

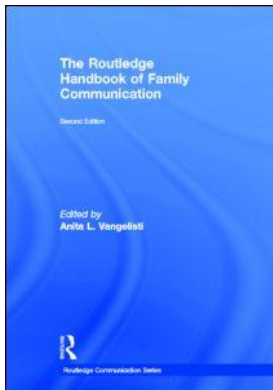
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Widening Circles

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Widening Circles

Interactive Connections Between Immediate Family and Larger Social Networks

Maria Schmeckle and Susan Sprecher

Introduction

Individuals, couples, and immediate families exist within wider interactive worlds. These wider circles of social networks and extended families have always been around, but in every era they take on their own forms and nuances. This chapter takes up the challenge of synthesizing the latest interdisciplinary research on the interactive connections between the wider circles of social networks and immediate family dynamics at the small group level.

We begin the chapter by defining *social networks*, *extended families*, and the *primary partnerships* which are embedded in and influenced by social networks and extended families. Second, we highlight recent themes in the literature on social networks and extended families that are related to communication. Next, we explore how social networks (including extended families) affect primary partnerships, as well as parenting and child outcomes. Turning our attention in the opposite direction, we then explore how transitions in primary partnerships and immediate families affect social networks and extended families. We end the chapter with suggestions for future directions in these areas of research.

Definitions and Concepts

Social Networks

In one approach to the study of social networks, groups of people are asked about their relationships with each other, for the purpose of mapping their patterns of interaction. This approach began with Moreno's (1951) sociometric studies of naturally occurring groups and is exemplified more recently by Wellman's studies of personal communities (e.g., Hampton & Wellman, 1999). (An example of such a network study conducted with extended families can be found in Widmer and LaFarga [2000] and Widmer [2006]). Network data from all or most people in a group are difficult to obtain and analyze.

The second and more common approach to studying social networks is to identify the relationships that individuals have with others, but from the individuals' perspective

only. These networks have been referred to as “ego-centered” or “personal” (Allan, 2006). Who are included in an individual’s network will depend on the researcher’s definition of network and the related criteria used to identify network members. For example, individuals can be asked who is important to them, with whom they interact, to whom they feel close, or from whom they receive support or would call on for assistance. The criteria can also be combined (e.g., “Name your close others with whom you communicate on a weekly basis”). The most expansive definition of a social network are others *known* by the person, which has been referred to as a person’s *global network* (Milardo, 1992). Practically, though, enumerating the network of all known others for a particular ego would be difficult if not impossible. Most often, social network researchers ask individuals about specific networks, and present a finite space for responses.

A major distinction in the literature is between the *psychological network*, which consists of people defined to be important or significant, and the *interactive network*, which consists of people with whom one interacts on a frequent basis (Milardo, 1992; Surra & Milardo, 1991). Milardo (1989) found that when individuals were asked to generate both types of networks, the overlap between the two networks was only 25 percent. As noted by Parks (2007), however, the interactive network in Milardo’s study was limited to individuals with whom there was communication in the past 24 hours. Parks argued that the psychological network and the interactive network may be better conceptualized as different sectors of the same overall network.

Social networks or sectors of networks, regardless of the specific criteria used to generate them, can vary on several properties. One network property is *size*, which refers to the number of people in the particular network or network sector. *Composition* refers to the type of individuals or relationships within the network. One common way to characterize the composition is the proportion of kin to nonkin, but a social network can be divided by any number of dimensions, including the proportion of those similar on some demographic trait (e.g., sex, age, race) versus those who are different. A third characteristic of networks is *density*. This refers to the degree that the network members themselves are interconnected. Other examples of network concepts include strength of network ties (e.g., strong versus weak) and the existence of cliques (cohesive subgroups). For ego-centered networks, these network properties would be assessed from the individual’s perspective. For further discussion of network properties, see Felmlee (2003), Parks (2007), and Schmeckle and Sprecher (2004).

Regardless of whether the social network for an individual is psychological or interactive, small or large, dense or loosely connected, there are certain types of “Others” likely to be included in it. Most people would include their immediate family members (e.g., spouses, children) and at least some of their extended family when asked to indicate who is in their social network. In fact, it is possible to view the extended family as a special type of network or network sector (see discussion below). Most studies on kin networks have not been conducted by network analysts or personal relationship researchers, but by family scholars. In the next section, we discuss how extended families have been defined in the family literature.

Extended Families

An important component of social networks that is studied on its own is the extended family. Extended families are often studied without an explicit definition of what is meant by this term. In this chapter we highlight four ways of conceptualizing extended family

membership. The first three align with a cross-cultural study of kinship conducted by Murphy (2008): *close primary kin* consist of adult children and their parents and siblings; *secondary kin who are blood relatives* include aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, and nieces; and *secondary affinal kin* are those related through marriage, and include parents-in-law and brothers- and sisters-in-law. Stepparents, stepsiblings, and other steprelatives might be included in this category as well. To these three types we add a fourth, *voluntary kin*, following Braithwaite et al. (2010). *Voluntary kin* are individuals who are not related by blood or law but who are considered to be kin or relatives. Examples include “other-mothers” who help to raise the children of friends or neighbors (Collins, 1990), godparents, former steprelatives and in-laws (Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006), and the “rainbow kinship” networks of gay men in Los Angeles (Stacey, 2004).

Just as there are various ways that social network members have been identified in actual research, extended family members have also been enumerated in various ways. One way is to ask people to list all known genetic and affinal kin, as was done in a recent study by Roberts and Dunbar (2011). Another approach is to identify different types of relatives and gather information about people in each of the types (Murphy, 2008).

Primary Partnerships Within Social Networks and Extended Families

Networks and extended families can be reduced to a constellation of pairs or dyads; in fact, the social dyad can be considered to be the simplest form of a network (Smith & Christakis, 2008). Arguably, the most important identifiable dyad for an individual is the romantic pair, which can be in the form of a marital, cohabiting, or dating relationship. We will refer to this dyad, regardless of its specific form, as the *primary partnership*. Not all adults, at any given time, are in such a partnership. Furthermore, of those who are, some would view their membership in another social dyad (e.g., with their child, with their best friend) to be more important. Nonetheless, society places importance on the primary partnership. Relationship researchers have examined how larger social networks influence primary partnerships, as well as how primary partnerships impact the larger network. Much less research examines how other pairs—friends, siblings, parent–child, or grandparent–grandchild—are impacted by larger social networks.

Current Research About Social Networks and Extended Families

Changing Communication Processes

People have more ways than ever before to communicate with others, including with distant social network members and extended families. Traditional means of communication, which include face-to-face interaction, landline phones, and letter writing, of course, still exist. Although landline phones and letter writing may be decreasing, face-to-face interactions have not been replaced, but rather have been supplemented by new forms of communication technologies, which include cell phones (voice, text, photos, videos) and Internet (e.g., email, instant messaging, web-based Internet calls, blogs, Twitter, multiplayer videogames, and social networks such as Facebook). Despite the worry expressed by some (e.g., Nie, 2001) that new forms of communication technology have reduced face-to-face interactions with neighbors, extended family members, and even with one’s immediate family and intimate others, this appears not to be the case. Recent evidence indicates that people do not have less face-to-face interaction with others, as compared to

years ago, and there is even some evidence to indicate that overall communication with others has increased, especially by those who frequently use cell phones and the Internet (e.g., Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Kennedy, Smith, Wells, & Wellman, 2008; Wang & Wellman, 2010). Wang and Wellman (2010) argue: “We believe that the growing number of friends in America is linked in part to the proliferation, popularity, and penetration of social media; increasingly diversified Internet users; and ubiquitous mobile connections” (p. 1163).

Growing evidence indicates that people use social networking sites such as Facebook to not only stay in touch with the inner core of their network but also to re-connect with peripheral members, including long distance relatives and friends (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Facebook began in 2004 to connect university students, but then expanded to include high school students and then adults of all ages. Profile information and public wall posts are visible to network members identified or confirmed as “friends,” and therefore people with whom one does not typically have much face-to-face contact (because of geographical distance or busy lives) can still have knowledge of one’s life.

Some studies have asked adults of diverse ages about their perceptions of how new communication technologies have affected their interactions with others. In a nationally representative phone survey of 2,252 adults in 2007–9 (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2008), most of the households represented in the study used the Internet and cell phones. About 90 percent of the participants reported that the Internet had no impact on the time they spent with family members, friends, or at social events. In addition, respondents reported that the Internet and cell phones had either increased the quality of communication with family members who did not live with them (53 percent) or made no difference (44 percent); only 2 percent believed that they had decreased it. A similar pattern of results was found for the effect of communication technology on the quality of communication with members of their household and with friends. About 25 percent believed that the Internet and cell phones made it possible for their family to be closer than was the case when their family was growing up; only 11 percent believed that it made their family less close (60 percent believed that it did not make a difference).

A second, recent large-scale study that focused on asking people their views of the effect of communication technologies on their interactions with others was conducted with a representative sample of Canadians in August of 2009 (reported in Wellman, Garofalo, & Garofalo, 2009). Only 7 percent of the respondents believed that communication technology made them less connected to their family; 35 percent said that the technology made them feel closer and more connected to each other. Women, as “kin-keepers” and facilitators of social connections were found to use the Internet to do such network and kin bonding activities as sending electronic family newsletters, photos, and social invitations (Wellman et al., 2009).

Other research has examined whether people who are heavy users of communication technologies differ from those who are light users or nonusers in aspects of their social and extended family networks. This research has shown that people who are heavy users of the Internet generally have more (not less) friends, social contact, confidants, and interaction opportunities than those who are light users or nonusers (e.g., Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009).

Although communication technologies can increase people’s ability to stay in touch with their network members in beneficial ways, there is also an interesting shift in long-distance communication that can have more mixed implications for kin and networks.

Landline phones connect households, but cell phones and the Internet connect individuals, which has been referred to as “networked individualism” (Wellman et al., 2009). Thus, the increasing use of cell phones may lead to the reduced likelihood of interacting with others in the household beyond the one being called.

Social Networks

In this section, we discuss two interesting lines of sociological research about social networks, both of which have links to the topic of family communication.

Are Americans’ Discussion Networks Shrinking?

In 2006, headlines appeared in the popular media, such as “The lonely American just got a bit lonelier” (*New York Times*) and “Study: 25% of Americans have no one to confide in” (from *USA Today*). The media flurry about lonely and isolated Americans arose from a publication by a team of respected sociologists who presented data from the General Social Survey (GSS) on changes in Americans’ discussion networks from 1985 to 2004 (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). GSS participants surveyed in the different years were asked: “Looking back over the last six months—who are the people with whom you discussed matters important to you?” Participants were also asked other questions, including the relationship they had with each person. Results indicated that from 1985 to 2004, the number of discussion partners decreased from 2.94 to 2.08, the percentage who reported four or five others decreased from 33 percent to 15.3 percent, and the percentage of participants who reported discussing important matters with no one increased from 10 percent to almost 25 percent. Although the researchers found that both family and nonfamily confidants decreased, the decrease was greater for nonfamily connections. They concluded that Americans’ social contacts can be described as a “densely connected, close, homogeneous set of ties slowly closing in on itself, becoming smaller, more tightly interconnected, more focused on the very strong bonds of the nuclear family” (p. 371). The researchers speculated that the decrease could be due to more hours spent at work, the growing influence of Internet communication, and the subsequent reduction in time spent in traditional social settings and public spaces. These speculations were consistent with earlier observations of Putnam (2000), who had written in *Bowling Alone* that there was a decrease from the 1960s through 2000 in various activities and forms of social engagement.

The findings published in 2006 (McPherson et al.) claiming a decrease in Americans’ discussion networks created an academic debate. For example, Fischer (2009) questioned some of the original claims, obtained NORC’s assistance in finding a coding error for 41 cases, and re-analyzed the data. Although the decrease in discussion networks was attenuated slightly after the correction, it was still found. To further bolster his argument that the original finding of increased social isolation was an anomaly, Fischer analyzed other, relevant items in the GSS, and found that responses to the other items did not show a decrease in Americans’ social networks over the same period of time. For example, there was not a change found in how often the participants reported spending a social evening with relatives, neighbors, or friends outside the neighborhood or in the reported number of friends and relatives with whom the participants kept in touch at least once a year (the average was about 15).

Other recent data also suggest that Americans' discussion networks have not decreased over this recent period of time, and may have even increased. Wang and Wellman (2010) selected from a national study conducted by the Center for Digital Future, the 2002 and 2007 American samples of adults aged 24 to 74, and compared them on their number of friends. Only about 5 percent of the participants in 2002 reported not having any friends whom they see or speak to at least once a week, and this percentage did not change for the 2007 sample. The average number of friends the participants met with or spoke to at least weekly in both years was approximately 10. In addition, they found that heavy Internet users actually had more "offline" friends in 2007 than in 2002.

Another recent study that examined trends over time in the size of Americans' social networks was conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, with a phone survey with 2,512 Americans in summer of 2008 (Hampton et al., 2009). Similar to the procedure in the GSS, the Pew participants were asked to indicate with whom they had discussed important matters in the past six months. The researchers reported that Americans are not as isolated as was believed to be the case based on the GSS trend data; they found that only 5.8 percent reported "no one" to either question. However, they did report that the average size of Americans' core discussion groups had declined since 1985, by approximately one confidant (they compared their responses to those of the GSS data from 1985). Participants in 2008 had an average of three core network members.

Social Networks and Social Contagions

A second recent line of research has examined social contagion through social networks—for example, how behaviors spread from person to person through a social network (e.g., Christakis & Fowler, 2009). More specifically, this research has considered how health behaviors (e.g., obesity, smoking, smoking cessation, consumption of alcohol, exercise) and affective states (happiness, optimism, depression, loneliness) can ripple through a social network. This work is based primarily on a longitudinal cohort study that began in 1948 with an original cohort of 5,209 residents from the town of Framingham (Massachusetts) and which has continued not only with the original cohort but also with their children and spouses ($N = 5,124$) and grandchildren who entered the study in 2002 ($N = 4,095$). A frequently cited finding from this research is that the likelihood that individuals became obese over time is associated with the likelihood that their social contacts, including friends of friends, became obese (Christakis & Fowler, 2007). Another well-publicized finding is about the spread of happiness: clusters of happy people and clusters of unhappy people can be identified in larger social networks, with happiness spreading through a social network to a greater degree than unhappiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).

The researchers argued that there are various mechanisms by which behaviors can be transmitted through a network (e.g., Christakis & Fowler, 2009). First, people may copy other people's specific behaviors (e.g., eating habits) if they have direct interaction with them or share an environment. The second mechanism, and the one they argued is probably most responsible for social contagion, is the spread of norms. Likely, norms, such as changing expectations or standards, can spread with minimal contact and through Internet communication. The most recent finding from this line of research is that divorce can also spread through a network, a topic that we discuss more later.

Extended Families

The literature on extended families tends to be fragmented, with many studies focused on specific types of relationships rather than the kinship group as a whole (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Adult children's relationships with parents, and grandparent–grandchild relationships have received significantly more attention than other types of extended family members (Milardo, 2010). Here we will discuss a recent line of research that has attempted to address the lack of attention to aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews.

These secondary kin, when studied, become visible as important contributing members of families. Strong-Boag's (2009) historical look at aunts in Canada demonstrates their vital role as alternative caregivers to nieces and nephews when parents could not fulfill their duties. Richardson's (2009) study of inner city African American boys and their single mothers revealed the serendipitous finding of vital surrogate father roles performed by the mothers' brothers (the boys' uncles), leading Richardson to consider these uncles as a "second line of defense" for single mothers, after the grandmothers. Milardo (2010), in a groundbreaking book, *The Forgotten Kin: Aunts and Uncles*, draws upon 104 interviews with aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. His findings reveal that aunts and uncles serve as adjuncts to parents, as surrogate parents, and as "third parties with unique perspectives." They exchange gifts, provide encouragement, and share their skills and knowledge with nieces and nephews. They help to mediate relationships in the extended family by passing on family stories and traditions. Taken together, these studies demonstrate the importance of secondary kin, and the ways these extended family members supplement and substitute for care and communication in immediate families.

Social Networks' and Extended Families' Influences on Primary Partnerships

Just as individuals are connected with others, so is every dyad connected with other individuals and relationships. Furthermore, social networks and extended families exert influence on primary partnerships—their initiation, development, maintenance, and whether they end and how.

Communication Processes Involved in Social Network Influences

There are various ways that social networks and extended families may influence primary partnerships, and most involve communicative processes that directly or indirectly facilitate or hinder a targeted relationship. Many years ago, Leslie, Huston, and Johnson (1986) asked college students to identify the specific types of activities that their parents directed to their romantic relationship. Common approving behaviors included asking about the partner, being pleasant to the partner, and inviting the two as a couple to events or activities. Disapproving behaviors including talking about others they could date, encouraging them to wait until they were older to become involved, and not communicating with the partner. More recently, Sprecher (2011) has shown that network members recognize that they engage in negative behaviors directed toward disapproved relationships and positive behaviors directed toward approved relationships. Today, network members likely provide their social reactions to a targeted relationship not only face-to-face, but also through email messages and Facebook posts. Although the network may not always give interfering or negative statements, the omission of positive and

inclusive messages can be also interpreted as negative reactions and can have the same consequences as outright rejection (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004).

According to a symbolic interactionist perspective, positive reactions from the social network can enhance the partners' identity as a couple (Lewis, 1973). In addition, positive social network reactions can facilitate an increase in interdependence between the two partners (Milardo, 1982). Omission of positive reactions or actual interfering and negative statements can have the opposite effects, a decrease in dyadic identity and in interdependence. Another process by which social networks influence primary partnerships is through *information*. This information can be either positive (e.g., learning about desirable traits of a partner manifested in other contexts that are witnessed by mutual friends) or negative (e.g., learning about a partner's sexual infidelity from a friend). Information can serve to reduce uncertainty about the partner, which can enhance the likelihood that the relationship develops (e.g., Berger, 1988).

The network can also be responsible, directly or indirectly, for two people meeting in the first place, and this process likely involves communication processes (Christakis & Fowler, 2009; Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, & Willetts, 2002). Passive social proximity effects occur when two people have a greater chance of meeting because of having friends or other network members in common even though the friends may not intentionally bring them together (Parks, 2007). More direct influences on the initiation process occur when the social network members try to influence the likelihood that two people meet and like each other.

Network Influences on Primary Partnerships

Network influences on dyads continue once relationships have developed. There is evidence to indicate that when network support for a relationship is forthcoming (at least as perceived by the members of the couple), dating partners experience greater satisfaction, more love and commitment for each other, and a greater likelihood of remaining together over time (e.g., Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; 2000). Similar positive associations between network support and relationship quality have been found in marital relationships (e.g., Bryant & Conger, 1999). In an exception, however, an early classic study found that greater parental interference in the relationship increased the intensity of the love over time, perhaps due to a reactance effect (Driscoll, Davis, & Lipetz, 1972). (For more review of these studies, see earlier reviews by Schmeckle & Sprecher, 2004; Sprecher et al, 2002; and Sprecher, Felmlee, Schmeckle, & Shu, 2006).

An increasing number of studies has examined actual network members' assessments of a relationship (e.g., Agnew, Loving, & Drigotas, 2001; Etcheverry, Le, & Charania, 2008; Loving, 2006). The general finding from these studies is that friends, particularly female friends, have accurate perceptions of the quality and outcome of the targeted relationship. The studies have also found that network members have a less optimistic view of the relationship than do members of the couples. One explanation for this is that network members, unlike romantic partners, do not have positive illusions about the relationship (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1997), which are views that are more positive than warranted. In addition, network members may engage in behaviors toward the relationship which ultimately create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indirect evidence of this network influence was found by Felmlee (2001), who found that a friend's approval of a dating relationship was associated with the decreased likelihood of the couple breaking up. As an extension of this research, Sprecher (2011), examined how network members

believed that their communications intended to either facilitate or hinder a relationship had an effect on the targeted relationship, from their perspective. About two-thirds of the participants believed that their reactions had an effect on the relationship, generally a slight effect.

Social Networks' and Extended Families' Influences on Parenting and Child Outcomes

Social networks influence not only primary adult partnerships in families but also parent-child relationships and children's development. In particular, the parents' integration within a larger social network can influence their success at raising children who are academically and socially well-adjusted and who are launched successfully into adulthood.

A distinction can be made between direct and indirect influences of parents' networks on the development of children (Cochran, 1990; Cochran & Brassard, 1979). Parent(s)' social networks can provide direct influences on children by providing other sources of interactions, experiences, and resources for them in addition to those provided by the parent(s). For example, parent(s)' adult friends and relatives may provide childcare, alternative role models, gifts, and additional social stimulation and opportunities. Social networks influence the development of children indirectly by affecting the ability of the parents to perform parental roles. Social networks can provide parents with support and advice about parenting behaviors, role models for parenting behavior, and emotional and instrumental support (e.g., Cochran, 1990; Helms-Erikson & Proulx, 2001). The influence of social networks and extended family may not always be positive for child outcomes, however. For example, network members can place demands upon parents, which can reduce the amount of time they have for the child. In addition, some network members may be poor role models, give bad parenting advice, and provide harmful experiences for others' children.

Of all network members, grandparents (parents' parents) are most often identified as assistants in the raising of children. Bengtson (2001) and others (e.g., Szinovacz, 1998) have argued that because of demographic changes, including decreased mortality rates and high divorce rates, grandparents are becoming more important than ever as sources of nurturance, socialization, economic assistance, role modeling, and other types of support for children raised in various family forms. Indeed, some grandparents take on the parenting role, either part-time or full-time.

As mentioned earlier, other relatives such as aunts and uncles (Milardo, 2010) also play important roles in the development of children. Close adult friends are significant as well. Research (as summarized by Cochran, 1990; and e.g., Romano, Hubbard, McAuliffe, & Morrow, 2009; Uhlendorff, 2000) has found that the number of close and reliable friends is associated with positive outcomes for the parenting process, including mother's satisfaction with parenting, mother's responsiveness to the child, positive mother-child interaction, and the social and academic adjustment of the child.

Working parents of minor-age children establish "networks of interdependence" around themselves to help them in raising their children (Hansen, 2005). Hansen examined these networks of care surrounding European American families across the social class spectrum. Networks of interdependence included friends and extended family members as mentioned above, but also paid caregivers, neighbors, and institutional care providers. More affluent parents relied to a greater degree on friends than they did on extended family members. Hansen elucidated how parents identify, screen, engage and

mobilize potential caregivers. Children themselves serve as links to potential caregivers through their friendships and connections in neighborhoods.

Large, diverse, and loosely knit social networks that consist of a large proportion of nonkin may be especially useful at the time a family is launching an adolescent. This is because having a range of diverse social ties increases the likelihood that there will be social ties (called “weak ties” by Granovetter, 1982) that can connect the family to other persons previously unknown to them but who might be able to provide educational or work opportunities, as well as romantic opportunities.

Primary Partnership Influences on Social Networks and Extended Families

We have already focused on how social networks and extended families influence primary partnerships. In this section, we consider the opposite direction of influence, how primary partnerships affect social networks and extended families. Major life course transitions are often accompanied by changes to social lives that affect family interaction and communication. Here we consider transitions related to partnership, parenthood, partnership dissolution, remarriage, and widowhood.

A dominant theme in the research on how moving into partnership affects social networks is a focus on social network contraction. Many years ago, the hypothesis of *dyadic withdrawal* was proposed (e.g., Johnson & Leslie, 1982), predicting that as couples progressed toward marriage, they would withdraw their involvement in their respective social networks. Although not always referred to using this label, past and current research about the effects of marriage and cohabitation on social networks shows evidence for this dyadic withdrawal, especially from friends (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Milardo, Johnson, & Huston, 1983). Contact and emotional care with parents have also been found to be less intense for married individuals than those who are unmarried or divorced, leading some researchers to refer to marriage as a “greedy institution” (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008).

Another theme in the social network literature regarding the transition to primary partnership focuses on the blending of partners’ social networks. Partners develop mutual friends and incorporate each other’s relatives and prior friends into their networks. Therefore, network overlap typically increases during this transition (e.g., Milardo, 1982; Milardo et al., 1983). Parks et al. (1983) refer to this process as *dyadic realignment*.

Research on the transition to parenthood also identifies ways that social networks contract and get restructured after the birth of a child. Numerous studies note a reduction in sociability for parents as they adjust to parenthood (e.g., Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Bost, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 2002; Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006). Interactive networks tend to become smaller, although parents may intensify their reliance on subsets of their social networks, such as close primary extended family members and friends who are also parents (Bost et al., 2002; Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006).

The dissolution of primary partnerships also tends to bring about contractions and restructuring in social networks. Individuals often sharply reduce interaction with their partner’s relatives, friends and associates (Milardo, 1987), although temporary declines in contact with network members after a separation may be followed by reinvestments later (Terhell, van Groenou & van Tilburg, 2007). Another common form of social network restructuring after a relationship breakup is that the composition of social networks is also likely to change, including an increase in the proportion of unmarried friends to married friends in the post-divorce network (e.g., Milardo, 1987; Terhell et al., 2007).

A somewhat different approach to the restructuring of social networks following divorce has to do with “social contagion,” which was discussed earlier. One couple’s relationship dissolution can lead to a ripple effect, in that other couples in the network can become more susceptible to divorce or dissolution. This likely occurs in part because having a friend or relative experience a divorce or relationship dissolution makes it seem more acceptable to an individual, already considering divorce, to also take this step; i.e., it reduces social barriers to divorce (e.g., Berscheid & Campbell, 1981). In fact, the “contagion of divorce” can spread as far as friends two degrees removed from a couple (McDermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009). With more divorces, two additional people become potentially available as relationship partners to others, potentially increasing the contagion effect even more.

Remarriages or subsequent partnerships bring new opportunities and complexities to immediate families and social networks. With remarriage and repartnering, a complex collection of new immediate and extended stepfamily relationships can be considered. Children of divorce may live part-time in the households of both biological parents, creating what has been called the *binuclear family* (Ahrons, 1994). The divorces and remarriages of multiple parents and stepparents can create very complicated interconnected households, expand social networks, and necessitate complex decisions about inclusion and exclusion related to extended family gatherings (Johnson, 2000). Former secondary affinal kin may be retained as voluntary kin.

With all this complexity, change and choice become key factors in remarriage-extended family networks. Kinship systems may become larger and more complex over time (Johnson, 2000), or they may weaken with subsequent divorces or partnership dissolutions (Lambert, 2007). Inclusive or exclusive behaviors can occur from all sides—there may not be consensus about who is in the extended family system. Children too, make inclusion decisions after remarriage. Multiple factors such as co-residence and relationship stability affect the extent to which children consider stepparents to be members of their families, and the probability of ties with a whole new branch of secondary affinal kin (Schmeeckle et al., 2006).

Research on widowhood shows that the restructuring of social networks and intensification of already-formed relationships is common. The loss of a spouse can weaken certain relationships in the social network, such as those with in-laws and couple-oriented friendships (Lamme, Dykstra, & Brose Van Groenou, 1996). Yet the time period after being widowed can also be a time of very strong ties with friends and extended family. Widowed individuals in later life tend to have smaller social networks but a greater volume of interaction, closeness, and network density within their social circles (Cornwell, Laumann, & Schumm, 2008).

Future Research Directions and Conclusions

It is clear from the studies discussed here that social networks and extended families affect and are affected by family communication at the individual and small group level. Past research, however, has not adequately recognized the significant influence of social networks and extended families on immediate family relationship dynamics, and vice versa. The literatures about social networks and extended families are rich with insights and concepts that can be usefully applied to the study of family communication.

Despite this useful potential, more could be done to integrate ideas across research on social networks and extended families. In particular, those doing research on extended

families might use more network concepts. A recent example of this cross-pollination was Widmer's (2006) study of family-based social capital. Using the "Family Network Method," Widmer identified seven types of family configurations, which reflected different levels of network density. Widmer also used a free listing technique in identifying family members, thus avoiding the tendency in the extended family literature of focusing on only one relationship type at a time.

Another noticeable outcome of our review is how new technologies are expanding the modes of communication that people are using and the prevalence of contact across social networks. It appears that new technologies have enhanced communication in myriad ways. While alarmist concerns seem overblown, changing norms have brought concerns and will probably continue to do so. A recent cover story in the news illustrates what we mean. At the end of 2010, *USA Today* ran the headline, "The Year We Stopped Talking" (Jayson, 2010). The article emphasized that while Americans were "more connected than ever, just not in person" they were experiencing high levels of divided attention. New books such as Turkle's (2011) *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* and Fischer's (2011) *Still Connected: Family and Friends in America Since 1970* are grappling with how the latest communication revolutions are affecting the quality of connections. This will be a fascinating topic to explore as even more modes of communication are created and a higher proportion of people use them.

Thinking spatially as well, we are curious how communication technologies will affect social networks and extended families at a more global level. The Internet has made it possible to maintain connections across much larger geographic regions than in the past (Christakis & Fowler, 2009), and we expect to see more research focused on communication across large geographic areas. In addition, research using data from multiple countries reveals the impact of factors affecting extended family communication at more macro levels than have usually been considered. Murphy's (2008) research on kinship across 27 countries demonstrates that kinship interaction varies across countries and is affected by such factors as religious attendance and north-south geographic differences (within Europe).

Issues of power and inequality, advantage and disadvantage shape connections between social networks and immediate families. It was beyond our focus to discuss this at length in this chapter, but we wish to acknowledge the importance of differences across race, citizenship status, and social class. Relative deprivation seems to be associated with a greater reliance upon extended families, affecting migration, co-residence, socializing, and support (Bashi, 2007; Hansen, 2005; Sarkisian, Gerena, & Gerstel, 2006). This is an important dimension in the literature, reminding us that communication opportunities and necessities are shaped by people's access to resources and location within societies.

A final dimension we consider important to explore in the future is the potential for social network disruptions in contemporary social life. Factors such as divorce, cohabitation, relationship fluctuation, and childbearing outside of marriage can lead to unclear boundaries in families (Cherlin, 2010), and sudden "truncation" of social networks (Widmer, 2006). Interventions designed to help children, such as placement into foster care, can lead to a drastic loss in established ties to extended family members and friends (Perry, 2006). Exploring disruption in communication for social networks and extended family members among those in more fragile family situations, and the ways that networks serve as safety nets may provide practical guidelines for the stability of relationships.

In conclusion, the studies we have reviewed here demonstrate the powerful impact of social networks and extended families on immediate family experiences. We encourage researchers to avoid studying primary partnerships and parents and children in isolation. We live in a world of widening circles, that appear to grow even wider with advances in technology and the shrinking significance of geographic space.

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