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2014

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Galvin, Kathleen M. and Braithwaite, Dawn O., "Theory and Research From the Communication Field: Discourses That Constitute and Reflect Families" (2014). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 82.  
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# Theory and Research From the Communication Field: Discourses That Constitute and Reflect Families

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## Abstract

From the disciplinary perspective of communication studies, we review theory and research in family communication, including a brief history of the family communication field; the contributions of a family communication perspective; and 5 theories of family communication: communication accommodation theory, communication privacy management theory, family communication patterns theory, narrative theor(ies), and relational dialectics theory. We then illustrate the concept of discourse dependence in family communication processes and discuss current trends in family communication research. We also suggest emerging directions for family communication scholarship.

**Keywords:** communication theories, discourse dependent families, family communication, family diversity, family identity

Family communication scholars belong to a vibrant and inherently interdisciplinary field with strong commitments to translational scholarship. Although our goal in writing this review is to focus on family scholarship from the communication field, we recognize that scholars across several disciplines, such as family studies, human development, psychology, and sociology, also have examined communication questions related to families. Previous surveys of the literature have taken a multidisciplinary approach to family communication (e.g., Stamp & Shue, 2013); however, in this review, we discuss the contributions of a family communication perspective, including (a) history of the family communication field, (b) contributions of a family communication perspective, (c) theories of family communication, (d)

discourse dependence and family communication processes, (e) current research trends in family communication, and (f) emerging directions in family communication scholarship.

Communication researchers may conceptualize the family through lenses of role, as well as socio-legal and biogenetic lenses (Floyd, Mikkelson, & Judd, 2006), but for most communication scholars, families are constituted in interaction and talked into (and out of) being; families form, negotiate, change, and dissolve via interaction (Baxter, 2004; Craig, 1999). For many scholars, practitioners, and family members themselves, this perspective opens up what it means to be a family, including not only families formed by blood or law but also those formed by communicatively negotiated bonds

of affection, interdependence, history, and long-term commitment (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006a). For example, Galvin, Bylund, and Brommel (2012) offer this definition of families: "Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated futures of functioning in a family relationship" (p. 8). Discourses of both stability and change characterize the family communication field as scholars both extend established research areas and break new ground.

### History of the Family Communication Discipline

Family communication emerged as an academic field within the broader discipline of communication in the 1970s, and more than 40 years later it represents a rapidly expanding scholarly area in communication studies. Three major factors contributed to its development: (a) expanding research on interpersonal communication, (b) advances in the field of family therapy and the self-improvement movement, and (c) increased scholarly attention to functional family interactions.

Interpersonal communication emerged from the group dynamics and general semantics movements of the 1930s and 1940s and the development of symbolic interaction theory, the position that the self emerges out of interactions with significant others (Knapp, Daly, Albadá, & Miller, 2002). Although much of the early interpersonal communication research was centered on dating and friendship dyads (given the availability of undergraduate populations to researchers), interpersonal communication scholars soon expanded their focus to the marital dyad (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 1987, 1988). During the 1970s, interpersonal communication scholars called for studies of long-term, committed relationships in place of short-term, collegiate relational ties and called for scholars to broaden their focus beyond dyadic relationships. Thus, scholarship focusing on communication in family systems emerged within the discipline at this time, influenced by the publication of "Conceptual Frontiers in the Study of Communication in Families" (Bochner, 1976). Early family communication scholars represented a range of backgrounds, including interpersonal communication, instructional communication, and counseling.

When family therapy scholars introduced the interactive concepts of family systems and multigenerational transmission of interaction patterns, the Palo Alto Group's interaction studies, for example, led to major conceptual advances in communication theory and research. Family therapy pioneers, such as Virginia Satir (1964), author of *Conjoint Family Therapy*, and Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Donald Jackson (1967), coauthors of *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, developed therapeutic approaches focused on family interaction patterns. The field's early years also coincided with the rise of the self-improvement movement's focus on teaching communication skills to couples and parents, which affected early scholarly research programs (Mace, 1982; Mace & Mace, 1975). During the 1960s and 1970s, Jules Henry's (1973) *Pathways to Madness* and Kantor and Lehr's (1975) *Inside the Family* identified processes characteristic of healthy and unhealthy family interactions. The family therapist Froma Walsh (1982) called for studying the complexities of everyday family life to identify characteristics of "normal" family functioning. Research on developmental stages, family structures, and ethnicity and culture flourished during this period.

By the early 1980s marital interaction research, including marital typologies (Fitzpatrick, 1987, 1988), decision-making styles (Sillars & Kalbfleisch, 1988), and relational control and coding work (Rogers & Farace, 1975) appeared in communication and psychology journals. When the first family communication textbook, *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change* (Galvin & Brommel, 1982), was published, the authors relied extensively on concepts and research from psychology, sociology, and counseling. The Commission on Family Communication began at the National Communication Association in the early 1980s and brought together scholars, especially from the broader study of interpersonal communication, whose interest was in family.

The 1990s brought an explosion of research that moved beyond initial marital interaction as scholars began to study the constitutive function of communication, examining communication across the family life cycle, a wide range of family communication processes, and a breadth of family communication contexts. Theories developed by interpersonal relations scholars contributed to family communication scholarship. In addition,

family communication scholars increasingly broadened the topics studied and the family forms and processes under analysis.

Family communication achieved divisional status at the National Communication Association in 1989 and has experienced healthy growth ever since, with a current membership of 425. The inaugural issue of *Journal of Family Communication* in 2001 represented a major step forward. By the time Braithwaite and Baxter published *Engaging Theories in Family Communication* in 2006, close to half of the theories included in their edited volume originated in the communication discipline. At the turn of the 21st century, communication scholars had begun to study diverse family forms in varying contexts and increasingly focused a critical lens on family interaction.

### Contributions of a Family Communication Perspective

A scan of popular media and the research literature offers a picture of family as a contested concept (Floyd, Mikkelson, & Judd, 2006), necessitating a wide lens to explore how groups of people outside traditional structures of blood and law constitute and function as a family. Communication scholars have made a unique contribution to this conversation by focusing on “talking family,” that is, how families are socially constructed, negotiated, and legitimated in the discourse of relational parties (Baxter, 2004, 2011; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006). This is especially important for nontraditional families (Galvin, 2006), such as same-sex, cohabiting, or stepfamilies, as they are increasingly reliant on interaction to define and legitimate the family to those inside the family and in the broader social network, and need to negotiate roles and expectations that more traditional families may take for granted.

As we have acknowledged, scholars across multiple disciplines study communication variables relevant to family processes. Most often they examine communication from a message transmission model with communication functioning as an antecedent variable (Baxter, 2004). In contrast, family communication scholars conceptualize communication as the primary, constitutive social process by which personal, relational, and family identity is formed, enacted, and managed. Baxter (2004) explained, “From a constitutive perspective,

then, persons and relationships are not analytically separable from communication; instead, communication constitutes these phenomena. . . . Put simply, relationships are constituted in communication practices” (p. 3). Craig (1999) argued for the importance of taking a constitutive approach to communication, paving the way for the discipline to make a greater scholarly contribution and to apply theory to everyday life.

While family communication scholars have argued for the value of a constitutive focus on communication, outside of ethnographic approaches, it is challenging to study communication this way. Scholars across paradigms and methodologies are working on different ways to examine and understand communication as constitutive of families, for example, using data collection methodologies such as diaries and focus groups, observations of family interactions, analysis of web-based interactions, and the development of sophisticated models. Such family communication scholarship may be found in communication journals, most notably, *Journal of Family Communication*. Related work appears in international and national communication journals, such as *Communication Monographs*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, and journals associated with regional communication associations, such as the *Western Journal of Communication*. While family communication scholars have published a number of research reports in interdisciplinary journals focusing on personal relationships, particularly in *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* and *Personal Relationships*, family communication scholarship is also found in interdisciplinary family outlets, for example, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Family Relations*, *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, and *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*.

### Theories Originating in Communication Studies

Family communication scholars engage a wide variety of theories developed in communication studies and allied disciplines. We highlight five of the most robust theories developed in family communication: communication accommodation theory, communication privacy management theory, family communication patterns theory, narrative theor(ies), and relational dialectics theory. Family communication patterns theory

and communication privacy management theory originated in family communication; however, the other three theories, while originating in interpersonal communication, were quickly applied to the family context as well. Four of these theories appeared in Baxter and Braithwaite's (2006a) analysis of the top five theories used to guide family communication scholarship from 1990 to 2004. We substituted communication accommodation theory for the fifth theory on their list (relational communication), which was very important to the development of family communication but has seen more limited use past the 1990s. Communication accommodation theory is a robust theory that has sparked significant lines of research.

### *Communication Accommodation Theory*

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) began as a theory of how language creates or diminishes social distances between persons, and it has developed into an interpersonal communication theory that has been applied across different contexts, including families (Giles, 2008). The theory is concerned with the ways people accommodate or communicatively adapt to others, focused on intergroup communication and on how and why persons adapt, or accommodate, their speech behavior depending on their perceptions of group membership of self and other(s) (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006). This is important to understand in families that are made up of intergroup relationships (e.g., in-law relationships, intergenerational relationships, multicultural relationships). When trying to reduce social distance with another, people may accommodate toward another by convergence, for example, by approximating or speaking more like the other, switching to the other person's dialect, or using similar nonverbal behaviors as the other (Li, 2001).

Scholars have summarized sociolinguistic accommodation as (a) approximation (adapting communication to converge or diverge), (b) discourse management (adapting on the basis of conversational needs), (c) interpretability (accommodation based on perceptions of the others' abilities), and (d) interpersonal control (accommodation based on perceptions of power) (see Giles, 2008; Harwood et al., 2006). In using any of these strategies, people may overaccommodate, for example, talking

too loudly or using baby talk with an elderly person, or underaccommodate, not listening or attending to one's own agenda in the interaction.

The theory has been used quite fruitfully to study family communication, for example, to study the positive effects of accommodative communication for both grandchildren and grandparents (Soliz, 2007; Soliz & Harwood, 2006), among stepchildren and their non-residential parent's family (DiVerniero, 2013), and in multiracial and multiethnic families (Soliz, Thorson, & Rittenour, 2009). Studying communication and accommodation in families is an important enterprise as scholars seek to explore shared family identity, especially in outgroup contexts, and the application of CAT will continue to grow.

### *Communication Privacy Management Theory*

Frustrated by some of the limitations of self-disclosure research to explain and predict the complexities of how relational partners and family members navigate private information, Petronio (2002, 2010) developed communication privacy management (CPM) theory to explain how relational parties make decisions about revealing and concealing information. The theory uses a boundary metaphor to represent highly nuanced principles of the theory that we can cover in only general terms here: (a) ownership (understanding private information as owned; one opens and closes boundaries, granting co-ownership to others); (b) privacy rules (controlling access to privacy boundaries by developing and enacting privacy rules, using criteria of motivations, gender, culture, contexts, and risk-benefit ratio that help one make judgments about granting access to information); (c) shared boundaries (maintaining dyadic, family, group, organizational and cultural boundaries around co-owned information); (d) boundary coordination (relational and family members coordinating and co-managing private information in their boundary linkages; as boundaries become more permeable, third parties are granted more access) (Petronio & Durham, 2008); and (e) boundary turbulence (when privacy rules are not coordinated or are not followed, privacy turbulence occurs, which can result in negative ramifications for the relationship or family).

The CPM theory has been applied to enlighten a wide variety of issues and contexts in family communication,

for example, marital interaction (Petronio & Jones, 2006), the decision of whether to have children (Durham & Braithwaite, 2009), and in postdivorce and step-families (Afifi, 2003). The theory has been especially adept in helping to enlighten the complexities of revealing and concealing information within families, for example, in cases of child sexual abuse (Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Mon't Ros-Mendoza, 1996), or how physicians reveal their medical mistakes to family members (Petronio, 2006). While self-disclosure researchers often focus on the perspective of the discloser, communication researchers interested in privacy also enlighten the perspective of the recipient of private information and reasons for topic avoidance (e.g., Caughlin & Afifi, 2004) and family secrets (e.g., Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti, Caughlin, & Timmerman, 2001). Communication privacy management is a dynamic theory with heuristic value for family communication and beyond.

#### *Family Communication Patterns Theory*

Family communication patterns theory emerged from mass media research exploring how parents socialize their children to process mediated information and was adapted by scholars interested in general family communication patterns (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994). Family researchers developed the Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP) instrument, which establishes two dimensions of family communication: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. The interaction of these two dimensions creates four family types that are qualitatively different: consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Each orientation ranges from high to low.

First, conversation orientation describes the degree to which family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interaction about a wide array of topics. A high conversation orientation suggests that family members speak freely and frequently with few limitations regarding time spent in interaction and topics discussed. Low conversation orientation reflects less frequent interaction, and limited topics are openly discussed; conformity is valued. Second, conformity orientation depicts the degree to which family members function within a climate of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs. A high conformity orientation describes

families characterized by interactions emphasizing uniformity of beliefs and attitudes, harmony, and conflict avoidance. Low conformity orientation reflects interactions that display heterogeneous attitudes and beliefs reflecting independence and individuality. Later research linked the communication and conformity orientations to four characterizations of family types (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). These family styles may be imagined on axes. The vertical axis runs from high conversation orientation to low conversation orientation, and the horizontal axis runs from low conformity orientation to high conformity orientation.

Consensual families rate high in conversation and conformity. Some members experience pressure to agree as well as encouragement to communicate openly and explore new ideas. Parents listen to children and then explain their decisions. Members avoid strong conflicts. Decisions rest with the parent(s), although members express their respective positions. Pluralistic families are high in conversation and low in conformity. Members engage in open and unrestrained discussions across a wide range of topics. Parents are not invested in control; children wield power in decisions. Independence is valued. Although open conflict occurs, members tend to use positive conflict resolution strategies. These families hold open discussions and consider ideas or concerns of all members when making decisions. Protective families present as low on conversation and high on conformity. Parents expect children to respond to their authority without negotiations. Little open communication occurs; parents make decisions and see little value in discussion. Finally, laissez-faire families are low in both conversation and conformity. Members raise few topics and actively discuss even fewer. Emotional separation characterizes many of these families as children make many decisions and adults are responsible for their own decisions. These patterns serve to limit conflict.

#### *Narrative Theor(ies)*

Family storytelling embodies sense making; members recount and account for their life experiences. Many communication-oriented narrative researchers rely heavily on an interpretive approach. Essentially, family stories construct family identity (Koenig Kellas, 2005)

as they support memories, create belonging and identity, teach expected behaviors and values, develop family culture, and provide stability across generations. Storytelling serves as a display of family identity. Many family communication researchers focus on adoption narratives (Harrigan, 2010); others address topics such as ethnicity, health, or entertainment. But family communication scholars also go beyond the story to the storytelling process, because research suggests that both are central to “creating, maintaining, understanding and *communicating* personal relationships” (Koenig Kellas, 2010, p. 1).

Communication scholars address narrative performance because “storytelling is one way of *doing* family” (Langellier & Peterson, 2006, p. 100). Studies of joint storytelling provide insight into how family and individual identities emerge. Performances involve constraints that both facilitate and restrict possibilities of who can tell or listen, how stories can be told and listened to, and which meanings and identities matter. In participatory storytelling, performances incorporate shifting relationships; the involvement of multiple performers reveals how family and individual identities are enacted. Performances reflect explicit and implicit rules that establish who speaks and/or listens, appropriate topics, and how narrators share and enact roles.

### *Relational Dialectics Theory*

Relational dialectics theory (RDT) focuses on meaning making of those in personal and family relationships as emerging from the interplay of competing discourses (Baxter, 2011). Discourses are those systems of meaning at the level of the broader culture or localized in a given relationship or family, by which interaction and relational life is made intelligible to those inside and outside of the relationship. Whenever parties interact, these discourses interplay as multiple systems of meaning are invoked, and the discourses are often in opposition or competition. For example, in a stepfamily, stepchildren may face challenges as they navigate the cultural expectations of family openness at the same time that they are experiencing being “caught in the middle” between their divorced parents who use the information against each other (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008). Scholars of RDT view competing discourses not

as negative but rather as at the core of relational life, unavoidable and essential to family functioning.

Relational dialectics theory was developed by Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery (1996) and further developed by Baxter (2011), who traced the roots of the theory to the work in dialogism by the Russian cultural and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In Baxter and Braithwaite’s (2006a) survey of the family communication literature from 1990 to 2003, RDT was the theory used most frequently by family communication researchers. After the initial introduction of the theory, family communication scholars undertook projects wherein they identified contradictions in various relationships, such as in stepfamilies (Braithwaite et al., 2008), adoptive families (Harrigan, 2009), and families with parents coping with the death of a child (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009).

Baxter (2011) concluded that scholarly work on relational dialectics needed to move beyond identifying contradictions and to focus more centrally and critically on what she called “discursive struggles” of competing discourses, uncovering which discourses are centered and given voice and which are marginalized. This new rendition of RDT has taken a decidedly critical turn; for example, Baxter, Scharp, Asbury, Jannusch, and Norwood (2012) examined the discursive struggles in online narratives of birth mothers of adopted children, between identity constructions as bad mothers or resisting this identity in favor of articulating birth mothers as good mothers or nonmothers.

Theorizing family communication is a work in progress, and at the same time, scholars are encouraged by the number of theories developing in the field. In a study of family communication research published from 1990 to 2004, Baxter and Braithwaite (2006a) noted somewhat better representation of research across paradigms: 76.1% of articles were in the postpositivist tradition (variable analytic, focused on prediction or hypothesis testing); 20.4%, interpretive (qualitative, focused on localized and contextualized meanings); and 3.5%, critical (focused on power relationships and emancipation). By comparison, interpretive and critical research has a smaller presence in the broader study of interpersonal communication (83.2%, postpositivist). We echo their call for theory and research that represents more fully the interpretive and especially critical paradigms, the latter of which has been almost nonexistent in the field of family communication.

## Discourse Dependence: Construction of Family Identities

Family communication scholars have focused extensively on the role communication plays in constructing contemporary families. Increasingly, families are formed by ties other than biology and law. Extended longevity, accompanied by serial marriages, long-term cohabitation, reproductive technologies, voluntary kin, and varied adoption practices, creates a more accepting climate for family variability. These family forms, previously referred to as “nontraditional,” appear increasingly normative, yet some members face unsettling challenges to their family’s authenticity. Therefore, many members depend, in part or whole, on communication to “define themselves for themselves” with respect to their family identity as they interact with outsiders, and even with one another. Family communication researchers frequently study how members of discourse-dependent families strategically interact to define their family form for those outside of the family and for themselves.

Family communication scholars emphasize the importance of transactional process definitions of family to understand how families define themselves, rather than relying solely on genetic and sociological criteria. Such definitions involve viewing the family “as a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity, complete with strong ties of loyalty, emotion, and experience” (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995, p. 254). Transactional definitions place a strong emphasis on communication while honoring a range of family forms; they rely on “definitions of the family that depend on how families define themselves” (Fitzpatrick, 1998, p. 45). Because “our families, and our images for families, are constituted through social interaction” (Vangelisti, 2013, p. x), this perspective renders all families “discourse dependent” (Galvin, 2006) and, with the decline of two-parent biological families, language plays a greater role in defining the family. Discourse-dependent families have become the new normal.

Galvin (2006) developed a framework that described strategies through which family members communicatively manage both their external and their internal boundaries, and are key factors in managing family identity. External boundary management involves using communication strategies to reinforce family

identity when outsiders misunderstand or challenge the validity of a specific family relationship. These four strategies, in order of imperative significance, include (a) labeling, or creating titles or positions to indicate the nature of a familial connection (e.g., calling a stepfather “Dad” or lesbian mothers “Momma Sally” and “Momma Ruth”); (b) explaining, or rendering the relationship understandable to others (e.g., giving reasons for family terminology such as “My biological father left and Mom’s second husband is ‘Dad’ to me”); (c) legitimizing, or invoking law or custom to justify a tie as genuine (e.g., “My parents adopted my deceased aunt’s daughter, so Kacey is my sister”); and (d) defending, or actively justifying a relationship against attack (e.g., responding to “Couldn’t you adopt a White child?” by saying, “Love trumps color—something you would not understand”).

In discourse-dependent families, internal boundary management involves using communication strategies to maintain members’ sense of family identity and ties. These include naming, or choosing names or titles for persons considered family but who do not have blood or legal ties (e.g., calling a grandmother’s second husband “Grandpa B,” where the *B* is for bonus); (b) discussing, or talking about the nature of special ties that bind certain persons to the family (e.g., conversations explaining the concept of known versus unknown sperm donors); (c) narrating, or telling stories that (re)present the family’s self-identity (e.g., repeating the complicated adoption saga that accompanied an international adoption); and (d) ritualizing, or involving members in enactments of familial identity, ranging from holiday celebrations to ordinary routines (e.g., placing members’ names on Christmas stockings, participating in a divorce ceremony).

Conversely, communication strategies may be used to dissolve or reject family ties (Galvin, 2009). This deconstruction process redefines family identity by distancing from or eliminating certain persons who have reason to be considered members. Such actions must be reflected in 104 *Journal of Family Theory & Review* deliberate, patterned behavior over time. External boundary management involves labeling, explaining, delegitimizing, and rejecting. Internal boundary management strategies include naming, discussing, narrating, and deritualizing. The conceptualization of discourse dependency



is not new, yet as families become increasingly complex, communication assumes greater significance in family self-definition and in ties among family members. Family communication scholars have focused significant research attention on diverse family forms, including postdivorce and stepfamilies, adoptive families, same-sex parent families, and multiethnic families.

### *Postdivorce and Stepfamilies*

Family communication scholars are working to understand the central role of communication by which postdivorce and stepfamilies interact and negotiate original and new identities, relationships, and expectations concerning what it means to be a family. Researchers have examined communication during the divorce process, including topic avoidance and privacy management, as well as negotiating postdivorce and co-parenting roles and expectations. For example, Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, and Baker (2007) discovered that external factors like lack of control over stressors experienced during the divorce process may lead to inappropriate parental disclosures to their children. Schrodtt and Ledbetter (2012) discovered that, by strengthening their relationship with their children, parents can help the children overcome negative effects from feeling caught between the parents.

Communication scholars also have devoted research attention to exploring the developmental pathways of stepfamilies and have created and tested stepfamily typologies. For example, Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) examined the turning points in feeling like a family over the first 4 years of stepfamily life and identified five patterns of stepfamily development. Schrodtt (2006) created a typology of five different stepfamily types and found significant differences in stepchildren's communication competence and mental health symptoms across the family types. Family communication researchers have highlighted the central role of discourse in co-constructing and altering stepfamily relationships via examining discursive struggles, rituals, and emotions. For example, family communication scholars are focusing on how stepfamily members interact and navigate challenges, communication and stepfamily roles (e.g., stepparents, stepchild), loyalty conflicts and triangulation (as different relational

parties feel "caught in the middle"), and the ongoing interaction of co-parents (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2008). Given the difficulties that postdivorce relationship parties and stepfamilies face, scholars have focused on challenges, yet some scholars are studying communication behaviors that promote growth and resilience.

### *Adoptive Families*

Adoption is another exemplar of the communicative construction of family identity. Communication scholars have focused on families formed through international and visible adoption and the role of adoption narratives and communication strategies in developing personal identities and shared family history. For example, international and/or transracial adoptions present unique communicative challenges; outsiders confront parents, siblings, or adoptees, openly questioning the validity of interracial and/or intercultural families (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Suter & Ballard, 2009).

Adoptive parents also may struggle to create and narrate birth or adoption stories to their children. For example, Krusiewicz and Wood (2001) studied adoptees' entrance stories and found five themes that emerged in parents' narratives: destiny, compelling connection, rescue, legitimacy, and dialectical tensions. Other researchers explored adult adoptees' decisions about whether to search for birth parents to reduce uncertainty and the role of their adoptive parents in their decision making (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010). A recent study examined online messages involving birth parents and prospective adoptive parents (Norwood & Baxter, 2011).

### *LGBTQ Families*

The first study of families headed by gay and lesbian couples, written by family communication scholars, appeared almost 20 years ago and provided a descriptive base of information and included data on parental "coming out" disclosures (West & Turner, 1995). Later studies examined the nonbiological lesbian parent's symbolic construction of a legitimate parent identity (Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006), as well as how lesbian families also use family symbols (last names) and rituals

(nightly neighborhood walks) strategically to represent family identity. A recent study identified turning points in families headed by lesbian women: enacting strategies for coming out to their children, managing challenges to family identity, and announcing commitment ceremonies or weddings (Breshears, 2010). A study of lesbian mothers' attempts to justify their family's legitimacy identified the challenges, verbal accounting strategies, and evaluations experienced or enacted by these parents (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012). However, few communication studies address families headed by male partners or a bisexual or transsexual parent.

### *Multiracial and Multiethnic Families*

Although communication scholars have been actively studying diverse family types, there has been surprisingly little family communication scholarship on multiracial and multiethnic families. Given their discourse-dependent nature, such families are especially reliant on interaction to negotiate identities, roles, and expectations both internally and externally. For example, Soliz et al. (2009) examined relational outcomes, identity, and group salience in multiracial and multiethnic families. In follow-up work they have studied the influences of cultural orientation and identity socialization on family interaction (e.g., Nuru & Soliz, 2013). Other scholars have explored aspects of culture in families, such as the role of interaction in interfaith marriages, which often include multicultural couples. For example, Hughes and Dickson (2005) explored religious orientation and the positive role of constructive communication on satisfaction in interfaith marriages. However, multiethnic families remain an understudied area in family communication research.

### **Current Research Trends in Family Communication**

Beginning in the 1990s family communication scholars began studying a variety of interactional processes and developing concomitant theories in several areas that have already been discussed. Although family communication scholars have developed many different lines of inquiry, in this review we briefly highlight four current

research trends: (a) ritualizing and family communication, (b) dark side of family communication, (c) health communication, and (d) work–family communication. For a more comprehensive overview of family communication research and an extensive bibliography of more than 150 annotated sources, see Braithwaite, Galvin, Chiles, and Liu (2013).

### *Ritualizing and Family Communication*

Family communication scholars have conceptualized rituals as communication events that are important to families and that may be enacted in a variety of forms, from everyday rituals to calendar-based rituals to extraordinary rituals. A family ritual is defined as “a voluntary, recurring, patterned communication event whose jointly-enacted performance by family members pays homage to what they regard as sacred, thereby producing and reproducing a family's identity and its web of social relations” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006b, p. 259). Scholars often cite Wolin and Bennett's (1984) theoretical work on family ritualizing, which identified a typology of three ritual forms: (a) celebrations (rituals widely practiced throughout a culture; e.g., Thanksgiving), (b) traditions (rituals idiosyncratic to a given family; e.g., doughnuts and coffee at the grave site on the anniversary of a family member's death), and (c) patterned interactions (everyday ritual forms; e.g., bedtime rituals for children).

Some communication scholars have focused their attention on the importance of rituals in particular relationship types, most often marriage (e.g., Bruess & Pearson, 1997). Relational dialectics scholars have studied family rituals as they highlight contradictions; for example, Braithwaite, Baxter, and Harper (1998) found that the most successful rituals were those that celebrated both “old” (original) families and the “new” developing stepfamily. Rituals that failed in the stepfamily either ignored one of the old families or celebrated the new family only. Family communication scholars also have explored celebrations held throughout a culture, particularly rites of passage (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006b). For example, Leeds-Hurwitz (2002) studied cultural identities inculcated in weddings, and Braithwaite and Baxter (1995) examined couples' renewal of marital vow ceremonies.

Baxter and Braithwaite (2006b) summarized several positive benefits that family rituals often have for families, concluding that “rituals contain deep symbolism about family identity and individual identity as a family member” (p. 272). However, although family rituals are often quite positive, they can also be negative and punishing. For example, Oswald (2000) poignantly described the difficulties that gay family members face when attending heterosexual weddings. Baxter, Braithwaite et al. (2009) interviewed young-adult stepchildren about the remarriage event of a parent and step-parent and found that the ritual was empty for most stepchildren, as the focus was on the marriage rather than the family.

### *Dark Side of Family Communication*

This family communication perspective focuses on familial verbal abuse, physical violence, hate, and prejudice, often referred to as “the dark side of communication” (Olson, Baiocchi-Wagner, Kratzer, & Symonds, 2012). Family communication researchers studying conflictual communication patterns often emphasize dyadic sequential behavior or how reciprocal hostile messages may escalate to a point of verbal or physical violence, or both. Many studies focus on couples’ patterned verbal aggression. For example, when couples enacted situational violence men and women participated equally, and their interactions were characterized as aggressive, violent, or abusive on the basis of their interaction patterns (Olson, 2004). Furthermore, recent research has revealed a link between parental communication patterns and the relationship to intimate partner violence among adult children (Babin & Palazzolo, 2012).

Parent-child abuse and conflict serve as another focus of family communication scholars. For example, research has indicated how parental attributions regarding child behavior can result in parental abuse (Wilson, Morgan, Hayes, Bylund, & Herman, 2004). Brule (2009) described an adolescent-to-parent abuse pattern that begins with the adolescent’s verbal abuse and develops into episodes of physical and emotional abuse. Communication scholars also have addressed issues such as children’s disclosure of sexual abuse (Petronio et al., 1996) and parental infidelity (Thorson, 2009). *Health and family*

*communication*. The intersection of family communication and health communication represents a thriving and growing scholarly area. Strong research strands include parent-child communication about drugs, drinking, and healthy behaviors, as well as family communication when a member confronts cancer. Studies reveal that parents of teenagers usually talk about drinking, drugs, and sex using “abstinence rules” or “contingency rules” (Baxter, Bylund, Imes, & Routsong, 2009; Miller-Day, 2008) and that parents encourage adolescents to engage proactively in healthy behaviors related to nutrition, exercise, and sun protection.

Narrative medicine studies have examined changing communication dynamics when a family member confronts cancer (Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005). For example, prostate cancer survivors describe their wives as sources of support and information research; adult children struggle to discuss their parents’ feelings during treatment, although positive humor strategies provided some relief. Emotional support during mother-daughter interactions may be helpful or unhelpful as a mother confronts breast cancer, depending on the mother’s developmental stage (Fisher, 2010). Topic avoidance after a parent’s lung cancer diagnosis appears functional when adult children enact a dialogical process of openness and avoidance (Caughlin, Mikucki-Enyart, Middleton, Stone, & Brown, 2011).

*Work-life issues and family communication*. Communication researchers have studied the challenges confronting families managing work-home boundaries as ongoing negotiations occur among and between employed partners and/or parents who manage complicated lives. For example, partners confront the effects of spillover (Medved & Graham, 2006) as they manage dialectical tensions and struggle with competing themes such as life planning and family permanency, work choice and prioritizing family, and stopping work and career permanency. Spillover from family to work, such as having sick children, raise tensions for employed mothers, who report their reliance on coworkers for communicative support, including advice, affirmations, and instrumental efforts (Krouse & Afifi, 2007). Individual and joint accounts of partnered working parents have revealed multiple collaborations that serve to achieve accord, validate choices, shape identity, and define a relationship (Golden, 2002).

A more recent focus of family communication research involves the eroding boundaries between home and work as new technologies shatter the traditional expectations of physical presence. For example, military wives with deployed husbands make decisions about disclosing stressors to the absent spouse depending on how they perceive his current safety risks (Joseph & Affi, 2010). However, far less is known about communication practices of fathers and husbands as they manage family and workplace boundaries.

In the past 20 years, family communication scholarship has moved beyond dyadic (mostly marital) relationships to a focus on family systems and cultural and social network influences. The field has also concentrated on theory development that maximizes the contributions of a communication lens on family life. Understanding families, especially nontraditional families, as discourse dependent is a central contribution of the field. The expansion into scholarship on diverse family forms is still in early stages, particularly research on communication in multiracial and multiethnic families and in same-sex families. The field needs concentrated efforts on empirical work and theorizing that shed light into the unique needs of communication in these family relationships across contexts.

### Conclusion: Emerging Directions in Family Communication Research

Today family communication scholars have broadened their areas of interest while collaborating actively across disciplines, including family science. Recent publications represent important areas of scholarship developing in the field: an expansion on the understanding of children in family communication (Socha & Yingling, 2010), the role of family communication in forgiveness (Waldron & Kelley, 2008), how families negotiate crisis and stress (Dickson & Webb, 2012; Maguire, 2012), family communication about genetics (Galvin & Grill, 2010), and family communication surrounding assisted reproductive technologies (Rauscher & Fine, 2012). Finally, scholars are focusing increased attention on translating scholarship to practice (e.g., Kelley, 2012).

Family communication scholars also continue to open the door to new theoretical approaches that span the continuum of paradigmatic commitments. For example,

Floyd has developed a bioevolutionary theory of affection exchange (e.g., Floyd, Judd, & Hesse, 2006), and there is increasing attention on biological and evolutionary approaches of understanding family communication (e.g., Floyd & Affi, 2011). Several scholars have called for an increased development and application of critical theories to enlighten the study of family communication (Baxter, 2011; Olson, 2012), although critical research is vastly underrepresented in the literature at present (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006a).

Although research in family communication has included a breadth of topics, the field's focus on discourse-dependent families necessitates broadening the family forms studied and using scholarship to help families navigate their place in American culture. We look forward to more research on multiracial and multiethnic families, families with transsexual members, blue-collar and/or low-income families, first-generation immigrant families, and foster families by scholars not only in the discipline of family communication but also in family studies more broadly. Finally, there is a dearth of literature on communication and new media use within families and a need to learn more about the role of social media in family life. With attention to these emergent directions, the study of family communication, developed during the final decades of the 20th century, will continue to flourish and add to interdisciplinary scholarship and practice in the 21st century.

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