FAMILY COMMUNICATION
COHESION AND CHANGE

FOURTH EDITION

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Family Communication:
Cohesion and Change
Fourth Edition

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To my family: The Galvins, Wilkinsons, Nicholsens, and Sullivans, plus the special friends I consider as my family.

KMG

To my children and grandchildren; with thanks to Joseph De Vito, Pete Tortorello, Vic Silvestri, and Terry Cozad. I dedicate my part of this edition to the memory of my sister Florence Cairo, and my friends Randy Treff and Phil Davitt. Their dying gave new meanings to my sense of the importance of family.

BJB

Preface

It is a pleasure to introduce the fourth edition of *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change,* the first textbook to address the family from a communication perspective. The earlier editions have been used by students and teachers of family-related courses in communication, psychology, sociology, counseling and home economics.

Historically, family interaction received attention solely within medical and therapeutic perspectives focusing on families with an ill or dysfunctional member. Only recently have scholars turned their attention to interaction within functional families. The past fifteen years have witnessed growing interest in ordinary family interaction processes within all of the social sciences. Current thinking places strong emphasis on theories and perspectives which value methodological diversity and recognize the diversity of family experience. Increasing numbers of communication scholars are researching specific aspects of family communication and these studies increasingly fill pages of the text.

The basic premise of this book is that communication processes serve to constitute as well as reflect families. Relying on symbolic interaction and systems theories, we consider, the communication processes within the family as well as the extent to which they affect and are affected by larger social systems.

The focus of the text remains descriptive rather than prescriptive, because we believe that description provides the understanding necessary to the eventual development of valuable approaches and strategies. We examine how family members typically perform primary family functions—regulating cohesion and adaptability—and secondary family functions—developing appropriate family images, themes, boundaries, and biosocial beliefs.

The first four chapters establish the foundation of the text. Chapter one presents basic communication and family concepts and an overview of rapidly changing family demographics. Chapter two details a framework for analyzing family communication relying on primary and secondary functions and the dialectical struggle which undergirds family relationships over time. Chapter three establishes the systems perspective. The fourth chapter provides an explanation of how family meanings develop and illustrates the influential role of multigenerational communication patterns on current family functioning. Later chapters explore communication issues related to basic family interactions: relationship development, intimacy, roles, power, conflict, developmental stages, and adjustment to unpredictable crises. The final chapters focus on the psychological, physical, and temporal contexts for family com-

munication patterns and discusses perspectives on well family function-
ing plus approaches to improving family communication.

With each edition we have attempted to reflect the constantly
changing family experience and the rapidly expanding research. In this
edition we focus extensively on diverse family forms, with special at-
tention to gender and ethnicity, all critical issues to contemporary fam-
ily scholars. We attempt to articulate more explicitly our underlying
theoretical structures, to emphasize dialectal thinking, to include more
qualitative studies and to emphasize psychological as well as physical
contexts. Whereas in the early editions we relied heavily on research in
related areas, we believe this edition synthesizes the best of current re-
lated research in communication as well as across the social sciences.

Throughout the book we present first-person examples (names
and identifying data have been changed) that complement the content.
In this edition we have linked these more directly to the text to illus-
trate the direct application of concepts.

Many persons contributed to the completion of the fourth edition.
We received valuable feedback on manuscript drafts from Gail
Whitchurch, Indiana University/Purdue University, Indianapolis; Glen
Stamp, Ball State University.

We are grateful to Cynthia Biron and Michael Gibbons and the
Harper Collins editorial staff for their supportive encouragement and
guidance. Our students and clients provided insightful commentaries
and examples. Frances Pearcy and Marilyn Mueller typed the manu-
script while Katie King and Andrea Spitz provided research support.
Charles Wilkinson supplied numerous examples from his family practice.

Our own families have grown and changed over the past fifteen
years, a process that has taught us a great deal more about family life
and family communication. To our family members we express our
gratitude for their exceptional patience, moral support and unwitting
examples.

Finally, this book comes from our own commitment to, and enthu-
siasm for, teaching family communication. Unlike most other academic
courses, students bring their personal experiences to the course con-
tent and, thus, start with considerable insight and knowledge of the
subject. From them, and through our practice and research, we con-
tinue to learn about how families interact and what it means to be a
member of a family system.

Kathleen M. Galvin

Bernard J. Brommel

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Introduction to the Family

Families: We are born into a family, mature in a family, form new families, and leave them at our deaths. Family life is a universal human experience. Yet, no two people share the exact same experience, partly because of the unique communication patterns in each family system. Because the family is such a powerful influence on our lives, we need to examine family interaction patterns to understand ourselves better as members of one of the most complex and important parts of society. These communication patterns serve to construct as well as reflect familial experience. In short, we create our families just as we are created by these families.

As you read this book, you will examine a subject you already know something about, since you have spent your life in some type or types of family arrangements. Yet, since you have lived in only one or a small number of families, your experience is limited compared to the range of possible family experiences. Your reading should expand your understanding of many types of families and their communication patterns. You should find similarities and differences from your experiences.

This book presents a framework for examining communication within families. By the end of the text, you should be able to apply this model to an unknown family and understand it as a communication system. We also hope that you will apply what you learn to your own family or to the family you will eventually form, in order to understand the communication dynamics of this important group.

Throughout this book, you will find some material written in the first person and set off from the text. These selections, some direct quotes and some reconstructions provided by friends, students, and clients, illustrate many of the concepts discussed in the text. These statements should enable you to understand the concepts more

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completely. Some material will remind you specifically of your own family experiences, while other material will seem quite different from your background, since people relate to each other very differently within a family.

As family members, teachers, and family therapists, we hold certain basic beliefs which undergird the words on the following pages. Our backgrounds have given us particular perspectives which affect how we view families and their communication. Our perspectives may be very similar, or they may be quite different from yours. Because our backgrounds influence our thinking and writing, we wish to share these with you to establish a context for understanding.

1. There is no "right" way to be a family. Family life is as diverse as the types of persons who create families. There are many types of families and numerous ways to relate within each family type. Families are human systems created by ordinary people; the "perfect" family does not exist. Each family must struggle to create its own identity as it experiences good times and stressful times. All families are influenced by the larger context in which they exist.

2. Communication serves to constitute as well as reflect family life. It is through talk that persons define their identities and negotiate their relationships with each other and the rest of the world. This talk also serves to indicate the state of family relationships.

3. Communication is the process by which family members work out and share their meanings with each other. Members create a relational culture, or a shared universe which may be viewed as a unique communication system.

4. Families are part of multigenerational communication patterns. Family members are influenced by the patterns of previous generations as they create their own patterns which will influence generations to come. The family serves as each person's first classroom in communication.

5. Well-functioning families work at managing their communication patterns. Developing and maintaining relationships takes work. Such families develop the capacity to adapt and to create change, to share intimacy and to manage conflict. Well-functioning families are self-aware; they value the goal of effective communication, understanding this may be achieved in various ways depending on the people involved. Yet, these family members consciously work at maintaining or improving their relationships through their communication.

This text attempts to introduce you to the diverse world of families and their complex communication patterns and to develop your observational and analytical skills. It will not present prescriptive solutions for family problems. We hope your increased understanding of family communication will be accompanied by an increased appreciation for complexities and change inherent in this area of study. We also hope you will find the area of family communication as fascinating and challenging as we do.

As an introduction to the family, this chapter will discuss definitional issues and family status. The next section establishes an understanding of the concept of the family which will be used throughout the rest of the book.

FAMILIES: DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

What comes to your mind when you hear the word *family*? How would you define the term? Although *family* is a word used frequently, reaching agreement on its meaning is much more difficult than you might suspect. In the following section, you will see the variations implied in the simple term *family*.

Family Types

There is no single, widely agreed-upon definition of the term *family*. Traditionally, blood and legal connections described families. Families have been viewed according to blood or consanguine ties and conjugal or marital ties, and described as networks of persons who live together over periods of time, and have ties of marriage and kinship to one another (Laing 1973). In their attempt to find the essence of family, Fitzpatrick and Badzinski (1985) suggest the only universal family type is a small, kinship-structured group whose primary function is the nurturing socialization of newborn children. This position describes a *family realm* which is created by the birth process and the establishment of ties across generations (Beutler et al. 1988), the core aspect being the "biological, emotional, social and developmental processes that are inherent in procreation and the nurturing of dependent children." This definition includes both intergenerational issues and alternative family forms.

In contrast, a family may be viewed more broadly as a group of people with a past history, a present reality, and a future expectation of interconnected mutually influencing relationships. Members often (but not necessarily) are bound together by heredity, legal marital ties, adoption, or a common living arrangement at some point in their

A two parent biological family is no longer the most common family form.

lifetime (Kramer 1980). As early as 1926, sociologist Burgess described the family as a "unity of interacting personalities existing chiefly for the development and mutual gratification of its members … held together by internal cohesion rather than external pressures." In their recent work, Fitzpatrick and Badzinski (1994) express support for a broad understanding of family. They support the work of Wamboldt and Reiss (1989), who developed an actional process definition of the family as "a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity; complete with strong ties of loyalty and emotion, and experience history and future" (728). Clearly, these definitions emphasize the personal, voluntarily connected relationships among family members, instead of relying solely on blood ties or legal agreements as the basis for a family.

As we talk about families in this book, we will take a broad, inclusive view. Therefore, if the members consider themselves to be a family, we accept their self-definition. Generally, we will refer to family as networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning in a family relationship.

Such a definition encompasses countless variations of family forms and numerous types of interaction patterns.

In contemporary society, family diversity abounds. One indication of the complexities of today's families may be found in a review of current literature, which includes such categories as large, extended, blood-related groups, formal and informal communal groups, stepfamilies, single-parent families, and gay and lesbian partnerships. These families reflect multiple cultural and socioeconomic situations (Cherlin 1992; Heaton and Jacobson 1994). Your authors represent two very different family orientations. One grew up on an Iowa farm in a German-Irish family of nine children, married, fathered six children, divorced, and is now a grandfather of seven. The other grew up in New York City as an only child of Irish immigrants. After her parents died, she acquired an adopted Norwegian-German family with three siblings. Currently, she is married and raising three children, one of whom is adopted from Korea. Although blood relatives are important to each author, both have friends who are considered to be family members.

You may have grown up in a small family, or a four-generation household. Your brothers and sisters may be blood related, step, or adopted. Some of you may be single parents, stepparents, or foster parents. Whereas some of you may have experienced one long, committed marriage, others may have experienced divorce, death, and remarriage or a committed partnership. No simple pattern exists.

There are many categories of families. We will use a simple category system encompassing the following styles of family formation: the two-parent biological family, single-parent family, blended family, extended family, and committed partners. These are not discrete categories; some families may belong to more than one.

A two-parent biological family consists of parents and the children who are from the union of these parents. Thus, blood ties and the original marriage bond characterize this type. Although frequently thought of as "typical," this type of family no longer represents the most common family form.

A single-parent family consists of one parent and one or more children. This formation may include: an unmarried man or woman and his or her offspring; a man or a woman who lost his or her partner through death, divorce, or desertion, and the children of that union; a single parent and his or her adopted or foster children. When two parents are still involved in child care, the term "primary parent" may be used.

The blended family consists of two adults and their children, all of whom may not be from the union of their relationship. Most are families blended through remarriage, a situation that brings two previous systems into new family ties. You may have witnessed the com-

Many children spend part of their lives in a single parent family.

mon pattern in which a two-parent biological family becomes a single-parent family for a period of time, after which certain members become part of a stepfamily. Families may also be blended through the addition of adopted or foster children.

Although an extended family traditionally refers to that group of relatives living within a nearby area, it may be more narrowly under-stood as the addition of blood relatives, other than the parents, to the everyday life of a child unit. For example, this may take a cross-generational form, including grandparents who live with a parent-child system or who take on exclusive parenting roles for grandchildren:

> *I grew up in an extended family. My great-grandparents were the dominant figures. Most of us lived with our grandparents at one time or another. There were six different households in the neighborhood I grew up in. My great-grandmother, re-ferred to as "Mother," babysat for all the kids while our par-ents were at work.*
>
> *There are also people who were informally adopted in my family. My mother and one of my cousins were raised by their*

grandmother, even though their parents did not live there. In my family no one is considered half or step. You are a member of the family, and that is that.

Another variation of the extended family is the voluntaristic family, a couple or a group of people, some of whom are unrelated, who share a commitment to each other, live together, and consider themselves to be a family. Formal examples of these family types are found in communal situations such as a kibbutz or in a religious organization. Other extended families are informally formed around friendship or common interests or commitments. Two families may share so many experiences that, over time, both sets of children and parents begin to talk of each other as "part of the family."

Committed partners may include married couples without children, lesbian and gay partners, and cohabiting heterosexual couples. Although we often think of families as having children, partners may form their own familial unit as an outgrowth of their original families. Although their numbers are small, some married couples choose to remain child free, while others remain childless due to infertility. Homosexual partners may also be included in this category, as long as the partners consider each other family. Partners without children continue to serve as children to the previous generation and as siblings and extended family members to other generations, while at the same time providing loyalty and affection to one another.

Most people experience family life in an evolutionary manner, moving through different family forms over time, experiencing changes due to aging and unpredictable stresses.

In addition, most persons experience life with one or more biological, adopted, or stepsiblings, the longest lasting family relationships due to age similarity. Sibling relationships are significant sources of information on communication patterns, as this respondent notes:

Because I have very close relationships with my two brothers and my sister, we know which buttons to push when we go home as adults. I find myself adding words back to my vocabulary that haven't been there in years, words such as "jerk," "brat," and "stupid." It is amazing how when I am with my family, we all revert to roles that we were in when we were children. Since I am the oldest, I find myself wanting to take charge.

It is important to distinguish between two types of family experiences—current families and families-of-origin. Families in combina-