

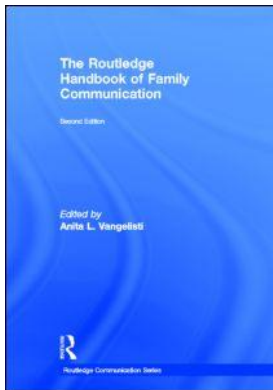
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Twenty Years of Family Research Published in Communication Journals

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Part I
Family Communication
Theories and Methods

Twenty Years of Family Research Published in Communication Journals

A Review of the Perspectives, Theories, Concepts, and Contexts

Glen H. Stamp and Carolyn K. Shue

While the above title may not be as figuratively eloquent as many of the article titles reviewed as a basis for this chapter, the title does articulate the chapter's purpose: to review family communication research published in communication journals during the past 20 years. This chapter extends the work presented in the first edition of this handbook and provides a sense of the current state of research as a backdrop for the other chapters contained within this edition.

The "theory" chapter in the first edition of *The Handbook of Family Communication* (Stamp, 2004) examined the literature in family studies so as to identify the perspectives of inquiry, theories, and concepts most commonly used within family relationships research. In order to accomplish these goals, Stamp reviewed 1,254 articles, taken from 12 journals over a 12 year timeframe. These included eight journals within the communication discipline (*Communication Monographs* [CM], *Communication Quarterly* [CQ], *Communication Studies* [CS], *Human Communication Research* [HCR], *Journal of Applied Communication Research* [JACR], *Journal of Communication* [JC], *Southern Communication Journal* [SCJ], and *Western Journal of Communication* [WJC]) and four interdisciplinary journals (*Journal of Marriage and the Family* [JMF], *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* [JSPR], *Personal Relationships* [PR], and *Journal of Family Communication* [JFC]).

The 2004 review identified the 16 most frequently used theories in family research and over 2,000 concepts which were then organized into 28 general categories. The review also indicated that 92 percent of the articles were empiricist in orientation. Finally, a grounded theory model of family relationships was generated from the concepts identified in the literature.

The initial goals of this chapter are similar in terms of identifying perspectives of inquiry, theories, and concepts in the family literature, with three key differences. First, since the four interdisciplinary journals comprised over 90 percent of the articles reviewed for the first chapter, the focus here is narrowed to family communication research, rather

than family relationships research. Second, as the first chapter examined a concentrated 12 year timeframe, the focus here is to review a longer timeframe so as to identify trends within the family communication literature. And, third, while the first chapter developed a grounded theoretical model from the data, the focus here is to use an existing template, taken from previous literature, to frame the concepts, theories, and contexts.

The specific questions guiding this inquiry are:

- RQ1 How are the different research perspectives—empiricist, interpretive, and critical—represented in family communication research?
- RQ2 What theories, concepts, and contexts have been investigated by family communication scholars over the past 20 years?
- RQ3 What research trends can be traced across the past 20 years of family communication research?
- RQ4 What do these trends tell us about the current, and future, state of family communication research?

Method

The journals analyzed in this review were the same eight communication journals used in the first handbook chapter (*CM*, *CQ*, *CS*, *HCR*, *JACR*, *JC*, *SCJ*, and *WJC*). These journals represent the national and regional journals in our discipline that have been in print since 1990 and publish family communication research. While this list is not exhaustive, it does include the major outlets for the dissemination of family communication research findings. Articles were identified through a key word search of the *Communication and Mass Media* database; family terms such as *married*, *spouse*, *parent*, *child*, *sibling*, and *family* had to appear in the title, abstract, key words, or article. To be retained for the final dataset, the articles had to be research articles that: (a) focused on family communication concepts or theories; (b) recruited a participant base indicative of the family or reflecting on their role in the family; and/or (c) reported findings that would reasonably be used in a literature review for future research. We excluded articles that were opinion pieces or literature reviews. The search resulted in 261 family communication articles published over the 20 year timeframe of 1990–2009.

To begin, we employed Bochner's (1985) definitions to code the articles by their primary research perspective—empiricist, interpretive, and critical. We recorded the frequencies for each of the perspectives as a means of presenting and analyzing research trends across the timeframes. Then, we reviewed the articles to identify the theories, concepts, and contexts investigated in the family communication research employing Graham and Shue's (2000) template as our organizing framework. Graham and Shue identified two dimensions of research, *theory/application* and *communication/relationship*, creating a four quadrant template to classify and describe research efforts. (See Table 1.2 in the Results section for a visual representation of the template and quadrants.)

The two quadrants on the left side of the communication/relationship axis contain the various theories employed in research. The upper left hand quadrant, the communication/theory quadrant, captures theories that focus on “core processes common to all communication” (Graham & Shue, 2000, p. 339) emphasizing message and perceptual processes. In contrast, the lower left hand quadrant, the relationship/theory quadrant, houses theories that explain “the role communication serves in initiating, sustaining, and dissolving social interactions” (p. 339) emphasizing relationship processes.

The two quadrants on the right side of the communication/relationship axis focus on application areas in research. The upper right hand quadrant, the communication/application quadrant, identifies the concepts, constructs, characteristics, and behaviors scholars study while the lower right hand quadrant, the relationship/application quadrant, is comprised of “the situations that serve to contextualize the study of social relationships” (p. 340). For this analysis, the relationship/application quadrant captures the varying settings related to the family (e.g., family unit, married couple, parent–child, siblings).

Following the procedures employed by Graham and Shue (2000), we reviewed the articles to identify and code the theories, concepts and contexts according to the quadrants of the template: communication/theory, relationship/theory, communication/application (construct quadrant), and relationship/application (context quadrant). Similar to the findings of Graham and Shue, articles varied in the number of theories, concepts, and contexts; consequently, one article could be represented in all four quadrants while another article could be represented in only two quadrants.

For most of the journals, we each independently coded half of the articles and then met to review each other’s coding, clarify the scope of the quadrant, confirm classifications, and resolve disagreements. For particularly challenging articles or journals, we coded the articles together. During the coding process, it was necessary to make decisions about which information to retain from the articles for use in the template and trend analysis. One coding challenge we faced was inconsistencies surrounding the identification and incorporation of theories in research. Often authors would make claims that their research was grounded in theory but not reference a specific theory. In these cases, we coded the article into the concept and context quadrants only because of the lack of clear theory reference or discussion. Other authors would *list* several theories but only *discuss* one or two of the theories in the article. In these cases, we coded the articles as employing only those theories discussed in the article. Finally, there were inconsistencies in the names used to identify the theories, such as the *interactional view* (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) referred to as *relational communication*. We identified the theories employed by researchers through the theory name, theorist(s) referenced, and the author’s description of the theory, and then selected the theory name most often used for inclusion in our analysis.

Another coding challenge pertained to the concept quadrant. Some authors made an argument for, and then proceeded to examine, gender differences while other authors did not address gender in the study rationale yet investigated gender differences in the results. While we recognize the importance of investigating participant and relationship characteristics, this inconsistent treatment of gender and other demographic or relationship characteristics such as age, race, and length of relationship led us to ultimately exclude these variables from the analysis.

The final coding challenge focused on the context quadrant where our coding goal was to illustrate the varied types of family relationships and family participants in communication research. To meet this goal, we had to review each methods section to determine who participated and the family relationship focused on in the analysis. For example, articles in which the authors recruited married couples to comment on marriage concepts were easy to code. Conversely, articles in which the authors recruited adults to retrospectively comment on family relationships or to project how they might communicate in a future relationship were more difficult to code. In these cases, although the participants were *adults*, we coded the context as the type of relationship investigated in the study.

After the initial coding, categories were reviewed and collapsed (i.e., “stories” and “storytelling” were combined into one “stories” category) to most accurately capture the nature of the family communication research activity across the four 5 year timeframes of 1990–94, 1995–99, 2000–4, and 2005–9. We reported the frequencies for each topic category in the template as a means of illustrating the amount of research activity associated with each theory, concept, and context. The frequencies also enabled us to statistically examine differences in the amount of research activity within each quadrant across the designated timeframes.

Results

Research Perspectives

Table 1.1 provides the overall number of articles, as well as the research perspective frequencies, across the four timeframes. The results show a statistically significant increase in the overall articles, ranging from 45 family communication articles in 1990–94 to almost twice as many (86) in 2005–9. Clearly, this incremental increase shows the rising interest, among researchers, in exploring family communication.

There has not only been a change in the number of family communication articles, but also a change in the research perspectives over time. As illustrated in Table 1.1, the percentage of articles that are empiricist in orientation have decreased over the past 20 years, while the percentage of interpretive and critical articles have increased. The change over time for the interpretive articles was also statistically significant.

Of the 261 total articles examined, 70.5 percent were empiricist in nature, 23.75 percent were interpretive, and 5.75 percent were critical. This compares to 91.87 percent empiricist, 6.46 percent interpretive, and 1.67 percent critical in the first handbook chapter. The difference can be accounted for in two ways. First, the percentages in the first chapter were heavily skewed by the inclusion of *JMF*, an interdisciplinary journal in which more than two-thirds of the examined articles were derived, and a journal that is almost exclusively empiricist in nature. Secondly, the first chapter examined a timeframe from 1990 to 2001, while this chapter analyzed 1990–2009. As indicated above, the more recent research in family communication has shifted in terms of the proportion of research perspectives within each timeframe. Communication scholars are not only conducting more family communication research, but in doing so, they are less bound to the empiricist research perspective.

Table 1.1 Research Perspective Frequencies by Timeframe

<i>Timeframe</i>	<i>Empirical</i>	<i>Interpretive</i>	<i>Critical</i>	<i>Total Number of Articles</i>
2005–9	59 (68.60%)*	20 (23.26%)	7 (8.14%)	86
2000–4	47 (62.67%)	26 (34.67%)	2 (2.67%)	75
1995–99	42 (76.36%)	10 (18.18%)	3 (5.45%)	55
1990–94	36 (80.00%)	6 (13.33%)	3 (6.67%)	45
Total	184 (70.50%)	62 (23.75%)	15 (5.75%)	261
Chi-Square	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 6.217$ $p = .1051$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 16.194$ $p = .0010$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 3.933$ $p = .2688$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 15.950$ $p = .0012$

* % indicates degree to which the perspective is represented in the literature for the timeframe

An example of empiricist research is the examination of stepfamily functioning, communication competence, and mental health (Schrodts, 2006). Five hundred and eighty-six stepchildren completed questionnaires measuring each of the three constructs, with the results indicating there are five different stepfamily types, each reflecting differences in both communication competence and mental health. Thompson-Hayes and Webb's (2008) work provides an example of interpretive research. Seventeen interviews were conducted with marital couples resulting in three main themes that punctuate these participants' marriage experience: a desire to remain in the marriage (commitment), a desire to grow old together (projected longevity), and outstanding characteristics (marital quality). Finally, an example of critical research is the examination of the corporate ideology of work/life (Hoffman & Cowan, 2008). Through an examination of company websites, the authors argue there is a corporate ideology that "work is the most important element in life" (p. 234), "the traditional family represents the only truly acceptable interest outside of paid work" (p. 235), and "employees bear the responsibility for maintaining this elusive 'work/life' balance" (p. 237).

Theories, Concepts, and Contexts: The Family Communication Template

The initial coding of the 261 articles resulted in 1,258 total theories, concepts, and contexts. One hundred and seven were identified as communication theories (upper left quadrant), 141 were identified as relationship theories (lower left quadrant), 717 were identified as concepts and constructs (upper right quadrant), and 293 were identified as contexts (lower right quadrant). The 1,258 initial theories, concepts, and contexts (referred to as "items" below) were then reduced to 223 specific categories, resulting in 51 communication theory categories, 42 relationship theory categories, 93 concepts and construct categories, and 37 context categories (see Table 1.2).

An examination of the 1,258 items and the 223 categories within the four quadrants reveals some interesting findings. First, by a considerable number, the application quadrants on the right side of the template contain many more family items than the theory quadrants on the left side. Indeed, 80 percent of the total items are application in orientation (1010 concepts and context items) and 20 percent are theoretical in nature (248 communication and relationship theory items).

Second, the top ten most researched categories in each quadrant collectively comprise 18 percent of the total categories (40 out of 223). However, those 40 categories account for 50 percent of the total research items (631 out of 1,258). That is, the ten most researched categories in the communication theory quadrant contain 55 items (out of 107) and each of the top ten categories in the other three quadrants contain 91 out of 141 items (relationship quadrant), 253 out of 717 items (concepts and constructs quadrant), and 232 out of 293 items (context quadrant). When one examines the top single category in each of the four quadrants (communication privacy management theory [11], dialectical theory or theory of family communication patterns [18], satisfaction [65], married couples [77]), the discrepancy in the numbers are even more striking. Four of the 223 categories (1.8 percent) account for 14 percent of the research activity (171 of the 1,258 items). These findings illustrate two seemingly opposing research outcomes: there is great diversity in theories, concepts, and contexts while also an extremely targeted research focus on a few specific theories, concepts, and contexts.

As Table 1.3 illustrates, there has been a steady, statistically significant, increase in the number of theories, concepts, and contexts investigated in the family communication

Table 1.2 (Continued)

THEORY		RELATIONSHIPS		APPLICATION		
<i>Focus: Relationship Theories</i>				<i>Focus: Context</i>		
Activity Theory	1	Interaction Effect Model	1	Children	Mother-Son	2
Adults as Gatekeepers Model	1	Interactional View	7	Children and other Members	Mothers	9
Affectance Arousal Model	1	Interdependence Theory	4	Daughters	Older Family Members	3
Affection Exchange Theory	4	Intergroup Contact Theory	2	Divorced Families	Parent-Child	36
Attachment Theory	9	Interpersonal Model of Depression	1	Divorced Parents	Parents	12
Attribution Theory	3	Model of Aggressiveness	1	Divorcing Couples	Relatives	2
Children as Mediators Model	1	Nonverbal Expectancy Violation Theory	2	Extended Family Members	Remarried Couples	1
Circumplex Model	1	Process Model of Blended Family Development	1	Family Unit	Siblings	14
Commitment Models	2	Relationship Cultural Perspective	1	Father-Child	Single Parent Families	1
Confirmation Theory	6	Role Theory	1	Father-Daughter	Single Parents	1
Conflict Theories	2	Social Relations Model	2	Father-Son	Stepfamilies	14
Defensiveness Model	1	Stage Models	3	Fathers	Stepmothers	1
Dialectical Theory	18	Stress and Coping Theory	1	First Marriage Families	Stepparent-Stepchild	2
Dialogism Theory	1	Theories of Relationship Development	2	Grandmothers	Triads (Two Family Members and Third Party)	1
Effect Models	4	Theory of Discriminative Parental Solicitude	2	Grandparent-Grandchild	Widows	1
Equity Theory	2	Theory of Family Communication Patterns	18	Husbands	Wives	1
Family Systems Theory	11	Theory of Marital Types	10	In-Laws		
Family Violence Perspective	1	Theory of Motivated Information Management	2	Intact Families		
Gender Perspectives	2	Theory of Suicide	1	Married Couples		
Inconsistent Nurturing as Control Theory	2	Trait/State Perspective	1	Mother-Child		
Influence Models	1	Uncertainty Reduction Theory	4	Mother-Daughter		
			141			
		Total Categories: 42				
						Total Categories: 37
						293

Table 1.3 Theory, Construct, and Concept Frequencies by Timeframe

Timeframe	Communication Theories	Relationship Theories	Concept	Contexts
2005–9	40	51	266	96
2000–4	34	29	189	82
1995–99	19	32	145	62
1990–94	14	29	117	53
Total: 1990–2009	107	141	717	293
Chi-Square	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 16.850$ $p = .0008$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 9.553$ $p = .0228$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 70.676$ $p < .0001$	$\chi^2_{(3)} = 15.437$ $p = .0015$

literature over the past 20 years. This increase can be attributed to the substantial increase in the number of family communication articles, in general, across the four timeframes. Factoring in the number of articles demonstrates that while the volume of research has increased, research still, on average, utilizes one communication or relationship theory (0.95 in 1990–94 and 1.06 in 2005–9) to explore approximately three concepts (2.6 in 1990–94 and 3.2 in 2005–9) in one context (1.18 contexts in 1990–94 and 1.1 in 2005–9).

Family Communication Theory, Concept/Construct, and Context Trends

To determine the trends in family communication research, we analyzed the data represented in each of the template quadrants in terms of volume (the most frequently researched theories, concepts, and contexts), consistency (research activity occurred across all four of the timeframes), and disproportion (research activity occurred in the earlier timeframes but not the later or vice versa). These analyses enabled us to empirically determine the theories, concepts, and contexts that have received considerable research attention from family communication scholars, the research areas that are no longer investigated, and the direction of current family research. The following discussion delineates the results of the analyses and provides a brief profile of the theories, concepts, and contexts identified.

Communication theories. The communication theory most frequently used in the family research reviewed was *communication privacy management theory* (CPM) (Petronio, 2002), $n = 11$. CPM explains the process of balancing information sharing and concealment in the management of relationships. According to the theory, there are metaphorical boundaries between private/concealed and public/shared information controlled and owned by individuals. Often decisions about what information is shared are guided by a rule-based management system and in response to the tension between revealing and concealing. Golish and Caughlin (2002) explained adolescents' and young adults' use of topic avoidance with their mothers, fathers, and stepparents in light of CPM processes. Adolescents use topic avoidance to regulate personal boundaries and the permeability of those boundaries vary from parents to stepparents.

Feminist theories ($n = 8$) were the second most frequently employed theoretical perspective in the communication quadrant. Feminist theories refer to a form of critical theory that highlights power imbalances related to gender, race, ethnicity, and class as well as women's lack of access to the male dominated public sphere of discourse (Kramarae, 1981). Buzzanell and Liu (2005) applied feminist theory to examine the discourse of women "who felt discouraged about their employment and advancement chances around the time of their maternity leaves" (p. 2). The results of their poststructuralist

feminist analysis provided insights into gendered organizational practices and called into question the notion that maternity leave policies are a “gender neutral organizing process” (p. 16).

The *aging theories* category (n = 6) includes aging and communication perspectives such as the *communication predicament of aging model* (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986) and the *age stereotypes in interaction model* (Hummert, Garstka, Ryan, & Bonnesen, 2004). These aging models explain how communication occurs between generations. Specifically, these models explore how such factors as cues (age, vocal, nonverbal behavior), experience, context, and stereotypes can both positively and negatively influence younger adults’ communication with older adults. To gain additional insight into the utility of these models in grandparent–grandchild relationships, Anderson, Harwood, and Hummert (2005) investigated the predictors of age-adapted communication behavior such as stereotyped perceptions, relationship closeness, reciprocal self-disclosure, and age salience. The type of relationship (e.g., grandparent or acquaintance) and health of the older adult were found to be key factors in the enactment of stereotypes.

Many of the aging theories and models stem from *communication accommodation theory* (CAT; n = 6), which focuses on the processes through which interactants modify their language, vocal patterns, and nonverbal communication in response to their conversation partner (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). The modification can result in convergence which highlights similarities in enacted behaviors or divergence which stresses distinctiveness. Rittenour and Soliz (2009) used CAT as their underlying framework to investigate the factors associated with positive and negative mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships. Communication factors, family of origin factors, and daughter-in-law future caregiving and contact intentions all contribute to a sense of shared family identity from the perspective of daughter-in-laws.

The final most frequently used theory, *social cognitive theory* (n = 6), was used in research across the four timeframes. The only other theory used across all four timeframes was feminist theories. Social cognitive theory assumes we learn behavior through the observation of “models” such as family members, friends, and media personalities (Bandura, 1977). Rimal and Flora (1998) examined the effectiveness of a public information campaign on the dietary behavior of children and adults finding both adult-to-child, and child-to-adult, influences. The results of their study support the need to target the entire family and not individuals as potential sources of influence when attempting to change health behaviors.

In terms of disproportional representation, aging theories, CAT, and CPM were not represented in the 1990–94 timeframe but prominently utilized in the 2000–9 timeframes. This is not surprising given when these theories were developed. The other theories that had disproportionate representation (e.g., developmental theories, face theories) were also infrequently referenced (five occurrences or less across the timeframes) in the literature.

Relationship theories. The two most commonly used relationship theories were *dialectical theory* and the *theory of family communication patterns*, each of which occurred 18 times. Dialectical theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) examines the “interplay of opposing tendencies in the symbolic, not material, practices of relationship parties” (p. 14). The three most commonly occurring tensions are the dialectics of integration–separation, stability–change, and expression–nonexpression, each of which can occur as an internal dialectic (within the relationship) or an external dialectic (between the couple and someone/something else). Pawlowski (1998) examined dialectical tensions in marital relationships and found that the internal dialectic of autonomy–connection occurred

most often, but the dialectic of openness–closedness was the most salient tension. In addition, the external dialectic of conventionality–uniqueness involved social networks while revelation–concealment was often used as a means to prevent a negative reaction from others.

The theory of family communication patterns (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002) posits four family types based on the dimensions of conversation (the degree to which family members can talk freely and spontaneously) and conformity orientation (the degree to which families encourage or discourage uniformity of beliefs and attitudes as well as behavioral regularity). Koesten (2004) examined the relationship between family communication patterns and communication competence and found that children growing up in conversation oriented families enacted a greater variety of interpersonal skills in adult relationships than those growing up in conformity oriented families.

The next most frequently used theoretical perspective in the relationship quadrant was *family systems theory* (n = 11). Family systems theory focuses on family relationships, rather than individual characteristics. As such, factors such as interdependence, wholeness, complexity, openness, and equifinality are privileged (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006). Schrodtt, Soliz, and Braithwaite (2008) used a systems approach to examine the everyday talk and relationship satisfaction in stepchild, stepparent, and parent triads. By using the stepfamily as the unit of analysis, they determined whether relational satisfaction in everyday talk is due to actor (the propensity for a family member to engage in talk across family relationships), partner (the propensity for a family member to elicit talk across family relationships), or relationship (the propensity for a family member to talk to only one other family member) effects. Among the findings were that satisfaction between spouses is primarily due to actor effects while a child's satisfaction with the stepparent is due to relationship effects.

The *theory of marital types* was utilized ten times in the family research reviewed. According to Fitzpatrick (1988), marital couples can be categorized into three types: traditionals, who “hold conventional ideological values about relationships” and value interdependence, stability, and regularity (p. 76); independents who “hold fairly non-conventional values about relational and family life” and privilege individuality, separate spaces, and spontaneity (p. 76); and separates who “seem to hold two opposing ideological views” in that they are conventional while also valuing individual freedom (p. 76). Honeycutt and Brown (1998) examined humor in marriage and found that traditionals were higher in humor orientation than either separates or independents.

The final most referenced relationship theory was *attachment theory* (n = 9). Attachment theory developed as a means to further understand the close relationship between infants and caregivers (Bowlby, 1988). Different attachment styles include secures (confident and comfortable with others), dismissives (confident and uncomfortable with others), and fearfuls (desire close relationships but often unable to obtain them). Dainton (2007) examined the relationship between attachment style and relationship maintenance in marriage and found that spouses with a dismissive attachment style used maintenance behaviors less than those with secure attachment styles. In addition, spouses with a dismissive attachment style were less likely to value, or appreciate, the maintenance behavior of their spouse.

Attachment theory, dialectical theory, family systems theory, and the theory of family communication patterns were not only high in volume, but also consistent in usage, as each was represented at least once in each of the four timeframes. All four theories did have greater representation in the later timeframes. All four of these theories are standing the test of time and remain popular with family communication researchers.

The theory of marital types, while high in volume, was disproportionate in treatment as it was represented, with one exception, entirely from 1990–99. It appears that this theory, developed in the 1980s, is decreasing in popularity. Two other theories were also disproportionate in usage: the *interactional view* (Watzlawick, et al., 1967) and *affection exchange theory* (Floyd, 2001). The interactional view was most heavily utilized during 1990–94, with the representation tapering off in the subsequent timeframes. Cissna, Cox, and Bochner (1990) employed the interactional view in their analysis of the communicative means through which stepfamilies (re)organize into a new family structure. In contrast, affection exchange theory was only used during the 2000–9 timeframes. Floyd and Morman (2001) examined the differences in affection between fathers and sons and found more affection displayed by fathers to biological sons and adopted sons, as compared to step-sons.

Concepts and Constructs. By a substantial amount, the largest quadrant was the communication-application quadrant. In terms of volume, the following 23 concept categories were studied in at least 10 articles: *satisfaction* (n = 65), *message processes* (n = 29), *conflict* (n = 25), *disclosure* (n = 23), *verbal aggression* (n = 21), *identity* (n = 20), *control* (n = 19), *closeness* (n = 17), *mental health* (n = 17), *television* (n = 17), *contradictions* (n = 15), *maintenance* (n = 15), *family patterns* (n = 14), *self* (n = 14), *competence* (n = 13), *marital types* (n = 13), *support* (n = 13), *avoidance* (n = 11), *emotions* (n = 11), *aging* (n = 10), *health* (n = 10), *negative patterns* (n = 10), and *roles* (n = 10).

Twenty-five of the concept categories had consistent representation across the four timeframes. These include 15 of the high volume concepts (those underlined above). In addition, the following 10 concept categories, though appearing in less than 10 articles, were consistently studied across each timeframe: *attachment*, *commitment*, *contact*, *expectations*, *experience*, *influence*, *interventions*, *stories*, *trust*, and *schemata*.

Finally, 14 of the concept categories, contained in six or more articles, had disproportionate representation across the four timeframes. *Affection*, *aging*, *identity*, *media*, *self*, *avoidance*, *secrets*, *culture*, *work/life*, *outcomes*, *structure*, and *uncertainty* all were moderately or not represented in the earlier timeframes and more prominently represented in recent research. In contrast, the concepts of *abuse* and *marital types* each received more attention from family researchers in the two early timeframes.

In this data set, satisfaction was both the most frequently studied concept and the most studied concept in each of the four timeframes. Some of the subcategories making up the more general category of satisfaction were quality of contact, marital quality, and family adjustment. In much of the research, the relationship between some version of satisfaction and some other variable(s) in a particular relationship was explored. For example, recent research has examined: relationship satisfaction and family communication patterns in parent–child relationships (Zhang, 2007); relational repair message interpretation and marital satisfaction in remarried individuals (Bello, Brandau-Brown, & Ragsdale, 2008); marital and in-law satisfaction in married couples (Serewicz, Hosmer, Ballard, & Griffin, 2008); everyday talk and relationship satisfaction in stepfamilies (Schrodt, et al., 2008); and communication motives and relationship satisfaction in sibling relationships (Fowler, 2009).

Message processes was the second most frequently studied concept and included subcategories such as message types, everyday talk, communication repair, communication topics, and information processes. Heisler and Ellis (2008) examined how memorable messages from others about motherhood impacted both women’s attitudes about motherhood and the construction of their identity as mothers. Other research in the message process category included the association between family communication patterns

and information processing outcomes (Schrodt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008) and address practices between married couples and their in-laws (Jorgenson, 1994).

Conflict was the third most studied concept. An example of research on conflict was the examination of the relationship between family type and conflict in family units (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). The results indicated that conflict avoidance occurs less often in pluralistic families and more often in protective and laissez faire families. In addition, there was a positive relationship between conformity orientation and conflict and a negative relationship between conversation orientation and conflict.

Regarding the concepts that were disproportionately represented in the articles, the results might be due to the incremental growth in the number of concepts across the four timeframes. However, there does appear to be increased interest in some of the areas that might not be accounted for by just a rise in overall research. For example, the concept of aging had eight of ten articles in the last ten years and none in the 1990–94 timeframe, while the concept of media had seven of nine studies, and work/life all six, in the past ten years.

Contexts. The most frequently researched family communication contexts in the past 20 years are *married couples* (n = 77), *family units* (n = 36), *parent–child* relationships (n = 36), *siblings* (n = 14), *stepfamilies* (n = 14), *father–son* relationships (n = 13), *children* (n = 12), and *parents* (n = 12). Across the four timeframes married couples, the family unit, and the parent–child relationship were consistently the top contexts studied. All the other top context areas, except for stepfamilies, also focus on individuals who make up the varying roles and relationships captured in the family of procreation. This is not surprising as these contexts also operationally represent traditional definitions of *family* from a structural approach (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004) and are the ways in which most family researchers operationalize families (Fitzpatrick & Caughlin, 2002).

All of the top context areas in terms of volume except the *father–son* relationship have consistently been studied across the four timeframes. Two other context areas, *mothers* (n = 9) and *divorced parents* (n = 7), have also been a consistently studied context by family communication researchers. In regard to disproportional representation of context, *father–son* relationship research was most prominent in the 1990–94 timeframe and steadily decreased with no father–son studies in the 2005–9 timeframe. Two other context areas that have received considerable attention since 2000 are the *grandparent–grandchild* relationship (n = 9) and the *mother–child* relationship (n = 6).

There is a substantial body of research focused on married couples as participants or individuals projecting their expectations for married life. Of particular research interest are the broad outcomes of marital satisfaction (or dissatisfaction), stability (or lack thereof), and the processes that contribute to those outcomes (Fitzpatrick & Caughlin, 2002). Often married couples are compared to participants representing other relationship contexts such as engaged couples (Honeycutt & Wiemann, 1999) or even combined with other relationship contexts such as dating or cohabitating couples in the analysis of research results (Olson, 2002).

Research on the family unit has been extensive, and this analysis captures studies that ask participants to reflect in general about processes within families. For example, Schrodt (2005) asked participants to complete measures of family communication schemata and family functioning. The items on those measures asked participants to comment on “family members” (p. 375) or “our family” (p. 376). Other research on topics such as family values provide insight into the family unit context area but do not actually use family members as participants (Cloud, 1998).

The majority of dyadic research in the family of procreation setting was in the broad category of parent–child relationships. In our review, parent–child research combined responses from, or about, mothers and fathers as well as combined responses from, or about, daughters and sons (e.g., Warren, 2005). Research has, and our coding system accounted for, more specific types of parent–child dyads, such as the consistently researched mother–child relationship and the disproportionately studied father–son relationship. Mother–child studies focus on both sons and daughters collectively in the sample. For example, Wilson, Roberts, Rack, and Delaney (2008) studied mothers’ interactions with their children during playtime. Sixty percent of the child participants were male while 40 percent of the child participants were female. Father–son studies, in contrast, examine the unique nature of male relationships within the family (e.g., Morman & Floyd, 1999).

In addition to the dyad, family research often focused on specific roles such as mothers, parents, divorced parents, and children. For example, there is research on how women form their expectations of motherhood (Ex, Janssens, & Korzilius, 2002), how parents transition into parenthood (Stamp, 1994), and how divorced parents negotiate co-parenting (Manusov, Cody, Donohue, & Zappa, 1994). Research on children has investigated how children perceive communication processes (Marshall & Levy, 1998), how divorce impacts children (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007), and how family communication processes can impact children’s communication with friends (Ledbetter, 2009).

Research extending beyond the family of procreation includes studies of stepfamilies and grandparent–grandchild relationships. Although research on stepfamilies has occurred across the four timeframes, the vast majority of research has occurred since 2000. All nine articles on grandparent–grandchild relationships were published in the 2000–9 timeframe. The past decade of research on stepfamilies demonstrates evolving forms of families (e.g., Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006) while the focus on the grandparent–grandchild dyad extends intergenerational research into the family setting (e.g., Anderson et al., 2005).

Additional analysis of the *Journal of Family Communication*. The *Journal of Family Communication (JFC)* was established in 2001 and consequently did not meet the 20 year timeframe criteria of the journals selected for review. However, as a secondary analysis, we reviewed the research articles in *JFC* to determine their primary research perspective and to identify theories, concepts, and contexts that were not represented in the previously reviewed articles. We reviewed 85 *JFC* research articles; 65 percent ($n = 55$) of the articles were from the empiricist perspective, 34 percent ($n = 29$) from the interpretive perspective, and 1 percent ($n = 1$) from the critical perspective. *JFC* mirrors the national and regional communication journals in that the majority of research articles are from an empiricist perspective, but to a lesser degree, and the percentage of articles from the interpretive perspective is higher in *JFC* than the other journals reviewed.

Many of the most frequently researched theories, concepts, and contexts such as CPM, dialectical theory, theory of family communication patterns, satisfaction, message processes, marital couples, parent–child relationships, and the family unit were also represented in the research in *JFC*. The articles in *JFC* have, however, studied additional or provided a more nuanced investigation of some concepts and contexts, as well as employed additional theoretical perspectives. For example, research has focused on defining *family* from the perspective of participants (Edwards & Graham, 2009), the concept of *adoption* (Suter & Ballard, 2009), and more purposefully investigated the role of *culture* in the family setting (Bylund, 2003). *Step-grandparents* (Soliz, 2007), *commuter wives* (Bergen, Kirby, & McBride, 2007), *elderly* parents and their adult children

(Miller, Shoemaker, Willyard, & Addison, 2008), and same-sex families (Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006) were contexts explored in *JFC* articles.

As was the case in the eight reviewed journals, there was great variety in the types of theories employed by researchers publishing in *JFC*, yet many of the theories were only used in one research study. Some of the theories utilized in *JFC* that were not employed in the previously reviewed articles included the risk and resiliency model of ambiguous loss (Afifi & Keith, 2004) and social exchange theory (Ragsdale & Brandau-Brown, 2005).

Discussion and Directions for Future Research

Over the past 20 years, family communication research has steadily increased and focused on a variety of theories, concepts and contexts. Although the empiricist perspective is still the predominate approach to family communication research, research from the interpretive perspective has increased substantially and has added additional insight into the lived experience of family members. The empiricist tradition which enables the investigation of many variables in the same study has expanded our breadth of understanding. More work, however, is needed in our depth of understanding. For example, in the past 20 years satisfaction has been a concept of interest in 65 studies; however, what more do we really know about satisfaction today? What more do we need to know about satisfaction? Multi-perspective work can help us understand the complexities of concepts beyond simply measuring again the degree of a concept present in a family relationship.

As illustrated in the family communication template (Table 1.2) and similar to the findings of Graham and Shue (2000), research efforts have focused more on the right side of the communication/relationship axis, application, than on the left side of the axis, theory. The diversity of application research is both a strength and potential limitation. This diversity has added to our breadth of understanding but has also made our research somewhat fragmented. While lines of family communication research can be traced (e.g., maintenance behaviors among married couples, bereaved parents, family secrets), other researchers have explored interesting and important theories, concepts and contexts in one study but then do not develop the investigation further as evidenced by the substantial number of categories with a frequency of one or two.

This lack of commitment to a line of research is most apparent on the theory side of the quadrant. Several of the theories utilized to ground family communication research were employed in only one or two studies. Such “theory shopping” does not promote theory development in the field nor does it enable researchers to tie concepts to theories through a developed programmatic investigation. In some cases, as we reviewed and coded the articles, there seemed to be a theoretical frame that was not fully articulated, resulting in limited studies identified as using a particular approach. For example, some of the articles used stories or narratives to frame the research, but narrative theory was not developed in any systematic way, resulting in a much larger story concept category than a narrative theory category. By not including narrative theory as a foundation for the research, and then not connecting the findings back to the theory, our ability to extend the understanding of narrative theory within family communication is limited.

Building a line of research around a theory or engaging in systematic theory development will increase our understanding of the interplay between theoretical assumptions and family communication phenomena as well as promote further family communication research. This outcome can be seen in some of the most frequently utilized theoretical perspectives identified in the template. Uncertainty reduction theory, dialectical theory,

theory of family communication patterns, CAT, CPM, and affection exchange theory are all theoretical perspectives that were either developed in the communication field or embraced and advanced by communication scholars. Certainly, there is room to advance our understanding of family communication through the additional use of currently underutilized theories such as constructivism, diffusion of innovations theory, structuration theory, and inconsistent nurturing as control theory.

Two prominent theories in the communication field that were not utilized in the 2005–9 timeframe were the theory of marital types and the interactional view. Clearly, research areas drop out of favor and scholars lose interest but there is still value in these theories. For example, Rogers (2006) argues that the interactional view applied to family interactions enables scholars to “identify specific communication behavior or patterns that lead in directions desired or toward less desired family outcomes” (p. 127). There is still more to learn from, and about, classic theories in the field.

Often the means by which theoretical and conceptual work gains attention is when the research occurs within a specific context. As family experiences in our culture evolve, so must our contextual work. Future research is needed in the areas of (1) specific family dyads beyond married couples such as mothers–sons and fathers–daughters, (2) children and other family members beyond siblings and parents, (3) single-parents and single-parent families, (4) same-sex parents, and (5) fictive kin. Over the past 20 years, we have broadened the scope of family contexts. We need to continue these efforts since, for many people, it is a specific family dyad or even fictive kin that are more influential in their lives than the primary family unit.

The purpose of this chapter was to review family communication research published in communication journals. We recognize that family communication research is published in other journals as well. Some research areas that are underrepresented in these analyses may be well-represented in other journal venues. We encourage family communication scholars to seriously consider the communication journal outlets identified in this review as a means of disseminating their work. Providing scholars with an understanding of what we currently know about the field, as well as the gaps in what has been published in the discipline, provides scholars with a foundation for their own programmatic research. We are encouraged by the breadth of past work and while we might make predictions about what might be reviewed for the third edition of the *Handbook of Family Communication*, we know we will also be surprised by some of the future family communication research directions and findings.

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