In Chapter 1 we defined communication as the process by which people interactively create, sustain, and manage meaning. Clearly, the focus on interaction implies that at least two people are involved. However, the reality is that messages have no meaning without an individual’s interpretation. Everyone has to process every message internally while considering how best to make sense of these messages. In other words, meaning is derived only after an individual perceives a message and gives it meaning; meanings reside in people’s interpretations, not in the words or behaviors themselves. Consequently, communication is also an intrapersonal process.

THE COGNITIVE PROCESS

The roots of regarding communication as an intrapersonal process can be traced to one of the major debates in the field of psychology in the
In the 20th century, American psychology was dominated by a focus on behaviorism (Runes, 1984). Most of us are familiar with Pavlov and his studies of salivary production in dogs; by associating the ringing of a bell with food, Pavlov was able to experimentally cause dogs to salivate when hearing a bell, even if the food was not present. Such is a description of a behavioral approach—a focus on external cause and behavioral effect. Major psychological figures such as J. B. Watson and B. F. Skinner argued that because we cannot observe mental processes, we should focus only on these causes and effects (Runes, 1984).

However, in the middle part of the 1900s, psychologists began arguing for a cognitive approach to understanding human behavior. Rather than focusing solely on external causes (or stimuli) and behavioral effects, these scholars argued that we should be concerned with the mental processes that are used to process stimuli and generate particular effects (Runes, 1984). A major proponent of this approach was Noam Chomsky, who spearheaded a significant critique of behaviorism. Cognition, then, refers to the processes of reducing, elaborating, transforming, and storing stimuli (Neisser, 1967). It refers to what happens in the mind that causes us to behave in particular ways.

In this chapter, we explain four theories that examine the cognitive and intrapersonal aspects of communication. First, message design logics accounts for individual differences in both message construction and interpretation based on divergent beliefs about communication. The second theory presented in this chapter, communication accommodation theory, focuses on how we adapt our messages based on our own goals as well as our perceptions of others. Third, uncertainty reduction theory aims to explain initial encounters with people. In other words, what drives you to initiate communication? The fourth theory presented, expectancy violations theory, strives to predict and explain people’s behavior when their expectations are violated. Altogether these theories emphasize the internal processes that serve as antecedents to the highly personalized creation of meaning, and each perspective applies to numerous communication contexts. From making judgments about a coworker based on her communication style (e.g., Message Design Logics) to determining how best to reduce one’s uncertainty during a job transfer (e.g., uncertainty reduction theory), each of the theories presented illustrates the internally driven process necessary to bring individual meaning to various messages.
MESSAGE DESIGN LOGICS

Everyone has been faced with the challenge of having to confront a coworker or subordinate who isn’t pulling his or her weight. The dilemmas that communicators confront when dealing with these sorts of situations can be understood by the theory of message design logics. According to O’Keefe (1988, 1997), because people think about communication differently, they also construct very different types of messages. A message design logic (MDL), then, is your belief about communication that, in turn, links thoughts to the construction of messages. Stated differently, people who have different views about the nature and function of communication will construct different types of messages. This difference in message type is particularly evident when a person is faced with communication challenges such as dealing with a difficult coworker. According to O’Keefe (1997), there are three types of design logics from which people operate.

Three Message Design Logics

Using an inductive approach to theory building, O’Keefe (1988) developed her theory after studying the techniques people used to try to persuade others. Despite a plethora of strategies that might be used, she found that people tended to use “fairly uniform” techniques (1997, p. 87). Through this work, O’Keefe uncovered three distinct MDLs: expressive, conventional, and rhetorical.

The expressive MDL is a sender-focused pattern (O’Keefe, 1988). That is, a person using this pattern is concerned primarily with self-expression. Communication is viewed as a means for conveying the sender’s thoughts and feelings. People who use the expressive MDL have a very difficult time holding back their thoughts; if it’s in their head, it’s out their mouth. They value openness, honesty, and clarity in communication and are mistrustful of anyone who seems overly strategic in his or her communication. Such communicators pay little attention to context and what may be appropriate behavior for a particular context. They can’t help themselves—they feel a genuine pressure to say what is on their mind right here and right now. When the situation calls for them to protect someone else’s self-esteem, they typically accomplish this by editing their comments (e.g., replacing profanity with a euphemism) rather than through genuine efforts at politeness (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of politeness theory). For example, when faced with potential sexual harassment, a person using an expressive MDL might respond in this way: “You are the most rude
and disgusting man I have ever met. You’re nothing but a dirty old man. Where do you get off thinking you could force me to have an affair with you? You make me sick!” (Bingham & Burleson, 1989, p. 192).

Note that the content of this message is focused entirely on what the sender is feeling at the time. The sender might have made an effort to temper his or her anger by editing his or her language, but other than that, little effort is made to modify the expression of thoughts and feelings.

Second, a person who uses the conventional MDL views communication as a rule-based game that is played cooperatively (O’Keefe, 1988). As such, those using a conventional MDL are primarily concerned with appropriateness; these individuals view communication contexts, roles, and relationships as having particular guidelines for behavior (O’Keefe, 1997). They are concerned about saying and doing the “right” thing in any given situation. To do the “right” thing, they follow the rules of politeness (see Chapter 4 for more on politeness theory). Keeping our example of dealing with potential sexual harassment, a person using a conventional MDL might respond:

There’s absolutely no chance I will have an affair with you, and if you try to fire me over this I won’t keep quiet about it. That kind of behavior is not appropriate in the workplace. Besides that, you’re married. Don’t approach me again. (Bingham & Burleson, 1989, p. 192)

In this case, the message sender makes several allusions to communication rules; not only does she or he point out that this behavior is “not appropriate in the workplace” but the speaker also refers to an implicit rule by saying “you’re married,” which is a social relationship that is constrained by certain behavioral guidelines.

The third MDL is the rhetorical MDL. Individuals using a rhetorical MDL view communication as a powerful tool used to create situations and negotiate multiple goals (O’Keefe, 1988). Instead of emphasizing self-expressing (expressive logic) or social appropriateness (conventional logic), “those acting on the basis of a rhetorical design logic focus on the effect of messages on the recipient” (Bonito & Wolski, 2002, p. 256). This approach is noted for flexibility, as well as for its sophistication and depth of communication skill. Those using a rhetorical MDL pay close attention to other peoples’ communication in an effort to figure out others’ points of view. They try to anticipate and prevent problems by redefining situations to benefit all parties involved in the
interaction. Unlike the expressive MDL, which is reactive, the rhetorical MDL is proactive (O’Keefe, 1988). An example of a rhetorical MDL in the potential sexual harassment situation is as follows:

We’ve got a great working relationship now, and I’d like us to work well together in the future. So I think it’s important for us to talk this out. You’re a smart and clear-thinking guy and I consider you to be my friend as well as my boss. That’s why I have to think you must be under a lot of unusual stress lately to have said something like this. I know what it’s like to be under pressure. Too much stress can really make you crazy. You probably just need a break. (Bingham & Burleson, 1989, p. 193)

In this case, the sender seeks to balance his or her own goal of stopping the harassment with the target’s goal of protecting against embarrassment. At the same time, the sender strives to maintain a good working relationship with the person in the future. This is accomplished by redefining the situation from one of sexual harassment to one of excessive stress. By reframing the message, the rhetorical communicator has found “a common drama in which to play” (O’Keefe, 1988, p. 88).

**Message Design Logics Preferences**

Reading the three examples presented might give you insight into the MDL under which you tend to operate. More than likely, one of those messages is similar to something you might say in a situation you perceive as harassing, and the other message types might reflect something that you would never say in a million years. Indeed, one of the challenges highlighted by this theory is the difficulty that individuals have when dealing with others who use a different MDL. O’Keefe, Lambert, and Lambert (1997) argued that when two people use the same MDL, these individuals recognize that the problems are communication problems. When two parties use different MDLs, however, these individuals often do not realize they have communication problems; instead, they blame the difficulties on perceived bad intentions, mistaken beliefs, or undesirable personality characteristics (see attribution theory presented in Chapter 2). For example, a person who uses an expressive MDL tends to view those using a rhetorical MDL as dishonest because they “manipulate” their perception of the situation. Table 3.1 presents some forms of miscommunication that occur due to differing MDLs.
Although individuals tend to prefer using one MDL to another, O’Keefe and colleagues have cautioned that MDLs are not the same as personality traits. Unlike personality traits, MDLs are not stable but can change and develop over an individual’s lifespan. In fact, O’Keefe and Delia (1988) found that the three MDLs reflect a developmental process, with the expressive MDL the least developed and the rhetorical MDL the most developed pattern. However, O’Keefe et al. (1997) cautioned that this developmental trajectory should not imply that the

### Table 3.1 Forms of Miscommunication Due to Message Design Logics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message Recipient</th>
<th>Expressive MDL</th>
<th>Conventional MDL</th>
<th>Rhetorical MDL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expressive MDL</strong></td>
<td>Genuine differences in opinion prevent communicators from achieving any connection</td>
<td>Expressive remarks perceived as embarrassing or crude due to inappropriateness</td>
<td>Expressive person perceived as inconsiderate and uncooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conventional MDL</strong></td>
<td>Ritualistic messages are taken literally by the expressive person (such as “Let’s get together soon”)</td>
<td>Differing views of appropriateness of the situation lead to perceived inappropriate behavior</td>
<td>Conformity to appropriateness viewed as rigidity, overly conservative approach to interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhetorical MDL</strong></td>
<td>Messages viewed as unnecessarily elaborate and indirect; sender viewed as dishonest</td>
<td>Failure to see coherence of complex messages because of focus on “correct” context</td>
<td>Incompatible assumptions about goals can lead to misunderstanding of others’ intent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

rhetorical strategy is superior to others; “[e]very design logic provides a logically consistent and potentially satisfactory way for an individual to use language” (p. 49). They believe that all communicators should recognize and accommodate diversity in MDLs. Knowing the variation is half the battle.

Again, O’Keefe’s (1988, 1997) theory suggests that individuals tend to operate using one of three MDLs. Users of expressive MDLs view communication primarily as a means of sharing their unique feelings, beliefs, and ideas. Those who rely on conventional MDLs perceive communication as a rules-based game; to play the “game” one must operate using social conventions for appropriateness. Last, a rhetorical MDL emphasizes a highly flexible approach to communication in which the speaker adapts to the situation, using self-expression or relying on social conventions as appropriate.

COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY

Have you ever caught yourself slipping into a southern drawl or using “y’all” while speaking to a native Texan? Maybe you have found yourself speaking in fast, clipped tones when talking with a New Yorker, or upon returning from a European vacation, friends point out that you suddenly sound more like Prince Charles than Charles Barkley. Do you speed up while talking with some colleagues, but slow your speech when speaking with others? Communication accommodation theory (CAT) can explain many of the changes in your speech and language use.

Originally conceived as speech accommodation theory (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987) and later refined as communication accommodation theory (Giles & Coupland, 1991), CAT provides an informative platform from which to understand how we adapt our communication when we interact with others. Essentially, Giles and colleagues argued that when interacting with others, individuals will accommodate their speech and language patterns, either by matching their partners’ speech or by differentiating their speech and language use. In this section, we explain Giles and colleagues’ notion of accommodation through both convergence and divergence.

Communicating Social Identity Through In-Groups and Out-Groups

Giles and Coupland (1991) assumed that individuals belong to a wide variety of social groups, such as groupings based on ethnicity, race,
gender, and religion. Moreover, they maintained that these groups shape each person’s collective identity. For example, “most ethnic minority groups in the United States have tended to form communities, however small, where they have other people of similar heritage to sustain their ethnic values, socialization practices, and culture” (Vivero & Jenkins, 1999, p. 9). Similarly, your marital status (married), your political alignment (Republican), your career (public relations director), and your ethnicity (Irish American) all represent various social groups that influence the way that you perceive yourself and that others perceive you.

Like it or not, human beings categorize information to simplify and create understanding. One way in which we commonly categorize others and ourselves is through these social identity groups; these clusters are divided into in-groups and out-groups, which will be discussed in Chapter 10. In-groups are social affiliations to which an individual feels that he or she belongs (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Out-groups are those social affiliations to which a person feels that he or she does not belong. In the workplace, for example, you may go to happy hour with members from your team or department but would feel out of place socializing with members of another department. Similarly, if you play on a company softball league, your teammates may become an in-group, even if you had not interacted previously.

In-groups and out-groups are important for understanding CAT. According to Giles and Coupland (1991), language, speech, and nonverbal messages all communicate one’s in-group and out-group status. For example, if you have been around a group of teenagers recently, you may feel very much part of the out-group because your poor command of slang (language) and lack of body piercings (nonverbal artifacts) clearly differentiate you from them. When your teenage son says, “Hey! You don’t need to be all up in the Kool-Aid” in response to your simple question of “Where are you taking your date tonight?” he has differentiated himself (a hip teen) from you (a stodgy middle-aged parent). Instead of simply saying, “It’s none of your business,” his use of slang leaves you wondering what the heck he is talking about, thereby creating a gap between his generation and yours.

The use of slang to create in-group and out-group status applies to the workplace as well. Each profession has its own set of jargon, or specialized language, that not only gives precision to words and meanings but also helps create and maintain a distinct in-group. Thus, jargon includes those individuals who have similar training and experience and excludes everyone else. A member of your company’s information technology (IT) department may use computer jargon that intimidates
the nontechnology minded. For instance, when Karen calls her company’s IT department with a question about a problem she is having with a Web site password, the help desk manager asks her, “What’s your ISP?” Karen has no idea what an ISP is, much less which one she is using. In this instance, the help desk manager may use the jargon unintentionally when communicating with out-group members such as Karen and employees from other departments simply out of habit. Conversely, the manager may intentionally rely on jargon so as to intimidate the out-group members or to promote one’s own credibility. Because she doesn’t know what her ISP is, Karen may feel inferior, or she may perceive the help desk manager as possessing complex and invaluable information. Karen may even feel frustrated or annoyed because members of the help desk can’t seem to explain things in plain English. Importantly, then, jargon is both inclusive and exclusive and should be used cautiously with out-group members.

**Accommodation Through Convergence or Divergence**

Individuals adjust their speech and conversational patterns either in an effort to assimilate with or to deviate from others (Giles & Coupland, 1991). When a person wants to be viewed as part of an in-group, CAT predicts that this person will accommodate by convergence. That is, you will alter your speech and behavior so that it matches that of your conversational partner. Speech includes word choice, pronunciation, pitch, rate, and even gestures such as smiling and gaze. For instance, elementary school teachers often converge their speech, using more expressive registers, slower speaking rates, and shorter words or phrases to accommodate their young pupils. When individuals match their speech, they convey acceptance and understanding. Interpersonal attraction also leads to convergence (Giles et al., 1987). That is, the more a person is likable, charismatic, and socially skilled, the more likely you are to try to match his or her communication patterns.

Conversely, there are times when individuals don’t want to be associated with a certain group or do find a person interpersonally unattractive; sometimes you want to differentiate yourself from a particular crowd. In this instance, you will alter your speech through divergence. Rather than match your partner’s communication patterns, you will seek to make your speech different. Deliberately diverging from the speech of your partner signals disagreement or rejection. A kindergarten teacher may use a more stern tone when disciplining the class for misbehavior. Similarly, you may overhear
your 16-year-old neighbor conversing in strings of expletives with her friends simply as a way of countering adult authority. In addition to expressing disagreement or rejection of a speaker, divergence also illustrates one’s cultural identity (e.g., a student’s use of Ebonics when speaking with an English professor) or differences in one’s status (e.g., a physician’s use of elaborate medical terminology when talking with a patient).

**Who Accommodates to Whom?**

It is worthy to note differences in accommodation across different groups because these differences say a great deal about the importance of perceived status, authority, and cultural and social identity within our multicultural society. In her review of research, Larkey (1996) reported that when looking at race, ethnicity, and sex in the workplace, Euro-American male employees typically diverge; that is, they maintain their communicative style regardless of conversational partner because it is commonly defined as the “standard” in both the United States and much of Europe.

Conversely, minority employees (including women and members of racial and ethnic minorities) typically must converge to this “standard” to achieve status within the organization. Persistent convergence may create cognitive dissonance for minority members by placing them in a dilemma; maintaining their cultural and social identity is sacrificed when using the mainstream speech patterns that are expected and rewarded.

**The Pitfalls of Accommodation**

Importantly, accommodation is not always appropriate or effective (Giles & Coupland, 1991). When in doubt, individuals rely on social norms to inform their decision to accommodate or not. Norms are implicit expectations that guide social behavior; thus, we must rely on our perceptions of social appropriateness when determining whether to converge or diverge. Table 3.2 provides some consequences of accommodation. Note that there are both positive and negative consequences for both types of accommodation.

All told, CAT explains and predicts the experience of convergence and divergence in interpersonal communication. The more we like a person or perceive ourselves as part of an in-group, the more likely we are to adapt and match our speech patterns. The more we want to communicate our difference, status, or unique cultural identity, the more likely we are to differentiate our speech from our partner’s.
Communicators must be aware, however, that accommodation is not always effective or well received.

### UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION THEORY

The third theory we discuss here is uncertainty reduction theory (URT). Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) URT holds that social life is filled with ambiguities. Not knowing what to wear on the first day at a new job (Should I wear a suit or go with business casual?), unsure as to how to greet a new boss (Should I call her Megan? Ms. Smith? Mrs. Smith? Dr. Smith?), and wondering whether you will get along with the new office mate who just transferred from another location (Will she bother me with questions? Will he gossip about team members?) are just a few typical concerns during an average workday. Guided by several assumptions and axioms of human behavior, URT seeks to explain and predict when, why, and how individuals use communication to minimize their doubts when interacting with others.

Three assumptions guide the uncertainty reduction framework. First, Berger and Calabrese (1975) maintained that the primary goal of communication is to minimize uncertainties that humans have about the world and the people therein. Second, they proposed that individuals experience uncertainty on a regular basis and that the experience of uncertainty is an unpleasant one. Third, Berger and Calabrese assumed that communication is the primary vehicle for reducing uncertainty. Importantly, with so many uncertainties presented to you within a given 24-hour period, Berger (1979) admitted that individuals couldn’t possibly reduce uncertainty about all of these new people or situations. Instead, he argued that there are three possible preceding conditions that influence whether people have the motivation necessary to reduce their uncertainty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive Effects</th>
<th>Negative Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convergence</td>
<td>Increased attraction; social approval; increased persuasion</td>
<td>Incorrect stereotypes of out-group; perceived condescension; loss of personal identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergence</td>
<td>Protects cultural identity; asserts power differences; increased sympathy</td>
<td>Perceived disdain for out-group; perceived lack of effort; increased psychological distance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reducing Uncertainty

Antecedent Conditions

Berger (1979) argued that individuals are motivated to reduce uncertainty only under one of three specific antecedent conditions. First, anticipation of future interaction suggests that you are more motivated to reduce uncertainty about someone who you are likely to see again. Thus, you are more inclined to use uncertainty reduction behaviors when a new office mate joins the team because you know that you will be working with this person on a daily basis. The second condition, incentive value, includes the notion that you are prompted to learn more about someone when the individual in question has the potential to provide you with rewards or even punishments. In other words, what can this person do for you or to you? The third antecedent condition is deviance. If a person is odd, eccentric, bizarre, or unusual in some way that counters your expectations, URT suggests that individuals will be more likely to reduce their uncertainty about the individual.

Types of Uncertainty

Beyond the antecedent conditions that prompt people to want to reduce uncertainty, Berger and Bradac (1982) argued that there are two distinct variations, or types, of uncertainty. The first type, behavioral uncertainty, takes into account your insecurity about which actions are appropriate in a given situation. For example, when starting a job at a new company, there is often some ambiguity about the hours “required.” Do employees of my position begin at 9:00 a.m. and leave at 5:00 p.m.? Or, am I expected to arrive early and stay late? Should I work through lunch, eating at my desk, or do colleagues expect me go out to lunch with them and socialize? These are all examples of typical behavioral uncertainty for a new employee who is not yet sure as to how to act within the new corporation.

The second type of uncertainty is cognitive uncertainty. Whereas individuals experiencing behavioral uncertainty question how they should act in a given situation, those who experience cognitive uncertainty are unsure as to what to think about someone or something. In other words, cognitive uncertainty emphasizes the doubts in your ability to pinpoint the attitudes and beliefs of others. When a colleague makes a comment about how “comfortable” you look on a casual Friday, you may wonder, was this a compliment? Or was the remark a subtle hint that you may be dressed in a manner that is too casual for the office? Should you even care what the person thinks of your attire? All of these questions emphasize cognitive uncertainty.
**Axioms Explaining the Uncertainty Reduction Process**

URT seeks to explain and predict the ways in which individuals use communication to reduce ambiguity. Specifically, the process of reducing uncertainty is predicated on eight axioms, or self-evident truths, that have been established and supported in previous research (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). These axioms are summarized in Table 3.3.

As is plainly evident, these axioms make sense; they are, after all, “self-evident truths.” Unlike a commonsense theory, however, URT’s axioms have been classified, paired together to create theorems, and tested systematically over time, thereby providing URT with scholarly credence. Moreover, the axioms presented in Table 3.3 supply only the backbone of the theory. In other words, to say that using friendly nonverbal behaviors reduces uncertainty is not enough to warrant a scholarly theory. Discussed next, communication strategies to reduce uncertainty provide additional substance to URT’s axioms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Axiom</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Axiom 1</td>
<td>As your verbal communication with a communication partner increases, your level of uncertainty about that person decreases; as a result, verbal communication continues to increase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiom 2</td>
<td>As welcoming nonverbal expressions increase, uncertainty decreases and vice versa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiom 3</td>
<td>The greater your uncertainty, the more information-seeking behaviors you use. Conversely, as your uncertainty lessens, you seek less information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiom 4</td>
<td>When uncertainty in a relationship is high, the intimacy level of communication content will be low. On the other hand, the reduction of uncertainty leads to greater intimacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiom 5</td>
<td>The more uncertain you are, the more you will use reciprocal communication strategies and vice versa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiom 6</td>
<td>The more similarities you perceive to share with the target person(s), the more your uncertainty is reduced. Alternatively, perceiving dissimilarities leads to increased uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiom 7</td>
<td>As uncertainty decreases, liking increases. Conversely, if your uncertainty rises, your liking of the person will decrease.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiom 8</td>
<td>Shared communication networks, or shared ties, lessen your uncertainty. On the other hand, if you share no common relations, your uncertainty intensifies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Axioms 1 through 7 are adapted from Berger and Calabrese, 1975. Axiom 8 is adapted from Parks and Adelman, 1983.
Uncertainty Reduction Strategies

When examining communication strategies for reducing uncertainty, it is important to remember Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) original premise: Uncertainty reduction is central to all social relations. Likewise, Berger (1995, 1997) noted that much of social interaction is goal driven. In other words, you communicate for a reason, and you create cognitive plans that guide individuals’ social interaction.

URT is related to Berger’s (1995, 1997) notion of plan-based messages. Specifically, when seeking information about social realities, individuals create and use plans that vary in complexity. Individuals may vary widely in their relational goals and have a range of specific tactics available to cope with uncertainty. Three overarching strategies typify most uncertainty reduction communication, however: passive, active, and interactive.

Indicative of the passive strategy, individuals observe their surroundings and surreptitiously gather clues about which behaviors are appropriate as well as which attitudes and beliefs others hold. The passive approach is much like playing detective. The active strategy to uncertainty reduction involves seeking information from a third party. Rather than playing detective yourself, you go to someone else who may know more about the person or situation in question. Last, the interactive strategy is when you go straight to the source in question and ask for as much information as possible.

For example, imagine yourself in a new position at a new company. As the December holiday season approaches, you begin to wonder whether you should give a gift to your boss. You could wait to see if others give gifts (passive strategy), you could ask several peers what they do for their supervisors (active strategy), or you could directly ask your boss what the company culture is like and what he or she expects (interactive strategy). Clearly, there are many possible goals that would influence which plan to enact. If the overarching goal is to appear appropriate, effective, and appreciative, the active strategy is probably the best choice. By asking others in your position what they do, you can get a good sense of what your supervisor expects without offending or embarrassing him or her.

Beyond Initial Interactions

Uncertainty reduction theory was originally concerned with explaining and predicting the ambiguity associated with initial interactions (Berger, 1979; Berger & Calabrese, 1975). That is, research using URT
emphasized when, why, and how individuals minimize doubt when in new situations or when meeting new people. Berger (1997) has since expanded his position on URT, however, noting that uncertainty exists in new and developing relationships as well as in long-term, ongoing relationships. For example, when Alison is suddenly laid off, Dana and Danielle become (understandably) uncertain about their own job security. Even in the face of positive change, uncertainty is inevitable. Imagine you are promoted and will now manage some of your closest friends at work. This change in power—from peer to superior—will likely increase your uncertainty. All relationships are characterized by change and growth—both of which promote the rise of uncertainty. Furthermore, as discussed later in Chapter 4, some researchers believe that a little bit of uncertainty is actually necessary for maintaining a healthy relationship.

To review, URT focuses on when and why individuals use communication to reduce uncertainty about others. Uncertainty predictably decreases when nonverbal immediacy, verbal messages, self-disclosure, shared similarities, and shared social networks increase. People routinely use passive, active, and interactive information-seeking strategies to reduce their uncertainty when encountering others.

**EXPECTANCY VIOLATIONS THEORY**

Developed by Judee Burgoon (1978, 1994), expectancy violations theory (EVT) explains the various meanings that people attribute to the violation, or infringement, of their personal space. Importantly, whereas much of Burgoon’s work emphasizes nonverbal violations of physical space (known as the study of proxemics), personal space can also refer to psychological or emotional space. Similar to URT, EVT is derived from a series of assumptions and axioms.

**Assumptions**

EVT builds on a number of communication axioms; most central to the understanding of EVT, however, is the assumption that humans have competing needs for personal space and for affiliation (Burgoon, 1978). Specifically, humans all need a certain amount of personal space, also thought of as distance or privacy; people also desire a certain amount of closeness with others, or affiliation. When you perceive that one of your needs has been compromised, EVT predicts that you will try to do
something about it. Thus, Burgoon’s initial work focused on the realm of physical space—what happens when someone violates your expectations for appropriate physical distance or closeness.

Beyond explaining individuals’ physical space and privacy needs, EVT also makes specific predictions as to how individuals will react to a given violation. Will you reciprocate, or match, someone’s unexpected behavior, perhaps moving closer or turning toward the individual? Or will you compensate, or counteract, by doing the opposite of your partner’s behavior? Before making a prediction about reciprocation or compensation, however, you must evaluate EVT’s three core concepts: expectancy, violation valence, and communicator reward valence.

**Core Concepts of Expectancy Violations Theory**

First, *expectancy* refers to what an individual anticipates will happen in a given situation. Expectancy is similar to the idea of social norms and is based on three primary factors. First, the *context* of the behavior is important. In a formal business meeting, for example, hugging a colleague to show support may be inappropriate and may raise some eyebrows. If, however, you hug the same colleague while attending his mother’s funeral, the gesture may be perfectly acceptable. Second, the *relationship* one has with the person in question must be examined. If attending the funeral of your boss’s mother, a hug may still be perceived as inappropriate, whereas if the funeral is for the mother of a colleague who is also a personal friend, a hug would likely be more suitable. Third, the *communicator’s characteristics* also fuel your expectations; you have expectations for the way people of both sexes and of certain ages, ethnicities, and the like will communicate.

By examining the context, relationship, and communicator’s characteristics, individuals arrive at a certain expectation for how a given person should and will likely behave. Changing even one of these expectancy variables might lead to a different expectation. Once you have determined, however, that someone’s behavior was, in fact, a breach of expectation, you then judge the behavior in question. This breach is known as the *violation valence*—the positive or negative evaluation you make about a behavior that you did not anticipate. Importantly, not all violations are evaluated negatively. Very often a person behaves in a way that you might not have expected, but this surprising behavior is viewed positively. For example, a normally cantankerous colleague brings coffee and bagels to the Monday morning
staff meeting or the habitually shy intern actually makes eye contact with you and asks for your opinion on a new project.

The third element that must be addressed before predicting reciprocation or compensation involves assessing the person whose behavior is in question. Similar to the violation valence, the *communicator reward valence* is an evaluation you make about the person who committed the violation. Specifically, does this person have the ability to reward (or punish) you in the future? If so, then the person has a positive reward valence. Rewards simply refer to this person’s ability to provide you with something you want or need. Similarly, punishment refers to the person’s ability to thwart your desires. A boss, a spouse, or a client might also be examples of someone whom you perceive to have such reward–punishment power. Again, however, it is possible for someone with a positive reward valence to engage in a negative violation.

**Predicting Reactions When Expectations Are Violated**

After assessing expectancy, violation valence, and communicator reward valence of a given situation, it becomes possible to make rather specific predictions about whether the individual who perceived the violation will reciprocate or compensate the behavior in question. These predictions are described in Figure 3.1.

Guerrero and Burgoon (1996; Guerrero, Jones, & Burgoon, 2000) noticed that predictable patterns develop when considering reward valence and violation valence together. Specifically, if the violation valence is perceived as positive and the communicator reward valence is also perceived as positive, the theory predicts you will reciprocate the positive behavior. For example, your boss gives you a big smile after you’ve given a presentation. Guerrero and Burgoon would predict that you smile in return. Similarly, if you perceive the violation valence as negative and perceive the communicator reward valence as negative, the theory again predicts you reciprocate the negative behavior. Thus, if a disliked coworker is grouchy and unpleasant to you, you will likely reciprocate and be unpleasant in return.

Conversely, if you perceive a negative violation valence but view the communicator reward valence as positive, it is likely that you will compensate for your partner’s negative behavior. For example, one day your boss appears sullen and throws a stack of papers in front of you. Rather than grunt back, EVT predicts that you will compensate for your boss’ negativity, perhaps by asking if everything is OK (Guerrero & Burgoon, 1996). More difficult to predict, however, is
the situation in which someone you view as having a negative reward valence violates you with a positive behavior. In this situation, you may reciprocate, giving the person the “benefit of the doubt.” Alternatively, you may view the communicator as having suspicious motives, thereby compensating. For example, if the disliked coworker
comes in one day and is very pleasant to you, you might be pleasant in return, but you also might treat the person with suspicion.

As evidenced, EVT focuses broadly on the infringement of one’s expectations for “normal” behavior. Burgoon’s research has chiefly emphasized the violation of nonverbal space; however, other expectations, such as behavioral norms, can be also violated. Notably, violations are not necessarily negative. One must evaluate the anticipated behavior, the communicator’s characteristics, and the violation itself.

§ CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter focused on cognition and communication, which refers to the way that individuals assess others’ behavior, attitudes, and messages to assign meaning. First, message design logics is concerned with the different beliefs that people have about communication and the way that communication varies because of these beliefs. In the workplace, message design logics has been used to explain characteristics of job-related complaints (Bonito & Wolski, 2002) and has correlated managers’ rhetorical MDL with reduced workplace stress and burnout (Peterson, Halsey, Albrecht, & McGough, 1995). Second, CAT focuses on when and how we modify our communicative behaviors with others and the resulting perceptions that might be associated with different sorts of accommodations. For example, police–civilian communication was perceived more positively when both individuals shared the same racial background (Dixon, Schell, Giles, & Drogos, 2008). Conversely, inconsistent patient records emerge when physicians fail to converge specialty jargon (Hewett, Watson, Gallois, Ward, & Legget, 2009). Third, URT states that when individuals encounter someone or something new, they experience uncertainty; uncertainty is uncomfortable, so people use communication strategies to reduce it. One application of URT is its usefulness in explaining how employees experience uncertainty and use uncertainty reduction strategies to manage both temporary (Rhodes, 2008) and long-term organizational change (Kramer, 1993, 1994). Finally, EVT predicts whether people will reciprocate or compensate when their conversational partner violates their expectations. Within organizational contexts, EVT has been used to explain negative perceptions of organizations’ responses to consumer complaints (Bolkan & Daly, 2009).
Case Study 3: Caught in Between

Julie Miller had recently joined the internal audit department of a large pharmaceutical company as an analyst. As a team, these analysts conducted thousands of inspections to ensure that the sales representatives complied with federal regulatory guidelines. It was a Monday afternoon, and Julie grabbed a seat at the weekly staff meeting. Her boss, Pat, sat at the head of the large conference room table, notebook open, looking ready to begin. Over the next hour, Pat previewed a new plan that he and a senior analyst, Erin, would create to standardize the team’s daily logging process.

Pat started the meeting by saying, "I done some checkin', and I can tell that yooz are not doin' the same amount of inspeckin. Uhbeaht heahf of yooz are checkin awwl da voided cards to look for blanks. The udder heahf of yooz aren't looking at no more 'an a hanful. We godda get this more together, ya know?"

He continued in his heavy Philly accent, saying that this type of inconsistency could leave the department open to liability issues and may be a problem in the department’s yearly internal audit.

"I jus' wanna make sure ever'bod's on da same page uhbeaht awl dis," Pat explained. "If any of yooz got any ideas 'bout what should be include' in da process, gimme a kawl on the phowen. Me enn Erin are gawn head up this projeck."

With that, as he did at each meeting, Pat asked each person around the table for any questions or issues they wished to discuss.

As soon as Julie got back to her desk after the meeting, the woman from the next cubicle rushed into her space, visibly angry. "What was that all about? Are we trained monkeys? Can you even believe him?" Marissa sputtered.

Julie felt a twinge of discomfort; she had been one of the people who recognized that there was a large discrepancy in the analysts’ process. She actually looked forward to having more definite guidelines.

Before Julie could respond, Marissa went on, "Why do we even need a standardized process? Is he really so sure I don't know how to do my own job? I've been in this department for 12 years! I think I know how to do an audit by now. Every day, I speak to senior directors who are so far above his head, he couldn't even see them! Of course, with him being so short and bald, that's not that difficult! I can't believe this!"

"Here we go again," Julie thought silently to herself. Although only a few months into the job, Julie had witnessed enough of Marissa’s vocal complaints to know that if left unchecked, she would go on and on.

Julie again attempted to speak but was interrupted by Marissa's rant: "And when will the man learn how to speak? Who talks like that..."
in management? I can't believe they hired this man to be my manager. He's absolutely stupid! I'm supposed to respect him? I can't. I won't. And why did he pick Erin? I have more seniority than she does—even if my title doesn't reflect it! Please! It's a shame you weren't here before Pat got here, Julie. The old boss knew we were doing a good job and left us alone."

Julie didn't know how to respond. She shared a cubicle wall with Marissa and didn't want to get on the woman's bad side. At the same time, Julie and Pat had gotten along well since he hired her a few months ago. Although she agreed that he was rough around the edges, she liked his straightforward manner. Pat had been a captain in the Philadelphia Police Department, until two years ago when he was injured in the line of duty and relegated to a desk job. He came to this company after being recruited by Mary, the senior director and a former Philadelphia detective herself who had worked for Pat. Julie had spoken privately with Pat a few times about his difficult transition from being a manager at the police department, which utilized a managerial style that was very confrontational, aggressive, and structured, and this company, which encouraged a managerial style that sometimes seemed to him to be more about how the job got done than actually getting it done. Sometimes, even now, Julie could tell that he had to stop and think about the "right" way to respond to a situation, instead of responding in his natural style.

Complicating matters, Julie had learned from a coworker that Marissa had applied for Pat's job but wasn't chosen. Knowing Mary's history with Pat, Julie assumed Mary had an interest in bringing in people with a background in criminal justice to round out the investigative skills on the team. Marissa, on the other hand, had chalked it up to plain old nepotism.

Julie could not imagine Marissa as a manager. An attractive woman in her mid-50s, Marissa was always meticulously put together. Twice divorced, Marissa had a sarcastic, if caustic, sense of humor that had initially turned Julie off. Marissa rarely held back from sharing her opinion as if it were the only correct one.

Over the past few weeks, however, Julie's initial opinion had softened. From chatting with Marissa, Julie learned that she had endured a lot early in life and, as a result, wasn't able to finish college. Starting as a secretary years before, Marissa had slowly worked her way up the ranks, even without a degree. Although she really was good at her job, Julie noticed that Marissa was rarely commended. Still, Julie was learning to take Marissa's tirades about Pat with a grain of salt. Everyone else did as well.

(Continued)
Julie whispered quietly, so as not to be overheard, “Well, why didn’t you raise any of your objections to the process in the meeting when Pat asked for feedback? He said he wanted to hear people’s concerns.”

“Are you kidding me?” Marissa replied, in her regular speaking voice. “He only says he wants feedback because that’s what he learned in some managerial class.”

At that moment, Pat walked by Julie’s cube on his way to Erin’s desk. Marissa stopped and looked a little guilty. Julie sensed the tension, but knowing she had done nothing wrong she just smiled and greeted Pat as she usually did. She assumed Pat would smile and make a friendly joke as he typically did when he saw Julie. Instead, he curtly nodded his head in their direction and barked, “Yo Marissa, why don’ I got those refurr’l ledders back? I gave ’em to you two-tree days ago. If you can’t hannel your work, lemme know. I’ll get summon else a do it.”

Marissa’s face reddened, but she coolly replied, “I’ll have them to you within the hour.” Pat turned to Julie, smiled, and continued on his way.

Julie was taken aback; Pat had never spoken to her in this way. She had recently turned in some requested referrals a day late herself and had been reassured by Pat that they were “no big deal, just more paperwork.”

Julie plopped down at her desk and sighed. I’m staying out of this, she thought. I’ll just be nice to both of them and do my work.

Questions for Consideration

1. What MDL does Julie appear to use? Marissa? Pat? How would this exchange have been more effective if different MDLs were used?

2. Does Pat converge or diverge in the meeting with his team? How do you know? Do you think Pat will be successful continuing this approach (converging or diverging) with his team? With upper management? Explain.

3. Julie is fairly new to the organization. What strategies has she used to reduce her uncertainty about Pat? Marissa?

4. Using examples for each of EVT’s core components (expectancy, violation valence, and communicator reward valence), what does EVT explain about Julie’s reaction to Pat? Then, think about it from Pat’s perspective. What does EVT explain about Pat’s reaction to Julie “gossiping” with Marissa?

5. Which theory alone seems to provide the “best” explanation for the situation? Why do you believe this to be the case? What situations might surface that would make a different theory or theories better at explaining the situation? How could you combine several theories to make for an even “better” explanation of the encounter?