

2-1993

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Petronio, Sandra and Braithwaite, Dawn O., "The Contributions and Challenges of Family Communication to the Field of Communication" (1993). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 132.

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Published in *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 21:1 (February 1993), pp. 103–110;  
doi: 10.1080/00909889309365358

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Published online May 21, 2009.

## The Contributions and Challenges of Family Communication to the Field of Communication

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As the Family Communication Commission in the Speech Communication Association is off to a good start, it seems appropriate to bring attention to the contributions and challenges studying family communication has for the discipline of communication. More than a decade ago, Bochner (1976) outlined several fruitful areas of investigation. Clearly, people heeded Bochner's persuasive arguments and produced research on family communication problems (e.g., Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1988; Petronio, 1982; Sillars, Weisberg, Burggraff, & Wilson, 1987). But, the need to examine family communication in more depth is essential to the growth and development of the area. In addition, encouraging research in family communication may enhance our thinking in other areas of the field. There are many concerns researchers and practitioners studying family communication encounter. The treatment of these questions may ultimately contribute to a more general understanding of communication. By fostering the expansion of research in family communication, we might potentially learn about issues that could help solve problems in other areas of the field.

Obviously there is a synergy between all of the areas found in the field of communication. Rather than discussing the contributions of other areas to family communication, we turn the argument around. We outline some contributions that family communication can make to the larger field and identify challenges to traditionally held beliefs about conducting research.

The exigencies of studying family communication lead to a collective, not individual focus; to development across time, not one-shot examinations; and to multiple methods

that are sensitive to the characteristics and limitations of studying families. As such, these three issues draw our attention to challenges family communication scholars face. Through exploration of these challenges, potential contributions to the discipline may be stimulated. This essay briefly examines three significant ways in which studying family communication may advance our thinking as communication researchers and practitioners.

First, family communication must develop a model that focuses more on the system of interrelationships among family members and less on the individual. The challenge is to move away from the practice of using the person as the unit of analysis (found so often in relationship research) and toward research that incorporates collectivities in a very specific environment-families. The contribution is in the fruits of this exploration by learning more about the way interaction takes place among people who share multiple levels of commonality.

Second, family communication must necessarily focus on how relationships develop over time. The challenge is moving away from investigating a phenomenon at one point in time and toward assessing change at many points in time. The contribution is in conceptualizing ways to investigate developmental shifts.

Third, studying family communication requires the establishment and utilization of multiple methods. The challenge is in learning how best to integrate various methodological approaches and selecting the most advantageous method for a research question. The contribution is the advancement of new methodological applications and statistical tests. While family scholars do benefit from the available body of knowledge on communication, we argue that the field of communication can also benefit from the challenges that face family scholars.

### **Beyond Individualism**

Family communication research necessarily focuses less on communication at the individual level and more on communication among family members as a system. This shift in focus is a challenge to family scholars given that most relationship research has traditionally used the individual as the unit of analysis. Because families are complex systems who may share the same environment and do share a history, singling out one person does not give a full account of the communicative issues. Knowing how one person cognitively makes choices or selects strategies cannot address the reactions other family members have to those decisions. Nor does research on the individual address the ability of family members to coordinate their communication to reach a decision.

Similar to the contributions of small group and organizational research, family communication brings the interrelationship among people to the forefront of inquiry. Like these areas, family communication scholars are grappling with ways to conceptualize the interconnectedness of a communicative system. However, family research scholars necessarily must focus their attention on the influence of a long-term history and the dynamics of close ties among the family members. There are several scholars working to address these issues (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 1988). Interestingly, Baxter's (1991) recent proposal allows for the integration of previous research on relationships from an individual perspective and provides a theoretical formula that extends into a multiple level analysis among individuals.

Baxter (1991), suggests that researchers adopt a dialogic research agenda. Her proposal provides the best of both worlds, noting the unique contributions of the individual, while striving to understand the impact interaction has mutually on all parties involved. Baxter (1991) notes, "to enact dialogue, the parties must fuse their perspectives but without losing their unique perspectives. The parties form a unity in conversation but only through two (or more) clearly differentiated voices" (p. 3).

Beyond theoretical developments, methodological advancements are also necessary. The research by Rogers-Millar and Millar (1979) on dominance provides an excellent example of how to accomplish expanding the unit of analysis beyond the individual on both a methodological and conceptual level. The very nature of families as . interrelated systems challenges the scholar to move beyond the individual in relationships and consider the fusing of multiple symbolic worlds. The notion of families also invites us to understand the moments when those symbolic worlds are at odds. This may allow for understanding the way communicative structures function in the system and the type of negotiations necessary for the family to be successful communicators. Family scholars can make a contribution by working toward these ends and advancing the focus away from the individual as the unit of analysis. In addition to advancing beyond using the individual, the second contribution studying family communication affords is an emphasis on a developmental perspective.

### **Over Time—A Function of Change**

Miller and Steinberg (1975) and Miller (1978) called for a developmental approach to study the nature of relationships. The thesis suggested by Miller and his colleagues illustrates how relationships move to a more interpersonal perspective over time. But, the notion of change focuses on only one form of development, similar to the life cycle changes suggested by many family scholars (e.g., Cavan, 1960; Hill & Rodgers, 1964; McGoldrick & Carter, 1985). In studying family communication systems, a more in-depth notion is required, finding at least three types of change to consider where each contributes to the understanding of family communication over time: (1) gestalt changes, (2) event changes, and (3) episodic changes.

Gestalt changes represent the life cycle perspective. Other disciplines frequently use the life cycle approach to study families. Many family scholars suggest models, theories, and classification systems to represent the life cycle of a family. Generally, these proposals outline a way to study family stages that show "expansion, contraction, and realignment of the relationship systems to support the entry, exist, and development of family members in a functional way" (McGoldrick & Carter, 1985, p. 43). The notion of continuity is a strong theme in the life-cycle perspective, and the unit of time encompasses the whole life of a family. In other words, these gestalt changes give a gross measure of the way family communication might ebb and flow throughout the history of a family's lifetime.

Event changes are more specific, where the communication scholar might define interaction in terms of particular events that take place over time. For example, celebration events in the family that occur year after year with some regularity. Interactions may be examined in the context of the event which serves as the stimulus for the communication.

Comparisons may be made across time to identify changes or similarities in the way talk is constructed.

There may also be episodic changes where the communication of family members may be examined in terms of interactive patterns over time. For example, marital couples may use certain conflict resolution patterns early in their marriage but change those patterns to be more successful in coping with conflict later on in their relationship. Tracing the establishment, development, and change of communicative patterns in family interactions contributes greatly to the understanding of family life and other similar phenomenon in communication.

Using a model that focuses on change over time in family communication may help delineate a more process-oriented view of communication. This same process view can be more widely adapted in our study of communication outside of the family system. For example, one could study gestalt changes in communication over the life of a small group. Event changes might encompass how organizations celebrate organizational anniversaries, marking time over the years. Episodic changes may be useful to track the way that political candidates might alter their rhetorical strategies in response media coverage over the course of a campaign.

### **Need for Multiple Methods**

In addition to focusing on multiple communicators and a developmental perspective, the third related challenge for family communication scholars is in the realm of methodology. Because of the demands involved in studying family communication, scholars may need a greater tolerance for different kinds of methodologies and depend upon an integration of approaches not always found in other communication research. While this is the challenge, working with these methodological constraints and expectations may also make a contribution to the larger discipline.

In attempting to research families as systems from a developmental perspective, the family scholar may employ both qualitative and quantitative techniques. There are many observational techniques, for example, family researchers use that may be adapted to other communication contexts. For example, Rosenblatt and Meyer (1986) propose the concept of "imagined interactions" where they ask participants to select one or more target others and construct a conversation with those people. This technique can be helpful, for example, in understanding family conflict in communication between parents and children. A researcher might ask both the parents and children to construct these imagined conversations independently and compare the results across members. Similarly, this would be an excellent alternative to self-report survey data on intercultural communication, as the researcher may ask participants to construct imagined conversations with persons from another culture.

Naturalistic observations such as watching how families in public places discipline their children (Petronio, Bourhis, & Berquist, 1990) may have application to other situations. The key issue in this study is the relationship between public and private behavior. An example of how this observational approach is used in another context may be seen in the public versus private behavior of bartenders or restaurant workers. The public or "front stage"

behavior of restaurant workers may necessitate a type of discipline where the person maintains a face that does not reveal the frustration with or anger toward customers who are abusive. Other types of observational foci used in family research have similar applicability. For instance, observing communication rituals like weddings and baby showers (Braithwaite, 1991) may be helpful in understanding other contexts such as initiation rituals that develop in organizations.

Alberts and Driscoll's (1992) work is also an exemplar of ways family researchers use observation and discourse analysis together as they investigate marital couple's complaints. In this line of research we see a combination of methods that proves useful in gathering information that addresses a variety of research questions. This approach may be helpful in health communication, for example, gathering observations of health care workers interacting with patients and analyzing their discourse.

Among other techniques that have recently been used to examine family systems over time is the Diary:Diary Interview Method (Zimmerman & Weider, 1977). In this method, researchers have family members observe and record their own behavior or events as they occur. For example, Leach (1992) asked family kinkeepers (family record keepers) to write diary entries detailing communication with their family networks. Leach analyzed the diaries and interviewed the participants about their perceptions of the communication. This method may be useful for a variety of communication studies, especially those for which the researcher wishes, for instance, to gain multiple interpretations of event changes in a particular context.

Besides observations by people and about people, researchers of family communication have used the mass media as a source of information. Examples include Kidd's (1975) often-cited research on attitudes toward relationships found in magazines and the analysis of the television program "thirtysomething" (Metts & Haefner, 1989). While the media provide excellent exemplars of family communication systems, they also provide examples of other communication contexts, as Carbaugh's (1988) studies of cultural communication on "Donahue" demonstrate.

As this discussion illustrates, observational techniques appear to be the most flexible in addressing the demands of family research. But, experimental design continues to be a mainstay of research in any context. The difficulties of using this technique for family communication are many. Most significantly is the question of ethics. Bring couples or whole families into the laboratory and manipulating variables such as family secrets presents enormous challenges to the researcher. We are not suggesting that experimental design is inappropriate. Nor do we find the approach ineffective because there are certain questions that cannot be answered any other way. But, studying families in controlled experiments raises a concern that the manipulation could produce serious, unanticipated, system-wide effects. These considerations are not new to group research or organizational scholars. Even so, the dynamics of assembling family members and using a treatment that is meant to change their behavior requires careful attention by the researcher to the complexity of outcomes.

Clearly the leading form of data gathering in family research is that of the survey design. While this approach has obvious utility, the way it has been used in the past limits data to the individual. Perhaps some of the innovative uses such as those by Sillars et al. (1987)

seem helpful in extending the benefit of this technique. Sillars et al. (1987) administered questionnaires to both members of marital couples in an attempt to gather multiple perspectives. When this technique is used over time in a panel or trend study, the combination of information begins to address developmental issues. The challenge of this methodology, for family researchers, like that of the experimental design, may be similar to other areas of inquiry in the field.

This discussion on methodology illustrates that there are similarities as well as differences in expectations among other areas of the discipline. Both the similarities and differences may contribute to the development of a broader way in which we use methods in our field.

## Conclusion

As this essay suggests, family communication is an important area to develop. The contributions that studying family communication can provide are great, but family scholars are also the recipients of existing knowledge that will help shape the area. A number of scholars have already started developing a research literature, and we would do well to look toward them for guidance (e.g., Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Bochner, 1976; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Rogers-Millar & Millar, 1979; Weber & Vangelisti, 1991). In the end, family communication is inherently applied in nature. Everyone has experiences with families and most find their family experience at times to be frustrating. With continued development, results of family communication research should provide us with a knowledge base. This information may be helpful in training family practitioners and families themselves to understand and improve their communication with each other. Ultimately, family communication can make a significant contribution to the communication discipline's research, theory, and practice.

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