

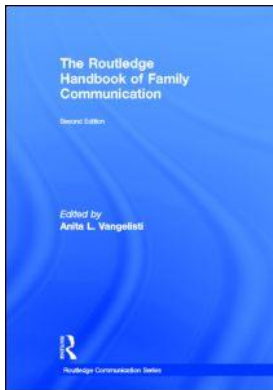
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The Communication of Emotion in Families

Julie Fitness

Introduction

The family is the fundamental social group to which humans belong from birth, and it plays a critical role in shaping who we are and how we live, and love, throughout the course of our lives. If we are fortunate, our family provides emotional sustenance and support, a “haven in a heartless world.” For those less fortunate, the family may be a crucible of painful emotions that drive family members to suicide, homicide, or at least, permanent estrangement from one another. For most of us, family life is constituted by a rich and complex array of feelings and emotions, including love, pride, anger, and even at times, hate; it can be the source of our greatest joys and sorrows. Every family member is a potentially powerful source of emotion for every other family member, and every family member’s expression of emotion has a more or less powerful impact on other family members. Emotions, then, are the currency of family relationships, imbuing them with meaning and importance.

In the years since the first edition of this *Handbook* was published, research on emotion has flourished, though much of it has focused on emotion in a rather abstract, rather than relational, sense. This is starting to change, with scholars from a variety of disciplines now recognizing the fundamentally social nature of emotions and their functions (e.g., see Niedenthal & Brauer, 2012). In particular, there is a growing emphasis on the informational and communicative aspects of emotions and on the ways in which they motivate potentially adaptive behaviors in ourselves and in those closest to us, in the interests of our shared survival. Even so, there are still large gaps in our understanding of the functions of emotions within particular relationship contexts, including the family. My aim in this chapter is to provide an overview of some of the most recent and interesting research on emotion, with a particular focus on the nature and function of emotion communication within families. Following a brief account of the functionalist approach to emotion, I will discuss recent emotion communication research in marital and parent–child relationships, focusing on the nature of emotion socialization within the familial context. I will then discuss the emotional lives of siblings and the dynamics of emotion communication within families, including the creation and transmission of emotion climates. The chapter will close with a discussion of adaptive emotion functioning in families, and

suggest some avenues for future research in this fascinating and important aspect of human relationships.

A Functionalist Approach to Emotion Communication in Marriage

The functionalist approach to emotion argues that humans are born with a number of evolved, “hard-wired” emotion systems that serve critical informational and motivational functions (see Fitness, Fletcher & Overall, 2007). The experience of anger, for example, signals that our goals are being thwarted and energizes us for battle, while the experience of fear alerts us to danger and urges us to freeze or flee, depending on the context. More positively, feelings of romantic love inform (or misinform) us that our beloved has the capacity to fulfill our desires and goals, and motivate us to bond with and commit to them (Gonzaga, Keltner, Londahl, & Smith, 2001). However, the informational function of emotions goes much further than this. Specifically, emotions also function to send information to others about the state of our needs and goals, and this is critical for our welfare and survival. Babies, for example, express happiness, sadness, and anger within the first few days of life, and caregivers respond appropriately to these signals (Scharfe, 2000). Similarly, throughout life, expressions of anger communicate goal-frustration and a desire for others to put things right; expressions of fear communicate danger and a desire for protection; expressions of joy communicate that we have resources (including positive feelings) to share, which in turn make us a valued social partner.

Nowhere is the profound functionality of human emotions so much in evidence as within that hothouse of feeling, the human family. Families are prototypically communal contexts, characterized by complex interdependencies and shared responsibilities for members’ welfare (see Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001, for a review). Consequently, the expression of emotions is an integral feature of family life, signaling members’ survival and welfare needs to those who, theoretically at least, are most willing to meet those needs (Clark & Finkel, 2005). Given this, it is not surprising that researchers have found positive associations between marital happiness and spouses’ abilities to both clearly express their own emotions, and accurately identify their partners’ emotions (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Noller & Ruzzene, 1991). Further, and in line with the functionalist perspective, proponents of an increasingly popular form of marital therapy that focuses explicitly on emotion communication (emotion-focused therapy) argue that spouses’ emotional attunement, deriving from their abilities to accurately mirror and validate each other’s emotions, is a critical component of happy and successful marital relationships (e.g., see Greenberg & Goldman, 2008).

It is important to note here that, although emotional expressiveness is in itself an adaptive feature of successful relationships, not every emotional expression plays an adaptive role in day-to-day family functioning. One of the most welcome recent research developments in this field, then, is the increasing emphasis on specific emotions (in the marital context, at least) and the signals communicated via different kinds of emotional expressions about partners’ underlying needs and motivations. These expressions may, in turn, have positive or negative consequences for relationship functioning. For example, Sanford and Grace (2011) reported the findings of a series of factor analytic studies drawing from data collected with more than 3,500 married individuals. On the basis of these data they identified two, basic dimensions of interpersonal distress associated with relationship conflict, with each dimension reflecting a particular underlying concern: perceived status threat, reflecting power and control-related concerns, and perceived neglect,

reflecting lack of love and/or belonging concerns. Sanford and Grace argue that each of these concerns is, in turn, associated with one of three types of emotions: hard (e.g., anger and other assertion-related emotions), soft (e.g., sadness and other vulnerability-related emotions), and so-called “flat” emotions, conveying boredom, disengagement and lack of interest. A spouse’s perception that her relationship partner is expressing hard emotion tends to elicit a defensive, reciprocal response, whereas perceptions that a partner is expressing soft emotion are more likely to elicit an empathic, caring response (see also Clark, Pataki & Carver, 1996). In their own research, Sanford and Grace (2011) found evidence supporting their model; further, they found that individuals who observed an increase in their partner’s flat emotion, or disengagement, perceived this to indicate partner neglect, or lack of love. This is reminiscent of earlier research describing the corrosive effects of “stone-walling” in marital interactions (e.g., Gottman, 1994), and underscores research on spouses’ use of “the silent treatment” to punish one another; a behavior which some spouses have argued is worse than being physically beaten (Zadro, Arriaga & Williams, 2008).

Of course, spouses’ perceptions of each other’s emotions may not be accurate; e.g., a stone-walling spouse may be highly aroused physiologically (Gottman & Levenson, 2002). Further, researchers have demonstrated that spouses’ perceptions of how accurately they communicate their emotions may be misguided (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Thomas, Fletcher, & Lange, 1997). For example, a spouse may believe she is communicating soft emotion (anxiety and a need for reassurance) to her partner, but her facial expression, tone of voice and gestures may actually be sending an angry, rather than anxious, message. Further, her partner is likely to respond to what appears to be an expression of “hard” emotion with anger, rather than empathy. Or a spouse may do a good job, objectively speaking, of communicating soft emotion, but her partner may be a poor reader of emotion signals and again, respond with anger. In both cases the most likely outcome is an escalating spiral of reciprocated hurt and hostility, and increasing marital distress (Gottman, 1994).

An interesting question, then, is why some partners appear to be more skilled than others in accurately sending and interpreting emotion signals. Several factors that affect emotional communication processes and outcomes in marriage have been identified, including transient moods and chronic emotional dispositions (Bradbury & Fincham, 1987; Fitness, 1996). For example, in a recent study of marital conflict, Papp, Kouros, and Cummings (2010) asked 267 couples to participate in laboratory-based conflict discussions, after which they rated both their own and their spouses’ perceived positivity, anger, sadness, and fear. Compared to nondepressed spouses, depressed spouses assumed greater similarity between themselves and their partners with respect to negative emotions, suggesting they were more likely to perceive negative signals from their partners than had actually been sent. Ironically, such negative perceptions may elicit the kinds of defensive partner responses that confirm a depressed spouse’s pessimistic outlook (Segrin, 1998).

Another important factor that affects emotion communication in marriage derives from spouses’ relationship histories, and in particular, their early attachment relationships with caregivers. As noted by attachment theorists (e.g., Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996), individuals develop schemas about what to expect from adult intimate relationships, based on the security or otherwise of their attachment relationships in childhood. Within adult romantic relationships, individuals’ attachment schemas influence both their own emotion communication styles and their responses to their partners’ needs and expressions of emotion. Individuals with secure attachment styles, for example, are comfortable with

the expression of a range of emotions, and are appropriately responsive to their partners' emotional expressions (Feeney, 1999). Attachment-avoidant individuals, however, tend to discount their partners' needs or react to them with anger; they also tend to distance themselves from their partners when experiencing stress themselves (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Anxiously attached individuals respond inconsistently to their partners' needs, and are vigilant for signs of rejection. They also express negative emotions such as anger and jealousy more intensely and more often than secure individuals (Shaver et al., 1996).

With respect to gender differences in marital emotion communication, research conducted some 20 years ago found that women were generally better than men at both accurately encoding and decoding emotional expressions, and that women tended to express "soft" emotions more frequently than men, who tended to express "hard" emotions more frequently than women (see Brody, 1999, for a review). However, such findings are highly dependent on context and it cannot be taken for granted that they hold over time (or across cultures). In particular, as men's and women's roles both in the family and the wider community have changed within Western culture, it may be that men are considerably more willing to express vulnerable emotions within the family than in earlier times (see Rohner & Veneziano, 2001); however, much of the evidence in support of this proposition is anecdotal and derives from the popular press. This in turn underscores the necessity for social scientists to be ever willing to re-examine research questions for which the data—and answers—may well have changed over time.

In summary, spouses' accuracy in sending and interpreting emotion messages is an important predictor of their marital happiness. Such emotional attunement enables spouses to respond sensitively to each other's needs and strengthens their perceptions that they are truly cared for. However, different emotions send different messages about spouses' needs and desires, and not every kind of emotional expression has positive outcomes for the marital relationship. Further, families typically comprise many more interdependent relationships than the marital one, adding further complexity to familial emotion dynamics. Indeed, it may be within the parent-child relationship, rather than the marital relationship, that some of our most intense emotions are experienced and expressed on a daily basis. In the next section of this chapter I will discuss what we know about emotional communication between parents and their children, and consider how children learn to become emotionally competent (or incompetent) within the family context, as a function of what psychologists refer to as emotion socialization.

Socializing Emotion: Learning Emotion Rules in the Family

As noted previously, human infants are born with the ability to express a number of emotions that serve to alert caregivers to their needs, and ensure those needs are met. Researchers have documented how in the earliest months of an infant's life, parents are oriented toward protecting and comforting their infants, and they respond to infants' emotional signals with support and encouragement (Barry & Kochanska, 2010). However, as children grow older, parents become more control and discipline-oriented, and increasingly concerned with socializing their children into the emotion norms of the family and wider community. This means teaching children, both directly and indirectly, how to regulate negative emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness, such that they acquire the kind of emotional competence that creates socially competent adults. Further, Fredrickson (1998) noted that effective socialization also involves emotion *cultivation*, whereby parents

strive to cultivate or encourage positive emotions in their children via such techniques as arranging social activities with other children, creating stimulating environments and learning opportunities for their children, and encouraging their children to reflect on their positive experiences. Fredrickson (1998) describes several benefits for children deriving from parental cultivation of their positive emotions, including enhanced feelings of well-being and broadened capacities for learning and creativity. Further, the ability to generate positive emotions can serve as a useful tool for regulating the experience and expression of negative emotions, while happy children also tend to build strong social networks and resources by virtue of their desirability as social partners. Each of these outcomes contributes to children's social competence.

Of course, parents must draw upon their own emotional competence (or lack thereof) when attempting to socialize their children's emotions. Two general approaches to parental socialization practices have been identified (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996). The supportive "emotion coaching" approach derives from an emotion philosophy that endorses family members' feelings as valid and important. Parents holding this philosophy actively teach children about the causes, features, and consequences of emotions, and help them to regulate and deal constructively with difficult emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness. In contrast, the dismissing approach to emotion socialization is associated with a philosophy that regards emotions as dangerous and/or unimportant, to be dismissed, changed or even punished by parents as quickly as possible. This latter orientation is associated with emotional suppression and minimization, which, in Western cultures at least (see discussion below) is associated with children's lower social competence and higher externalizing problems (Eisenberg, Cumberland & Spinrad, 1998).

There are many factors that influence parental emotion socialization orientations and practices. For example, in a longitudinal study examining the effects of maternal depression and attachment security on children's understanding of emotion at the ages of two and three, Raikes and Thompson (2006) found a significant, negative effect of mothers' depression over time on their children's emotion understanding. These researchers also found that more securely attached mother-child pairs made more references to emotion in conversation, which, in turn, promoted children's emotion understanding. As several researchers have noted, children in a secure attachment relationship learn that expressing their emotions elicits parental attention to their needs. Thus, securely attached children tend to be emotionally expressive and are able to both understand and regulate their own and others' emotions (Scharfe, 2000). Conversely, parents with insecure attachment styles tend to endorse emotion socialization practices in line with their own experiences and expectations of attachment relationships. For example, Magai (1999) found that parents with fearful attachment styles were more likely than non-fearful parents to physically punish and shame their children for expressing their needs, just as they were themselves shamed as children. Parents with an avoidant style, on the other hand, may discourage or dismiss children's emotional expressions altogether.

Of course, emotion socialization is a reciprocal process. Thus, while some children have calm, agreeable temperaments and may be easily coached, others may have more difficult temperaments; they may be shy, anxious, irritable, or emotionally labile (Lytton, 1990). These children may pose difficulties for parents who have different temperaments and who cannot understand, appreciate, or meet their children's emotional needs. For example, in a recent study, Rasbash, Jenkins, O'Connor, Tackett and Reiss (2011) investigated individual (including genetic) and relationship influences on expressions of negativity and positivity in 687 families. They found that overall, family members are

much more consistent in the negativity that they direct toward others than in the negativity they elicit from others, and that there are genetic contributions to family members' negativity that play a unique role in shaping their emotional lives and interactions. Further, there are structural features of family life that can create conflict around emotion socialization practices. For example, Rasbash et al. (2011) found that children showed higher mean levels of negativity and lower mean levels of positivity as actors than did parents, no doubt reflecting the inevitable power imbalance in the parent-child relationship and the frustrations experienced by low power individuals.

Finally, it is important to consider the wider cultural context when exploring emotion socialization practices. Much of the research discussed here has been conducted with middle-class American families. However, different cultures have different emotion rules depending on the relative importance they place on the self versus the group (e.g., see Planalp & Fitness, 1999). For example, in so-called collectivist cultures (e.g., Japan, China, and Korea) family harmony is prized and individual needs may be subordinated to the needs of others. Accordingly, the open expression of anger is discouraged because it disrupts social relationships and puts individual needs ahead of group needs. Conversely, in individualist cultures (e.g., North America), independence and individual achievement are prized and the expression, rather than suppression, of emotions such as anger is encouraged in the pursuit of individual needs and goals.

These cultural differences were demonstrated in a study that found U.S. children showed much more anger and aggression in symbolic play than Japanese children (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1996). In addition, U.S. mothers encouraged their children's open expression of emotions, whereas Japanese mothers fostered sensitivity to other children's emotional needs (see also Eisenberg, Liew, & Pidada's study [2001] of emotional expressiveness in Indonesian families, and Yang & Rosenblatt's analysis [2001] of the role of shame in Korean families). In a further, more recent example of the ways in which different cultures socialize children to regulate their emotions in ways that fit with cultural norms and values, Soto et al. (2011) found that, as expected, suppressing the expression of emotions was associated with adverse psychological functioning for European Americans; however, this was not the case for Chinese participants. Similarly, in a laboratory experiment, Ng, Pomerantz and Lam (2007) found that when children succeeded on a test, American mothers were more likely than Chinese mothers to provide positive comments (i.e., cultivating positive emotions) whereas Chinese mothers were more likely than American mothers to make neutral or task-relevant statements than overtly positive ones. The function of this emotion dampening is to discourage "too much" happiness in preference to what Soto et al. (2011) refer to as the "middle way," characterized by efforts to achieve a balance between positive and negative emotions and not favoring one kind over the other (see also Tao, Zhou, & Wang, 2010).

In summary, some parents actively coach their children about emotions and help them develop sophisticated understandings of their own and others' emotional lives, while other parents discourage or even punish the expression of emotions. Clearly, there is still much to learn about other styles and philosophies of emotion within the family, and importantly, about the content and function of emotion rules according to cultural differences in emotion-related values and norms. However, it is also important to note that parents are not the only familial agents of emotional socialization. Sibling relationships are also profoundly emotional, with brothers and sisters both competing with one another for resources and providing mutual support, sometimes throughout their lives. In the next section of this chapter I will discuss some of the causes and outcomes of

emotions in sibling relationships with a particular focus on jealousy and envy (since these have attracted the most research attention). I will also point the way to further research in this important, but understudied, familial context.

Emotions in Sibling Relationships

Sibling relationships have been described as quintessentially emotional (Bedford & Avioli, 1996). Of all the emotions experienced by siblings toward one another, however, jealousy and envy tend to be regarded as prototypical (Volling, McElwain, & Miller, 2002); indeed, in one interview study with 5th and 6th graders, Thompson and Halberstadt (2008) found sibling jealousy was reported in 98 percent of families, occurring on average once a month.

The most frequently cited reasons for sibling jealousy include the loss of exclusivity and diversion of parental attention once there is more than one child in the family, and perceived parental favoritism (see also Fitness, 2005; Rauer & Volling, 2007). However, there are other important causes of sibling jealousy. For example, Volling et al. (2002) found a positive association between parents' marital unhappiness and sibling jealousy, suggesting that parental conflict may heighten the experience and expression of negative emotions in the family. Part of this effect may be accounted for by children modeling their parents' angry and aggressive behaviors (Boyum & Parke, 1995); however, this heightened negativity may also be a function of so-called emotion contagion, whereby individuals unconsciously "catch" emotions like anxiety, anger, and depression from one another (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). Further, some children are more sensitive to perceived frustration than others and are prone to frequent displays of anger; such children also tend to display more jealousy than less chronically angry children (Volling et al., 2002).

Interestingly, parental reactions to displays of sibling jealousy tend to be more positive than negative. In studies of children's anger tantrums, for example, Hart (2010) noted that parents provided more warmth and reassurance if the perceived cause of the tantrum was rivalry-related, than if it were frustration. One possible reason for this is that parents in Western cultures, at least, have been exposed to a considerable amount of information in the popular press about "sibling rivalry" and may believe that children's expressions of jealousy and envy are normal and natural. Parents may also feel some guilt if they perceive that they have, indeed, treated their children differently. Further, just as jealousy expressions may be interpreted as a signal of love in romantic relationships (see Fitness, 1996), so too parents may perceive sibling rivalry as somewhat flattering (after all, the children are fighting for the parent's attention and love). As Hart notes, however, this perception also presents parents with a dilemma: if a child's jealous displays are interpreted as signals of love, then how can a parent discipline a child for expressing such feelings?

It is also important to emphasize that siblings are allies as well as competitors, and sibling relationships may be a source of emotional support throughout life and into old age (Gold, 1989). Researchers have found, for example, that when exposed to marital conflict, some older siblings increase protective, care-giving behaviors toward younger siblings (Cummings & Smith, 1989). Warm sibling relationships have also been identified as powerful contexts for the development of trust, self-disclosure skills, and socioemotional understanding (Howe, Aquan-Assee, Bukowski, Lehoux, & Rinaldi, 2001). There is still much to learn, however, about how and when different emotions are experienced and

expressed within sibling relationships, and there is a need to consider a much wider array of sibling emotions than jealousy and envy (see Brody, 2004). In particular, we still know relatively little about the origins and functions of sibling love and hate throughout the lifespan, and the emotions that keep siblings “stuck like glue” or forever estranged. We also know little about how emotions and emotional expressions might differ depending on the age, birth order, and gender composition of the sibling (and frequently today, step-sibling) relationship, and about the ways in which emotional experiences with siblings in childhood may shape adults’ understandings and experiences of emotion in later life (and in particular, with their own children).

In summary, sibling relationships are characterized, in part, by the expression of negative emotions such as jealousy and envy as a function of their intrinsically competitive nature. However, siblings may also form strong attachment bonds and experience highly positive emotions toward one another. There is no doubt that sibling relationships play a powerful role in shaping our ongoing emotional lives with others, though their role may be unrecognized. In the next section of the chapter I will move from a consideration of individual types of family relationships to a more holistic view of the family as an emotional system in its own right. In particular, I will review both the dynamics of emotion communication within the family and the creation of emotional family climates.

The Dynamics of Emotion Communication Within the Family

Families are dynamic systems comprising complex patterns of interdependencies and expectations. Every family member is affected by what happens to every other member, with important implications for the experience and expression of emotions. For example, and as noted previously, emotions within highly communal relationships may be contagious, with both positive and negative outcomes. In a study exploring the effects of positive affectivity on marital functioning, Gordon and Baucom (2009) found that individuals who are typically very happy, and individuals who perceive their spouses to be very happy, have more satisfying marriages. “Catching” another family member’s happiness and excitement creates shared feelings of warmth and closeness, and may strengthen the relationship.

However, emotion sharing is not always a positive experience. For example, when one spouse is depressed, the degree to which the couple is emotionally close is a risk factor for the other spouse also becoming depressed (Tower & Kasl, 1995). The powerfully contagious nature of negative emotions was also demonstrated by Thompson and Bolger (1999), who found that depression in one partner reduces happiness in the other, rather than the other way around. Emotions, then, may cascade through families and create emotional atmospheres, or climates, that affect the day-to-day feelings and functioning of family members. Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine, and Volling (1991), for example, reported that as men became more dissatisfied with their marriages, they expressed more negative emotions to their children. Their children, in turn, reciprocated their fathers’ negative emotions which increased their fathers’ dissatisfaction with parenting and the marital relationship. Fathers then retreated further from the family, increasing their wives’ and children’s distress. Given that siblings may react to a general climate of negativity by fighting with one another, further upsetting their parents (Brody, 1998), it is easy to see how a whole family may become immersed in hostility and distress as a function of spousal unhappiness. Further, Rasbash et al. (2011) have noted how individuals may feel

quite comfortable within the family context to “ignore the social niceties that require the reciprocation of positive effect and the inhibition of negative effect” (p. 486) and to express the kinds of irritable and ill-mannered behaviors that would not be acceptable in the wider community. Indeed, this can be observed in any number of Western television shows focusing on family life in which insults, verbal abuse, and mutual shaming appear to be normative.

So what constitutes adaptive emotion functioning in the family? According to Blechman (1990), the key characteristics include the open communication of feelings and emotions, the frequent expression of positive emotions, and the ability to monitor and regulate emotional expression (e.g., keeping anger and bad temper in check). In line with these recommendations is a growing body of research on the benefits of expressing explicitly positive emotions in close relationships. For example, Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher (2004) found that so-called capitalization, or communicating with others about personal positive events, was positively associated with the experience of positive emotions and enhanced well-being on a daily basis, above and beyond the impact of the positive events themselves. Further, when others were perceived to respond positively to the sharing of positive events, the beneficial effects were even greater.

There is also evidence for the benefits of positive emotion expression in research focusing on the family. For example, Barry and Kochanska (2010) found that healthy marriages are associated with more positive emotion expression between parents and their children, with mothers’ marital happiness associated with more expressions of joy and fathers’ happiness associated with more displays of affection. These findings underscore how important it is in close relationship contexts, not simply to reduce or avoid the expression of negative emotions, but to actively generate and express positive emotions. Carstensen, Gottman, and Levenson (1995), for example, found that spouses in long-term, happy marriages express conflict-related emotions much less frequently than they express affection and good humor. They note the importance of expressing positive emotions for building cultures in which family members treat one another with fondness and respect, accept and respond to the emotional expression of one another’s needs, and cultivate warmth, and emotional connectedness with one another.

An important question, then, concerns how to generate the kinds of positive emotions that are clearly so beneficial for relationships. Here, some of the most pertinent recommendations come from Berscheid’s seminal work on emotion in relationships (e.g., see Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2001). According to the Emotion-in-Relationships model, generating positive emotions in relationships requires partners to make active efforts to surprise and delight each other; to work together in pursuit of shared goals and dreams; and to actively care for and support each other in times of illness and/or stress. Generating emotions such as interest and excitement is also important, with shared participation in novel and exciting activities creating feelings of cohesion and mutual pleasure, and strengthening social bonds (Aron et al., 2000; Gonzaga et al., 2001). In this sense, families that play together may well stay together.

In summary, adaptive family functioning involves the open exchange of emotions, the frequent generation and expression of positive emotions, and the ability to effectively regulate and manage emotions. Further, the emphasis on the role of open, positive emotion expression and emotion regulation in adaptive family functioning is echoed in the growing literatures on emotional competence (e.g., Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Saarni, 2001) and emotional intelligence (e.g., Fitness, 2006). Typical definitions of these closely related constructs include such features as the ability to accurately encode

and decode emotions, the ability to understand the meanings of emotions and to be able to respond appropriately to them, and the ability to effectively manage and regulate both one's own and others' emotions. Emotionally intelligent families, then, may be those in which family members feel validated and embraced within a culture of mutual regard. There is still much to be learned, however, about how to achieve such adaptive outcomes, and the roles of different emotions in generating and maintaining them. In the final section of the chapter, I will suggest some avenues for further research on emotion communication in families, and draw some conclusions about our current understanding of this important topic.

Agenda for Future Research

As noted in the introduction, the study of emotion communication in families has been relatively sparse. There are still gaps in our understanding of how different kinds of emotions are communicated and miscommunicated in families, for what purposes, and with what outcomes. In addition, and as noted in the first edition of this Handbook, much of the research that has been conducted to date has focused on dyads (i.e., spouses, or parents and children, or siblings), rather than on the family system as a whole. Again, in researchers' defense, it should be noted that although the "family as a system" metaphor is a powerful one (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000), the scientific study of such complex patterns of interdependent relationships poses some extraordinary methodological and ethical challenges. It is important to acknowledge, though, that the emotional functioning of the family overall is not a simple function of the sum of its parts.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, an important recent development in the study of emotions has been the increasing emphasis on understanding their causes, functions, and outcomes. This emphasis has provided a strong theoretical framework for studying the dynamic features of emotions within the family context. However, there is still much to learn, especially in relation to positive emotions. For example, Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas (2010) have argued that compassion is a distinct emotion that arises in response to a perception of another's suffering, and that is associated with subjective feelings of concern and behaviors that aim to alleviate that suffering (including physical soothing). Clearly, there are many opportunities for both eliciting and receiving compassion within parent-child, sibling, and spousal relationships (especially in times of illness and stress); however, little is known about how and when compassion is given and received between family members. Similarly, Lishner, Batson and Huss (2011) have discussed the features and functions of so-called "other-oriented" emotions such as tenderness and sympathy, emotions that may be particularly salient within the familial context. For example, they describe tenderness as an expansive, "warm and fuzzy" feeling that derives from the perceived vulnerability of another and the perception that he or she is in need of protection (e.g., observing a loved child, asleep in bed). The experience and expression of such positive feelings have not been the focus of study within family relationships, yet may play a major role in their maintenance. In particular, feelings of tenderness may play an important role in ameliorating the experience and expression of "harder" emotions, such as anger or contempt.

Gratitude, too, is a positive emotion that may play an important role in adaptive family functioning, especially in response to expressions of love and tenderness from others. As Algoe, Haidt and Gable (2008) have argued, feelings of gratitude help us to "find, remind, and bind ourselves to attentive others" (p. 429). In this way, gratitude builds

positive relationships with the people who care about us (see also Kubacka, Finkenauer, Rusbult, & Keijsers, 2011). It is interesting, then, to speculate about the outcomes of feeling underappreciated in family relationships (“how sharper than a serpent’s tooth than to have a thankless child,” as Shakespeare’s King Lear noted). Too little gratitude for benefits bestowed by others may generate both “hard” (anger) and “soft” (hurt, sad) emotions with potentially negative outcomes, not only for parent–child relationships, but for family relationships more generally.

Of course, while it is relatively easy to identify interesting and unexplored research topics in this field, choosing appropriate methodologies is more difficult and requires considerable ingenuity and resourcefulness. As noted by Rasbash et al. (2011), the use of observational data is “the gold standard in family research” (p. 485). However, such research is expensive and challenging to run. No doubt, laboratory-based observational studies will continue to be important, as will more naturalistic observations in different kinds of familial contexts (see Teti & Cole, 2011, for an excellent review of useful methodologies). The most important point, however, is that the choice of method is theoretically driven so that with each piece of the puzzle we uncover, we obtain a richer, more coherent, and more integrated picture of emotion communication processes and functions within family life.

Conclusions

Families are profoundly emotional contexts. When we express our emotions within the family, we expose our deepest needs and vulnerabilities. In turn, the response of family members to the expression of our emotions colors our perceptions and beliefs about ourselves and others, and helps form the template from which we, in turn, respond to others’ needs. Throughout this chapter, I have stressed the potentially adaptive nature of emotions and the functions they serve in informing ourselves and others about our needs. Certainly, emotions can motivate dysfunctional or destructive behaviours, but they always tell us something important about who we are and what we care about, and nowhere is this informational function more important than in the context of the family. It is my hope that within another 10 years, there will be an opportunity to write a fresh chapter on this fascinating topic that demonstrates significant advances in our knowledge and understanding of emotion communication in family relationships.

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