groups. Group dynamics sought to illuminate how group interaction processes influence conformity to group norms, group cohesion, the exercise of social power and the decisions that groups make. During the 1960s most interpersonal communication research addressed the role that various source, message, channel, and receiver factors play in changing audience members’ attitudes and behavior; although studies of speech anxiety, communication apprehension, and group decision-making also appeared in the interpersonal communication literature of that era.

Most of the communication and persuasion research appearing during this time did not examine social influence in the context of ongoing social interaction; rather, experimental studies in which audience members were individually exposed to persuasive messages that systematically varied different source and message factors were used to investigate the effects of persuasive communication on recipients’ attitudes and opinions. As elegant as this experimental approach to the study of persuasion was, in that it allowed for the experimental control of extraneous factors, unfortunately it did not allow researchers to investigate the reciprocal influence processes that occur when people engage in face-to-face interaction. In social encounters, social influence is not a one-way street; individuals who enter such encounters hoping to influence their co-interlocutors instead may encounter resistance or find themselves being influenced by their partners.

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, interpersonal communication research perspectives expanded beyond the communication and persuasion domain to include the role social interaction plays in the development, maintenance, and deterioration of personal relationships. Interpersonal communication and interpersonal attraction in romantic and friendship relationships began to become a focal point of study; at the same
time interpersonal communication researchers became interested in the study of self-disclosure (→ Disclosure in Interpersonal Communication). This period was also marked by a significant increase in attention to the study of nonverbal communication (→ Environment & Social Interaction; Eye Behavior; Facial Expressions; Gestures and Kinesics; Paralanguage; Proxemics), and during the latter part of the 1970s interpersonal communication research began to reflect a concern to understand the cognitive structure and processes that underlie social interaction with respect to both message production and message processing (Berger 2005). Deceptive communication was another research focus that emerged during this period. In the ensuing decades, each of these research areas has continued to attract considerable attention.

During the 1970s, communication researchers in general and the interpersonal communication researchers in particular expressed considerable frustration over the lack of original theories designed to explain various interpersonal communication phenomena. As a consequence, beginning in this decade, interpersonal communication scholars began to engage in dialogue about the nature of communication theory, and they increased their theory development efforts. Since that time, interpersonal communication researchers have proposed a variety of theories concerned with explaining such phenomena as relationship development, nonverbal communication, message production, interaction adaptation, and deceptive communication.

As the theoretical and research trends set in motion in the 1970s continued to play out during the 1980s, interpersonal communication researchers became increasingly interested in illuminating the communication strategies individuals use to achieve a wide variety of goals, such as acquiring information, gaining compliance, making requests, comforting others, and seeking affinity. In conjunction with this focus on the functions that social interaction serves in the strategic pursuit of such goals, some interpersonal communication researchers began to develop theories and models of message production for the purpose of explaining how such strategic interaction works. This theory development work continued through the 1990s and into the new millennium.

As a sub-field of the communication discipline, interpersonal communication can be divided into six unique but related areas of study, each representing a relatively coherent body of theory and research. These six areas are concerned with uncertainty, interpersonal adaptation, message production, relationship development, deceptive communication, and mediated social interaction. In addition to these theoretical domains, interpersonal communication researchers have addressed specific topics such as emotion and social interaction, although these specific topics are not as well developed as the six domains. Nevertheless, some of these specific topics will be considered as each of the six research areas is described below.

**UNCERTAINTY IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION**

Few would disagree with the proposition that when individuals engage in social interaction with each other, they cannot be completely certain of their conversational partners’ current emotional states, beliefs, attitudes, and future actions, even when their interaction partners are familiar and perhaps even well known to them. That is, it is impossible to predict accurately all of these internal states and potential future actions at any given point in time. Consequently, when individuals engage in social interaction they
do so under conditions of more or less uncertainty, but uncertainty is probably never completely absent. In addition, because individuals harbor uncertainties about co-interlocutors, they must, of necessity, have uncertainties about how they should act toward their partners; consequently, individuals experience uncertainty with respect both to themselves and to others. These uncertainties are maximal when strangers meet, but uncertainties can also arise in close relationships of long duration (Planalp & Honeycutt 1985). Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT; Berger & Calabrese 1975; Berger & Gudykunst 1991) proposes that individuals must reduce their uncertainties to some degree in order to be able to fashion verbal discourse and actions that will allow them to achieve their interaction goals. The theory’s propositions describe relationships between verbal and nonverbal communication and information seeking, self-disclosure and interpersonal attraction (→ Uncertainty Reduction Theory).

Berger (1979) identified three general classes of strategies for reducing uncertainty. Passive strategies do not entail social interaction between parties; rather, they involve the unobtrusive observation of others for the purpose of acquiring information about them. Active strategies also do not involve face-to-face social interaction between information seekers and their targets. Acquiring information from third parties about a target person falls into this category. Finally, interactive strategies such as asking questions, disclosing information about one’s self, and relaxing the target may be used to acquire information when interaction occurs. These strategies vary with respect to their efficiency and social appropriateness.

For example, acquiring personal information from another by asking questions might be an efficient strategy, but it could become socially inappropriate if too many questions or excessively personal questions were to be asked. Conversely, relaxing the target person might be perceived to be highly appropriate socially but, at the same time, might be highly inefficient for acquiring specific pieces of information from the target. A person who is more comfortable might say more than one who is less so but still not reveal the desired information. Studies have also examined the strategies individuals use to resist revealing information about themselves to highly inquisitive co-interlocutors (Berger & Kellermann 1994). URT has been found to have some purchase in explaining social interaction in intercultural (Gudykunst 1995) and organizational (Kramer 2004) communication contexts. Moreover, some have argued that individuals not only harbor uncertainties about themselves and others as individuals, but also may experience uncertainty with respect to their relationship with each other (→ Relational Uncertainty).

Some researchers have argued that individuals may not necessarily be motivated to reduce their uncertainty when they anticipate experiencing negative outcomes by so doing. For example, individuals who have their blood tested for the presence of the HIV virus because they suspect that they may be HIV positive may choose not to obtain their test result, presumably because they are fearful of it. That is, they will maintain their uncertainty in the service of avoiding hearing bad news. Similarly, married people who suspect that their spouses are cheating on them may elect to avoid reducing their uncertainty in this regard in order to avoid projected negative consequences that might follow from this knowledge. According to this perspective, then, uncertainty is something to be managed rather than necessarily reduced (→ Uncertainty Management). Although there are a number of examples of situations in which some people might avoid reducing
their uncertainty, the degree to which these uncertainty reduction avoidance maneuvers portend optimal adaptation to the environment is open to question. In the long run, ignorance may not always be bliss (Berger 2005).

**INTERPERSONAL ADAPTATION**

Students of social interaction have long recognized that when individuals converse, they show strong proclivities to reciprocate each other’s verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The norm of reciprocity, which states that in the conduct of social intercourse people are obligated to help and not harm those who help them, provides a potential explanation for the ubiquity of reciprocity in social interaction. However, behavioral reciprocity has been observed between very young infants and their caregivers, suggesting a biological basis for reciprocal behavior (Burgoon et al. 1995).

Evidence for the operation of the norm of reciprocity was found in early studies of self-disclosure published in the 1950s and 1960s. This manifestation of the norm was labeled the “dyadic effect.” When individuals disclose information about themselves at a particular intimacy level, their co-interlocutors are likely to disclose information about themselves at a similar intimacy level. Moreover, as individuals increase the intimacy of their self-disclosures, their co-interlocutors tend to increase the intimacy level of their self-disclosures (Burgoon et al. 1995). It is not that individuals reciprocate the same information about themselves; rather, individuals tend to match the intimacy level of their disclosures. In addition to reciprocity at the level of message content, early studies demonstrated reciprocity of nonverbal behaviors in interview situations. As interviewers purposively increased or decreased their speech rate or the number of pauses in their speech, interviewees were observed to respond by adjusting their speech or pause rate in the direction of the interviewers’ (Burgoon et al. 1995).

Although the forces for reciprocity in social interaction are both highly pervasive and particularly strong, there are conditions under which interacting individuals will show compensation in response to each other's behaviors. Compensation occurs when a behavior displayed by one person is not matched in some way by another. For example, in the domain of nonverbal communication a smile by one person might be met with a frown by a conversational partner, or an attempt to begin a conversation by moving closer to an individual might be responded to with eye-gaze aversion, signaling an unwillingness to converse. In the smile–frown case, compensation occurs within the same nonverbal communication channel, facial expressions; in the second case, the compensatory behavior is expressed in a different channel than is the initiating behavior.

A number of alternative theories have been devised to illuminate the conditions under which reciprocity and compensation are likely to occur during social interactions, especially with respect to nonverbal behaviors. Although Expectancy Violations Theory, Arousal Labeling Theory, Discrepancy-Arousal Theory, and Cognitive Valence Theory differ in terms of their explanations for reciprocity/compensation, they share a common assumption that when expectations for nonverbal behavior are violated, individuals tend to experience arousal → Reciprocity and Compensation in Interaction). For instance, when people try to converse at inappropriately close conversational distances, they are likely to create arousal in their co-interlocutors. Arousal Labeling and Discrepancy
Arousal theories suggest that when the experience of this arousal is pleasant, reciprocity is likely to occur; however, when the arousal is experienced negatively, compensation is likely to follow.

Research comparing these theories has been inconclusive and has prompted the development of Interaction Adaptation Theory (IAT) (Burgoon et al. 1995). This theory argues that when an individual's interaction position matches a co-interlocutor's behavior, reciprocity or matching is likely to occur, but when an individual's interaction position is discrepant from the other's behavior, compensation is likely to occur. Interaction position is determined by the individual's basic drives and needs, their cognitive expectations concerning social norms and behavior, and their goals and preferences. Although IAT offers a potentially more comprehensive explanation of interaction adaptation than do the other theories, its scope is quite ambitious, thus making it difficult to evaluate.

**MESSAGE PRODUCTION**

The notion that language is a tool or an instrument for attaining everyday goals has enjoyed long acceptance among students of language and communication. Given the uncontroversial nature of this proposition, it is but a small step to contend that social interaction, like language, is a tool or an instrument for goal achievement (Berger 2003; Dillard et al. 2002; Wilson & Sabee 2003). Consistent with this proposition, beginning in the 1970s and continuing through the 1990s, constructivist researchers endeavored to determine the characteristics of messages deemed to be effective for achieving a variety of goals, most of them concerned with persuasion (Constructivism; Constructivism and Interpersonal Processes); although, a parallel line of research concerned with the goal of providing emotional support also developed within this tradition (Burleson 2003; Comforting Communication).

A robust finding from this line of research is that when given the task of devising messages to achieve such goals, individuals with high levels of cognitive complexity tend to generate messages showing greater evidence of social perspective taking than do their less cognitively complex counterparts. Within this research perspective, cognitive complexity is indexed by the number of psychological constructs individuals typically used to construe other persons (cognitive differentiation) and the degree to which the constructs they use are abstract (construct abstractness). Greater numbers of highly abstract constructs contribute to higher cognitive complexity levels. Because highly differentiated individuals' messages take into account their co-interlocutors' goals, emotional states, and potential responses to their messages, their messages are, as a result, deemed to be potentially more effective than the more egocentric ones generated by their less cognitively complex counterparts.

Beginning in the 1980s, a more comprehensive and abstract message production theory labeled Action Assembly Theory (Greene 1997) was developed to explain how individuals produce actions and discourse, and during the same period theories featuring such knowledge structures as scripts, plans, and memory organization packets (MOPS) were devised (Berger 1997; Kellermann 1995). In the case of these latter theories, sometimes referred to as Goal-Plan-Action (GPA) theories (Dillard et al. 2002), scripts,
plans, and MOPS are conceived of as hierarchically organized knowledge structures representing action sequences that will bring about the achievement of goals. Once goals are activated, these knowledge structures serve to guide actions toward their attainment. These knowledge structures vary with respect to their abstractness and level of detail, and they can be made more complex by including contingencies that anticipate points at which projected actions in them might fail (→ Relational Schemas; Schemas, Knowledge Structures, and Social Interaction). Individuals who plan ahead during conversations, anticipate their co-interlocutor’s future conversational moves, and develop plan contingencies to meet these future actions are more likely to attain their social interaction goals than are individuals who do not engage in such planning activity while they converse (Waldron 1997).

A potential shortcoming of GPA theories is that they do not provide a detailed account of how goals arise in the first place; i.e., they begin with the assumption that social actors have a goal or goals to pursue. However, there are at least two examples of attempts to formulate and test theoretical explanations for how goals arise during social interaction (Meyer 1997; Wilson & Sabee 2003). Because much of everyday social interaction is aimed at satisfying recurring goals, much of everyday conversational interaction is routine (Berger 2005). Nonetheless, important questions can be asked about the conditions under which specific goals are activated and the consequences that follow from the disruption of these routines once they are undertaken. Interference with the completion of these routines should provoke annoyance and other negative emotions because it prevents the efficient achievement of recurring goals; however, there may be circumstances under which the disruption of social interaction routines provides relief from boredom or from an undesirable situation such as a routine conflict with another person.

People sometimes imagine social interactions with others (→ Imagined Interactions). These imagined interactions may occur before an encounter, as when employees imagine what they might say to their bosses, but imagined interactions can take place after a particular encounter is over. Under certain conditions, imagining what one might say to another person before an actual interaction with them takes place can reduce the amount of apprehension that the person who has imagined the interaction shows during the actual encounter. Moreover, imagining interactions may help those who imagine them cope with negative emotions they have experienced in their relationship with the person or persons with whom they imagine conversing (Honeycutt 2003). However, imagining interactions before they take place may have the effect of encouraging individuals to commit themselves prematurely to a particular plan for the actual interaction and, as a result, render them less inclined to recognize potential problems that arise during the actual conversation, and to consider contingent actions that might be undertaken to deal with these problems (Berger 2005).

**RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

The idea that interpersonal communication plays a critical role in the development, maintenance, and deterioration of social and personal relationships is one that has gained widespread acceptance over the past 35 years (→ Relationship Development). Although a great deal of research attention has been paid to the development of romantic
relationships during this period, probably because college students, who are frequently used as research participants, are likely to be involved in such relationships (→ Dating Relationships), researchers have also investigated relationships between friends, spouses, and family members.

A central question researchers have sought to answer is why some relationships become closer over time while others grow distant and perhaps end (→ Relational Maintenance). Social exchange theories have frequently been invoked to explain why relationship growth and deterioration occur (Roloff 1981; → Social Exchange). In general, these theories suggest that individuals experience both rewards for and costs of being in relationships with each other, and not only assess their own rewards and costs, but estimate their partners’ levels of rewards and costs. Rewards may be material (wealth) or emotional (emotional support), and costs may be similarly material (lack of money) or emotional (undesirable personality). Each individual puts these reward and cost estimates into ratio form (rewards/costs) and compares the two ratios (self: rewards/costs vs partner: rewards/costs).

Individuals will feel equity in their relationship to the degree that the reward/cost ratios match; however, if the self’s ratio is less favorable than the partner’s, the individual will feel inequity and thus dissatisfaction with the relationship. Dissatisfaction arising from felt inequity is sometimes expressed verbally when people say, e.g., “I am putting more into this relationship than I am getting out of it.” In general, these theories suggest that favorable relative reward/cost ratios fuel relationship growth, whereas unfavorable ratios are associated with relationship deterioration. It is not the absolute levels of rewards and costs that determine equity but the degree to which the two ratios match. Individuals might perceive their partners to be receiving more rewards from their relationships than they are, but because their partners may be perceived to be incurring greater costs for being in the relationship, the fact that they are receiving greater rewards does not lead to feelings of inequity.

Some have argued that social exchange theories and other relationship development perspectives have made the processes of relationship development and deterioration appear to be much more continuous and linear than they actually are. These researchers contend that the development of relationships is fraught with dialectical tensions that may serve to pull individuals in opposite directions simultaneously (Baxter & Montgomery 1996; Montgomery & Baxter 1998; → Relational Dialectics; Friendship and Peer Interaction). For example, individuals may at once feel interdependent and autonomous with respect to their partners, and because the tension between these polarities shifts over time, relationships are in a constant state of flux. There are a number of possible dialectics such as predictability–novelty, openness–closeness, and autonomy–connection; thus, these contradictions can interact with each other through time. Given the dialectical nature of personal relationships and their dynamic interplay, proponents of this perspective contend that the complete merger of relationship partners is not possible.

Although social exchange theories and the relational dialectics perspective provide explanations for the growth and deterioration of relationships, they do not centrally address the effects of messages exchanged between people. That is, in the case of social exchange theories, individual’s judgments about relative rewards and costs are presumed
to be residues of verbal and nonverbal interaction; similarly, the dialectical contradictions
that individuals report experiencing in their relationships ostensibly arise from
communicative exchanges with relationship partners; however, actual message exchanges
between partners are generally not examined.

Nevertheless, although not necessarily strongly motivated by theory, there has been
considerable research interest in→interpersonal conflict in general and marital conflict
in particular, much of it based on direct observations of partners engaged in social
interaction (→Marital Communication; Relational Control). Such studies have found
that couples who display a demand–withdraw pattern of message exchanges when
interacting with each other, such that one person makes a demand of the other and the
other person responds by withdrawing, report lower levels of relational satisfaction
than do couples who acknowledge and respond to each other’s demands in a conciliatory
way. In addition, because emotional communication plays an important role in many
different types of relationships, there is increasing interest in how the regulation of
→emotions affects relationship development (→Emotion and Discourse).

DECEPTIVE COMMUNICATION

Many interpersonal communication researchers subscribe to the view that deception is an
integral part of social interaction. So called “white lies” are commonplace in everyday
social commerce. Some researchers have gone so far as to argue that deception is an
important lubricant that enables the smooth operation of the social interaction machine.
Many times these lies are told to help co-interlocutors save face when potentially
embarrassing circumstances arise in social situations. For example, dinner guests might
tell a host that the food they have just consumed was “wonderful” when, in fact, it was
utterly horrible, and persons might tell acquaintances that new articles of clothing the
acquaintances are wearing “look good,” when their true evaluation of the new clothing is
highly negative (→Politeness Theory). Deception by commission occurs when proffered
information is at variance with the “true” state of affairs, as in the previous examples;
however, deception may also occur by omission; i.e., individuals may intentionally
withhold critical information so that others will draw erroneous inferences, as when a
used car salesperson fails to reveal known mechanical defects present in a car to a
prospective car buyer. The prospective buyer is left to infer that the car is mechanically
reliable.

Although interpersonal communication researchers have expended considerable research
effort on examining deceptive communication, there are relatively few theories of
deceptive social interaction (Berger 2005; Miller & Stiff 1993). Nonetheless, there are at
least two enduring questions concerning deceptive communication that have attracted
considerable research attention over the years. One of these questions concerns the degree
to which engaging in deception alters nonverbal behaviors; i.e., do truth tellers’ nonverbal
behaviors differ systematically from those of individuals who are telling lies? The research
germine to this question has focused on nonverbal behaviors because it is generally
assumed that when people engage in deceptive communication, they can carefully
monitor what they are saying but cannot necessarily control their nonverbal behaviors in
ways that will make them appear to be telling the truth while they are lying.
Those employed in such fields as law enforcement and the military, as well as those who perform psychological counseling, have a great deal of interest in knowing when individuals are providing truthful and deceitful answers to their questions. In general, research findings suggest that no one nonverbal behavior – e.g., eye-gaze aversion, excessive leg movements, fast or slow speech rate, or changes in body posture – can be used as an indicator of deceptive communication across all individuals (Deception Detection Accuracy; Deceptive Message Production). Specific behaviors may be diagnostic of deceptive communication in specific individuals; however, no universal nonverbal indicator of deceptive communication has yet been identified.

Another enduring question investigated by interpersonal communication researchers is the degree to which individuals are skilled at detecting deception as they interact with others. In this case research has generally shown that most individuals are not very adept at detecting deception, even those whose professions frequently require them to ascertain whether people are lying or telling the truth, e.g., judges, counselors, and law enforcement personnel. One explanation for the apparent inability of most individuals to detect deception is the pervasiveness of the “truth bias.” The truth bias arises from the fact that in the conduct of everyday interpersonal communication, individuals must routinely assume that their conversational partners are telling the truth. For example, when one friend tells another, “I went to the movies alone last night,” under most conditions it would be quite odd for the friend to reply, “Can you provide me with evidence to support that assertion?” Individuals involved in social interactions must assume that others’ utterances are truthful; after all, requiring co-interlocutors to provide evidence for the truthfulness of every statement they make in most conversations would make even mundane social interaction a torturous activity. Consequently, because individuals routinely assume others are telling the truth, it is difficult for them to detect deceit when it is being perpetrated. There is some evidence that deception detection accuracy can be improved with practice, but these improvements appear to be confined to those specific individuals who are observed on repeated occasions; there is little evidence of generalized improvement beyond those individuals who are observed.

**MEDIATED SOCIAL INTERACTION**

Increasingly, social interaction is being accomplished through such communication technologies as computers with email and chat-room capabilities and mobile phones with text messaging and other communication features. Teleconferencing has become a commonplace in business communication. As the use of these technologies has become progressively more widespread, there has been a concomitant increase in research aimed at understanding their potential individual and social effects (Mediated Social Interaction; Online Relationships). However, technologically mediated social interaction is hardly a new phenomenon, having been possible on a wide scale since the advent of the landline telephone.

As was the case after traditional mass media such as film, radio, and television were introduced, research has investigated the potential deleterious effects of Internet use, such as Internet addiction and increased social isolation and loneliness, although evidence for the latter association is both scant and equivocal (Berger 2005). An inherent
difficulty in examining such effects is establishing causal directions of influence: Do high levels of Internet use induce people to feel socially isolated and lonely, or do people who are already socially isolated and lonely, for reasons other than Internet use, gravitate to the Internet to help them alleviate or cope with these unpleasant feelings? Do people with “addictive personalities” simply find Internet use to be another activity to which to become addicted, or does use of the Internet itself induce addictive behavior? Yet another, and perhaps more realistic, possibility in each of these examples is that both causal directions occur and interact with each other in a complex, reciprocal fashion.

Some researchers have observed that when individuals engage in anonymous computer-mediated communication (CMC), as they might in an Internet chat room or on email, they are more likely to act in ways that they would not if they were interacting with others face to face (FtF) or if their identities were known to others in the CMC context. Researchers have postulated both positive and negative possibilities in this regard. On the positive side, anonymous individuals communicating with others by CMC might assume new identities, personalities, or both that could help them cope with personal problems. For example, highly introverted and shy people who wish to overcome their social inhibitions might “try on” a highly extraverted and outgoing persona whilst engaging in CMC. The effect of this experimentation might be to move such individuals in the desired direction of becoming less shy and introverted. However, on the negative side, others have noted that this same cloak of anonymity may serve to embolden individuals to insult and attack others or to “flame” them, behaviors they would not normally display in most FtF interactions or in CMC if their identities were known to their co-interlocutors.

Just as the advent of television prompted both considerable speculation and research aimed at comparing the then-new medium’s potential effects, especially with respect to its visual channel, with those of older media such as radio, so too the appearance of CMC has precipitated considerable research aimed at determining how CMC and FtF interaction differ with respect to various outcomes associated with their use (Walther & Parks 2002). Because text-based CMC, as currently used in electronic mail (email), newsgroups, and chat rooms, filters out many nonverbal cues typically available to people engaged in FtF interactions, it is presumed, e.g., that communication via text-based CMC is more task focused than is FtF communication. Moreover, while relatively cue-deprived, text-based CMC venues may be quite useful for initially encountering and screening potential friends and romantic partners, they apparently do not afford sufficient information for developing close relationships. Individuals who initially meet in the text-based CMC world usually elect to communicate with each other through other channels, e.g., phone and FtF encounters.

These alternative communication channels afford their users potentially more rich and comprehensive samples of each other’s behavior. Although the ability to send pictures and live video in the CMC context may overcome some of this cue loss in the visual realm, there are certain nonverbal communication channels such as touch, pheromones, body temperature, and smell that are at once both highly significant in most close romantic relationships and currently difficult or impossible to instantiate in CMC. The unavailability of these channels in current, commonly used incarnations of CMC raises questions about
this medium’s ability to help sustain close, romantic relationships over long distances (→ Long-Distance Relationships).

Because text-based CMC may serve to filter out personal information that might be used to understand people as individuals rather than as group members, some researchers have suggested that when groups use CMC to communicate with each other, the lack of individuating information about group members may foster stronger ingroup identity. Increased ingroup loyalty may serve to “deindividuate” people to the point where they are willing to stereotype outgroup members and behave negatively toward them. Although research has supported this possibility (Postmes et al. 2000), some have observed that these findings are limited to the domain of group-based CMC and may not apply in situations in which people are using CMC to interact with others on an individual basis (Walther & Parks 2002). Beyond the realm of CMC, under the aegis of human–computer interaction (HCI), considerable research evidence has been adduced to support the idea that people tend to treat computers and other communication technologies as if they are human agents, even when users know that they are interacting with a machine (Reeves & Nass 1996). Apparently, technology users cannot help imputing human-like qualities to the communication technologies they encounter in their everyday lives.

Given the rapid rate at which new communication technologies that enable mediated social interaction between people are being made widely available to the public, understanding how the use of these technologies affects communication in these modes and how prolonged use of the technologies may alter the nature of FtF interaction represents a challenge to communication researchers.

**OTHER RESEARCH AREAS**

The six areas just considered do not exhaust the entire domain of interpersonal communication research. In addition to these theoretically defined areas are specific concepts in which interpersonal communication researchers have had an enduring interest. A few of the more important of these are now considered.

Everyday experience suggests that some individuals are consistently better able than others to achieve their goals during their social interactions. Some people appear to be able to induce others to like them (→ Ingratiation and Affinity Seeking; Impression Management) and others seem to be very effective at persuading others and getting their way (→ Power, Dominance, and Social Interaction). The skills associated with success in these and other social interaction domains can be subsumed under the term communication competence (→ Interpersonal Communication Competence and Social Skills). Much has been written about the communication competence concept, but there remains considerable ambiguity concerning its meaning; moreover, there has yet to be a theory that elaborates the concept. Some have suggested that communication competence might profitably be viewed as a theoretical term or domain of study rather than a single theoretical concept (Wilson & Sabee 2003).

There appears to be some agreement that communication competence refers to the degree to which individuals are able to reach their goals (effectiveness) and the extent to which goal achievement is accomplished in an appropriate manner (social appropriateness). In addition, some have suggested that efficiency may be another component of
Interpersonal communication competence; i.e., how quickly individuals are able to achieve their goals. Another point of convergence is that communication competence is not a generalized skill but is specific to different kinds of communication goals and situations. Thus, a parent might be very persuasive when conducting high-level business negotiations on the job but, at the same time, be quite ineffective at inducing a resistant son or daughter to finish his or her homework. Similarly, an individual might be very effective at offering social support and comfort to others (→ Social Support in Interpersonal Communication) but very ineffective at gaining compliance from others. Although most interpersonal communication researchers acknowledge that communication competence is goal- and situation-specific, as yet there is no typology of goals and situations that enables us to determine specific skill sets that are associated with various classes of goals and situations. This typology development task is one in need of attention.

As noted previously, much of everyday social interaction is organized around recurring goals that arise in the course of everyday living. The routines associated with everyday family and work interactions, and with daily transactions in business and commerce, encourage the development of communication routines in order to reach these recurring goals effectively and efficiently. If people had to plan consciously how to reach each of these recurring goals every day, the pace of social life would slow to a crawl. Instead, communication is routinized and can be enacted automatically when the occasion arises. Routinization of language use is pervasive; it has been estimated that up to 70 percent of adult language is formulaic (Berger 2005). The notion of communication routines may be related in some ways to communication competence. Competent communicators may be those who, in a given situation, have rapid access to communication routines that generally eventuate in goal achievement. Of course, the relationship between the availability of communication routines and communication competence rests on the assumption that the routines accessed are both effective and socially appropriate. A given situation may be nonroutine and require conscious planning effort; thus, the discerning communicator must be able to differentiate between those social situations that are routine and those that are not. This requirement for astute social discernment suggests that competent communicative action involves more than the production of effective messages. Accurate perception of others’ circumstances, moods, and emotional states is a vital prerequisite to competent social conduct.

Uncertainty  ▶  Relationship Development  ▶  Schemas, Knowledge Structures, and Social Interaction  ▶  Social Exchange  ▶  Social Support in Interpersonal Communication  ▶  Uncertainty Management  ▶  Uncertainty Reduction Theory

References and Suggested Readings

Every act and artifact of communication is open to evaluations of its quality, i.e., how well it was accomplished. Because such evaluations involve individual and social judgments of communicative performance, especially in interpersonal contexts, and because virtually all relevant achievements of interpersonal communication depend on performance and subsequent evaluations, a theory of interpersonal communication competence is tantamount to a theory of interpersonal communication itself. Interpersonal communication competence and social skills are concerned with both the performance of communication and the evaluation of its quality.

Interpersonal communication competence is typically defined either as the ability to enact message behavior that fulfills requirements of a given situation, or as the subjective evaluation of the quality of message behavior. The first conception views competence as a set of abilities that enable repeated, goal-directed behavior that fulfills task demands of a particular communication context. If the context is a job interview, competent communication consists of the ability to perform the various behaviors identified as essential to a good interview. The judgment of what constitutes a good interview, however, brings with it a perceptual dimension that necessarily connects the ability perspective to the subjective evaluation perspective. What distinguishes good from not so good performance will necessarily vary somewhat from interviewer to interviewer, organization to organization, and culture to culture. Social skills are similarly defined as either the ability to perform various requisite behaviors in everyday interpersonal encounters, or the evaluation of the quality of performance in such encounters. These terms have been used