

Perspectives on Family Communication

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PERSPECTIVES ON FAMILY COMMUNICATION

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Mayfield Publishing Company

Mountain View, California

London • Toronto

To those who have taught us about family communication: Our families, Roberta, Jerry, Scott, Edie, Max, Ted, Sabrina, Sasha, Beverly, Jim, Mike, Marysue, Jimmy, Laura, Kurt, and Roger; our mentors and friends, Kathy Galvin, Elizabeth Graham, Sandra Metts, and Judy Pearson.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Turner, Lynn H.

Perspectives on family communication / Lynn H. Turner, Richard West.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 1-55934-690-6

1. Communication in the family. 2. Family. I. West, Richard L.

II. Title.

HQ734.T915 1997

306.85—dc21

97-37782

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Mayfield Publishing Company

1280 Villa Street

Mountain View, California 94041

Sponsoring editor, Holly J. Allen; production, Strawberry Field Publishing; manuscript editor, Judith Brown; art director and cover designer, Jeanne M. Schreiber; text designer, Cynthia Bassett; illustrator, Joan Carol; manufacturing manager, Randy Hurst. The text was set in 10/12 Sabon by TBH Typecast, Inc., and printed on 50# Text White Opaque by The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group.

Preface

We all have extensive experience with family interactions, and we spend much of our lives with family members. At times our encounters with our families bring us painful challenges; other times they bring us intense joy. Because of these powerful experiences, we are motivated to understand the communication dynamics within our families. Thus family communication has become a field of great interest to professionals, laypersons, and researchers alike. In fact, for the past 20 years, family communication research has flourished, and classes on family communication have proliferated.

Our purpose in writing this book is to celebrate the breadth and depth of scholarship on the family within the field of communication. In the past, communication students and researchers had to depend on research from our scholarly “cousins” in psychology, sociology, and family studies. Although we still find that some of this research informs our understanding of the family, growth in our own field now allows us to place communication at the center of our investigations of families.

We do not prescribe antidotes for family ills, nor do we believe this is appropriate. Rather, we suggest that the material in this book should be read with a questioning attitude. Our goal is an understanding of family communication dynamics across a rich diversity of families. While we do not necessarily have answers, exploring vital questions will help us in moving toward conclusions.

GOALS OF THIS BOOK

We have written this book with three major goals in mind. Our first goal is to provide a consistent communication focus in viewing family life. We want to help students understand how this perspective differs from the way other disciplines approach the family. Students will find the communication perspective embedded within each chapter. Everything we discuss, beginning with our consideration of family types in chapter 1, is related to communication behavior. Further, interaction and language are primary concerns throughout the book. We are able to accomplish all this by drawing extensively on current communication research.

Our second goal is to illustrate how theoretical frameworks enrich our understanding of family. In chapter 3 we lay out a theoretical structure consisting of systems, social construction, developmental theory, and dialectics. By combining these four perspectives, we maximize our ability to capture the complexities of family interactions. We consistently apply this framework throughout the book. We emphasize that theory and practice work together to inform our impressions of family communication.

Our third goal is to broaden the definition of family. We integrate many family types and co-cultures into the text. We do this because we recognize that, while

students bring a wealth of family communication experience to this class, their experiences necessarily are drawn from a limited number of family types. Few people have intimate knowledge of families other than those in which they have lived. We provide examples and research pertaining to a wide range of family types and a variety of cultures in an effort to help students expand their understanding of family interactions. When we speak about cultural variety in the text, we realize we generalize about cultural customs and behaviors. These generalizations have to be read with the acknowledgment that they do not apply to every member of the group. We try to balance sensitivity to differences with a desire to draw conclusions.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE BOOK

To accomplish our goals we have incorporated the following innovative features that make this book especially appealing to students:

- Chapter opening vignettes—Each chapter begins with three short scenarios featuring a diverse range of family types. We refer to these three family scenarios to illustrate points we make in the chapter.
- Student commentaries—Throughout each chapter, boxes identify students' personal experiences and comments about family communication issues discussed in the chapter. We have changed students' names, however, to allow us to preserve their privacy. We invite students to use these commentaries to reflect upon both the subject matter and their own experiences.
- Attention to co-cultures—We have made a significant effort to address the myriad co-cultures in the United States. We therefore include a number of research conclusions and examples pertaining to families of a variety of races, ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations. We also address homeless families in our discussions.
- Questions for reflection—At the end of each chapter we provide a series of questions geared to stimulate student thinking about the material presented. The questions may also be used as class discussion-starters and guides.
- Glossary of important terms—Each chapter includes a list of key terms. When we first mention these key terms in the text, they appear in bold-face. At the end of the book, they are all listed and defined in the glossary.

In addition, we provide an Instructor's Manual that includes pedagogical tips, detailed chapter outlines, media suggestions, sample syllabi, suggested exercises, and sample test questions designed to help the instructor facilitate the course.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with definitions, theory, the communication perspective we maintain, and the context—cultural

and environmental—that conditions family interactions. The first three chapters provide this foundation. The second part deals with structural and process features of family life: roles, rules, conflict, power, decision making, violence, and the interplay between intimacy and independence. Chapters 4 through 6 detail these topics.

The final part of the book focuses on communication practices in families: storytelling and meaning creation, stress management, and discussion of challenging topics such as sex and religion. In this part—chapters 7 through 9—we also examine how technology can provide challenges for families' communication practice. An epilogue summarizes the main points of the text and points out several areas for future research in family communication.

Content Highlights

- Chapter 2 provides unique coverage of the external context affecting family communication (emphasis on media portrayals of family, social movements, and governmental policies).
- Chapter 5 traces the intricate relationships among conflict, power, and violence in the family. We relate issues of power to decision making, conflict, and violence, showing how outcomes can be both positive and negative for families.
- Chapter 7 features the important topic of meaning-making within the family. It explicates family stories, metaphors, themes, rituals and myths and shows how these function to create family identity.
- Chapter 9 explores issues that have complicated ramifications for family communication. These topics include religion, technology, and sexuality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Any book owes its existence to efforts made by others in addition to the listed authors, and some people who have helped with this book may not even realize the debt we acknowledge here. We would like to thank all those who have helped us as we worked our way through this project. First, our extended families contributed in ways both large and small to the book's creation. For providing us with daily object lessons and myriad examples of communication and family life, we cannot thank them enough. We also thank the families we live with for putting up with long hours away from us while we toiled on the manuscript and for entertaining and feeding both of us as we made trips to each other's homes to work on final drafts.

Additionally, we owe a great deal to the students who have enrolled in our family communication classes over the years, providing us with their insights and expanding our own knowledge about this topic. Our students have contributed greatly to our thinking about family communication. First, we have quoted many of their specific comments. We chose comments reflecting how

the communication principles we discuss related to students' life experiences. Second, we have drawn upon our past interactions with students to inspire us to write with clarity and purpose.

Further, our chosen family of friends and colleagues have helped with this project in many ways. Lynn wishes to thank Nancy Pollock, Gerry Keen, and Kay Berkson for a lifetime of friendship and anecdotes about family communication. In addition, Lynn's colleagues, especially Pat Sullivan, Helen Sterk, Bob Shuter, Patrice Buzzanell, and Steve Goldzwig, have been most supportive of her and, in several cases, patient, as they waited for this book to be finished so she could get back to projects with them.

Rich would like to thank Kurt Hebert, who not only taught him what personal growth can be, but also how to look beyond one's personal lens of understanding the world. He would also like to thank Kathryn Lasky for making him laugh during some of the more challenging times of writing this book. Her insistence on "getting away from it all" was often heeded. Finally, Cathy Bourgeois, who is always available to help him out professionally, was instrumental at a very critical time in the book's production. Her assistance is not forgotten.

We also wish to acknowledge Marquette University and the University of Southern Maine. Both provided support and funding, which allowed us to finish this book in a timely manner. We are grateful for the secretarial help, the research assistance, and the general climate of support for our endeavors at both our institutions.

Candice Thomas-Maddox contributed greatly by writing a cogent, thoughtful, and useful Instructor's Manual to accompany this text. Candice understood the spirit of our work and labored long and hard to produce a really superior tool for using this text in the classroom. Candice teaches family communication herself, and her experience with students enlivens and enriches the Instructor's Manual.

We thank the team at Mayfield Publishing for working with us so well to produce a high-quality book. Melanie Field and April Wells-Hayes provided enormous help to make the book a polished finished product. Of course, we owe our greatest thanks to our editor at Mayfield, Holly Allen. Without her faith in us, her critical skills, her persistence, and her unfailing good sense and good humor, this book would not exist. Our work with Holly has been grounded in a rare combination of friendship and professional collaboration. Finally, we thank the reviewers who gave their time and expertise to improve our efforts. Their careful reading and insightful suggestions expanded and clarified our thinking in many significant ways. The flaws in the book are our own, but the strengths were greatly enhanced by the following reviewers: Peter A. Andersen, San Diego State University; Diane M. Badzinski, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; Vincent L. Bloom, California State University, Fresno; Cynthia Burggraf, College of Wooster; Douglas L. Kelley, Arizona State University West; Michelle Miller, University of Memphis; Teresa Sabourin, University of Cincinnati; Laura Stafford, Ohio State University; Glen H. Stamp, Ball State University; and Candice Thomas-Maddox, Ohio University.

To the Student

Our society is rapidly redefining what it means to be a family. As you take this course and listen to your classmates' contributions, you may hear from people who come from large families, small families, families that include grandparents, adopted children, and special friends. You might hear individuals speak about their stay-at-home fathers, their two mothers, or their aunts who raised them. Some may speak of divorces and reconfigured families. As you will learn in this class, families are rich in their diversity, and family communication may differ in different types of families.

We encourage you to keep an open mind as you read this text. Some of what you encounter will sound familiar and fit your family to a T. Other material may not apply to your own family at all. As you read about different families, keep in mind that there really is no such thing as a typical family in the United States, in any meaningful way. Yet, while families differ greatly, some communication practices and processes help us to understand commonalities across diverse families. As you take this course, we ask that you cultivate a healthy tension between what sets families apart from one another and what ties them together.

Although we realize we will probably not meet you in person, we tried to imagine you reading this text as we were writing it, and we thought that you might wish to know something about us as people and as family members while you read what we have written. Our stories are very different from one another's (and, no doubt, from your own). As such, they provide a beginning look at the diversity of family experience that we try to introduce throughout the text.

One of the authors, Lynn Turner, grew up in a white, middle-class nuclear family in suburban Chicago. Her family consisted of two parents, Jerry and Roberta, and one younger brother, Scott. Her father worked full-time, and her mom stayed at home to care for the children. Her parents were each also the elder of two children, and Lynn's aunts, uncles, and cousins all lived nearby as she was growing up. In fact, one of her aunts and her family lived next door to Lynn's family for most of her growing-up years. Lynn met and married Ted while they were both at college in Iowa.

Ted's family-of-origin was much different from Lynn's. He grew up in rural Iowa and had four younger sisters. His mother was employed for most of her life, and his father managed family farmland. Ted had aunts and uncles spread out from New York to California. He also had been married before and had two children, Leila and Ted. Ted and Lynn had one more child, a daughter, Sabrina. Their blended family, which provides so much of what interests Lynn in family communication issues, keeps expanding. Leila and her husband have one daughter, Zoe, so Lynn and Ted are now grandparents.

The other author, Rich West, is the product of a white middle-class family from Illinois. He is the fourth child of five and was born in the early 1960s. He also lived in a nuclear family-of-origin, but when he was 7 years old, his mother returned to full-time work as a city clerk. In crucial ways, his family has helped him form life impressions and construct his world views. As a child in his Midwestern family, he grew up believing that success was defined as going to college, getting a job, getting married, and having children. Now, of course, he knows so much more is involved in being successful.

Two women have been instrumental in his life. First, his mother, Beverly, nurtured in him a sense of compassion and respect for diversity. His grandmother, Lucy, has also been a positive influence. She not only provided him the wherewithal to set foot in his first college classroom, but her personal narratives have been invaluable as well.

Personally, he has been in a committed relationship for over 5 years. The unique experiences that this relationship has afforded him have been implicitly woven throughout this book. As with all relationships, these experiences have been challenging, exciting, and often eventful.

The authors met each other at a communication conference more than 15 years ago. We were drawn to each other because of our common interests in family communication and gender and communication. Our collaborations on this book and other work have intensified our personal and professional relationships with one another. We learned from each other as we wrote this book, and we continue to evolve as students and teachers of family communication. Part of the enduring charm of this discipline is the possibility of continued discoveries and developing understandings.

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**Chapter
1**

**PROVIDING
A DEFINITION**

Family Culture

Defining the Family

Self-Definitions of Family • Definition Through Interaction
Voluntary and Involuntary Ties • Creation of Boundaries
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Family Communication Perspective

Defining Communication • Axioms of Communication

From Tradition to Transition: Family Configurations

Family-of-Origin • Nuclear Family • Gay and Lesbian Family
Extended Family • Blended Family • Single-Parent Family
Cohabiting Couples • Family Typologies

Summary

Key Terms

Questions for Reflection

THE GOODHUE FAMILY

The Goodhue family lives in a suburban neighborhood in the Midwest. They have two children, Tucker and Mabel. Laura Goodhue sells cosmetics out of their home, and her husband, Mark, owns several currency exchanges in the large metropolitan city nearby. The Goodhues are neither wealthy nor impoverished; they buy what they need and are saving up to build the house of their dreams. They have had little conflict in their relationship but recently disagreed about purchasing some land to build a home. The two handled the conflict by agreeing to delay the decision. They agreed that their current budget could not accommodate the asking price of the land. Other than this recent disagreement, the Goodhues have little verbal conflict in their marriage and raise their children with love, compassion, and tolerance. They have been happily married for 8 years.

THE BRUNO FAMILY

Beth Bruno is a single parent raising six children in a two-bedroom trailer in the southwestern United States. Beth works in a deli, and she receives no child support; her ex-husband is in prison for car theft. Beth has tried to get a better paying job, but she has limited previous work experience. The last job she had was as a restaurant server. Every day is a challenge for Beth, filled with preparing her six children for school, traveling 12 miles to work at the deli for 8 hours, preparing dinner for seven, bathing the kids, and finally, putting them to bed. By the time Beth cleans up and sits down, it is about midnight.

THE ORTIZ-DELGADO FAMILY

Five-year-old Luisa is the child of Karen Ortiz and Julien Delgado. The family lives in Miami. Karen and Julien are lesbians in a committed relationship with each other, and they are each mothers for Luisa. Both women desired children. After 6 years together, Karen became inseminated. Their own parents were not too keen on the idea of bringing a child into a household with homosexual parents. Still, Karen and Julien view themselves as co-parents and think of Luisa as their treasure in life. The women experience prejudice from both their families and the community at large, causing them to struggle with stereotypes, bias, and hatred every day of their lives. So far, Karen and Julien believe that these problems have not affected Luisa. They hope that Luisa will grow up in a more tolerant world.

Are the Goodhues, the Brunos, and the Ortiz-Delgados all families? Certainly, they are very different from one another and perhaps unlike the family in which you grew up. Families in the United States have undergone much change in the 200-plus years of our existence as a nation and doubtless will