

Mastering the Art of Interpersonal Communication: A Qualitative Study on How  
Individuals Become Masters of Interpersonal Communication

by

Jessica Renney  
B.A., University of Lethbridge, 2007

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

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University of Victoria

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## **Abstract**

The current study examines how individuals become masters of interpersonal communication. Its significance is in its unique findings that contribute to existing counselling literature. Qualitative methodology and thematic analysis were used in this study. Five peer nominated individuals took part in semi-structured interviews and were asked to tell their story of how they became masters of interpersonal communication. Findings show observational learning, being aware of others' needs, listening, striving to be better, bringing true self forward, trusting gut feeling, learning to accept limits, and mentors emerged as important themes. Future research investigating the trajectories of individual journeys in becoming a master of interpersonal communication across developmental stages is suggested along with research that could lead to the creation of valid and reliable instruments that may identify potential masters of interpersonal communication.

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## Acknowledgments

It is difficult to overstate my gratitude to my graduate advisor, Dr. Timothy Black. I will never forget that day I walked out of his office after I pitched the following research idea. Finally, someone other than my mom and dad who understood what the hell I was talking about! Throughout my thesis writing he provided encouragement, good teaching, good company, and lots of good ideas.

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the enthusiastic supervision of Dr. Susan Tasker and Dr. Jennifer Walinga during this work. They were everything I could have hoped for in thesis supervisors, and much, much, more.

I wish to thank Randy Wong and Magee Miller for helping me through the second year of my graduate program. Their emotional support, energy, laughter, wise advice, and encouragement taught me the “art” of therapy.

I would like to thank my close friends and extended family for providing me with a loving environment. My grandparents Helen and Joe Renney as well as Cathy and Ernie Gare were particularly supportive. They encouraged me from near and far.

I am forever indebted to the five individuals who participated in this study. I am especially grateful for their time, wisdom, vulnerability, and experience. I feel extremely privileged to present their experiences of becoming masters of interpersonal communication.

Lastly, and most importantly, I wish to thank my family, Tom Renney, Glenda Renney, Jamie Renney and Adam Maglio. They supported me, taught me, challenged me, and loved me. To them I dedicate this thesis.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *Background to the Study*

If you were looking to learn more about interpersonal communication and how you could enhance your interpersonal communication skills, you could turn to the internet to see what you might unveil. If you Google “effective communication” or “mastering the art of interpersonal communication” you would most likely come across the “Top 6 Secrets to Mastering Communication” (Tretjakov, 2007). You may find a one-day workshop that promises to enhance your interpersonal skills through a lecture-based seminar with interactive exercises that give you the opportunity to practice your newly acquired skills (McLuhan & Davies Communication Incorporated, 2010). Many of these strategies for improving interpersonal skills target the enhancement of one’s ability to articulate words, conversation management skills, and awareness of one’s nonverbal communication. Empirically established components of individual interpersonal communication such as adaptability, conversational involvement, conversational management, empathy, effectiveness of the conversation, appropriateness for the situation (Canary & Cody, 2000), active listening (Egan, 2006), self-awareness, self-management, social competence, and social awareness (Goleman, 1995) are factors associated with the effectiveness of interpersonal communication. This suggests that the way in which an individual uses interpersonal components is important in determining the success of interpersonal communication.

The intention of this study is to further explore how individuals, nominated by their peers as “masters of interpersonal communication”, understand and explain how they became masters of interpersonal communication. Across disciplines there is a large

body of research dedicated to exploring interpersonal communication, communication competence, effective interpersonal communication, and mastery learning. However, there is a considerable gap in the literature focused on the process behind achieving mastery in the realm of interpersonal communication; it is this gap, which this study explored.

### *Researcher Context*

Communication in general and the process of interpersonal communication in particular, has always fascinated me. I have been privileged enough to witness the power of effective communication and its ability to connect people and further relationships throughout my life thus far. I was raised by parents who valued the importance of communication in their relationship with each other and with my sister and me. My father in particular has ignited my interest in interpersonal communication. Professionally he has been touted as a *master communicator*; someone who has the ability to relate to, inspire, and motivate people, and to enable them to feel comfortable. As a professional hockey coach in the NHL it is his job to support, challenge, and motivate the appropriate people to achieve success. He is expected to communicate with different people including players, other coaches, the training staff, as well as answer to the media and to upper level management. My father and I have had many conversations around his role as a leader within a large scale organization and the importance of his interpersonal skills within this context. He attributes most of his success as a coach to his ability to connect, relate, and empower people through the way in which he communicates. Personally, I view my father as having these qualities, highlighting the congruency of his communication skills between his personal and professional life. As I grow older and

continue to experience interpersonal communication outside of my family, I have come to realize that some people really can, and do, communicate better than others.

In the initial stages of my thesis research, I was preoccupied with obtaining information around the *skills* involved in communicating effectively. In my first year as a counselling graduate student I was inundated with the skills counsellors should understand and exercise when communicating with clients. Reflective listening, paraphrasing, probing, normalizing, clarifying, working towards congruency, and empathizing; all of these skills theoretically form the bases of effective interpersonal communication in counselling. However, even though I knew these skills were necessary and important to communicating with others I felt like something was missing. What was it about my father that took him from being a good communicator to a master level communicator? And how did he come to be this type of communicator? It is for these reasons that I have decided to explore how individuals become masters of interpersonal communication.

#### *Research Purpose and Question*

The current study explores how individuals who are “masters of interpersonal communication” become masters. The research question is: How do individuals become masters of interpersonal communication? Currently there is a considerable research gap around mastery level communication and master level communicators. Literature pertaining to competent communication, effective communication, mastery, and mastery learning help inform how the construct “*master of interpersonal communication*” will be defined in the current study. For the purpose of this study, master interpersonal communicators will be defined as: (a) self reflexive (i.e., being able to openly reflect on their process and contributing to such process); (b) able to consistently and effectively

communicate with others so that intended messages are received by the person towards whom the communication is directed, with little or no miscommunication (e.g., the sender sends the message intended to tell someone they are behaving in a manner that needs to be changed and the receiver of the message is able to hear that the sender would like their behavior to change); (c) communicates (as per point b) across multiple levels of power and influence (e.g., an NHL hockey coach communicates with his players, the media, training staff, other members of the coaching staff, upper management, coaches from other teams, and fans); (d) communicates (as per point b) across multiple roles (i.e., as a spouse, partner, parent, sibling, colleague, and friend); (e) possesses the ability to flex and adapt their style of communication across different contexts (i.e., at home with friends and family, at work with colleagues and/or superiors and subordinates, and at the grocery store with service staff).

Given that I have identified my own father as a “master of interpersonal communication” and given his leadership role at work, it is important to distinguish between an effective leader and an effective interpersonal communicator. It may be the case that effective interpersonal communicators and leadership ability have overlapping personal qualities and skills. Many effective interpersonal communicators may indeed find themselves in leadership roles. However, being in a leadership role does not necessarily equate with effective interpersonal communication skills. Nor does simply having effective interpersonal communication skills equate with being a good leader. It is for this reason that being in a leadership position is not a prerequisite for participants in the current study, despite the fact that some of the participants may in fact be leaders in their chosen professions.

There is a large body of knowledge dedicated to the examination of interpersonal communication (e.g., Engel & Wysocka, 2006; Gibb, 1961; Goffman, 1967; Gouran & Wiethoff, 1994; Grivas, 2004; Knopp & Daly, 2002; Ralph, 2006; Tarone, 1981) and communication competence (Canary & Cody, 2000; Fredrich, 1994; Spitzberg, 1984). Interpersonal communication (person to person interaction between two or more individuals; Gibb, 1961) is broadly defined across theories and disciplines making it difficult to universally identify individuals who communicate at a mastery level. This gap in the literature creates the opportunity for me to further explore the realm of interpersonal communication in an attempt to flesh out the definition of interpersonal communication generally and, more specifically, to identify how individuals develop mastery-level interpersonal communication skills. Learning about the process behind an individual's journey towards becoming a master of interpersonal communication will hopefully identify factors that participants believe contribute to one's ability to communicate on a master level. The current study attempts to fill the gap in the interpersonal communication literature and to enable counsellors and other professionals who rely on communication to improve their skills and abilities in this area.

This study takes a narrative approach to the research question. Narrative inquiry is an appropriate method for this study because I am interested in learning about participants' stories of how they became masters of interpersonal communication and how they make meaning of such experiences through story telling. Narrative inquiry will highlight how participants make meaning of their journey towards becoming a master of interpersonal communication because it not only lends itself to the telling of stories that formulate a coherent narrative of a particular experience or instance, but narrative inquiry

also highlights the story within a greater on-going story which is one's life. Key theorists in narrative inquiry will be used to justify and support the use of narrative inquiry and story telling. Such theorists include but are not exclusive to Riessman (1993), Sandelowski (1991), and Willig and Staintion-Rogers (2008).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### *Chapter Introduction*

This chapter is intended to illustrate previous research supporting the current study, as well as to provide the perspective from which the study is presented. Specific topics and themes that emerged from the literature and directly pertain to the current study will be discussed. The criterion that forms the foundation of a working definition of interpersonal communication for the current study is identified based on current theory and models. Communication competence and personal and social components of effective communication that contribute to an effective interpersonal communicator, will be outlined. The concept of ‘mastery’ and the process of mastering interpersonal communication skills is introduced and identified as the purpose and intent of this research study.

### *Working Definition of Interpersonal Communication*

There are four different, yet specific, perspectives from which one can study interpersonal communication (Rubin, Rubin & Piele, 2000). These perspectives are the following: (a) *Relational communication* is governed by roles of the sender and receiver that are shared by two people simultaneously in order to create meaning; (b) *Situational communication* occurs between two people in a particular context; (c) *Quantitative communication* includes person-to-person interactions that consist of impersonal communication; (d) *Functional communication* is governed by achieving interpersonal goals. For the purpose of the proposed study I will not be looking to one specific perspective to define interpersonal communication. Rather, the intention of my study is to better understand how people master interpersonal communication across different

interpersonal communication perspectives. Accordingly, it is important to identify and define the different types of interpersonal communication to offer the reader more information and to contextually locate the study's working definition of interpersonal communication.

Interpersonal communication is a person to person interaction between two or more individuals who bring to the exchange different life experiences, varied levels of communication skills, and diverse perceptual sets regarding communication (Gibb, 1961). Tarone (1981) adds that communication between two people is the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning. Tarone highlights the process of meaning sharing between communicating individuals as serving the function of interpersonal need fulfillment. These needs include affection (a desire to express and receive love), inclusion (a desire to be in the company of other people) and control (a desire to influence the events and people around us) (Schutz, 1966). For example, the conversation we have with a stranger on the bus may not be the result of an explicit goal but may serve to fulfill our implicit need for inclusion. In summary, effective interpersonal communication is herein defined as the purposeful and intentional engagement with others that fosters a shared meaning between individuals while fulfilling individual goals and basic interpersonal needs.

#### *Current Conceptual Definitions of Interpersonal Communication*

Interpersonal communication is a basic life skill that enables us to navigate our way through the different situations and experiences we face in our lives. It lies at the very existence of our ability to relate to others (McKay, Davis & Fanning, 1987) and may be the largest single factor determining the types of relationships we make and maintain

throughout our lifetime (Satir, 1976). Despite race, culture, and language differences, verbal and non-verbal interpersonal communication is a powerful connecting force that brings people together and fosters a shared experience. Because interpersonal communication lies at the foundation of our being and relating in the world, I believe it is accurate to suggest that the process of our everyday conversations often takes place with little attention paid to “how” the process comes to be. However, there are conversations and interpersonal exchanges that resonate with us and may leave us wondering what it was about the process or experience that makes these conversations different from other exchanges. One view is that memorable interactions consist of two individuals who accurately convey their own intention and experience, resulting in a feeling of being understood by the other (Gibb, 1961).

Interpersonal communication is defined in many different ways by many different scholars (e.g., Engel & Wysocka, 2006; Goffman, 1967; Gouran & Wiethoff, 1994; Grivas, 2004; Knopp & Daly, 2002; Ralph, 2006). Identifying and solidifying a universal definition across a wide variety of academic literatures such as counselling, education, business, leadership, law, and conflict resolution presents me with a significant challenge. The counselling field generally defines interpersonal communication as an interaction that occurs when two people interact simultaneously and mutually influence each other, usually for the purpose of maintaining relationships (Beebe, Beebe, Redmond & Geerinck, 1997). ABA Law practice magazine cites interpersonal communication as “two-way communication that involves the sharing of information between two or more parties in a constructive exchange” (Engel & Wysocka, 2006) and which nurtures the client-lawyer relationship such that productivity and profitability are maximized. In the

realm of leadership studies, interpersonal communication has generated a great deal of interest. Interpersonal communication in leadership studies include an array of interpersonal skills such as expressing interpretation, encouragement, assurance, openness, confrontation, trust, agreement or disagreement, empathy, and self-disclosure (Argyris, 1976; Leonard, 1983). Indeed, the early work of social psychologist Argyris (1976) influenced communication researchers who primarily viewed interpersonal communication as a composite of interpersonal skills. Argyris (1956) states, in addition to interpersonal skills, one's ability to express knowledge and sensitivity about the particular context is seminal to defining interpersonal communication. The field of conflict resolution believes that interpersonal communication both breeds and resolves conflict and controversy. Interpersonal conflict occurs when the communication of one person attempting to maximize his or her goals prevents, blocks, or interferes with another person also attempting to maximize personal goals (Deutsch, 1973). In order to resolve conflicts of interest constructively, individuals must be able to communicate what they want, how they feel, explain their interests as well as their positions, take the opposing perspective, create a number of optional agreements that maximize joint outcomes, and reach agreement on one of the options (Johnson & Johnson, 1995b).

In addition to the different definitions, the intent (to transmit and share information) behind interpersonal communication usage also differs between disciplines, professions, and organizations. Generally speaking, interpersonal communication is primarily concerned with the transmission of information from one person to another (Grivas, 2004). More specifically, from a contextual view, interpersonal communication is the exchange of information between two or three individuals in close proximity who are

using different communication channels while providing immediate feedback to one another (Gouran & Wiethoff, 1994). Taking all of this into consideration, how do we differentiate between the “intent” of interpersonal communication and highlight the “how” or different modes of communication.

### *Key Modes of Interpersonal Communication*

Different sensory channels (seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling) used by the sender and the receiver most commonly take two distinct forms: direct and indirect channels (Knapp & Daly, 2002). Direct channels are those that are obvious, verbal and nonverbal, and are easily recognized by the receiver. Verbal channels include words, both written and spoken, and nonverbal channels include, but are not exclusive to, facial expressions, body movements, and sounds all transmitted from the sender (p.145). Indirect channels of communication are often recognized by the receiver on a subconscious level. This includes the interpretation of the sender’s body language that reflects possible feelings and motivations around the message and the delivery of the message. For example, the receiver may describe indirect channels of communication as a “hunch”, intuition, or gut feeling.

The skill of listening to others is an important skill to mention when considering different channels of interpersonal communication. For example, you are at a dinner party. Someone is telling a story about his or her promotion, someone is complaining about a parking ticket, and someone else is relaying his or her recent trip to Vancouver. Everyone is anxious to talk, and to tell his or her own story. This type of superficial (low personal investment) communication highlights a “cocktail” type of talking and listening. The party may be a success, but people go home without hearing or knowing each other.

This anecdote highlights the importance of both listening and communicating as two essential skills for making and keeping relationships (McKay, Davis & Fanning, 1987). Listening is a commitment to understanding how people feel by putting aside your own beliefs, anxieties, or personal agendas. In a North American context, intentional engagement in interpersonal communication with another person is a compliment because it tells the other person that you care about what is happening to them in their lives by being interested in and validating their experience. Many of the interpersonal communication definitions I have encountered thus far describe communication as verbal projection, and sharing ideas and insights. Ironically, listening, the act of holding one's spoken words may be the most integral part of communicating with others and it appears as though listening and the importance of listening is minimally mentioned in communication literature. In contrast, there is a vast amount of literature in counselling psychology dedicated to listening and the importance of active listening in counselling. In preparing for this research, I had suspected that participants in the current study would speak to listening, and learning to listen to others as an important piece of their journey in becoming a master of interpersonal communication.

In addition to direct channels of communication, indirect channels play an important role in interpersonal communication. The receiver most commonly describes the experience and understanding the sender's message in terms such as a gut feeling, intuition, or hunch. In the same way that meta-messages are usually transmitted from the sender to the receiver on a subconscious level and not always under complete control of the sender; the interpretation of meta-messages by the receiver occurs subconsciously through the receiver's indirect channels of receptive communication and not always

under complete control of the receiver. For example, if I were having a conversation with a friend regarding their inability to attend my birthday party and the friend were checking in with me around how that might affect me, I might quickly respond “ Oh yeah no big deal ” in a sarcastic tone. My tone, upright posture, inability to make eye contact with my friend, and my attempt to quickly change the topic are likely to alert my friend’s gut feeling that my true feelings around the issue are annoyed and disappointed.

Outlining the different definitions and components of interpersonal communication highlights both the breadth of and the discrepancy between definitions amongst and across professions. Missing from all of the preceding definitions, are the facilitative conditions, relational and emotional facets of interpersonal communication, and the importance of personal and social awareness. The next section will address these components.

### *Contributing Factors of Communication Competence*

In a study that seeks to better understand individuals who excel at interpersonal communication, *communication competence* will be explored to provide a theoretical framework around what constitutes competent communication. Communication competence is defined by Spitzberg (1984) as “the ability to interact well with others” (p. 68). He further explains that the qualifier “well” refers to accuracy, clarity, comprehensibility, coherence, expertise, effectiveness, and appropriateness of words, expressions, and gestures. Friedrich (1994) later defined communication competence as “a situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to maximize their achievement by using knowledge of self, other, context, and communication theory to generate adaptive communication performances” (p. 24). Communication competence is

measured by determining if, and to what degree, the goals of the interaction are achieved. I think this definition represents an accurate description of one piece of communication competence. However, achieving and measuring only the goals of an interaction seems to be a limited view of communication competence.

A useful framework for understanding communication competence was designed by Spitzburg and Cupach (1984) and comprises three specific elements: motivation (individuals' approach or avoidance in various social situations), knowledge (plans of action, knowledge of how to act, procedural knowledge), and skill (behaviors performed). This model assumes that communication competence is defined by the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components in an interpersonal encounter, within a specific context (Spitzburg & Cupach, 1984). It is important to note that communication competence is dependent on the context in which the interaction takes place. A communicative interaction that takes place with an individual in one situation may not be perceived as competent with a different individual in a different situation (Cody, McLaughlin, & Robey, 1980). For example, a drill sergeant might view competent communication as clear, concise, direct, and loud. A teacher may view competent communication to be supportive and inquisitive with a curious overtone. In order to be a competent communicator, one must be able to recognize which skills are necessary in a particular situation, have those skills, and be motivated to use those skills. This perspective helps inform the proposed study by highlighting the importance of being able to match the style of communication with the context in which one is communicating.

Similar to Friedrich's (1994) focus on interactional goal achievement, Canary and Cody (2000) also suggest that communicative competence is the ability to send messages that promote attainment of goals. However, Canary and Cody include the proviso of goal-

attainment while maintaining social acceptability. Furthermore, Canary and Cody (2000) provide six criteria for assessing one's level of communicative competence which include: (a) adaptability; (b) conversational involvement; (c) conversational management; (d) empathy; (e) effectiveness; and (f) appropriateness. As interesting and applicable as these six criteria are to the proposed study, Canary and Cody do not provide operational or real life examples to help the reader better understand to what they are referring. The following are operational definitions for Canary and Cody's six criteria, along with suggested case examples based on my personal reading and understanding of each criterion:

*Adaptability.* Adaptability is the ability to change behaviors and goals to meet the needs of the interaction, and comprises six factors: social experience (the participation in various social interactions); social composure (keeping calm through accurate perception); social confirmation (acknowledgment of partner's goals); appropriate disclosure (being sensitive to amount and type of information); articulation (the ability to express ideas through language); wit (the ability to use humor in adapting to social situations to ease tensions) (Canary & Cody, 2000) . For example, Brad is a mid-level manager who communicates with a variety of individuals on a daily basis. At work these individuals include customers, employees, his boss, and financial stakeholders. Brad must adapt and change his behaviors and goals depending on the purpose of the interactions and with whom he is communicating.

*Conversational Involvement.* This includes the cognitive and behavioral activity that is demonstrated through interaction behaviors. Conversational involvement can be assessed according to three factors: responsiveness (knowing how to interact based on roles and

knowing what to say); perceptiveness (being aware of how others perceive you); attentiveness (listening without being preoccupied) (Canary & Cody, 2000). It is difficult to provide an example of conversational involvement therefore a less descriptive example would be a counsellor being aware of a client's body language, and listening and tracking what the client is saying, while formulating a question to ask the client that will help the counsellor better understand what the client is describing.

*Conversational Management.* This refers to how the communicator regulates their interactions; who controls the interaction's ebb and flow, how smoothly the interaction proceeds, and how topics proceed and change (Canary & Cody, 2000). It is also difficult to give a concrete example of conversational management therefore a less descriptive example would be a counsellor paying attention to the flow of an interaction with a client. This does not mean the counsellor is controlling or deciding the content in the session, but instead is being mindful of the ebb and flow, how topics proceed and change and the overall flow of the session.

*Empathy.* This is the ability to demonstrate understanding and to share emotional reactions to the situation which, while paralleling or reflecting the response and experience of the other person, need not lead to "helping" the other person (Canary & Cody, 2000). For example, if a friend was expressing her anger and frustration around a mark she received on a class assignment I may empathize with her feeling angry and frustrated because I understand and have experienced what it is like to feel anger and frustration.

*Effectiveness.* This is described as achieving the objectives of the conversation and achieving personal goals (Canary & Cody, 2000). For example, Gary has been asked to

fire one of his staff members (Jane) due to recent cut backs. Gary feels bad that he has to fire Jane. An effective conversation would mean that Gary communicates to Jane that she has been let go (objective of conversation), in an empathic and supportive manner (personal goals).

*Appropriateness.* This is described as upholding the expectations for a given situation (Canary & Cody, 2000). For example, communicating with colleagues in a business meeting may be very different than the way you communicate with your husband or wife at the dinner table.

### *Contributing Factors of Effective Interpersonal Communication*

Effective communication can be defined as the “transmission of meaning from one person to another, as it was intended by the first person” (Gudykunst, 1998, p.27). In other words, you communicate effectively when your message is understood by others and achieves its intended effect. For example, if you wanted your sister to stop taking clothes from your closet, and after you talk to you sister she stops taking clothes out of your closet, your message has been effective. Effective interpersonal communication should also be appropriate (Beebe, Beebe, Redmond, & Geerinck, 1997).

Appropriateness is defined by Beebe et al. (1997) as the communicator considering the time, place, and overall context of the message while being sensitive to the feelings and attitudes of the listener. For example, if you got your sister to stop taking clothes from your closet by yelling, “If you don’t stop taking clothes from my closet, I am going to throw your clothes in the garbage” your delivery would not be perceived as appropriate. Your message might be effective if your sister stopped taking your clothes from your closet, but not appropriate. In summary, for a message to be effective it has to be received

in the form that it was intended by the sender; by extension, effectiveness reflects the sender's communication competence. The literature on competent and effective communication contributes, therefore, to how masters of interpersonal communication will be defined for the purpose of this study. In addition to competent communication, I believe several other factors make up effective interpersonal communication. These factors include facilitative conditions, social and personal competence, and are outlined in the paragraphs to follow.

*Facilitative conditions.* The results from a study on effective teachers conducted by Catt, Miller and Schallenkamp (2007) propose that a shared meaning must exist between the sender and the receiver for effective interpersonal communication to transpire. Emotional and physical aspects of interpersonal communication convey information about the emotions, attitudes, powers, and control the speaker feels towards the other and they offer information about relationship dimensions (Ralph, 2006). What you say (content) and how you say it (the tone of your voice, and non verbal expressions) can provide insight into the meaning of the message and the relationship dynamic. For example, your dad interrupts your conversation with your mom and loudly yells, "HEY LAZY! PICK YOUR CLOTHES UP IN YOUR ROOM." Your sister articulates the same verbal message but in a quieter more playful tone: "Hey lazy. Pick your clothes up in your room." Both are communicating the exact same message and seeking the same outcome yet, the two messages offer different relationship cues. The delivery of your dad's message suggests that he is frustrated that you have clothes on your floor, and your sister's delivery suggests she may be amused by your untidiness.

Counselling is another example that highlights the importance of relationship

dimensions and content in interpersonal communication. A counsellor's ability to establish an open, honest, and trusting relationship with the client is one of the most important factors in determining client success (Frank & Gunderson, 1990). Lambert and Barley (2001) suggest four decades of research have shown there are four main factors that initiate change for clients within the context of therapy: (a) client factors (percentage contribution to positive outcome: 40%); (b) therapist/client relationship factors (percentage contribution: 30%); (c) hope and expectancy (percentage contribution: 15%); (d) model and technique (percentage contribution: 15%). Therapeutic relationship factors that have been most commonly studied include: (a) empathetic understanding (the degree to which the therapist is successful in communicating awareness and understanding of the client's current experience in the language that the client understands and identifies with); (b) non- possessive warmth and positive regard (the extent to which the therapist communicates non-evaluative caring and respect for the client as a person); (c) congruence (the extent to which the therapist is non-defensive, real, and "non-phony" with the client) (Carkhuff, 1972; Lambert, DeJulio & Stein, 1978; Rogers, 1980). Empathetic understanding, non-possessive warmth, positive regard, and congruence are examples of facilitative conditions that are believed to contribute to a positive relationship between the client and therapist. The way in which content is expressed (i.e., through empathetic understanding, non-possessive warmth and positive regard, and congruence) in therapy might be more important than the content itself. Further to these facilitative conditions and in the context of the proposed study, I expected that master interpersonal communicators would be aware – either intuitively or rationally - of the importance of such facilitative conditions and would utilize such conditions when

communicating.

*Interpersonal communication and self.* Personal and social competence have gained interest and publicity with the release of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and Primal Leadership (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). Peter Salovey and John Mayer first introduced the term *emotional intelligence* in a 1990 article. Salovey and Mayer (1990) described emotional intelligence as a set of skills that involve the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action. Goleman, who advocates the importance of emotional intelligence when communicating and leading others, later popularized emotional intelligence with the release of Emotional Intelligence in 1995. Goleman highlights the importance of emotional intelligence and suggests it is more important than IQ in determining one's life success. This notion of emotional intelligence (or, personal and social competence) is applicable and important to effective interpersonal communication because it draws attention to one's personal and social intelligences rather than an acquired set of micro-skills as determining factors in one's ability to communicate effectively. Goleman's work was important to consider because, prior to the interviews, I expected to listen to participants highlighting the development of their social and emotional intelligence as an important component in their journey towards becoming a master of interpersonal communication.

Goleman and colleagues believe that one's personal and social competences are two key aspects of leading others through communication. Personal competence suggests self-awareness (i.e., accurate self-assessment and self-confidence) and self-management (i.e., self-control, transparency), both of which jointly determine how we manage

ourselves. The idea of social competence refers to social awareness and relationship management (i.e., inspiration, influence, developing others, and teamwork) as determinants of how we manage relationships (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002, p.256). Social awareness is described as being aware of others around you in the society in which you live and acting accordingly (Goleman, 1995); for example, being polite when you are in the company of others. Relationship management refers to managing and nurturing your relationship with another individual (Goleman, 1995). For example, when parents have date nights without their children, they allocate specific time (without their children) to nurture and manage their relationship.

Understanding that communication starts and ends with the self, has important implications for effective interpersonal communication and for the proposed study. Goleman and colleagues speak to this understanding when they speak to personal and social competence. When you are communicating with someone, you intentionally or unintentionally code your thoughts and emotions to be interpreted by another (Beebe, Beebe, Redmond, & Geerinck, 1997). When you receive a message, you interpret the content through your own frame of reference that is shaped by values, worldview, culture, and gender (Beebe et al., 1997). In preparing for this research considered the possibility that participants might speak to personal competence such as self-awareness and self-management and the positive effect both of these had on their abilities to be socially aware and responsive to others.

The notion of communication competence, effective communication and the different theoretical components discussed are important to outline in a study that seeks to understand how an individual becomes a master interpersonal communicator. For

example, if the participant said that empathy is an important component to consider when communicating at a master level, I asked a follow-up question such as, “How, where or from whom did you learn empathy?” It is important to note that I am not attempting to solidify what constitutes a master communicator; rather, I am describing some of the theoretical and empirical factors that contribute to mastery levels of interpersonal communication that may present themselves in participants’ narratives. The next section will further explore mastery, masters, and the process of mastery learning.

### *Mastery, Masters, and Mastery Learning*

The current study expands on previous research of interpersonal communication and mastery by explicitly asking participants how they came to be master interpersonal communicators. After a thorough search of relevant databases [i.e., PsycInfo (EBSCO); PsycArticles (EBSCO); Psychology: SAGE Full-Text Collection (CSA); Google Scholar; JSTOR; Academic Search Premier (EBSCO)] using the search words “interpersonal,” “communication,” “skills,” “effective,” “self-efficacy,” “mastery,” “learning,” “process,” “identifying,” and “masters,” this author found that the majority of existing literature focuses on identifying masters in specific professions and identifying characteristics of such masters (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Sparks & Lipka, 1992). However, the author was unable to locate research that specifically asked individuals how they learned to be master communicators.

Generally and colloquially, *mastery*, is defined by Webster’s dictionary as “possessing or displaying a great deal of skill, or technique that makes one a master of a subject” (Merriam-Websters Collegiate Dictionary, 1993. p.402). We often hear the words “master of...” in front of a specific skill when speaking of someone who seamlessly

executes such skill. For example, Harry Weinstein is believed to be the master of Hollywood movie production, Alfred Brendel is known to many as a master pianist, and David Letterman is often referred to as the master of late night television. I often hear the words “master manipulator” used when describing someone with heightened skills around persuading people, and came across the catch line “master of evil” when referring to a super-villain in the comic-book world. How do these people become a master of their craft? What do all these individuals have in common? The following section will look to education and counselling professions to explore these questions and will highlight the defining characteristics of masters in each respective field. It is important to note that I draw on research from education and counselling professions because these are the only two professions that I came across that study mastery within their respective realms.

#### *Contributing Factors of Mastery*

In attempts to begin to identify what constitutes a master, we can look to Sparks and Lipka (1992) who conducted a study that assessed personality characteristics of master teachers. This study helps inform the proposed study by exploring the procedures that Sparks and Lipka (1992) used to distinguish master teachers from not so masterful teachers. Twenty nine teachers were included in the study sample that consisted of 13 males and 16 females (aged 24 to 58 years) with 2 to 24 years of experience. Of these, 17 teachers held master degrees and 12 held bachelor degrees. Students, teachers, and administrators were given a list of teachers participating in the study. Each individual rated each teacher on a 0 to 3 Likert scale as follows: 0= *No knowledge of this teacher*, 1= *Meets expectations for teacher in our district*, 2= *Exceeds all expectations for teacher in our district*, 3= *“Top-notch,” greatly exceeds all expectations for teacher in our*

*district* (Sparks & Lipka, 1992). Teacher ratings were tabulated as a modal score across the ratings received from students, teachers, and administrators. Teachers receiving a 2 (exceeds all expectations on our district) rating were excluded to create the most contrasting samples. Students, teachers, and administrators respectively rated 8, 7, and 3 teachers as master teachers (i.e., a rating of 3 was assigned to these teachers). However, although operational definitions are provided for teachers who are being identified as master teachers, the ratings are nonetheless subjective. For example, what I consider to be “top notch” may be different from what you consider to be “top notch”. The authors describe master teachers as individuals who “greatly exceed all expectations”. The reader is left to wonder what expectations the authors are referring to. The lack of clarity and reliance on rater subjectivity when defining master teachers makes it difficult to apply the methodology used to identify masters to the proposed study. This study also highlights the difficulty I have encountered in attempting to define a “master” in universal terms. In light of this difficulty, criteria-guided nomination techniques were used in the current study to help define and identify masters of interpersonal communication. This will be further explored in the paragraph to follow.

In a similar study conducted by Jennings and Skovholt (1999), cognitive, emotional, and relational characteristics among 10 peer-nominated master therapists were highlighted. Master therapists were identified through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. The methodology section of this research article is important to highlight because I used purposeful and snowball sampling as my primary methods for identifying masters of interpersonal communication in the current study. Jennings and Skovholt (1999) identified three (two male, one female) well-regarded therapists as master

therapists and key informants who were asked to nominate colleagues they considered master therapists. Key informants were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) involvement in the training of therapists; (b) longstanding involvement with the local mental health community; and (c) reputation for being well-regarded therapists.

Each key informant was asked to nominate three master therapists. Inclusion criteria for the nomination of a master therapist were: (a) This person is considered to be a “master therapist”; (b) this person is most frequently thought of when referring a close family member or a dear friend to a therapist because this person is considered to be the “best of the best”; (c) one would have full confidence in seeing this therapist for one’s own personal therapy, meaning this therapist might be considered a “therapist’s therapist” (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999).

The authors then telephoned master therapists nominated by a key informant and asked the master therapist to nominate three other master therapists using the same criteria. One hundred and three master therapists were nominated; however only ten therapists received four or more nominations and therefore their interview responses represent the data, as four nominations were chosen as the cutoff point for the sample group. The methodology outlining nomination techniques (peer-nomination and snowball sampling) informed the current study by highlighting an effective recruitment method. Accordingly, I used the same criteria-guided peer nomination techniques, and snowball sampling to identify masters of interpersonal communication. For example, masters of interpersonal communication will be self reflexive (e.g., being able to openly reflect on their process and contributes to such process).

*Social Learning Theory and Mastery Learning as Theoretical Frameworks for  
Interpersonal Communication Expertise*

*Social Learning Theory*

The current study seeks to understand how masters of interpersonal communication become masters. Therefore, it is important to highlight theories that could explain how these individuals have developed to be masters. While rooted in many of the basic concepts of traditional learning theory, Bandura (1977) believed that direct reinforcement could not account for all types of learning. His theory added a social element, arguing that people can learn new information and behaviors by watching other people; this learning Bandura refers to as *observational learning* as a result of modeling. He outlines three basic social learning concepts: (a) Observational Learning (people can learn from observation); (b) Intrinsic Reinforcement (mental states are important to learning); (c) The Modeling Process (factors involving both the model and the learner can play a role in whether social learning is successful).

*Observational learning.* Bandura (1977) identified three basic models for observational learning: a live model, which involves an actual individual demonstrating or acting out a behavior; a verbal instructional model, which involves descriptions and explanations of a behavior; or a symbolic model, which involves real or fictional characters displaying behaviors in books, films, television programs, or online media.

*Intrinsic reinforcement.* Bandura (1977) noted that external, environmental reinforcement was not the only factor to influence learning and behavior. He described intrinsic reinforcement as a form of internal reward, such as pride, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment.

*The modeling process.* Not all observed behaviours are effectively learned. Factors involving both the model and the learner can play a role in whether social learning is successful. Certain requirements and steps must also be followed. The following steps are involved in the observational learning and modeling process: (a) Attention (in order to learn, you need to be paying attention); (b) Retention (the ability to store and pull up information later); (c) Reproduction (practice of the modeled/observed behaviour); and (d) Motivation (readiness and interest to imitate the behavior that has been modeled). Bandura (1977) suggests direct reinforcement and punishment play an important role in motivation. That is being praised or receiving positive attention for an action or behavior done, or being punished or receiving negative attention for an action or behavior. Equally effective is observing someone else experience some type of reinforcement or punishment. This is known as the vicarious experience of reinforcement or punishment. For example, if you see another student rewarded with extra credit staying a few minutes after class to help the teacher clean up, you might start to stay and help after class.

### *Mastery Learning*

Block and Burn's (1976) theory of mastery learning provides a theoretical framework for understanding the *process* and *product* of "mastery." It is an optimistic theory arguing that all students, regardless of their IQ or learning style, are capable of learning to levels of excellence and to master a great deal of what they are taught (Block, 1980). If the instruction is approached systematically, if students are helped when and where they are having difficulty, if they are given sufficient time, and if there is a clear outline of what constitutes mastery, all students can achieve mastery (Martinez &

Martinez, 1990). Materials are presented to the class in a variety of ways including cooperative groups, individual exercises, and by the teacher lecturing the group (Bloom, 1968). Following the learning process, students are tested for mastery. Those students that have accomplished mastery move on to the next lesson, while those who require more work to achieve mastery receive additional individual exercises until mastery is achieved (Bloom, 1968).

Two individualized instructional strategies have taken the concept of mastery learning in education, and developed a working framework for education providers. The first strategy *Learning for Mastery* (LFM) by Bloom (1968) and later refined by Block (1980), has greatly impacted the education of elementary and secondary school learners. LFM is predominantly a group-based, teacher-paced instructional approach, in which students learn by cooperating with their classmates (Block & Burns, 1976). It does not focus so much on the content being presented but rather the process of mastering the content. Bloom's ideas outlined two essential elements that must be present for the process of mastery learning to transpire. These elements include: (a) the feedback, corrective, and enrichment process; and (b) instructional alignment (Martinez & Martinez, 1990).

*Feedback, corrective, and enrichment process.* Bloom (1968) believed that teachers who use mastery learning provide students with frequent and specific feedback through the use of regular and formative classroom assessment. However, feedback alone does little to help students improve their learning (Martinez & Martinez, 1990). Improvement in student learning requires feedback to be paired with correctives (activities that offer guidance and direction to students on how to work through their

learning problems). Correctives offer the student more time to learn and a different learning modality to the teacher's initial instruction (Martinez & Martinez, 1990).

Correctives that are accompanied by enrichment activities (activities that broaden students' learning experiences, e.g., projects or reports, academic games and problem solving tasks) is an optimal combination that further promotes student learning.

Correctives reward students for their learning success, offer exciting opportunities to expand their learning, and challenge them to go further (Bloom, 1968).

*Instructional alignment.* Bloom stressed instructional alignment must be present for mastery learning to transpire (1968). Instructional alignment includes learning goals (what teachers want students to learn), and instruction (the way in which teachers present and teach the material). Mastery learning requires alignment among how something is taught and how learning is evaluated (Martinez & Martinez, 1990). For example, if a student is expected to learn a higher level skill such as problem solving, mastery learning stipulates that the instructional activities must be planned to give students the opportunity to practice and engage in problem solving skills. It also requires that students be given specific feedback on how well they have learned the skills in addition to directions on how to correct learning errors. Finally, measures for evaluating students should reflect those higher-level skills as well. When combined, feedback, correctives, enrichment procedures, and instructional alignment are the fundamental elements of mastery learning. The literature has, for the most part, indicated positive effects of mastery learning on students (Clark, Guskey, & Benninga 1983; Dunkelberger & Heikkinen, 1984; Ritchie & Thorkildsen, 1994).

The theoretical underpinning of the social learning theory and mastery learning theories helps to inform the current study by highlighting the necessary circumstances that promote learning and mastery achievement. The current study examined masters of interpersonal communication; hence, it is important to have a framework for understanding their learning process and product of mastery. Elements of the social learning theory (observational learning, intrinsic components, and modeling process) and mastery (feedback, correctives, and instructional alignment) were expected to emerge from participants' narratives and were also expected to present as important components in their journey to becoming masters of interpersonal communication.

#### *Chapter Summary*

The intention of this chapter was to inform the reader in the major constructs of the current study as well as introduce the reader to literature that informs how individuals become masters of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication theories, and specifically those of communication competence and effective communication, were used as a starting point to investigate the different elements that are believed to make up what "good" communication looks like. As highlighted above, competent communication speaks to the process of communication, and effective communication speaks to the product or outcome of communication. Personal and social competences were highlighted as important contributing factors to effective interpersonal communication and as potential themes that could emerge from participants' narratives. Scholars have yet to ask individuals how they become masters of interpersonal communication therefore mastery learning was explored as a theoretical framework for better understanding of how individuals in the proposed study may unpack their journey in becoming a master of

interpersonal communication. The proposed study will strive to fill this gap in the literature by specifically asking individuals to narrate their journey.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### *Chapter Introduction*

This chapter will discuss the narrative approach to research that will be utilized within this study and further explain narrative inquiry as a research design. The interview method will also be outlined in order to further explain the methodological framework for this study. Participants will be described in terms of recruitment and peer selection, followed by a discussion around transcription and thematic analysis procedures.

### *The Narrative Approach*

Different scholars articulate narrative models differently but the underlying research approach remains consistent from one narrative scholar to the next. “Narrative researchers look to find the story in the study, the tale in the theory, and the parable in the principle” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 161). Narrative inquiry is the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note that, “Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 5). In addition Riessman (1993) states, “As nations and governments conduct preferred narratives about history, so do social movements, organizations, scientists, other professionals, ethnic/racial groups, and individuals in stories of experience”(p. 56). Different from other scientific modalities, narrative modes of thought are characterized by “good stories” that gain credibility through their lifelikeness (White & Epston, 1990). It is within the narrative theoretical framework that I will look for the “good stories” from individuals considered to be masters of interpersonal communication.

Chase (2000) describes six elements that characterize and distinguish narrative inquiry from other forms of qualitative research. The first element highlights narrative inquiry as a distinct form of discourse; it is a means to understanding one's own actions, the actions of others, and the organization of events. Mainly, narrative inquiry goes beyond description, facilitating understanding of meaning as a whole by connecting and revealing the connections between actions and events to consequences over time. Narrative inquiry makes meaning retrospectively by shaping and ordering past experience. Secondly, narrative inquiry expresses thoughts, emotions, and the storyteller's interpretation of human action through the telling of stories. In doing so, individual uniqueness is highlighted (Polkinghorne, 1995) which is central to the narrative approach in qualitative research. Third, researchers using the narrative approach view narratives as "verbal action" meaning the narrative is actively created thus emphasizing the narrator's voice. When researchers treat storytelling as active, as in doing or accomplishing something, they attend to the narrator's statements and highlight the narrator's versions of self, reality, and experience that are produced in the telling (Holstien & Gubrium, 2000). Fourth, narrative researchers view the story being told by the narrator as both "enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances"(Chase, 2000, p.657). Social circumstances can include the narrator's cultural and historical location, organizational and social membership, and community or local setting. Such particulars are viewed to be unique within one's narrative but can also highlight similarities and differences to the researcher across narratives. Fifth, narrative inquiry is a collaboration and co-creation between both the narrator and the researcher (Bauman, 1986; Briggs, 2002). More specifically, Chase (2000) describes narrative

researchers' awareness around the social impact of the setting of the interview, the purpose, and the audience, and the impact these elements have on the narratives themselves. For example, a story told to a researcher in a comfortable relaxed setting will likely differ from the same story told to a news reporter or journalist at and in a different time and setting. Each narrative is a co-construction jointly told by the participant and researcher. This highlights the narrator's story as flexible and viable and shaped in part by the interaction with the audience (Chase, 2000). Sixth, narrative researchers view themselves as narrators as they transcribe and interpret the narrative data to present or publish their ideas around the narrative they studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For example, I will be presenting my research in the first person in ways that are both enabled and constrained by social resources and circumstances, and made sense of in my own voice, for a particular audience, thereby emphasizing my own narrative action.

Considering the research question in this study explores how master interpersonal communicators became masters, it is fitting to utilize narrative inquiry within qualitative research to answer the research question. In general, when participants are asked to describe their personal experience, these experiences are usually verbalized in life story form (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). I anticipated a similar response from asking masters of interpersonal communication to describe their personal experience. As mentioned above, narratives organize, structure, and facilitate the meaning making process behind human experience (Riessman, 1993). Because narratives are representational they cannot be seen as an exact replica of an event or of a developmental process being described but are evolutionary and change with each telling, sometimes dramatically and sometimes incrementally (Sandelowski, 1991). In a process that is

circular and ever-evolving, stories provide structure for our lives and that which we perceive to be reality. We create our stories and then see our world and ourselves through stories (Riessman, 1993). Narrative interviews facilitate this process, and therefore narrative interview is considered to be the best fit for exploring how master interpersonal communicators become masters. Hence, I asked participants to tell me their story of how they became masters, and I was looking to access all of the cognitive, emotional, personal and physical aspects of the “how”. The narrative interview allowed participants to speak from an embodied place, rather than from a merely cognitive self-reflective stance.

#### *Methodological Trustworthiness in the Current Study*

Many of the different research criteria employed in quantitative research are not applicable in qualitative research. Despite these differences, qualitative research continues to be graded against quantitative means (Krefting, 1990). For example, terms such as “reliability” and “validity” used in quantitative research do not easily translate into the realm of qualitative research. Quantitative research strives to generalize the results found in a specific study to larger populations however, as described by Krefting (1990), qualitative research attempts to “describe accurately the experience of the phenomenon under the study” (p. 215). Rigor in qualitative research is evaluated on several different criteria. Guba (1980) proposed a model for assessing *trustworthiness* of qualitative studies that is based on the identification of four criteria of trustworthiness (truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality). In addition to Guba’s model, Krefting (1990) offers an interpretation and summary acknowledging a movement in language from quantitative terms such as internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, to a discussion of a different set of four criteria of trustworthiness in

qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In attempts to establish and assess the trustworthiness of the current study, Krefling's (1991) four criteria will be outlined and addressed. Different strategies were employed in the current study to address these criteria and to increase the worth of the qualitative process and findings.

*Credibility.* Historically speaking it was believed that a major threat to *credibility* (Krefling's first criterion for trustworthiness) in qualitative research is the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Marcus & Fisher, 1986). Researchers believed that if the relationship became too intertwined it could be hard for the researcher to separate their own experience from the participant's experience (Marcus & Fisher, 1986). However, more recent research around the role of the researcher/participant relationship and experience (Gilbert, 2002) suggests the separation of the researcher's experience from the participant's is not the aim of narrative but that researchers need to be aware of their effect on the research: "Researchers must be aware that they influence the story simply by their physical presence and by their listening to that unfolding story" (Gilbert, 2002, p. 229). Therefore, the context in which the story is being told, the researcher's previous experience, interests, perception, and the relationship that builds in the interview are important contextual elements that will influence the experience and the data collected. In order to ensure researcher awareness around such contexts a strategy called *reflexivity* was utilized in the current study. Reflexivity highlights my role as a researcher and aims to assess how my background, interest, and perception might influence various aspects of the research process. White and Epston (1990) note that reflexivity starts with a conscious examination of paradigm assumptions; selection of

research strategies and participants; and decisions made in collecting data, conducting interviews, and interpreting findings. In attempts to engage in reflexivity and to promote transparency in the current study, I kept a field journal. I started by making notes of my current biases around interpersonal communication and the individuals I was interviewing, my hopes for the interviews, what I expected to find, and issues that came up throughout the process of my research.

I also made use of a technique called *member-checking* to enhance the credibility of this study. Member checking is the process of bringing the research data, researcher interpretations, and conclusions back to participants (Krefting, 1991). In doing this I checked with the participant to make sure my interpretations of the participants' experiences were in fact "good" interpretations. Credibility was also enhanced in the interview process through the use of reframing questions, expansion questions, and indirect questions about the participant's experience (May, 1989). Credibility assesses whether the researcher has established confidence in the truth of the findings for the participants in the context in which the study was conducted (Krefting, 1991). Outlined as one of the most important checkpoints in qualitative research by Krefting (1991), a study is believed to be credible when "the study presents accurate descriptions and interpretations of the human experience that when individuals who also share the same experience would immediately recognize the descriptions" (Sandelowski, 1986).

*Transferability.* To address Krefting's (1991) second criterion of trustworthiness, namely *transferability* (the degree to which the findings can be applied to other contexts and settings; of the findings, as the researcher I have provided as much information as possible to allow transferability decisions to be made by the reader. In light of this, I have

provided as much background about the participants' experiences and the context of the research as possible to enable readers to draw their own conclusions around the transferability of findings from this study.

*Dependability.* Similar to credibility, ensuring *dependability* (the consistency of the findings) – Krefling's third criterion for trustworthiness - entails providing as much information as possible about data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the study (Guba, 1980). One way to ensure a dense description of methods is to make certain the research process is auditable by colleagues and research supervisors. This means another researcher can clearly follow the steps and decisions I have made in my research and understand the rationale behind each step and decision. These steps are clearly outlined in the appropriate sections of the current study.

*Confirmability.* Krefling's fourth criterion for trustworthiness is *confirmability*. Confirmability refers to the degree to which the data can be confirmed by others (Krefling, 1991). To enhance confirmability in the study I used a number of different strategies throughout the different stages of my research. I used member-checking as described above to ensure I represented the participant's story in an accurate and credible manner. I also kept a journal that described in detail the procedures I used to check and recheck the data and also highlighted my awareness around the influence I may have had on the data. I engaged in ongoing discussions with my supervisor who took on the role of playing the "devils advocate" which was also documented.

### *Participants*

Five peer-nominated "masters of interpersonal communication" were recruited through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling methods to participate in the study.

Both my supervisor and I identified my father as someone possessing an understanding of the skills of a master of interpersonal communication, as defined herein. My father assisted me in connecting with some of his peers who he nominated as masters of interpersonal communication. Nominations of masters of interpersonal communication (by my father) were based on the following criteria as laid out by Jennings and Skovholt (1999). This person is: (a) self reflexive (i.e., being able to openly reflect on their process and contributing to such process); (b) consistently and effectively communicates with others so that intended messages are received by the person towards whom the communication is directed, with little or no miscommunication (i.e., the sender sends the message intended to tell someone they are behaving in a manner that needs to be changed and the receiver of the message is able to hear that the sender would like their behavior to change); (c) communicates (as per point b) across multiple levels of power and influence (e.g., an NHL hockey coach communicates with his players, the media, training staff, other members of the coaching staff, upper management, coaches from other teams, and fans); (d) communicates (as per point b) across multiple roles (i.e., as a spouse, partner, parent, sibling, colleague, and friend); (e) possesses the ability to flex and adapt their style of communication across different contexts (i.e., at home with friends and family, at work with colleagues and/or superiors and subordinates, and at the grocery store with service staff).

Information about the study was distributed to peer-nominated individuals who contacted me if they were interested in participating. Individuals had to agree with the criteria upon which they had been nominated in order to participate in the current study. At the beginning of the telephone interview I asked participants if they considered

themselves meeting these criteria upon which peer nomination was based. All participants answered, “yes” to this question. There were no power-over relationships between my father and his peers and my father was not informed regarding who chose and who did not choose to participate in the study. Identifying information has been deleted or changed and pseudo names have been used in present thesis. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if they knew of anyone else who may fit the description of the original nomination criteria (identified above) and, if so, to provide them with my contact information.

In total, five participants were recruited to the study and completed interviews with me. Three individuals were initially peer nominated by my father. All three individuals who were nominated responded to the formal letter, agreed with the criteria upon which they had been nominated, and participated in the study. Upon completion of the interview each participant then nominated one individual who they felt fit the nomination criteria. Of the three individuals who were peer nominated, three individuals responded to the formal letter and agreed with the criteria upon which they had been nominated; however only two individuals were able to participate in the study. The individual who was unable to participate responded to the formal letter, but was unable to participate due to a busy schedule. Of the six peer nominated individuals who received formal letters, five (i.e., 83.3%) participated in the current study.

#### *Interview Procedures*

The process and procedures used in this study was submitted and approved by the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board prior to conducting data collection. Interview times were scheduled at participants’ convenience and all five

participants participated from the comfort of their home. Participants were provided with informed consent forms that were e-mailed to them prior to the interview taking place. I went over the consent form with participants on the telephone and answered any questions they had about confidentiality, anonymity, or the study prior to beginning the interview. I accepted verbal consent on the telephone with a request for participants to mail or fax their signed consent form back to me at their earliest convenience. Once verbal consent was obtained, I engaged participants in a narrative-based, telephone interview that lasted between one and two hours. The interview format followed the questions attached in Appendix A. As the researcher, I asked participants to tell me the story of how they became masters of interpersonal communication. Using open-ended questions, active listening and prompting, participants co-constructed their story with me until they felt that their story had been told. Each interview was complete when the answer was “yes” to the final question, “Have you told me your story of how you became a master of interpersonal communication?”

When I proposed the current study, I planned to conduct a follow-up interview with participants after the initial interview had been transcribed and analyzed. Due to participants’ busy schedules, I opted to email the themes, theme descriptions, and supporting quotes to participants and asked them if the themes and quotes accurately depicted their journey in becoming a master of interpersonal communication. All five participants emailed me back answering “yes” to this question and agreed that the themes and quotes supported their journey in becoming a master of interpersonal communication. I offered participants a follow-up telephone conversation as a way to respond to the email. However, none of the participants thought this was necessary.

### *Data Analysis*

The intent of thematic analysis is to place emphasis on the content of a text: “what is said, how it is said, and told rather than the telling” (Riessman, 1993). This approach aims to identify and report patterns (themes) within the narrative data. Boyatzis (1998) presents the following description of thematic analysis that helps explain the role it will play in the current research study:

Descriptive use of thematic analysis is desirable if the particular methodology for the desired study requires enhancing and clarifying results or findings and the ease in communication. In particular providing discoveries and insights generated through qualitative methods, thematic analysis expands the possible audience for the communication and dissemination of ideas and results. Thematic analysis allows researchers using qualitative methods to incorporate operant and open ended measures or forms of information collection into their designs. (p.7)

In terms of analyzing the data and reporting findings, it must be noted that the intent is not to obtain objective, generalizable findings. As mentioned above, the telling of the story creates a new story as well as a new experience and interpretation of the story. By simply listening, the researcher transforms the story (Riessman, 1993) and is therefore influencing the story. I made choices about what to report in my results chapter, which parts of the transcripts I wanted to use and how I interpreted statements made by participants. I utilized Braun and Clarke’s (2006) *Step by Step Guide to Thematic Analysis* which is based on six stages: (a) familiarizing yourself with the data; (b) generating initial codes; (c) developing themes; (d) reviewing themes; (e) defining and naming themes; (f) producing the report.

In the first stage of data analysis, the researcher familiarizes themselves with the depth and breadth of the data content. Transcriptions of the audio taped interviews were completed by a professional transcription company on receipt of which, verification of

content was completed by me. When the transcription and verification process was concluded I engaged in repeated reading of the data. I began by working through the entire data set, giving full and equal attention to each data item, and identifying conceptually congruent aspects in the data items that appeared to form the bases of repeated patterns (themes) across the data set. Braun and Clarke (2006) cite this stage as tiresome and time consuming often tempting the researcher to skip over or become selective in reading. However, such familiarity with all aspects of the data will become the bedrock for the rest of the analysis.

The second stage includes building upon the list generated in stage one by producing initial codes from the data. Codes refer to identifying features of the data that appear interesting to the researcher and which are believed to be “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p.63). Braun and Clarke (2006) make note of three pieces of key advice that are useful to the coding process: (a) code for as many possible themes or patterns - this may become interesting later; (b) keep just a little of the surrounding data if relevant, a common criticism of coding is that the context is lost; (c) be mindful of that fact that you can code individual extracts of data in as many “categories” as they fit into.

The third stage involves a re-focusing of the analysis to a broader level of themes which requires sorting of the different code categories into probable themes, and assembling all the pertinent coded data within the known themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Simply put, I took a closer look at the codes and how different codes may come together to form an expansive umbrella-like theme. Some of these codes went on to develop into

main themes and others were unnecessary and discarded. In this stage I started to look at potential relationships between codes and themes as well as different levels of themes. Given that the purpose of creating themes across interviews is to find commonalities, a theme was included as a theme if at least 60 percent (e.g., 3 out of 5) of participants endorsed a particular theme. There is no current standard for the number of participants who must endorse a particular theme and 60 percent has been chosen to provide voice to those themes of which a majority of participants endorse (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A 50 percent endorsement rate would mean that while half of the individuals would include a particular theme in their story of how they became masters of interpersonal communication, half would not endorse that theme in their story; this of course brings into question whether or not the theme informs us about the research question or something else. Hence, 60 percent was chosen as an arbitrary cutoff for what constitutes a theme in this study. Before moving into stage four, I met with my supervisor to review the tentative themes that I constructed. This meeting was to ensure both credibility and consistent interpretation of the data.

Stage three moved into stage four when set themes were identified and agreed upon; from there, I engaged in the refining of these themes. For example, I noticed some proposed themes were not really themes. Such refinement of themes included a two phase process: first, I read the data within each theme thoroughly and conscientiously and then decided if the collection of data formed a coherent pattern; second, I decided if the entire data set formed a coherent pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal of reviewing the proposed themes was to enable me to consider the authenticity of individual themes in relation to the data set, and to determine if my proposed thematic map accurately

represented the meaning in the data set as a whole. I then reread the entire original data set of verbatim narrative transcripts to make sure the themes “fit” into the entire data set (as outlined in more detail above) and also to code any additional data that may have been missed in earlier coding stages. It was important for me to be mindful that the coding and recoding process does not have clear guidelines around when to stop. Therefore, and as cited by Braun and Clarke (2006), when my refinements were no longer adding anything substantial I was able to recognize this and I stopped making refinements.

After solidifying the different themes within my analysis and how they fit together, the fifth stage required me to define and name themes by highlighting the fundamental nature of each theme; as well as the overarching themes connecting the data to my research question. I wrote a detailed analysis for each theme describing the scope and content of each theme as well as its essence. I then transformed working titles used to describe themes into names that were representative of each theme in my final analysis. To ensure credibility of each theme, I emailed the theme titles, descriptions, and supporting quotes to endorsing participants. I then asked participants if the theme and quote accurately depicted their story in becoming a master of interpersonal communication. Each participant answered, “yes” to this question.

The sixth and final stage of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) Step-by-Step Guide to Thematic Analysis includes the final analysis and write-up of the results. The purpose of the final write up is to tell the story of the data in a way that highlights the themes. I used extracts from the interviews with participants to provide evidence of the themes identified within my data and also used examples of such themes to capture the essence of master

interpersonal communicators as a way to demonstrate the overall story I am telling about my data.

### *Chapter Summary*

The intention of this chapter was to introduce the reader to the narrative research design and thematic analysis, both of which will be used to ground the current study within the context of qualitative research. A thorough discussion of the narrative approach to research was provided. Specifically, I discussed how participants were recruited, how informed consent was obtained, how interviews were conducted in a way that is congruent with this research design, and provided a summary of my rationale for choosing this method of data gathering and analysis. Issues around the trustworthiness of qualitative research were explored and strategies (e.g., reflexivity, member checking, journaling) to enable trustworthiness in the current study were identified. Participant selection and recruitment strategies such as peer selection and snowball sampling were outlined, and thematic analysis procedures provided the concluding section of this chapter.

## Chapter 4: Results

The qualitative interviews, as described in the previous chapter, were conducted in a semi-structured format that focused on how individuals understood their development in becoming masters of interpersonal communication. Telephone interviews were conducted with five criteria-based peer nominated masters of interpersonal communication. The five participants (two men, three women) ranged in age from 35 to 71. The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription company and reviewed by myself to ensure accurate transcription; following this, a thematic analysis of the data was conducted based on procedures outline by Braun and Clark (2006). After I spent a considerable amount of time carefully collecting, reviewing, and coding the data, a list of eight themes emerged in relation to how an individual becomes a master of interpersonal communication. These eight themes are: (a) Observational Learning; (b) Aware of the Other; (c) Listening; (d) Striving to be Better; (e) Bringing True Self Forward; (f) Trusting Gut Feeling; (g) Learning to Accept Limits; (h) Mentors.

The developments of these themes were reviewed by my supervisor, in order to ensure the process was auditable. All five participants endorsed the themes *Observation Learning*, four participants endorsed *Being Aware of the Others Needs*, and the remaining six themes *Listening*, *Striving to be Better*, *Bringing True Self Forward*, *Trusting Gut Feeling*, *Learning to Accept Limits* and *Mentors* were each endorsed by three participants. That is, two themes received an 80% endorsement rate, and six themes received an endorsement rate of 60%. All eight themes satisfy Braun and Clarke's (2006) criterion of 60% endorsement for theme establishment. The title of the themes, the description of the themes, and the supporting quote for each theme were individually

validated by participants to ensure that the themes reflect their experience. Finally, I sent a descriptive paragraph and supporting quotes to the participants who did not initially endorse a theme in their interview and asked them whether or not their experience matched with the theme and quotes. Each participant answered, “yes” to this question for each theme therefore, each participant endorsed all eight themes.

What follows is the title and description of each theme, followed by a verbatim quote from each participant who expressed the theme during his/her interview. The names used here are the pseudonyms selected by participants.

### *Themes and Supporting Quotes*

#### *Observational Learning (Theme validated by five participants initially)*

Participants reported that watching other people communicate and the outcomes of their communication have been important factors in how they learned to be masters of interpersonal communication. For example, participants reported that watching people communicate effectively and ineffectively has impacted the way they communicate.

- Jennifer: Just more or less watching him with people and kind of seeing how they react, what they do with themselves, you can just see it’s amazing.
- Peter: I think the other was really observing coaches in hockey and how they communicated with the various types of personalities, and how challenging that would be. That was really interesting and [important 41:54].
- Janice: I remember when [my boss] took over [men’s hockey team], and I’d worked with some other teams in some other sports, and so in then working with the hockey, it was like things, it looked easy the way they ran everything. Like you had no idea of all the things that had to be done behind the scenes in order to

make it look easy, but I remember watching them and consciously being aware and going, “Wow, they set things up so well” as far as how they’re running it as smoothing as it is, right?

- Jack: Now, some of it wasn’t positive. So... but I would see something, and I would say, “Okay, I like that.” And I would use it, and I’d see something else and say, “Oh, I hate that. I’m never going to be that.”
- Susan: I think that my story of becoming a master of interpersonal communication really begins with my father. My father was a successful businessman for 36 years. He had a self-owned business, and I began working in that business in the office when I was ten years old. It was through his example I think I learned many things. I learned how to give clear directions, I learned how to lead and manage successfully, because as I got older, many times I had to take over the business when my parents went away for a weekend. And of course I had to look and feel confident, and also when I met with customers I had to disagree politely but firmly.

*Being Aware of Others Needs (Theme validated by four participants initially, and then five after follow-up)*

Participants reported that they learned to be aware of the other person’s needs, thoughts, and feelings when communicating.

- Jack: I think I’ve always had compassion. I’ve always tried to understand people and I think because I never had the God-given abilities...
- Janice: It doesn’t matter what human being, what you’ve been through, where you come from, but I simplify it back to that, is everybody wants to feel valued, feel

appreciated. And the way I can be there for them, whether that... like being fully present when you talk to them, like present with everything they're saying, not in your own head of thinking what you want to say next but fully being with them, and then giving them your time and you is really valuable and that [starts hopefully 18:11] the trust and the foundation for a trusting working relationship too.

- Jennifer: Knowing how to be empathetic and sympathetic towards other people is a huge. If you don't know how to bring yourself down to reality and be empathetic and be sympathetic and kind of put yourself in their shoes, then you're not going to be successful. So knowing how to be empathetic and sympathetic towards other people is a huge, huge piece of myself as far as how I think I... I hate to say "mastered" it.
- Susan: I don't know. I think that's something else that I... I think I grew up being not only empathetic but picking up on non-verbal cues. Later I read books on it, but I had that ability I think much before I'd read... That's why I did read books on it. I thought, "Am I right about this?" I think I'm just maybe more a hyper-sensitive person, something like that. So I can pick up on non-verbal cues quite a bit.

*Listening (Theme validated by three participants initially and then five after follow-up)*

When describing how they became masters of interpersonal communication participants describe their learned ability to listen. For example, participants reported that learning to listen was important so they could make sure they were clear on what they were expected to do.

- Jennifer: Because I really had to learn to kind of sit back and bite my tongue and be a sponge and listen. Because the one thing you don't want to do is put your foot in your mouth. And I did it, as a new lieutenant I did it. I did it all the time.
- Janice: I think, well, first I always listen. I try to really listen first. Like say for example with a team or company I'm working with, is really hear from them first what their needs are and their expectations, but then digest that and go through then what's realistic on my end or what works and fits with both my values and what will work so that everybody trusts you and you're making the best decisions for the whole team. So that's I think a big one, making sure you're aligned that way.
- Susan: I was always taught to learn to listen so that I always got the correct message. I listened to many people who would come in to his business, and many of those people were of different professions and also the salesmen, and I would listen to him talking to them, and listening to what they were saying, and just absorbing a lot of information. And also of course, when I would take orders I'd have to listen well to the customers so that I didn't make mistakes mixing up orders.

*Striving to Be Better (Theme validated by three participants initially and then five after follow-up)*

When describing how they became masters of interpersonal communication participants reported they strove to be better communicators. For example, participants reported that they had drive, personal motivation, and a willingness to be better communicators.

- Jack: So I think communication skills is absolutely that as well. I think I was always motivated, even as a young lad. So, I was always a motivated young lad – did I always communicate that well? Probably not. But I was always personally motivated and I always try to be motivated.
- Janice: Drive and wanting to be better always, right? So it's a fine line [obviously] – like [reflection] or, you know... Like I'm the hardest on myself.
- Susan: I think because I was always taught to do things the best way I could and even better than I could. I was always taught to do things well, no matter what the task. To do it well, and to learn how to do it better, because sometimes, you say, "Well, I've done the best I can," maybe that's not the best. You can't be satisfied with saying, "No, I've done the best I can." Well, maybe you could do better.

*Bring True Self Forward (Theme validated by three participants initially and then five after follow-up)*

Participants reported that they learned to bring more of their true self forward when communicating. For example, participants learned to present more of their authentic self rather than trying to be something or someone else.

- Janice: And then if you come truly just "This is who I am," then you can just flow and be present and be doing what you love to do, not spending energy trying to do something else or chase something that's not attainable.
- Jack: I... people say, well maybe I should have been tougher, or should have been this, or should have been that... and I say, "Look. Just learn from it and be you. But don't go in and change who you are."
- Jennifer: You kind of just got to go with what you got.

*Trusting Gut Feeling (Theme validated by three participants initially and then five after follow-up)*

When describing how they became masters of interpersonal communication, participants reported that they learned to trust their gut feeling and/or instincts.

- Jennifer: I think he kind of taught me to kind of go with my gut feelings, not being a wavering, you know, when you make a decision just kind of stick to it.
- Janice: I think I trust my gut now more than I ever have. That was a big one because I remember coming out of school, you felt like... like you just said, like you go, it's like, oh, you don't know anything and you're being told all this and you're told all these things you have to be taught, right? And I'm going, "Oh my God, I know nothing." I'm like, "How am I ever going to...?" And then going, "Wait a minute." Like I think there are so many things that we naturally know and pay attention to if you're solid in yourself and you're a good person.
- Jack: I just think communicating is just ... you've just got to kind of learn it as you go, and trust your instincts.

*Learning to Accept Limits (Theme validated by three participants initially and then five after follow-up)*

Participants reported that they learned to accept limits to what they can do as masters of interpersonal communication. For example, participants learned to accept that not everything will work out as expected, they don't have all the answers, and they will make mistakes.

- Jennifer: It was more of like a light bulb. I was like, sometimes people would tell me things and I'm like, and I'd be like, "Hey, you know what? Yeah, okay, I kind

of get this.” sometimes you just have to say, “Hey, it’s impossible. I can’t get it done. I need more time because I don’t know the answer.”

- Jack: Sometimes it just doesn’t work out, and all you can do is just learn from it, grow from it and go from there.
- Janice: Am I going to make mistakes? For sure I am. But I’ll learn from those ones and I’ll make other mistakes, so I’ll keep learning. And that’s been something I think I’ve... really still to this day – I’m 37 now. Am I an expert at it? No, but I think I was better than I was, say, a year ago or two years or three years ago, right?

*Mentors (Theme validated by three participants initially and then five after follow-up)*

Participants reported that individuals with who they had an ongoing developmental relationship (mentor) influenced and/or impacted the way in which participants learned to be masters of interpersonal communication. For example, participants reported that they learned by watching mentors, working with mentors, and feeling validated and encouraged by mentors.

- Jennifer: I give my husband all the credit in the world because he, your spouse is the one that kind of gives you that little bit of nudge when you’re down in the dumps. My husband, he’s a great communicator. And he definitely, definitely has been a mentor to me. I learn from watching him every day.
- Janice: (My boss) taught me a massive amount. Like that year then working with him and his team and the staff that year, and then all the way through... In ’01, I started with (a professional sports team) and he was great for me to learn so much from, whether it was discussing players to like draft players of the team. And then

also with (my other boss), same thing. [inaudible 26:30] both of them. So like massive learning. I'd say I went from... Like I almost feel it's like two PhDs – I went from my PhD to then like (my boss) and (my other boss).

- Susan: Well, I think, yeah, I have watched some people and maybe they're just models to copy, but I really think really just watching someone is not enough. I think that there has to be some type of mentor that helps you grow, and shows confidence in you and teaches you to have faith in yourself. And I think maybe in my college instructors I had a few, I think, who were great mentors when I was going through college.

### *Chapter Summary*

The purpose of this chapter was to outline, define, and provide supporting quotes for the eight themes that emerged from participants' stories. Observational Learning, Being Aware of Others Needs, Listening, Striving to Be Better, Bringing True Self Forward, Trusting Gut Feeling, Learning to Accept Limits, and Mentors were all notable categories of participants responses. Such themes will be further discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

### *Summary of the Findings*

The results of this study as described in the previous chapter illustrate how five individuals constructed their story of how they become masters of interpersonal communication. Findings both complement and contribute to the literature described in chapter two which will be further explored in this chapter.

### *Unique Contributions of the Current Study*

While many of the findings support some of the previously cited research literature, there were also results of this study that are not present in the literature to date. For example, participants expressed a learned ability to accept limits to what they can do as masters of interpersonal communication. Much of the literature around competent communication (Canary & Cody, 2000) and effective communication (Beebe, Beebe, Redmond, & Geerinck, 1997; Ralph, 2006) focuses on what an individual can do to control the effectiveness of an interpersonal exchange by applying specific skills and being aware of different facilitative conditions. However, the theme “learning to accept limits” is speaking to each participant’s ability to accept that not everything will work out as planned, they do not have all the answers, and they will make mistakes.

In addition, participants expressed a learned ability to trust their gut feelings as an important part of their journey of becoming masters of interpersonal communication. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the literature speaks to being aware of and strengthening personal and social competence when communicating (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002) however, no literature explores trusting ones intuition or gut feeling.

Interestingly, participants reported that having an ongoing developmental relationship with a mentor influenced and impacted the way in which participants learned to be masters. Participants reported that they learned by watching mentors, working with mentors, and feeling validated and encouraged by mentors. These findings seem to compliment the process of learning in both mastery learning and social learning theories; however, there is a relational element that is missing from both mastery learning and social learning theory that is being expressed by participants. For example, observational learning is an important component of the social learning theory yet there is no requirement to have an ongoing developmental relationship with that individual you are observing. Social learning theory does however talk about the status of the model as influential (e.g., imitation of superiors). In mastery learning theory the role of the teacher is very important in helping students achieve mastery. The teacher provides instruction, correctives, enrichment opportunities, and feedback to the student yet there is no mention of existing relational components between the teacher and student.

Participants also described their learned ability to listen as an important factor in their journey in becoming a master of interpersonal communication. Despite little research dedicated to listening in communication literature as an important aspect of interpersonal communication. McKay, Davis and Fanning (1986) speak to the importance of listening as an essential skill for making and keeping relationship. Moreover, McKay, Davis and Fanning (1986) cite listening as commitment to understanding how people feel by putting aside your own beliefs, anxieties or personal agendas. Participants spoke to the importance of listening, which is congruent with the literature; however, participants reported that learning to listen was important so they could make sure they were clear on

what was expected of them. As outlined in chapter two, counselling literature does address listening as an important counselling skill; however, as far as I know the communication literature does not mention the importance of listening to ensure the receiver clearly understands what the sender is saying.

Another interesting theme that emerged in participants' stories of becoming masters of interpersonal communication was their striving to be better communicators. Striving to be better is notably absent from mastery learning theories (Bloom, 1986; Martinez & Martinez, 1990). Bandura (1977) addresses motivation as an intrinsic component to the modeling process within social learning theory. However, to the best of my knowledge, no literature addressed the drive, motivation, and willingness, and desire to become better at interpersonal communication as it is expressed by participants in the current study.

#### *Findings and the Current Literature*

Many of the themes that emerged from this investigation complement the literature discussed in chapter two. The theme "Observational Learning" from the current study fits well with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Bandura believed that people could learn new information and behaviors by watching other people and coined this process *observational learning* or learning through behavior modeling (i.e., by observing and imitating behaviours modeled by others). Participants in the current study reported that watching other people communicate effectively and ineffectively (i.e., they also experienced vicarious positive reinforcement or punishment) impacted their journey of becoming a master of interpersonal communication, directly supporting Bandura's theory of observational learning.

Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) suggest social awareness (being aware of others around you) is an important part of how we manage ourselves when communicating with others. The theme “being aware of the other” in the current study speaks to learning to be aware of the other person’s needs when communicating. Participants described this as an important part of their journey of becoming a master of interpersonal communication which supports Goleman and colleagues’ line of thinking.

The current findings also appear to complement the counselling literature (Carkhuff, 1972; Lambert, DeJulio & Stein, 1978; Rogers, 1980) that has taken a closer look at facilitative conditions that positively impact the therapeutic relationship. The therapeutic relationship is believed to be the most important factor in determining client success (Frank & Gunderson, 1990). Research (Carkhuff, 1972; Lambert, DeJulio & Stein, 1978; Rogers, 1980) suggests that a counsellor’s ability to be congruent (non defensive, real, and “non phony”) has a positive impact on the therapeutic relationship. Participants from the current study reported that they learned to bring their true self forward by presenting more of their authentic self when communicating rather than trying to be something or someone else.

In summary, some of the current findings are not mentioned in interpersonal communication and mastery learning literature to date. Learning to Accept Limits, Trusting Gut Feeling, Mentors, Listening and Striving to Be Better are unique findings that emerged from the current research study. Other findings such as Observational Learning, Being Aware of the Other, and Bringing True Self Forward support the existing literature described and discussed in Chapter 2 of the present paper.

*Researcher Context and Reflection*

Upon discussion of the current findings it seems appropriate to discuss what I expected would emerge from participants' stories, as well as unexpected themes that emerged from participants' stories. I expected I would hear about practical or academic based training in interpersonal communication skills as an important element in mastery level communication development. My undergraduate training in interpersonal communication has had a significant impact on my ability to communicate; therefore, I assumed these individuals would speak to formal training in communication. Given my immersion in the literature exploring the concept of mastery and mastery learning, my assumption may also have been based on the belief I held around processes supporting achieving mastery (and specifically processes of mastery learning theory). Before conducting participant interviews, I suspected I would mainly hear about experiences that paralleled important components of mastery learning theory such as instruction, correctives, enrichment opportunities, and feedback. To my surprise, mastery learning components did not emerge as themes. Rather, themes such as *Trusting Gut Feeling*, and *Learning to Accept Limits* emerged as important pieces in mastery level communicators journey. I cannot help but notice the potential dichotomy between the *instruction* and *correctives* components of mastery learning theory and the *Trusting Gut Feeling* and *Learning to Accept Limits* themes that emerged from the current study. *Instruction* and *correctives* are components of a predetermined set of steps that help students achieve mastery. These components appear somewhat mechanical and seem to ignore the "person" in the process. Conversely, *Trusting Gut Feeling* and *Learning to Accept Limits*

speaks more to individual differences in achieving mastery and seems to emphasize the individual over a prescribed set of steps.

I was equally surprised that *Bringing True Self Forward* also emerged as a theme from participant's stories. This surprised me because competent and effective communication literature places great emphasis on individual capabilities or abilities that make up "good" communication. For example, competent communication as cited by Canary and Cody (2000) suggests that in order to be a competent communicator, one must be able to recognize which skills are necessary in a particular situation, have those skills, and be motivated to use those skills. Interestingly, the theme *Bring True Self Forward* suggests participants learned to bring forward more of – and indeed, to trust and rely on – their true self when communicating. For example, participants learned to present more of their true selves rather than trying to mechanically perform "good" communication skills or to be something or someone else. Presenting elements of participants' true selves appear to be equally important in developing mastery level communication.

In addition, I suspected themes such as *Observational Learning*, *Striving to Be Better* and *Listening* would emerge as an important piece of their journey. However, I underestimated the emphasis participants would place on mentors and the level of impact mentors would have on developing their interpersonal skills. Participants reported many different ways in which they learned from mentors which included watching mentors, working with mentors, and feeling validated and encouraged by mentors. This finding is consistent with the literature dedicated to adult learning theory specifically mentoring relationships, yet noticeably absent from interpersonal communication development.

*Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study*

New findings not discussed in the existing literature add to our understanding of masterful interpersonal communication. Semi-structured narrative interviews were an effective modality for asking individuals how they became masters of interpersonal communication. Strengths of using this approach include the detail and depth of the data obtained. This was a simple and effective way for me to obtain information about their journey while prompting and probing deeper into the research question. Participants decided when and where they wanted to participate in the telephone interviews. All five participants participated from comfort of their homes leading me to believe they were in a more relaxed environment, which probably had a positive affect on the depth and detail of the data. For example, if participants participated from work they might have felt preoccupied with work activities or pressured for time.

It is interesting to note that 4 of the 5 participants were able to speak about their experience of becoming a master of interpersonal communication in story form. One participant found it more difficult to speak about their experience with story like flow and their verbatim interview seemed more fragmented than the others. With the help of leading and probing questions this participant was able to speak to their experience from a more embodied story-like place. While qualitative research allowed me to investigate this topic in detail and provide depth and breadth in the results, there are some limitations to consider.

First, three of the five individuals who participated in the current study have been personally or professional connected to my father. Despite the measure I took to ensure participant confidentiality (e.g., reviewing limits of confidentiality with participants,

destroying original audio interview after data analysis procedures, and using pseudonyms in my result section), there is a chance that participants could have censored their experience of becoming a master of interpersonal communication out of concern that their information would get back to my father.

Another limitation is the nature of my construct “master of interpersonal communication”. I found no discernable communication differences between female and male participants, however the culture in which participants live was not addressed. Even though communication and mastery theories were called on to help inform how I defined masters, this is a value-laden term that has its roots in western notions of what “good” communication looks like. This limits transferability of the findings and the ability to inform other cultures that might have different views on what good communication entails.

Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone. While this allowed me access to individuals that I would not have had access to in person for geographical and scheduling reasons, our own interpersonal communication was limited. Telephone conversations include nonverbal communication such as tone, pitch, and pressure of voice however, I was not able to detect or “see” possible nonverbal behavior of participants and they had limited access to my nonverbal cues. Only having access to verbal channels of communication in the interviews might have influenced the data to some extent.

Moreover, while the small sample size is in keeping with qualitative methodology, it does not allow generalizations to be made to the overall population of people considered masters of interpersonal communication. I would have liked to have

shared more identifying information about participants to further allow readers to make their own decisions around the transferability of this study. However due to the high profile nature of participants' jobs and their connection to my father such identifying information would have threatened their confidentiality within this study. Future research that builds on the current findings and is of a quantitative nature with a larger, more representative sample may allow for more generalizability of the results and provide more data in support of the current findings.

A final limitation of the current study is my inexperience in conducting qualitative research and narrative semi-structured interviews. In an attempt to minimize this limitation, I took graduate-level courses in research methods and incorporated pilot interviews into the research procedures. In addition, the research process (research design, methodology, protocol, data collection, and data analysis) was monitored and reviewed by my supervisor who is experienced in this type of research. Finally, the member checking process that was included in this study further added to the credibility of the findings discussed here.

#### *Implications for the Field of Counselling Psychology*

The significance of this research is that it adds most particularly to the counselling psychology research base with implications for counsellor training and practice. The findings could provide new perspectives on counsellor training programs in the sense that it may be beneficial for such programs to incorporate and facilitate the experiences participants highlighted in their stories. For example, all five participants endorsed observational learning as an important component in their journey towards becoming a master. Therefore, in addition to meeting direct client counselling hourly requirements, a

standard requirement for most graduate programs, it might be beneficial for counselling students to be required to meet a number of observation hours as well.

The current study could potentially have implications for graduate counselling programs' screening procedures. Individuals who had been peer-nominated and informed of the study, self selected into this study by agreeing that they fulfill the criteria outlined for a master of interpersonal communication. This could inform the screening process by highlighting specific criteria that a selection committee might want to consider when making decision around who to accept or who not to accept into their program. For example, asking referees of graduate applicants to speak to the applicant's ability to communicate across multiple levels of power and influence and to effectively communicate a message with little or no miscommunication. Further research in this area is still needed before specific implications or suggestions can be made.

Finally, the findings described herein may be used to encourage students to engage in an interpersonal communication personal growth journey in conjunction with formal counselling training. My experience in taking psychology undergraduate and counselling graduate level course is that *Learning to Accept Limits, Trusting Gut Feeling* and *Bringing True Self Forward* are not themes that receive developmental attention. Rather, the "technicality" (e.g., active listening skills such as minimal encouragers, paraphrasing, reflections, summarizing) of interpersonal communication skills appears to trump the "art" (e.g., learning to accept limits, trusting gut feeling and bringing true self forward) of interpersonal communication in communication training.

### *Future Research Directions*

Some recommendations for future research have been made as a part of the discussion on the limitations of this study. Future research can build on the current study by investigating this topic with a larger number of participants. Drawing on the present study's findings, it seems reasonable to suggest that future researchers could build tools that are both valid and reliable to identify potential masters of interpersonal communication. For example, a survey could be developed as a screening tool to identify potential future masters of interpersonal communication.

Another interesting approach to this topic would be a longitudinal study, which could explore the developmental journey involved in achieving mastery of interpersonal communication. It would be interesting to explore how individual journeys correlate with specific experiences in childhood, adolescence, young-adult, middle-aged, and senior years. Knowing and understanding this could help us better understand potential implications for developing mastery of interpersonal communication. For example, two of the participants who participated in the current study worked in family owned service stores as children and teenagers. Further research aimed at exploring developmental precursors or facilitating conditions of masters of interpersonal communications might help us better understand if this type of experience contributes to mastery level communications skills.

### *Concluding Comments*

The current study appears to be one of the first to better understand how individuals become masters of interpersonal communication and, as such, helps to lay the foundation for future research in this area. This study complements the available research

conducted in the area of competent and effective communication, mastery, and mastery leaning. Five peer-nominated, self-selected masters of interpersonal communication participated in this study. Over the telephone, participants engaged in semi-structured narrative interviews with me where they discussed their experience of becoming a master of interpersonal communication.

The journey of this research study has been both exciting and personally relevant as I enter into a career that relies heavily on my ability to communicate with clients, colleagues, supervisors, and other service providers. I hope that this study inspires others to further explore individuals who have mastered the art of interpersonal communication.

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## Appendix A: Formal Letter



University  
of Victoria

**Department of Educational Psychology  
and Leadership Studies**

PO Box 3010 STN CSC  
Victoria British Columbia V8W 3N4 Canada  
Tel 721-7799, Fax 721-6190

Dear Participant,

My name is Jessica Renney and I am doing my Master's Degree in Counselling Psychology at the University of Victoria. I am writing to notify you of a research study that will explore how people who excel at interpersonal communication become masters and to inform you that you have been identified by a peer as a master of interpersonal communication. We are conducting an interview-based study that takes a closer look at how an individual becomes a master of interpersonal communication. I am interested in talking to people who meet the following criteria:

- (1) The person is self-reflexive (e.g., being able to openly reflect on your process and contributions to such process).
- (2) The person consistently and effectively communicates with others so that intended messages are received by the person towards whom the communication is directed, with little or no miscommunication (e.g., You intend to tell someone that they are behaving in a manner that needs to be changed and the person is able to hear that you would like their behaviour to change).
- (3) The person is able to communicate (as per point #2) across multiple levels of power and influence (e.g., an NHL hockey coach communicates with his players, the media, training staff, other members of the coaching staff, upper management, coaches from other teams, and fans)
- (4) The person is able to communicate (as per point #2) across multiple roles (e.g., as a mother, wife, sister, colleague, and friend)
- (5) The person is able to effectively adapt and be flexible in their style of communication across different contexts (e.g., at home with your friends and family, at work with colleagues and/ or superiors and subordinates, and at the grocery store with service staff)

In being mindful of your busy schedule, please note that the initial interview will take between an hour to an hour and a half and the follow-up interview between a half hour to an hour. If you feel that you meet the criteria listed above and you are interested in sharing your story with me, I would greatly appreciate hearing from you. For more information or to schedule an interview please contact Jessica Renney (primary researcher) by phone at (250) 508-3498 or by email at [renneyj@uvic.ca](mailto:renneyj@uvic.ca). Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Jessica Renney M.A. (Cand.)

## Appendix B: Telephone Script

The following is an example of the script to be used when participants (P) initiate contact with the primary researcher, Jessica Renney (JR); exact wording and order may change slightly depending on participants' responses:

JR: "Thank you for taking the time to call. Can I tell you a bit more about this study before we talk about setting up an interview time?"

P: "Sure"

JR: "First, just to help me get an idea of what your experience is, do you feel like you communicate on multiple levels, within multiple contexts, while flexing and adapting your style of communication across different contexts?"

P: "Yes I do"/ "No not really"

JR: "Great. That is the kind of experience I am looking to talk to people about in my study. Can I tell you a bit more about the study?" "Okay well I'm looking to specifically talk with people who have experienced these situations. I really appreciate the time you took to contact me."

P: "Sure." or "Actually, no thanks." "Oh, okay."

JR: "This study is trying to get a better understanding of how people become masters of interpersonal communication. The interviews will be conducted over the telephone and taped. There will be lots of room for you to tell me the story of your experience in the way that you wish to do so. I also want to let you know in case you were not aware, there will be two interviews. The first one is expected to take about an hour to two hours, and the second is expected to take up to another hour, so your total time will be up to three hours. How does all this sound to you?"

P: "That sounds okay to me." "I think that's going to be too much for me to be able to do right now."

JR: "Would you like to go ahead and set up the first interview?" / "Would you rather not participate?"

P: "Sure." / "Yes, I think I would rather not"

JR: "Great. We can set up a day and time for recording the interview." "That's not a problem at all. I really appreciate you taking the time to phone me."

P: "I'm free on Thursday at 5:30"

JR: "I'm free then too. Thursday at 5:30. **I WILL EMAIL OR FAX YOU A COSENT FORM THAT WE WILL GO OVER TOGETHER AND REVIEW ANY QUESTION YOU MAY HAVE BEFORE WE START THE INTERVIEW.** Do you have any other questions for me at this time?"

P: "No, I think I'm fine for now."

**JR: "OK. CAN I PLEASE HAVE A FAX OR EMAIL NUMBER WHERE I CAN SEND YOU THE CONSENT FORM?"**

**P: "SURE, MY EMAIL ADDRESS IS PARTICIPANT@GAMIL.COM"**

JR: "Thank you. Well, if anything comes up between now and when we meet, please feel free to give me a call. My cell phone number is 250-508-3498. Thank you for taking the time to call and talk with me. I'll talk to you next Thursday at 5:30."

## Appendix C: Sample Interview Questions

### Introduction:

Throughout this interview I'm going to be asking you to tell me your story about some of your experience in becoming a master of interpersonal communicator. You may start your story at whatever point in your life that you think your story of this experience begins. Throughout the interview I will be asking clarification and prompting questions to make sure that I understand you. I also want to make sure that you have said all you want to and if you need help in telling your story. I will check with you before we finish up to ensure all of the above.

### Potential prompts and clarifiers:

Do you mind telling me a bit more about...  
How was it for you when...  
Is this what you meant by ...  
Do you mind repeating...

### Additional questions to ask as necessary:

### At the end of the interview:

Thank you and now that we have had some time to talk, have you told me your story?  
Do I know everything you want me to know so that this story feels finished to you?

## Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

[Your department letterhead]

***Participant Consent Form***

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**Project Title: Mastering the Art of Interpersonal Communication: A Qualitative Study on How People Become Master's of Interpersonal Communication.**

**Researcher(s):** Jessica Renney, Graduate Student  
Faculty of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies  
University of Victoria  
(250) 508-3498; renneyj@uvic.ca

**Supervisor:** Dr. Tim Black  
Faculty of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies  
University of Victoria  
(250) 721-7829; tblack@uvic.ca.

**Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

- Learn and understand more about how people who have mastered interpersonal communication become masters.
- This research will be asking participants who have been identified as mastery level interpersonal communicators to describe their story of how they have achieved such mastery.

**This Research is Important because:**

- To help better inform how counselling professionals and other professionals who rely on interpersonal communication can enhance or better their interpersonal communication skills.

**Participation:**

- You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as someone who excels within the realm interpersonal communication.
- Participation in this project is entirely voluntary.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position [e.g. employment, class standing] or how you will be treated.

**Procedures:**

- You will be asked to think back and describe your experiences surrounding your journey in becoming a master of interpersonal communicator.
- The interview will consist of a few pre-scripted questions; however, the majority of the interview will be more open-ended to allow for freedom in responses.
- Interviews will be audio-taped for transcription purposes, and written notes may also be taken.

- After this first interview, you will be asked to meet with me a second time when you will be given the opportunity to review how I interpreted what was said during the interview, and may add or change anything that does not fit with your experiences.
- **Duration: 1 ½ - 2 hours for initial interview; ½ - 1 hour for follow-up; 1 ½ - 3 hours total**
- **Inconvenience: the time that you will be investing into coming and travelling to both interview sessions, and depending on your family situation, there may be a need to arrange child-care.**

#### **Benefits:**

- Furthering understanding of how people come to excel at interpersonal communication.
- The opportunity to have your experiences heard and validated as important.

#### **Risks:**

- It is anticipated that there will be minimal risks to you by participating in this research; however, due to the personal nature of the interviews, you may feel fatigued or stressed and/or experience emotional responses including embarrassment when discussing your journey in becoming a master of interpersonal communication.
- **Risk(s) will be addressed by:** The primary researcher is a counsellor-in-training at the University of Victoria, and will be as sensitive as possible throughout the interview process. Either the participant or the researcher can stop the interview at any time if proceeding with the interview may be harmful. If your emotional responses indicate the need for further support, the primary researcher will help participants contact appropriate services.

#### **Researcher's Relationship with Participants:**

- It is possible, though not anticipated that you may have a previous relationship with Jessica Renney, the primary researcher. If you happen to know me, Jessica Renney, please do not feel obliged to participate in this study out of any sense of obligation and would not participate otherwise.

#### **Withdrawal of Participation:**

- You may withdraw at any time without explanation or consequence.
- If you choose to withdraw, your data will not be used and any record of your participation (e.g., audio-tape, field notes, etc.) will be destroyed.

#### **Continued or On-going Consent:**

- Before beginning the previously described follow-up interview, you will be asked to verbally consent to demonstrate your on-going consent.

#### **Anonymity and Confidentiality:**

- Due to the nature of the interviews, the primary researcher will know your identity. To keep your anonymity beyond these interviews, you will be asked to

take on a pseudonym of your choice during the interview, which will be used on all subsequent data and records.

- Everything you say during the interview will remain confidential with the following exceptions: if you inform me that a child is in need of protection, or if you or another person intends to harm yourself or another person.
- We may also be asking, if you are comfortable doing so, to tell others who might want to participate about this study. If you choose to do this it, the people you talk to will subsequently know of your own participation. Please know there is no compulsion for you to do this.
- All records (e.g., audio-tapes, transcripts) will be labeled with participants' pseudonyms and kept in secure locations, either in locked filing cabinets for hard-copies or password-protected personal computers for digital records, to which only the principal researcher will have access. Any personally identifying information will also be removed from the transcripts and formal documents.

**Research Results May be Used/Disseminated in the Following Ways:**

- Directly to participants for confirmation of interview analysis.
- As a published article.
- In a Masters-level thesis & class presentations.
- In presentations at professional meetings.

**Questions or Concerns:**

- Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1;
- Contact the Human Research Ethics Office, University of Victoria, (250) 472-4545 [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)

**Consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

---

*Name of Participant*

---

*Signature*

---

*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***