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**LECTURE**

**For Better or For Worse:**

*Rethinking the Role of Communication  
and "Misperception" in Family Conflict*

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# For Better or For Worse: Rethinking the Role of Communication and “Misperception” in Family Conflict

by  
**Alan L. Sillars**

When I entered the field of communication, the study of interpersonal communication was first emerging as an identifiable, academic sub-discipline, pushed along by the social and intellectual climate of the late 1960's and early 1970's. Civil unrest and social criticism connected with the Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movement, and Watergate created disdain for public persuasion; whereas the human potential movement brought a focus upon self-expression and authenticity in interpersonal relationships (Knapp, Daly, Albada, & Miller, 2002). From this period forward, the study of interpersonal communication has been about the self, on the one hand, and relationships, on the other, although these concepts have a less ideological meaning now than they did earlier. In addition, there are two themes that have anchored the study of communication and interpersonal relationships; these being “relationship development” and “relational communication.” Each suggests a particular model for integrating self with relationship. It is interesting to compare these models.

The “relationship development” theme evolved from research on self-disclosure and models of relationship change constructed by Irwin Altman, Charles Berger, Mark Knapp, Gerry Miller and others. Roughly speaking, these models suggested that relationships are transformed by the mutual exchange of personal information and accumulation of shared experiences, leading to more intimate mutual knowledge, more efficient and idiosyncratic ways of communicating, and more complete and thorough understanding between communicators. The theme of relationship development continues to evolve, in that there is currently much less focus on self-disclosure as the driving force in relationships than there once

was. Still, we continue to see versions of this theme in many places. For example, the theme is evident in recent accounts of how we understand messages and make sophisticated inferences about others by virtue of shared knowledge and relationship history (e.g., Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994; Duck, 2002).

Second, there is the theme of “relational communication,” that was introduced by interactional systems theorists, sometimes referred to as the Palo Alto Group (e.g., Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), and extended by authors such as Aubrey Fisher and Edna Rogers. This theme suggests that relationships are continuously negotiated through the implicit subtext of communication. Further, the “relational communication” theme has emphasized aspects of communication that are largely beyond the direct comprehension of individuals and that often lead them into trouble, including the confusing binds that result from paradoxical messages, the “imperviousness” of communicators, and other tendencies that Watzlawick and colleagues labeled “pathological communication.” This work originated in the context of family therapy, so it naturally stressed the most problematic examples of interpersonal communication.

These two themes make an interesting contrast. On the one hand, you have people emphasizing the centrifugal force of relationship development in gradually drawing together the inferences and meanings of separate individuals. On the other hand, you have people talking about how family members literally drive one another crazy by their misguided efforts at communication.

I have framed my own research on understanding and misunderstanding in terms of the juxtaposition of these two themes. As a base-

line assumption, it is reasonable to assume that understanding increases as individuals acquire greater shared knowledge. At the same time, there are dramatic exceptions to this baseline that beg for explanation. Further, common explanations for misunderstanding in close relationships are not entirely satisfying. These explanations tend to assume one of two things; either the communicators have not made themselves explicit or there is something else wrong with these people, that is, they lack social skill, have personality deficits, or they are not really trying. In contrast, I will suggest that misunderstanding mostly results from the complexity and inherent limitations of communication.

Further, misunderstanding naturally becomes more profound and important during relationship conflict.

***In contrast, I will suggest that misunderstanding mostly results from the complexity and inherent limitations of communication.***

Before going further, I should clarify how I am using the terms “understanding” and “misunderstanding.” For me, “misunderstanding” means that the intentions (including communicative intentions), meanings, thoughts or feelings that one person identifies are different from the intentions, meanings, thoughts or feelings attributed to that person by someone else. This is roughly how understanding/misunderstanding was defined by Laing, Phillipson and Lee (1966) (i.e., as the overlap between person A’s “direct perspective” and person B’s “meta-perspective” for A). This is a fairly broad definition and it differs somewhat from colloquial use of the term “misunderstanding,” as should become clear from subsequent comments.

For the remainder of my talk, I will develop a set of propositions about understanding and misunderstanding. These propositions represent the gist of what I presume to have learned from studying understanding over the past 20 years.

## Propositions

### In Close Relationships and Families, There is a Tradeoff Between Familiarity and Objectivity

This first proposition provides a general explanation for the persistence of misunderstanding in close relationships. In essence, when people are very familiar with one another, their inferences tend to be well informed but also quite biased.

The first half of the familiarity/objectivity tradeoff is illustrated by the effects of shared relationship history on inferences made during conversation. Shared relationship history supplies unstated context that allows individuals to fill in gaps in meaning and to make more complex and integrated inferences about others. As Planalp and Garvin-Doxas (1994) have shown, one can easily tell whether two people are familiar by the details they omit in speech but assume to be understood. Further, people who have an established relationship are usually better than new acquaintances at judging what the other person is thinking during conversation (Colvin, Vogt, & Ickes, 1997).

On the other hand, with more relationship history, inferences established at an earlier time may acquire considerable momentum. Thus, individuals may attend to messages more selectively (i.e., the sense of having “heard it all before”), fit new observations to existing theories, and maintain greater confidence in their understanding of the partner than is warranted. In close relationships, people tend to overestimate how much they know about others (see Sillars & Scott, 1983), sometimes to the point of presuming to know other people better than these people know themselves. This happens, for example, when parents or spouses explain to their children or partners what they “really think,” “really mean,” or why they are “really doing something.”

Other illustrations of the types of biases that occur in close relationships and families come up throughout this talk.

## There are Different Types of Misunderstanding

Colloquial use of the term “misunderstanding” suggests that misunderstanding is a simple matter of dropping the ball. For example, I once attended a party given by the provost at my university for the benefit of deans and vice presidents. I was not invited to this party (no faculty were) but I attended anyway. I had actually been invited to a different party for faculty at the provost’s house, and the fact that there was another party going on when I showed up on the wrong day supported my illusion that I was where I was supposed to be. This is the type of situation that I would characterize as an “innocent misunderstanding,” which is what most people are referring to when they say that something was “just a misunderstanding.” Innocent misunderstanding can result from a lack of shared knowledge, lack of shared coding assumptions, signal distortion, faulty memory, distraction, or (as in this example)

sheer stupidity. This sort of misunderstanding is not taken personally most of the time and is relatively easy to rectify once the source of the error has been identified.

Innocent misunderstanding occurs in all relationships but, with increasing closeness and familiarity, innocent misunderstanding should become less prevalent and important relative to “motivated misunderstanding.” Motivated misunderstanding occurs as a consequence of motivated distortion in how we perceive others or present ourselves. For example, Simpson, Ickes, and Blackstone (1995) placed dating couples in the uncomfortable situation of having to view slides of other potential dating partners and then talk about how attractive they found each of the people on these slides. The experiment revealed that the more insecure individuals were least accurate at judging what their partners privately thought about the people on the slides. Simpson and colleagues suggested that this

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showed a type of motivated, and perhaps benevolent, inaccuracy on the part of insecure couples, since these couples were all still together four months later.

In other contexts, motivated misunderstanding can be onerous. For example, in angry quarrels, individuals may structure their representations of self and other in a way that supports self-justification and bolsters personal arguments, thereby further inflaming reactions to the conflict and making it much more difficult to reconcile separate accounts and positions. In these instances, misunderstanding is not simply a matter of “dropping the ball,” so to speak. Instead, misunderstanding is driven by affect and structured around defensive and persuasive goals in communication.

## Misunderstanding is Pervasive and Normal (Not Episodic)

This principle suggests that misunderstanding is not a discrete event, with a distinct beginning and end; rather, misunderstanding is always present to a degree. Of course, there are distinct episodes in which misunderstanding comes to the forefront of attention, up to the point at which it seems to be adequately resolved (i.e., the type of situation that leads to conversational repair; Drummond & Hopper, 1991). While these episodes are significant in their own way, there is always an element of both understanding and misunderstanding in human communication. Further, the latter element is generally greater than what we assume.

There are a few different ways to estimate the degree of understanding in relationships. While these are rough simulations that do not capture all the richness and complexity of the real phenomena, the simulations give us some basis for thinking about the limits of intersubjective understanding.

One approach that my colleagues and I have used in several studies of married couples is to record perceptions or attitudes using typical attitude scales (i.e., with “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” response options) and also have each



spouse guess the partner's response to the same items. The scales dealt with things like the importance of specific conflict issues in the marriage or various conjugal attitudes (e.g., "husbands should do half the cleaning," "in a good marriage, people don't have secrets").

Understanding was assessed by means of a partial correlation between the attitude or perception reported by one spouse and the response attributed to that person by the other spouse. The partial correlation controlled for the tendency of individuals to project their own response to the partner. Thus, the scores actually reflect the extent to which the spouse could predict attitudes of the partner that were different from the spouse's own attitudes.

Across four studies of married couples and several alternate measures of understanding (using different items), the average understanding score has ranged from a low of .05 to a high of .28. We can surmise from this that spouses have some ability to guess their partners' perceptions and attitudes on these numerical scales, since the average partial correlations have consistently been above zero. On the other hand, the magnitude of these scores is only slightly to moderately greater than what we would expect from random guessing.

Another way to estimate intersubjective understanding is using the video recall procedures developed by Ickes (1993). In this case, individuals (who might be strangers, friends, dating partners, or married couples) first have a conversation and afterwards, go to separate rooms where they watch a videotape of the conversation. While watching the videotape, individuals report specific thoughts or feelings that they remembered having earlier and they also guess what the conversational partner reported thinking or feeling at particular moments in the discussion. The typical range of mean "empathic accuracy" scores, across a number of studies, is from 20% to 35% (W. Ickes, personal communication). These scores represent the percentage of thoughts reported by one per-

son that are accurately guessed by the conversational partner. Friends and intimates generally achieve higher scores than strangers, however, the scores obtained by intimate partners may drop precipitously in relationship-threatening situations. Again, this suggests that individuals have some ability to predict what another person is thinking but the slippage is more prominent than the convergence of perspectives.

My colleagues and I adapted Ickes' approach in a study of parent-adolescent communication about family conflicts (Sillars, Smith, Koerner, & Fitzpatrick, 2002). These family members were rather poor at guessing what others in the family were thinking during the discussion. In only 7% of their attempts did one family member accurately guess most (i.e., over 50%) of the thoughts of another family member. In over three-fourths of the attempts, people failed to capture any of the specific thoughts of the other family member. In nearly a third of the attempts, they were so far off that the attributed thoughts were not even on the same topic as the other family member's reported thoughts.

## Disclosure is Not Strongly Related to Understanding

Contrary to intuition, explicit disclosure does not necessarily lead to greater understanding. Several studies support this point. In one such study, my colleagues and I assessed how often married couples reported discussing certain topics (Sillars, Folwell, Hill, Maki, Hurst, & Casano, 1994). We found only a weak and complex association between the frequency of communication about specific topics and understanding with respect to the same topics. In another study, we looked at conflict styles during observed interactions between spouses (Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984). The extent to which spouses directly discussed or avoided conflict issues had no bearing on how well they understood one another with respect to these conflict issues. Similarly, a study of dating couples (Simpson et al., 1995) and another study of married couples

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(Thomas & Fletcher, 1997) found that individuals could not guess the partner's thoughts and feelings during conversation with any greater accuracy when the partner communicated these thoughts and feelings openly and directly.

Thus, it seems that talking together and disclosing openly are not sufficient to create understanding. However, the studies cited above mostly involved conflict or other relationship-threatening situations in romantic relationships and married couples. We might expect to find a more straightforward connection between disclosure and understanding in other relationship contexts, for example, during getting-acquainted conversations between strangers or non-threatening interactions between intimate partners.

## Attention to Communication is Highly Selective

This principle helps to explain the previous proposition. One reason why disclosure is not strongly and consistently related to understanding is that individuals attend to communication selectively and, at times, rather idiosyncratically. Considerable selectivity is inherent and inevitable, since live conversation is an extremely complex stimulus field. To avoid being overwhelmed and to assign coherent meaning, we necessarily discard most of this complexity and reduce conversation to something fairly simple. Of course, there is no guarantee that individuals will accomplish this reduction in parallel fashion. Indeed, our evidence suggests that, during marital conflict, spouses are mostly thinking about quite different things at any given moment.

The study in question utilized a type of stream-of-consciousness reporting that was elicited through video-replay of interaction (Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000). In this research, 118 married couples discussed an issue of contention in their relationship. Afterwards, spouses went to separate rooms where they viewed a videotape of the discussion and reported, at 20 second intervals, what they recalled thinking or feeling during the discussion. The

videotape showed only the partner's face in order to simulate the individual's visual perspective during the earlier interaction. In contrast to other studies, where people were accompanied by a research assistant and prompted to guess the partner's perspective, the spouses in this particular study were left alone and instructed only to imagine

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the discussion as it was taking place and to report their thoughts (by speaking

aloud) in an uncensored manner.

The first thing that stood out from the Sillars et al. (2000) research was the sheer diversity of thoughts associated with communication. At various times, individuals reflected about feelings of love or anger, how to resolve the conflict, the partner's motives for getting married, past events that show blame, how well or poorly the discussion was proceeding, how disclosive or evasive the partner was being, or how the couple's children were getting along with the baby sitter. In order to classify the thoughts, we created a coding system with 50 specific content categories (collapsing into several more abstract categories). It was necessary to have such a large number of specific codes in order to retain a reasonable sense of the diversity of reported thoughts.

Along with diversity, another obvious feature of the thought data was the autonomy of individual thoughts. There was often very little overlap in the line of thought followed by two spouses during the same segment of conversation. Typically, these thoughts revealed separate issues, events, and levels of analysis, with only occasional convergence. For example, during one particular segment of conversation, lasting about two minutes, a husband thought about the couples' financial situation, the cost of eating out, his wife's lack of restraint in spending, and her evasiveness regarding this issue. The wife reported thinking about her anxiety, the husband's tone of voice, his belittling and criticism, and his lack of appreciation for her efforts as wife and expectant mother. Ostensibly, the two individuals in this example

coordinated their conversational moves and maintained a common topic of discussion. Subjectively, however, they identified different interactional events, emotions, and memories. Thus, the “content” of the interaction was quite different from the perspective of either individual. Further, the two spouses came to different conclusions about who is doing what to whom within the interaction sequence. The husband, in this case, saw himself as pressing a point in response to his wife’s evasiveness, whereas she saw herself as defending and justifying her actions in response to his belittling.

## Differences in Attention have a Confounding Effect on Relationship Conflict

In the same study described above, we observed several systematic differences in the types of thoughts reported by different parties to the same interaction. Some of these differences were gender-specific. In general, wives were more other-directed and relationship-sensitive. For example, most of the husbands’ thoughts were directed toward self; most of wives’ thoughts were directed toward husbands. Wives also engaged in more spontaneous attempts to interpret the partner’s perspective than husbands did and wives focused more than husbands on their own angry emotions. These trends show a lack of symmetry in attention to different potential objects of perception within the interaction.

When this occurs, one or both parties tend to register inferences about the interaction that the other party is unaware of or insensitive to.

My colleagues and I noticed one prevalent form of asymmetry that represents a type of “content-relationship confusion” (Sillars, Roberts, Dun, & Leonard, 2001). In this situation, one person focuses upon explicit and literal content issues in the discussion, while at the same moment, the partner is thinking about the process of interaction and the implicit relation-

ship messages contained therein. For example, in one discussion about spending time together, the husband thought about how his band can only practice on Tuesdays and Fridays. At the same moment the wife thought that he does not listen to her. The pattern is not inherently gender-based, but most examples we have isolated involve a husband who is content-oriented and a wife who analyzes and reacts to his messages in terms of implicit relationship-level meaning. Characteristically, the person who intently analyzes the process of interaction reacts more strongly to the discussion. On the other hand, the content-oriented spouse often fails to anticipate or compensate for the strong reactions of the partner.

## Understanding is Especially Problematic at the Relational Level of Communication

As I have noted, many of the thoughts reported by spouses during communication reveal spontaneous attributions about communication, for example, whether the partner is presumed to be openly disclosing, criticizing, changing the topic, apologizing, and so forth. These inferences

refer to the pragmatic intentions of the speaker, or “relationship level” of meaning, as opposed to the propositional content of messages. The relational level of meaning is relatively unconstrained by formal coding rules and is ambiguous for

several other reasons as well (see Sillars, 1998). It is not surprising then, that we see the clearest indications of motivated misunderstanding with respect to the relational level of communication. The spouses in our research were rather self-serving when interpreting the stream of communication. Specifically, individuals often saw their own communication as an effort to talk constructively about the conflict and to see the partner’s communication as evasive or confrontational (Sillars et al., 2000). Very rarely did individuals think of

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their own behavior as being confrontational, regardless of how confrontational the actual dialogue may have appeared to the researchers.

## Differences in Perception of Communication Increase in More Competitive Interactions

Differences in perception are probably inherent to conflict (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001).

Moreover, as conflicts escalate, we tend to see an increasing schism in the perception of significant issues and events driving the conflict, along with contrasting interpretations of the sequence of communication. In the most extreme cases, individuals construct irreconcilable narratives for the conflict, which, in turn, underlie extreme attributions about communication. For example, one couple in our research quarreled about cleaning. Reports from the video recall session after the interaction revealed two different scenarios from the point of view of either spouse.

From the wife's perspective, the husband rarely helped with the housework and treated her like a "slave."

From the husband's perspective, the wife was lazy and expected him to do everything, although she would not admit it.

Further, she refused to discipline their child for leaving his toys everywhere. These different subjective constructions of the conflict led to contrasting attributions about communication. The wife saw the husband as making excuses, complaining, changing the subject, and acting "like he is the boss" to get out of helping with housework. The husband saw the wife as lying, ignoring his concerns about the child, and verbally attacking him, in order to hurt him and to get out of the housework herself.

There are a few particular dynamics that may help explain how two individuals can provide such profoundly different interpretations for the same events (both prior to and during the observed discussion). First, people who are often angry or unhappy in a relationship tend to rehearse negative thoughts and memories. Thus, they are more vigilant and reactive toward nega-

tive communication and they tend to supply negative interpretations for ambiguous messages.

These tendencies have been discussed extensively in literature on the psychology of marriage (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Weiss, 1980). One implication is that unhappy spouses will attend to and remember negative messages by their partner to a greater extent than positive messages (happy spouses do the opposite). In one study, we asked spouses, immediately after a discussion, to recall verbatim what the partner said in connection with three conflict issues. Unhappy spouses had more accurate recall of the partners' negative and confrontive statements but worse memory of the partner's conciliatory statements, in comparison to happy spouses (Sillars, Weisberg, Burggraf, & Zietlow, 1990).

A second dynamic, more speculative than the first, is that representations of self and other are shaped by the goals and requirements of communicative episodes; a phenomena that might be

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referred to as the "rhetorical properties of perception" (Sillars, 1998). Essentially, some communicative activities promote other-centeredness

and understanding (e.g., reminiscing, comforting, play, affinity-seeking, ritual), because goals are met through perspective-taking and convergent thinking. However, different demands apply in contexts where individualistic goals, such as self-assertion or self-justification, dominate. In such contexts, communication reinforces divergent thinking because cognitive processes are enlisted in support of persuasive and defensive goals. For example, during quarrels, individuals may dramatize assertions, simplify or distort the partner's position, and selectively remember past relationship events in a way that supports personal arguments. These are rhetorical strategies designed to sharpen messages and deflect criticism, however, they also alter the perspective of the speaker by transforming vague or equivocal sentiments into clear and pointed disaffections. Over time, repeated interactions of a similar nature are likely



to elicit perceptions of conflict that are increasingly one-sided, extreme, and irreconcilable.

## People are Mostly Insensitive to Bias and Misunderstanding in Communication

Compounding the biases discussed to this point, there are several indications that people are relatively unaware of their own biases during communication and do little to correct for them. First, we see scant evidence of conscious perspective-taking during communication. When individuals reported their thoughts during video recall, they spontaneously reflected on the partner's perspective only 5-7% of the time in Ickes' research (W. Ickes, personal communication) and 5% of the time in our research. In our research, many of these spontaneous "meta-perceptions" characterized the partner in simplistic and one-sided terms (e.g., "He doesn't really care, he's only thinking about himself."), and thus, did not represent a sincere, effort to understand the partner on his or her own terms.

Why is there so little indication of spontaneous perspective-taking during these interactions? Again, the communicative goals that are operative during competitive interactions probably play a role. In addition, inherent demands and constraints of communication, particularly the need to interpret, plan, and respond to messages in real time, limit the opportunity for conscious perspective-taking during interaction (Sillars, 1998; Sillars et al., 2000). In effect, it is too much effort and there is not much time.

A second point, observed by Ickes (1993), is that people lack accurate meta-knowledge about their degree of understanding. Ickes notes that self-rated empathy is not correlated with one's actual ability to infer the thoughts and feelings of another person during conversation (Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990). Further,

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there is little correlation between the degree of confidence that people express regarding their empathic inferences and how accurate these inferences are (Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, & Teng, 1995; Thomas & Fletcher, 1997).

In my own work, I have been struck by how confident people seem to be when making very tenuous inferences about others. This confidence seems to be greatest when the inferences are most problematic. For example, when spouses verbalized their thoughts while watching a videotape, they often made extreme inferences about the partner (e.g., "She's lying." "He wants to change the topic because he knows I'm right." "She's backed into a corner and just wants to push the blame off on me.") without the least bit of hedging. Further, they rarely attached any sort of verbal qualifiers (e.g., "I guess," "I think," "I'm not sure," "sort of") to their inferences.

Ironically, the adolescent children in our research have been the greatest exception to the overconfidence and lack of meta-knowledge shown by family members. These children, both boys and girls, often said that they did not know and could not guess what their fathers were thinking. They did not generally say the same about their mothers. These assessments by children were realistic. Children were less accurate at guessing what fathers reported thinking than they were at guessing what mothers were thinking; or than mothers were at guessing what fathers were thinking; and so forth. For some reason, the fathers in this research were murky figures to their children and the children were self-consciously aware of their inability to understand what their fathers were getting at.

## Conclusion

I have now constructed an argument that family members and others maintain separate realities and that communication provides only a tenuous link. People attend to communication selectively and interpret it idiosyncratically; they rarely make a concerted effort to take the other's perspective while communicating and they seem

mostly unaware of or unconcerned about their own biases. Obviously, this is not an optimistic account. One could also legitimately claim that it is overstated. I could have reached other conclusions by emphasizing different findings, contexts, and examples. Instead of focusing so much on marital and family quarrels, I might have emphasized the types of interactions that are conducive to convergent thinking, such as one partner supporting and encouraging another during a moment of distress or family members reminiscing together about good times from the past. I might have chosen examples of people who were empathic and charitable in their inferences, who expressed loving thoughts during video recall, and who were highly concerned about their partner's perspective. As one might suspect, there were also some of these people in each of the studies I have discussed.

The point here is that it is possible to portray communication as either a cohesive or divisive force in relationships because it is, in fact, both. Talking together often helps to bring perspectives more closely in line but it can also drive them further apart. I have chosen to emphasize the latter circumstance because I think we lack strong explanations for the problematic examples of communication that violate our baseline assumptions.

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## B. Aubrey Fisher

B. Aubrey Fisher served as a faculty member in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah from 1971 to 1986. He began his professional career as a high school teacher and radio announcer in South Dakota. After receiving his Master's and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Minnesota, he spent four years on the faculty at the University of Missouri.

Professor Fisher was a prominent scholar in interpersonal communication and communication theory. His published work includes three books and more than thirty-five articles and book chapters. He was considered one of the most notable and influential communication scholars of his time. He held numerous offices in professional organizations, including president of the Western Speech Communication Association, president of the International Communication Association, and editor of the *Western Speech Communication Journal*.

The B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture was established by the Department of Communication in 1986 to recognize Professor Fisher's outstanding achievements and to provide a forum for presenting original research and theory in communication.

## Alan L. Sillars

Alan L. Sillars is Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Montana, where he has taught since 1986 and served as department chair since 1997. Professor Sillars received his Ph.D. in Communication Arts from the University of Wisconsin in 1980. In addition to his current appointment, he also held positions as assistant professor at West Virginia University and Ohio State University, Visiting Distinguished Scholar at the University of Wisconsin, and Guest Scholar at Kumamoto University in Japan.

Professor Sillars has published extensively in the areas of communication and conflict, interpersonal perception, and family communication. His article, titled "(Mis)understanding," received the Franklin H. Knowler Award from the National Communication Association in 1999 for the top article published in the area of interpersonal communication. Professor Sillars has served on the editorial boards of nine journals and reviewed for numerous other journals. He has lectured widely on the nature of understanding/misunderstanding in family relationships and other topics related to interpersonal and family communication.

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