Chapter 1

An Introduction to Communication in Family Contexts

Family relationships are some of the most important and long-lasting ones we will have in our entire lives. Although many other disciplines study family relationships, we focus on the power of communication in family contexts. Indeed, how we create a family, maintain family relationships, and even distance ourselves from family members requires communication. In this chapter, we answer three questions to orient you, the reader, to this book and to the study of family communication. First, we answer "what is a family" followed by "what is family communication." Last, we describe "how to use this book."

WHAT IS A FAMILY?

Traditionally, family communication scholars define the family in one of three ways: (1) **structurally** based on form, (2) **functionally** based on task, or (3) **transactionally** based on interaction. Structural definitions rely on specific criteria (e.g., blood ties, law) to determine family membership. For example, the U.S. Census (2010) claims a family "consists of two or more people [one of whom is the householder] related by birth, marriage, or adoption, residing in the same housing unit," and scholars argue that the dominant North American ideology identifies a "real" family as the nuclear family, comprised of a heterosexual couple and their

biological children. If you think of the show *Modern Family*, the family that most clearly fits the structural definition of family consists of Phil, Claire, Haley, Alex, and Luke. Phil and Claire are a mixed-sex couple with three biological children. Communication researchers have found that many people privilege blood ties when thinking about family, especially those that unite parents and children (Baxter et al., 2009).

Although structural definitions of family dominate research literature and policy, functional and transactional definitions are sometimes used to illuminate different facets of familial relationships. For example, functional definitions rely heavily on the tasks members perform. Segrin and Flora (2011) contend that functional definitions "view family as at least one adult and one or more other persons who perform certain tasks of the family life such as socialization, nurturance, development, and financial and emotional support" (p. 6). Leslie Baxter and her colleagues (2009) suggest that functional definitions afford more flexibility than structural definitions but still tend to highlight reproduction and child-rearing: what others have called a biological or genetic focus. On *Modern Family*, Cameron, Mitchell, and Lily represent a family based on function since Cameron and Mitchell, a same-sex couple, provide support for one another and are actively helping Lily, their adopted daughter, develop through socializing and nurturing her.

In addition to structure and function, family communication scholars use the criteria of "transaction" to define what it means to be a family. A transactional definition emphasizes the communication among family members and the subjective feelings, typically positive, generated by interaction. Baxter et al. (2009) argue that transactional definitions emphasize the role communication plays in constituting what it means to be a family. They explain, "Relationships are familial, according to this approach, to the extent that members feel and act like a family" (p. 172). Thus, biology and law hold little relevance when thinking about a family using a transactional definition. The whole extended family on the show *Modern Family* can be seen through a transactional lens if we examine how they feel about each other and how they communicate about being a family. The characters clearly feel and act like a family, and this alone makes them a family, no matter how they are connected through law or blood.

In brief: there are three ways to answer the question "what is a family" and each definition draws different lines around who is "in" and who is "out" with structural definitions of family being the most black and white and also limited. The transactional definition is the most flexible of the three ways.

Although many researchers have privileged structural definitions and view family as a nonvoluntary relationship, some scholars across multiple disciplines are beginning to question and challenge the structural definition of family. For example, Judith Stacey (1996) argues that "No longer is there a single culturally dominant family pattern, like the 'modern' one, to which a majority of citizens conform and most of the rest aspire" (p. 7). Instead, Stacey contends that the postmodern family, or today's family, is characterized by a variety of arrangements, which are constantly changing across the lifespan. Thus, a postmodern family is one that exemplifies the contentious, ambivalent, fluid nature of contemporary family culture and invites the possibility of different family formations. Throughout this textbook we invite you to learn about many different types of families and family relationships.

WHAT IS FAMILY COMMUNICATION?

Defining Family Communication

Family communication has been defined in many ways. To accomplish the task of defining family communication, we should first define communication. **Communication is a process, based in interaction with others, where people create, share, and regulate meaning** (Segrin & Flora, 2011). Defining communication as a process means that it is ongoing and always changing. It has no beginning or end and is influenced by its surroundings. For example, how you communicate with your sister in a restaurant will be influenced by your past conversations, what your relationship is like, how your family as a whole communicates, and quite literally, the restaurant itself (Is it noisy? Is it formal? Are you there for a specific event?). Family communication, then, is **communicating to construct and regulate shared meaning with people who are considered family**. As you read above, we take a broad definition of who "counts" as family.

    Families are constituted in communication. This means that communication *creates* families. Without communication, we would not be able to socially group people by their relationships. The way I talk about and talk to my brother, in part, makes him my brother. It is also true, then, that families that do not fit a traditional narrative, such as families who are not related by blood or law, must communicate more to explain to others (and themselves) that they are a family (see Chapter 14). Many of those types of families are covered in this book including adoptive families (Chapter 23), LGBTQ families (Chapter 26), and voluntary kin (Chapter 30), among others. With this being said, we still consider all families to be discourse dependent. In other words, all families rely on communication to construct their identity to both themselves and the outside world.

    This book is primarily focused on communication **within** the family, but we also cover communication **about** the family.

Intersections of Family Identity

Throughout the textbook we will present distinct family roles and relationships such as parent, child, and sibling. Yet, people perform multiple roles with multiple identities that can overlap and/or sit at the intersection of different locations in the family and contexts. For example, your textbook authors are both sisters and daughters. When we are with our families, we are performing both roles at the same time. We encourage you to think about not only the relationships individually but also to remember the ways in which they overlap and the opportunities and challenges when they do.

Levels of Family Communication

Family communication occurs at multiple levels (Figure 1.1). In this book, you will read about research and theorizing that considers family communication as a phenomenon that happens at each of these levels.

Figure 1.1 Levels of family communication.

Research that takes an **individual** look at family communication asks the individual to report about their communication with the rest of their family. They might ask one member about their family environment growing up (Was your family environment generally warm and accepting? Did you communicate often?). Other researchers focus on how individual differences such as personality or strength of identity influence communication with the rest of the family (for example, see Chapter 25).

Family communication can also be examined at the **dyadic** or **triadic** levels. This type of examination involves thinking about family communication in a more sophisticated way, recognizing that one person's communication influences and is influenced by other people in a dyad (two people) or triad (three people). Dyadic and triadic conversations are typically relaxed and without specific goals. For example, in the in-law communication chapter (Chapter 24), you will read about studies that collected information about communication patterns from an adult child, their spouse (the child in-law), and their mother (the spouse's mother in-law).

Ultimately, the family is a **small group**, and when families are together, they engage in small group communication. Within that small group, families often communicate in smaller clusters like the dyads and triads mentioned above. Small group communication is more challenging than dyadic or triadic communication because there are many voices to be heard and to consider when crafting a message. Small group communication is sometimes more structured than dyadic or triadic communication. For example, imagine planning a funeral with your brothers, sisters, and parents, or discussing with your entire family where to go on vacation next year. These conversations may benefit from some structure and guidance. Usually someone has to take on a leadership role in these situations.

Finally, researchers and theorists think of the family as an **organization** with hierarchies, power structures, and specific roles such as the decision maker, the advice giver, and the kinkeeper (see Chapter 25 for more on kinkeepers). Chapter 6 details family systems theory, a theory that considers the family a living organism that is constantly in flux and adapting to its members and its environment. Complex organizations like businesses can be thought of in the same way.

INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES*

What's in a Name?

This activity is a great way to begin class. It allows the professor to learn about the students and the students to get to know one another. Our names inherently link us to our families.

Tell the class as much as you know about the history of your full name. You may not know much about your name, but share what you do know. Why did your parents pick it? Does your last name have a meaning? What country does your last name come from? Do you share the same last name as your parents? Did you choose to change parts of your name? Do you prefer a nickname (and why)? Does your name include "Jr." or "III"?

This activity pushes you to think about some of your family stories. Family stories tell us who we are and help us form our identities. You will learn much more about family stories in Chapter 7.

Six-Word Story

Create a six-word story that describes your family. Your story can be only six words, but you can describe and explain your story in a paragraph below. You can visit the Six-Word Memoirs website for more examples (http://www.sixwordmemoirs.com/). Other examples appear below.

- Rearing well gives roots and wings.
- Kids get bigger, house gets smaller.
- Saw my mom in my reflection.
- They failed me, loved them anyway.
- Their deepest secrets were never revealed.

*Both activities were taught at the Hope Conference for Faculty Development at a session led by Lynn Turner. They have since been adapted. Thanks to Turner and the other participants for sharing.

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