

# FIVE

## *Compassion, Moderation, and Humility in Interpersonal Relationships*

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*I have three treasures  
 Which I hold and cherish.  
 The first is known as compassion,  
 The second is known as frugality  
 The third is known as not daring  
 to take the lead in the empire;  
 Being compassionate one could afford to be courageous.  
 Being frugal one could afford to extend one's territory,  
 Not daring to take the lead in the empire,  
 one could afford to be lord over vessels.  
 (Lao Zi, Chapter 67)*

### *Introduction*

Perhaps more than anything else, relationships are a defining aspect of our lives. It is in the contexts of family, friendship, romantic relationships, and professional relationships that we grow to know and understand others and ourselves. This chapter is intended to stimulate your thinking about communication in these relationships.

In chapter 67 of the *Dao De Jing*, Lao Zi identified the three jewels, or treasures, of Daoism: compassion, moderation (frugality), and humility (not daring). We have chosen to organize this chapter around these “jewels,” as they allow useful lenses through which to view others, ourselves, and the dynamic process of interpersonal communication. As we move through this chapter, consider the presence of these jewels in your relationships and reflect on how a deeper understanding of interpersonal communication might help you to enhance their presence in your life.

### *Defining Interpersonal Communication*

There are two major perspectives about *interpersonal communication*. From a situational or quantitative perspective, interpersonal communication occurs whenever two people communicate with one another (Adler & Towne, 2002; Trenhom & Jensen, 2008). This perspective would classify a wide range of interactions as interpersonal: a brief interaction between a cashier and a customer as

interpersonal, a deep discussion between a husband and wife, or even a stranger asking another stranger for the time.

Another approach is referred to as developmental or qualitative (Adler & Towne, 2002; Trenholm & Jensen, 2008). According to this school of thought, interpersonal communication occurs when the two people interacting are communicating in a way that acknowledges the other person's uniqueness. Accordingly, an interaction between a cashier and a customer would not necessarily constitute interpersonal communication, *unless* this interaction went beyond what is expected according to role-based scripts.

Regardless of how one chooses to define interpersonal communication, it is clear that it plays an important role in our lives. Interpersonal communication allows us to build, maintain, and, sometimes, terminate what Duck & McMahan (2009) refer to as *personal relationships*, those that involve people we value and whom we consider to be special and irreplaceable. Life without our friends, roommates, romantic partner, siblings, or parents would be dismal for most of us. And yet, at the same time, many of us can identify with the challenges of interpersonal communication and relationships. Misunderstandings, conflict, and feelings of frustration are common features of personal relationships.

Knowledge of interpersonal communication allows for a more complete understanding of the messages we send in our personal relationships and the implications of these messages. This knowledge can empower us to improve our relationships.

### *Interpersonal Communication and the Three Jewels of Daoism*

#### *Jewel 1: Compassion*

Compassion, the first jewel of Daoism, relates to kindness and caring. In personal relationships, compassion helps communicators to relate to one another with understanding and patience. The *Dao De Jing* suggests that compassion leads to courage. Personal relationships are not often thought about as endeavors requiring courage; however, perhaps courage is precisely what is needed in order to engage meaningfully with others and to maintain relationships through difficult times.

*Empathy.* In order to build and sustain satisfying, enduring interpersonal relationships, communicators must have compassion for one another. Compassion may arise naturally and easily in some circumstances. For example, when a close friend discloses to you that her father has been diagnosed with terminal cancer, you will likely feel a sense of caring and concern, as well as an understanding of why your friend is feeling shocked and saddened. Other times, however, compassion must be cultivated and brought forth intentionally. Imagine that this same friend has been acting impatient and distracted toward you for several months after her father's diagnosis. In this situation, you might have to remind yourself to be compassionate, given your friend's circumstances. Just as our relationships and interactions are dynamic (i.e., ever changing), our sense of compassion changes from relationship to relationship and interaction to interaction.

Most communicators will have difficulty feeling compassion without a sense of empathy. *Empathy* involves "viewing a problem from the perspective of another person to understand his or her thinking and how he or she is feeling" (Duck & McMahan, 2009). Empathy requires individuals to go beyond feeling sorry or sad for another person. Instead, empathy necessitates that individuals to attempt to *think, feel, and experience* from the perspective of someone else. As is true with compassion, empathy comes easily in some situations and with great difficulty in others. It may be especially difficult to feel compassion and empathy when others' feelings threaten one's own sense of *face*, or public sense of self (Goffman, 1971).

*Perspective Taking.* Empathy also involves viewing situations from the perspective of others. Trenholm & Jensen (2008) define *perspective taking* as "a cognitively oriented appraisal of how the other perceives himself, his situation, and his emotions." When communicators "perspective take," they set aside their own interpretations and judgments in an effort to understand what another person is thinking. Often, perspective taking will lead to a clearer understanding, not only of what another person is thinking, but also, why he or she is feeling a certain way.

Wendt (1984) developed the *D.I.E. exercise* as a way to improve communication, and it is also useful in helping communicators perspective take. This exercise requires communicators to distinguish between description (D), interpretation (I), and evaluation (E). *Description* statements are factual and can be verified through the senses. For example, “Jamie has not spoken much all night.” *Interpretations* attribute meaning to the descriptive statements. Wendt (1984) writes that interpretations are “what we *think* or *believe* about what we see and hear.” For example, “Jamie is mad at me.” *Evaluations* occur when communicators pass judgment and involve beliefs about “what ought not happen and what should be” (p. 397).

It is important to note that only statements at the level of description are nonjudgmental (Nakayama & Martin, 2007). Yet, communicators often evaluate without considering that their interpretations or evaluations could be wrong. Compassionate interpersonal communication involves acknowledging the subjectivity in our own interpretations and evaluations, as well as making an effort to interpret and evaluate situations from perspectives other than the one that comes most easily: our own.

*Social support.* One way to demonstrate compassion is through providing social support to those around us. Tardy (1985) identifies three different types of social support. *Emotional support* consists of affective (i.e., emotional) support such as trust, love, and caring. This type of support corresponds well with the previous discussion of empathy. *Instrumental support* refers to providing resources such as money, time, or tasks. When a friend or family member approaches you with the question, “Could I ask you for a favor?” they are asking for instrumental support. *Informational support* consists of advice or information provided in a particular area. For example, having just moved to a new city, we have relied on the people we meet to provide informational support regarding the best restaurants in town, and fun things to do in the area. These types of social support can be used individually, but they can also be used in conjunction with one another.

*Communicative challenges to compassion: Direct and passive aggression.* At times, people in relationships communicate in ways that are less than compassionate and empathetic. Instead, they respond with what

Adler & Towne (2002) refer to as *direct aggression*, which threatens the face of the other person, or engage in *passive aggression*, which “expresses hostility in an obscure way” (p. 409)

*Direct aggression*, which is also referred to as aggressive talk (Hybels & Weaver, 2009), can include attacks on another person’s character, competence, or physical appearance, as well as maledictions, teasing, ridicule, threats, and profanity (Infante, 1987). Direct aggression can also include nonverbal messages, such as paralinguistics (i.e., the manner in which something is said), rolling of the eyes, and insulting gestures. Not surprisingly, couples who engage in aggressive talk report less relational satisfaction than couples who do not (Sabourin, Infante, & Rudd, 1993).

In contrast to direct aggression, *passive aggression* (Hybels & Weaver, 2009) is characterized by manipulation or strategic messages. For example, imagine a college student who gets upset with his girlfriend and instead of talking with her about his feelings, he makes plans with his friends on an evening where he would normally spend time with her. Although this college student is not acting aggressive toward his girlfriend in an overt way, his intention is to cause her mental or emotional distress.

This discussion of direct aggression and passive aggression is useful, not only because it provides a clear contrast to compassionate communication, but also because it reminds us of times where it is challenging to be compassionate. When a friend, family member, or romantic partner communicates to us with direct aggression or passive aggression, it is difficult to respond with empathy and perspective taking.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps at these times, we ourselves might be tempted to respond in ways that are either directly or indirectly aggressive. But, as communicators who wish to cultivate compassion, it is our responsibility to exercise empathy.

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<sup>1</sup> Note, however, that if someone close to you uses direct aggression to communicate with you, it could be signs of danger in the relationship. In this case, it is wise to seek the support of people you trust and to minimize risks to your mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

*Theoretical connection: Compassion and constructivism*

Perhaps one of the most significant ways to communicate compassion in our interpersonal interactions is to engage in sensitive communication that is adapted to particular others. One well-regarded theory of communication is *constructivism*, which proposes that individuals who are more cognitively complex in their perceptions of others have the ability to deliver person-centered messages that achieve the outcomes they desire (Delia, O’Keefe, & O’Keefe, 1982; Burleson, 2007). Constructivism’s core concepts of *cognitive complexity* and *person-centeredness* are particularly important in our quest to become compassionate interpersonal communicators.

*Cognitive complexity* refers to the mental ability to distinguish subtle personality and behavior differences among people. To test your cognitive complexity, we encourage you to complete a short version of the Role Category Questionnaire (RCQ), a survey used in constructivist research studies (Crocket, 1965):

Select one person you like and one person you dislike. After you have two people in mind, spend some time mentally comparing and contrasting them in terms of personality, habits, beliefs, and the way they treat others. Do not limit yourself to similarities and differences between the two; consider the full range of characteristics that make them who they are.

Using a sheet of paper, spend about 5 minutes to describe the person you like so that a stranger would have an accurate understanding of what he or she is like. Do not list physical characteristics; instead, list all of the attributes, mannerisms, and reactions to others that identify the person. Use phrases and single words to describe the person; full-sentence descriptions are not necessary.

When you’ve finished describing the person you like, repeat the procedure for the person you dislike. Spend about 5 minutes to describe this person as well.

How many different descriptions did you use to describe both people? Each new term you used can be counted as a *mental construct*, a yardstick or cognitive template we fit over reality to bring order to our perceptions and understanding of others. You may have listed constructs such as warm, intelligent, kind, friendly, and creative for the person you like. On the other hand, you may have described the person you dislike as cold, unintelligent, boring, and aloof. As compassionate interpersonal communicators, however, we must realize that our cognitive complexity is always limited. Our interpretations and predictions may be incorrect. Our mental lexicon is forever incomplete and leads us to stereotype quite easily.

Constructivist theorists remark that people who are more cognitively complex are more capable creating person-centered messages, or engaging in sensitive communication that is tailored to particular others. More specifically, *person-centered messages* are “messages which reflect an awareness of and adaptation to subjective, affective, and relational aspects of the communication contexts” (Burlison & Waltman, 1988, p. 15). Take some time to reflect: In interpersonal interactions, do you find yourself adapting your messages to specific individuals and contexts? How so?

*Compassionate communication: Skills to practice*

*Practicing empathy.* Like relationships and communication, empathy and compassion are ever-changing. We can feel compassionate and empathetic toward a friend one day and irritated with her the next. What can we do about this shifting sense of compassion?

A first step is to bring awareness to the times in which we feel the least compassion. Writer James Thurber is quoted saying, “Let us not look back in anger, nor forward in fear, but around in awareness.” Take a moment to look around, bringing awareness to yourself:

Think of a person who brings out your judgmental, critical side at certain times. For a moment, try to think from that person’s perspective. Try to feel what that person is feeling.

You can picture this person, but try to avoid interpreting or evaluating this person and his/her actions. Instead, try to direct caring and understanding toward this person.

If this task is difficult, you are probably doing it right! This activity may not change the way you feel about the person or situation above permanently, but our hope is that it shifted your perspective just slightly. Often, as communicators, we respond emotionally as if it were a reflex. Being compassionate communicators requires that we stretch beyond our own emotions and perspectives, and doing so requires time, patience, and practice.

*I/you language.* In addition to practicing empathy, we can also practice compassion through our verbal messages. Wood (2004) distinguishes between “I” messages that take responsibility for our own actions, and “You” messages that place the blame on others. For example, if you were hurt that your sister forgot your birthday for the second year in a row, you could say to her, “I felt hurt that you forgot my birthday again” (“I” message), or “You hurt my feelings by forgetting my birthday” (“You” message). “I” messages convey the speaker’s acknowledgement of responsibility for his/her feelings, whereas “You” messages blame the other person. This acknowledgement is important, because it emphasizes the distinction between behaviors and interpretations or evaluations.

By now it should be evident that part of having compassion for others involves taking their perspective and trying to understand their feelings and thoughts. “You” messages don’t leave room for others’ perspectives. Instead, they label our evaluations as singularly valid. “I” messages are better suited for compassionate communication, because, although they convey our feelings clearly, they acknowledge that our feelings and interpretations are subjective.

#### *Compassion: Concluding thoughts*

The introduction of this book highlighted the nonlinearity associated with Eastern thought. This nonlinearity is an important aspect of compassion: We not only give compassion; we receive it. We not only empathize; we also need others’ empathy. We not only offer support; we rely on others’ support. To us, this nonlinearity is a

beautiful aspect of interpersonal relationships and one that draws communicators into a circle of complementary needs and mutual reliance. It is in these relationships that compassion can best be nurtured and grown.

*Jewel 2: Moderation*

*Moderation* is the second jewel of Daoism. Just as compassion leads to courage, moderation, or the absence of excess, is thought to lead to generosity. Personal relationships often require generosity. We are asked to give our energy, our time, our listening, our trust, and even more. At the same time, unhealthy relationships are often characterized by excess, where partners invest too much time and energy into their partner, friend, or family member, and not enough on themselves or their other relationships. Thus, perhaps the most meaningful personal relationships demonstrate moderation, where both partners refrain from excess and find balance: between giving and taking, between sharing and listening, and between self and other.

*Self-disclosure*

*Self-disclosure* has been defined as the intentional act of sharing information about oneself that another person would not otherwise know (West & Turner, 2006). This information can be *evaluative*, revealing our opinions about something or someone (e.g., “I love Whistler in the summertime.”), or it can be *descriptive*, revealing information about ourselves (e.g., “My parents divorced when I was twelve.”). Acts of self-disclosure, regardless of their particular content, can allow for new knowledge or understanding of the person who self-disclosed.

We have found that students are often fascinated by the concept of self-disclosure. They enjoy thinking and talking about what they choose to tell their friends, siblings, and parents, and just as interestingly, what they choose *not* to tell them. They also like discussing and reading about the nuances and implications of self-disclosure, such as how it affects impressions of others, what happens when it is not reciprocated, and the factors that influence it. For example, a study conducted by researchers at the University of

Toronto found different self-disclosure patterns for people with secure attachment styles (i.e., those who have a high value for themselves and others) versus those with dismissive attachment styles (i.e., those who have a high value for themselves and a low value for others) (Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1998). Specifically, participants with secure attachment styles were more likely than those with dismissive attachment styles to self-disclose to their romantic partners.

Moderation is an important aspect of self-disclosure. “Refusing to let anyone know anything about you keeps others away. Revealing too many of your reactions too fast may scare others away” (Stewart, 2009). At the beginning of relationships, self-disclosure should be reciprocal and that you should match your partner’s level of self-disclosure. As communicators who strive for moderation, we need to balance self-disclosure with careful listening and attention to context, in order to find appropriate times for self-disclosure.

### *Listening*

In Western culture, people who display outgoing personalities tend to be viewed as sociable, fun, and likeable. In Eastern cultures, people who listen more than they talk are viewed positively, and people who talk too much are seen as careless and brash. For example, an international student from Japan was somewhat perplexed at the thought of getting a grade for class participation. He said, “In Japan, students who talk a lot in class are perceived as annoying.” When asked whether the professor or the other students had this perception, he responded simply and quickly. “Both,” he said.

Just as this student adapted to Western culture (he became a very participatory and engaged student who shared his opinions and experiences in class regularly), many Westerners would do well to balance their tendency to value speaking with an equal value of listening. This moderation between speaking and listening is an important aspect of interpersonal communication.

Although listening might seem like a simple act, it involves several processes. First, one must *physically hear* what is being said. Anyone with a cell phone can recall times where this physical act of hearing has been interrupted by static, wind, or a faulty connection.

Second, listening involves *paying attention* to the sounds we hear. The notion of “selective listening” fits into the discussion here. Sometimes people in relationships listen only to the information that they find interesting or relevant. We have noticed, for example, that our nephews pay close attention to their mother’s voice when she telling them that it is time for dinner or to go on a fun outing, but when she is telling them to clean up a mess they have made, they act as if they can not hear her. To some extent, most adults engage in selective listening as well.

Third, listeners must be able to *interpret* a message and make sense of it. Some may have experienced times they find that they are unable to understand what others are talking about. Here, it may be important to remember that communication does not always have to be linear. Ask a clarifying question to the person receiving your message. Then it becomes their responsibility to reshape his/her message to make it easier for you to understand.

The fourth listening process involves *responding* to the person who is speaking. Even though you might not be speaking, be aware that you are sending a message to the person who is speaking. Through eye contact, nodding your head, and eliminating distractions, you are responding to the person who is speaking and indicating that he/she has your full attention.

Lastly, *remembering* is a highly important, and often overlooked, listening process. When we remember what other people say to us, we reaffirm that we were actually listening in the first place, and we communicate that we value what they have shared with us.

*Communicative challenges to moderation: Excessive Internet use*

People born after 1979 are part of a demographic that has grown up in the “tech” age. They most likely download music to an iPod, keep track of friends on *Facebook*, and *Google* to find the answers to questions. The Internet has resulted in unprecedented access to information and other people. Yet, how does this technology impact upon our personal relationships?

Researchers at the University of New Hampshire found that mental health professionals cited overuse as the most frequent Internet-related problem among patients seeking counseling

(Mitchell, Becker-Blease, & Finkelhor, 2005). In fact, sixty-one percent of the 1,505 practitioners in this study reported that their clients struggled with Internet overuse. In addition, clients' Internet use limited their social interactions with family, friends, and partners (Mitchell, *et. al.*, 2005). Those who overused the Internet were more likely to choose online interaction over face-to-face interaction and to isolate themselves from family and friends than those who did not.

*Theoretical connection: Moderation and relational dialectics*

Refraining from excess and finding balance in interpersonal relationships is almost like the game of tug-of-war. You likely have felt a “tug” or tension in a friendship to spend time with a particular friend, while at other times you realized that too much time spent with this friend is not ideal. Maybe you've experienced a pull to self disclose something about yourself with a romantic partner, but at other moments you've felt the need to conceal details of your past.

One particularly useful communication theory to help explain this balancing act we experience in relationships is *relational dialectics* or *dialectical theory*. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) illuminate that we experience *relational dialectics*, which are “a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contradictory or opposing tendencies” (p. 8). In other words, relational partners experience a vibrant, constantly changing search for moderation or balance.

Three different types of internal dialectics, or ongoing tensions played out within a relationship have been identified (Baxter, 1990, 1993). Think of a time when you have experienced the *connectedness-separateness* tension. Can you identify a time when you have you felt the need to be connected, together, or integrated with someone you know? A second dialectical tension, *certainty-uncertainty*, helps explain the pull of feeling like there is stability and predictability in the relationship versus change and novelty. Finally, the tension of *openness-closeness* concerns balancing expression and candor versus privacy and secrecy. You may have experienced this dialectic in the earlier stages of your relationships, as you were trying to figure out just how much to reveal about yourself.

Dealing with these tensions, much like a balancing act or game of tug-of-war, concerns finding moderation. We tend to respond to dialectical tensions in a number of different ways (Baxter, 1990). You might choose *balancing* (i.e., compromising or meeting needs to only a partial degree), *contingent selection* (i.e., doing one thing in one circumstance and another in a different situation), or *cyclical alternation* (i.e., alternating back and forth between one action and another). One difficult, but potentially satisfying response is *redefinition*, or redefining one of the contrasting elements so that it does not contradict the others. “If you are struggling between doing what your partner wants to do and what you want to do, you might reason that what you really want is for your partner to be happy” Littlejohn (2002). We can see, now, why moderation is thought to lead to generosity (Lin, 2008).

*Moderation: Skills to practice*

*Conversational maxims.* We have all been part of conversations that are a far cry from moderation. This could be a conversation with someone who speaks much about himself and asks you little in return. Grice (1999) offers us four *conversational maxims*, or principles to follow while engaged in conversation.

First, the *quantity* of information provided by conversational partners is key. Contributions ought to be as informative as only required. Second, we should focus on the *quality* of conversation and not say what we believe to be false and always have adequate evidence for what we do say. Third, our contributions must have *relevance*. Grice remarks, “I expect a partner’s contribution to be appropriate to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction; if I am mixing ingredients for a cake, I do not expect to be handed a good book.” (p. 80). The *manner* by which contributions are imparted is instrumental. Conversational partners should practice moderation by finding the right balance of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner.

*Managing conflict.* On a regular human basis, this is one of most difficult interpersonal encounters. Most people have used conflict management styles that either have a high concern for themselves (e.g., competing, passive aggression) or high concern for

others (e.g., giving in, withdrawing). These styles lack moderation as there is an excess focus on either “winning” the conflict for ourselves or simply giving up. Instead, we should consider how we might engage in compromising, wherein a negotiation, bargain, or middle ground is sought. How can everyone’s interests be met and maintain a good relationship? Third-party help may also be useful for handling some conflicts, which seeks the aid of a mediator or neutral party to help resolve the conflict.

*Moderation: Concluding thoughts*

Our personal relationships are characterized by constant change, adaptation, and multiple perspectives (Docan-Morgan & Manusov, 2009). Indeed, these qualities are what make these relationships so interesting, fun, and challenging. As you reflect on your personal relationships, consider the role of moderation—listening more than speaking, balancing dialectical tensions, and approaching conflict cooperatively—and how it might allow you to be more generous to the people to whom you are close.

*Jewel 3: Humility*

The third jewel of Daoism is *humility*. It is thought to lead to leadership. In one translation of the *Dao De Jing*, humility is defined as “not presuming to be above nature.” This definition could be expanded to indicate that individuals with genuine humility also do not presume to be above their fellow humans. The notion sounds simple enough. Yet, it is very easy for many people to think that their own way of speaking, understanding, and living is the “right” way. When we practice genuine humility, however, we are aware that our own perspectives, experiences, and practices are subjective and idiosyncratic. This awareness allows us to open our minds and pursue relationships with people who are different than we are and who may have a great deal to teach us.

*Mindfulness.* This refers to being conscious of our own thoughts and communication. Many of us go through the motions of life, not thinking about the consequences of our communication and not being aware of how we are behaving or thinking about others. This is referred to as being “mindless” Langer (1978). On the

contrary, communicators must be mindful. Three main behaviors characterize *mindful* communicators: creating new categories, being open to new information, and being aware of more than one perspective (Langer, 1989). Human beings tend to place people, events, and things into categories to make sense of them. Have you ever met someone who you could not identify as either male or female? This type of situation might have caused you to feel confused, or even uncomfortable, because you were unable to categorize this person into a familiar gender category. In this situation, a mindful person would be aware of his/her thoughts and assumptions about this person, being aware of any potentially negative opinions of this person. He/she might then create a new category for a person whose gender did not fit into a binary category of male or female. Mindful people tend to be humble people. They understand that they need to be conscious of their own communication if they are to avoid making snap judgments and inaccurate assumptions. They also know that their knowledge of others is always incomplete and can be expanded.

*Flexibility.* One of our grandfathers, who lived to be 93, often said, “I’ve learned that in life, the most important thing is to be flexible.” This grandfather never took a course in interpersonal communication, but he knew, based on his life experiences, that communicators must be able to adapt to a variety of situations.

*Behavioral flexibility* is the ability to alter behavior to adapt to new situations and to relate in new ways when necessary (Pearson, 1983). Communicators displaying behavioral flexibility have a wide set of behaviors from which they can select the most appropriate behavior for each situation and/or relationship. They are able to *self-monitor* their behavior, meaning that they tailor their communication to fit certain situations. A high self-monitor would be able to adjust to a wide range of communicative contexts and act appropriately in each. Flexible communicators know that different situations call for different types of verbal and nonverbal behavior. Thus, they display humility by acknowledging that they are not “above” any situation. Rather it is their responsibility to be aware of the context and to act accordingly.

*Communicative challenges to humility: Stereotyping and ethnocentrism.*

*Stereotypes* are rigid mental categories that ascribe certain characteristics to any and *all* members of a particular group. Hewstone and Brown (1986) identified three cognitive (mental) processes associated with stereotyping:

1. Often individuals are categorized, usually on the basis of easily identifiable characteristics such as sex or ethnicity.
2. A set of attributes is ascribed to all (or most) members of that category. Individuals belonging to the stereotyped group are assumed to be similar to each other and different from other groups, on this set of attributes.
3. The set of attributes is ascribed to an individual member of that category. (p. 29)

Stereotyping occurs when we make assumptions about people based on superficial characteristics such as appearance and group membership. For example, imagine that a blind date came to get you on a motorcycle and is wearing all black leather, has more than a dozen visible piercings, and is covered in tattoos. What assumptions might you make about this person and his/her education, interests (other than motorcycles), and values?

People stereotype others based on a range of characteristics, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political group membership, and social class. Often this process happens without thinking. It is only when our stereotypes are negated that we become aware of them, because we are forced to question our automatic assumptions.

Stereotyping is tempting because it is easy. We often have little time to understand and get to know others for who some people really are. And yet, we do not like it when other people stereotype us, because we know that we are more than the groups and categories to which we belong. When we stereotype others and when others stereotype us, knowledge of each person's uniqueness is lost. Stereotyping is not an act of humility. When we stereotype, we are saying: "I would rather categorize and make assumptions about you

than get to know you.” If we are truly humble in our interpersonal communication, we will make the time to limit our stereotypes.

### *Ethnocentrism*

Ethnocentrism is the opposite of humility, as it involves judging others’ culture based on our own cultural standards. The word “ethnocentrism” is derived from two Greek words, *ethno*, meaning “nation,” and *kentron*, meaning “centre.” When we are ethnocentric, we judge our culture to be superior to other cultures. Ethnocentrism is often not deliberate, and most everyone is ethnocentric to some degree (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). At the same time, being ethnocentric keeps individuals from understanding and accepting people from other cultures.

For example, Carpenter (2001) interviewed Muslim women about their choice to wear a veil, or *hijab*, to cover their face and neck. She found that the Muslim women she interviewed saw the veil as a cultural symbol, a feminist expression, and modesty, not as a symbol of oppression. When some non-Muslim students read these findings, they had assumed that Muslim women were forced to wear the veil and that the veil symbolized Muslim men’s domination over Muslim women. Without realizing it, these people were being ethnocentric. They did not consider the possibility that their beliefs about the veil were wrong and that it based purely on Western perspectives of what it means to be a liberated woman.

As communicators who strive for humility, it is important to recognize our tendency to stereotype and to be ethnocentric. By recognizing that we have these tendencies, we can begin to change and improve ourselves and our communication. Perhaps humility is thought to lead to leadership because good, ethical leaders take the time to examine who they are, make improvements in their relationships, and learn from others. Regardless, being mindful, flexible, and avoiding stereotyping and ethnocentrism will help you to enact your own relationships more effectively and more meaningfully.

### *Theoretical connection: Attribution theory*

*Attribution theory* offers a particularly useful theoretical lens to help us practice humility. As human beings, we are in a constant

search for *why* things happen or *what* something means. We may consciously or subconsciously search for and assign meaning to our romantic partner's constant silence throughout the night, or we might make a snap judgment that the homeless person asking for spare change is a lazy individual.

*Attribution theory* helps explain the ways people infer the causes of behavior in a commonsense search to understand why things happen (Heider, 1958; Kelly 1967; Weiner, 1986). We constantly make *attributions*, or assign meaning to behavior. Take a moment to reflect on the last few days: What meanings have you assigned to some of the specific verbal and nonverbal messages sent by your instructors, romantic partner, and acquaintances?

As humble interpersonal communicators, we should understand the types of attributions we make. An *internal attribution* locates the cause of a particular behavior within the person. For example, my friend is yelling at me because she is impatient. An *external attribution* locates the cause of the behavior in the situation. For example, my friend is yelling at me because of a bad day at work. Unfortunately, humility is often put on the backburner when we make attributions. "There is pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their [own] actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions" (Jones & Nisbett, 1972).

For example, if I am driving and forget to signal when I turn, I am likely to attribute this behavior to my mood or to an external circumstance such as my cell phone ringing. On the other hand, if another driver forgets to signal, I am likely to attribute this behavior to this person and to think, "That person is a bad driver!" We are all prone to committing this *fundamental attribution error*, which occurs when we overestimate the importance of internal factors and underestimate the significance of external factors. Practicing humility necessitates that we keep our attributions in check and practice perspective taking.

#### *Humility: Skills to practice*

Being humble involves acknowledging that our perceptions of situations might be different from another person's. At the same

time, being humble does not mean being a passive bystander or avoiding asserting your opinion. Sometimes, it is important to clarify our perceptions of social situations, especially when conflict might arise. *Clear message format* provides a way to express our perceptions of a situation in a way that is clear, yet humble (Adler & Towne, 2002). It contains five components: behavioral description, interpretation, feeling, consequence, and intention.

In the *behavioral description*, objective information is verifiable through the senses. For example, “On Monday, you said that you would meet me for lunch today at noon. You’re an hour late.” In the *interpretation*, you attach meaning to the behavior you described. Continuing the previous example, an interpretation could be, “It seems that you’ve forgotten our plan to meet for lunch.” The *feeling* statement indicates the emotion that you are experiencing, such as, “I feel unimportant,” or “I feel angry.” In the *consequence* statement, you state what happened as a result of the behavior, interpretation, feeling, or all three combined. This consequence could be for yourself, the person your addressing, or others. Examples from the current example include, “By the time I realized you weren’t going to show, I didn’t have time to eat lunch.” Finally, in the *intention* statement, you state, based on the four previous statements, what you plan to do in the future, or what you would like from the person to whom you are speaking. For example, “Next time, I wish you would call me when you’re going to be running late.”

Here is an example of a message following the clear message format:

Last week we planned to go to the Raptors game, but this morning you canceled our plans (behavior). I am frustrated (feeling) because I already bought two tickets for tonight’s game. Now I need to sell your ticket and go alone (consequence). I am thinking that you don’t realize that I already bought tickets or that you think that I could easily find someone else to go with me (interpretation), but my other friends already have plans. I’m wondering if you would reconsider going to the game or let me know why you had to cancel (intention).”

It is important to note that the elements of the message can be delivered in any order. Notice that the above message avoids making accusations or attacks. Although it expresses the speaker's perspective clearly, it leaves room for other interpretations and opens the door for communication about the topic. In doing so, the message demonstrates humility, even during a moment of potential conflict.

*Humility: Concluding thoughts*

Humility is often thought of as the way that individuals feel about themselves. What we can see from this section, however, is that humility can also be found in the way we think about and communicate with others. The concepts of mindfulness and behavioral flexibility remind us to be aware of our own communication and to adapt to the requirements and norms of a variety of contexts, whereas the concepts of stereotyping and ethnocentrism, and attribution theory, encourage us to think about others as individuals and to be wary of our own assumptions. When we integrate these important concepts in our lives, we communicate with humility and in doing so, we invite new ways of thinking about others, ourselves, and our relationships.

*Conclusion*

Throughout this chapter, the three jewels of Daoism—compassion, moderation, and humility—have allowed us to examine important concepts and theories in interpersonal communication. We reflected on what Daoism might be able to teach us about our personal relationships. If compassion indeed leads to courage, moderation leads to generosity, and humility leads to leadership, the information and questions in this chapter may help to shape you into courageous, generous leaders. Or, perhaps, a concept in this chapter allowed you to see your relationships or your communication in a new way.

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