

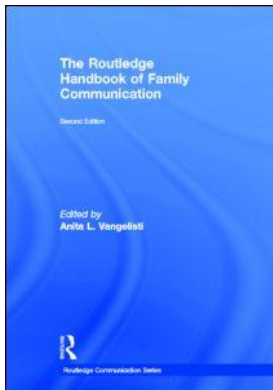
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Anita L. Vangelisti

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Karen L. Fingerman, Kira Birditt, Jon Nussbaum, Diana S. Ebersole

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Generational Juggling

Family Communication at Midlife

*Karen L. Fingerman, Kira Birditt,
Jon Nussbaum, and Diana S. Ebersole*

Adulthood, like a good story, has a beginning, middle, and an end. Like many stories, however, the beginning and the end of adulthood are more clearly explicated than the middle. Although the start of adulthood in most Western societies does not involve a formal ceremony, there are definable indicators of this period of life. As a matter of course, in general, young adults complete schooling, search for paid work, find mates, and start new families (Furstenberg, 2010). Likewise, late adulthood includes physical and social markers such as retirement, an intensification of ties to family, chronic disease, and physical decline. But, what are the characteristics of midlife, and how do these characteristics shape family communication? What occurs in the middle years of adult family life that differentiates it from the beginning and the end?

This chapter examines the ways in which family communication patterns are distinct at midlife. Other chapters in this volume address relationships that pepper middle-aged adults' lives—middle-aged adults communicate with romantic partners, children, and extended family. They engage in conflict resolution, attend reunions, build new relationships, and maintain friendships. In this chapter, however, we consider characteristics of middle adulthood that may contribute to family communication. Middle-aged adults bring perspectives to their relationships based on their prior experiences and their current developmental goals. Finally, families are systems with dynamic processes; middle-aged adults respond to interactions with other family members in their communications (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000).

We first describe aspects of middle-aged adults' family life and the roles they occupy as well as their developmental goals and experiences. Then, we address two questions about family communication in midlife:

- 1 What is the content of family communication for middle-aged individuals?
- 2 What factors determine how middle-aged individuals communicate with family members?

Finally, we devote attention to topics in this area ripe for future research. As the population grows older, the middle years of adulthood become increasingly discrete and

increasingly important for family functioning. Scholarly work in this area has only begun to investigate what is happening to individuals within families at midlife.

Characteristics of Midlife

Individual differences are rampant at midlife. Middle-aged adults manifest variation on nearly every issue of interest to family scholars: marital status, presence and age of children, physical health, career development, grandparenting roles, ties to family of origin and their own aging parents, leisure time, and personal style of communication. Indeed, treatises on midlife development commonly begin with disclaimers about the vast diversity evident at this period of life (e.g., Lachman, 2001; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Add to these considerations macrolevel differences with regard to gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, and the question arises, should we even attempt to describe commonalities of midlife communication?

In fact, convergent experiences exist at midlife, just as they exist in infancy, adolescence or old age. People communicate in different ways based on their accumulated life experiences, who they are communicating with, their available time and energy, and the roles or social positions they occupy; these factors vary systematically by age (Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, & Thompson, 2000). In the following section, we first describe the social contexts in which middle-aged adults function and then consider psychological goals that middle-aged adults share.

Social Contexts of Midlife Communication

Popular culture often describes midlife as a period of increasing demands from others, as “life in the middle” with regard to social and work pressures. To assess the challenges middle-aged adults face, we pulled together national data regarding the roles and demands middle-aged adults confront in their daily lives in comparison to younger and older adults. Table 6.1 provides a summary of this information (see table footnotes for citations). This table is intended as a heuristic rather than as precise information about the activities of middle-aged adults. For example, published reports of the percentages of adults who have children over the age of 18 and who have living parents include data from the 1980s (e.g., Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Sweet, Bumpass, & Vaughn, 1988). Instead, we used data from the more recent National Survey of Midlife Development (MIDUS) study to estimate these probabilities (Radler & Ryff, 2010). For some activities, we could not obtain precise information for all age categories. When data were available for a wider age range than used in the table, we repeated numbers across columns (e.g., physical disability rates for individuals aged 20 to 34 and 35 to 44 in the table reflect reported disability rates for individuals aged 20 to 44). We describe three general aspects of this table:

- 1 the family relationships middle-aged adults have;
- 2 the other social roles in which they are embedded;
- 3 the task demands in which family communication takes place.

Family Ties at Midlife

The term “midlife” is highly descriptive with regard to family ties—it is literally a period in the middle of the family. A study of individuals aged 13 to 99 revealed that middle-aged

Table 6.1 Competing Demands at Midlife: Proportions of Individuals Fitting Each Category by Age Group

	Age					
	20–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65–74	75+
Health status						
Has a physical disability ^a	.11	.11	.19	.30	.40	.64
Limitation in activity ^b	.07	.07	.13	.20	.25	.42
4+ healthcare appointments in past year ^c	.32	.32	.38	.45	.57	.65
Had major depression in past year ^d	.03	.03	.02	.02	.01	.01
Social engagement						
Working for pay ^e	.70	.77	.75	.60	.25	.07
Enrolled in school ^f	.19	.04	.02	.00	.00	.00
Community activity 2+ hours a week ^g	.62	.64	.56	.51	.47	.32
Exercises at least 3 times a week ⁱ	.36	.36	.32	.32	.26	.18
Uses the Internet ^h	.91	.84	.86	.78	.61	.42
Uses internet social media ^h	.74	.55	.47	.36	.21	.08
Family roles						
Married ^j	.91	.77	.77	.68	.65	.76
Widowed ^j	.01	.02	.04	.05	.16	.99
Children in home under 18 ^j	.32	.40	.23	.04	.01	.00
Children aged 18–24 in home ^j	.00	.13	.56	.27	.02	.00
Children over 18 ^k	.00	.26	.62	.77	.74	.74
Has grandchildren ^l	.03	.33	.33	.79	.81	.81
Grandmother regularly helps with grandchildren ^m	–	–	.54	.45	.29	–
Has a living mother ^k	.71	.69	.55	.30	.09	–
Has a living father ^k	.61	.51	.31	.10	.01	–
Providing care for spouse ⁿ	.01	.03	.05	.05	.07	.07
Providing care for aging parent ⁿ	.05	.10	.11	.11	.06	.01
Total U.S. population in year 2008 in 1,000s	61,991	42,501	44,372	33,686	20,123	18,747

Source:

^a U.S. Bureau of the Census (2005). *Survey of income and program participation, June-September 2005*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/disability/sipp/disable05.html>

^b National Center for Health Statistics (2006–7). *Activity limitation caused by chronic conditions among working-age adults*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/09.pdf#fig14>

^c National Center for Health Statistics (2010). *Health, United States*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/2010/091.pdf>

^d National Center for Health Statistics (2005–6). *Depression among adults 18 years of age and over by sex and age: United States*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/2005/09.pdf#fig12>

^e Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010). *Labor force statistics from the current population survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat3.pdf>

^g Gallup Organization (1990). *Giving and volunteering in the United States: Findings from a national survey*. Washington, DC: Independent Sector.

^h Pew Internet & American Life Project (2010). December 2010: *Social side of the internet* [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Shared-Content/Data-Sets/2010/December-2010-Social-Side-of-the-Internet.aspx>

ⁱ U.S. Bureau of the Census (2008). *Statistical abstracts of the United States*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2011/tables/11s0208.pdf>

^k O. G. Brim, P. B. Baltes, L. L. Bumpass, P. D. Cleary, D. L. Featherman, W. R. Hazzard & R. A. Shweder (2011). *National survey of midlife development in the United States (MIDUS), 1995–96*. ICPSR02760-v7. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

^l M. E. Szinovacz (1998). Grandparents today: A demographic profile. *The Gerontologist*, 38, 37–52.

^m N. Baydar & J. Brooks-Gunn (1998). Profiles of grandmothers who help care for their grandchildren in the United States. *Family Relations*, 47, 385–93.

ⁿ N. F. Marks (1996). Caregiving across the lifespan. National prevalence and predictors. *Family Relations*, 45, 27–36.

adults had more living family members than did younger or older adults (Fingerman & Birditt, 2003). Middle-aged adults have ties to family members in generations above them (e.g., parents), generations below them (e.g., children and grandchildren), and their own generation (e.g., partner, siblings, and cousins). Younger adults have ties to their family of origin, but are generally in the process of finding mates and having children. By contrast, at the end of life, older adults have often lost their parents and may have outlived their spouses, siblings, and even some of their children.

Obviously, there is considerable diversity in middle-aged adults' family ties. For example, high divorce rates, alternative lifestyles, and decisions during early adulthood leave a high proportion of adults unpartnered at midlife. The presence and ages of children also varies. Some individuals who had children early in life are showing pictures of grandchildren to co-workers at midlife, whereas other individuals who had children in their 30s or 40s are organizing play dates for their toddlers, and still other individuals enjoy evenings out on the town in the absence of ties to children. Nonetheless, midlife tends to be the period when individuals of all backgrounds have the greatest number of close family ties (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Fingerman & Birditt, 2003; Lang, 2004).

Middle-aged adults not only *have* more family members, they are more engaged with these family members than are younger or older adults. Young adults are interested in fostering new ties to people outside the family (Charles & Carstensen, 2010) and are unlikely to take on family demands. At the same time, however, young adults turn to their middle-aged parents for advice about their careers, schooling, and even love affairs, generating family work for this generation (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009). Likewise, by late life, many older adults have lost members of their own generation and turn to middle-aged children, nieces, or nephews for assistance or comfort (Wolff & Kasper, 2006).

Midlife is a period during which relationships with others tend to become salient and responsibilities for other individuals increase (Erikson, 1963). Multiple individuals across generations often depend upon the middle generation for emotional, physical, and financial support at various times and in crises (Fingerman et al., 2010; Grundy & Henretta, 2006). Middle-aged adults talk with members of generations above and below them. They assist young adult offspring, take pride in nieces, nephews, and care for grandchildren. With older family members, they discuss their own careers, children, grandchildren, the older adult's health and daily happenings, and long-time family friends and traditions. They are likely to be in communication with their siblings and cousins.

With regard to more intense caregiving, middle-aged adults are sometimes falsely referred to as "the sandwich generation" in reference to finding themselves "sandwiched" between generations. Thirty years ago, Brody (1981) warned that a significant percentage of middle-aged women would find themselves "sandwiched" in the overwhelming role of managing multiple family responsibilities. Nonetheless, social scientists do not find evidence for such "sandwiching" when they study families at midlife (Putney & Bengtson, 2001; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). For the most part, the nearly impossible task of simultaneously caring for an older parent and a misbehaving teen in the same house is quite rare. The common place pattern is for middle-aged adults to have young adult offspring and aging parents. Research shows that middle-aged adults provide considerable support to their grown children, and the frequency of such help has increased over the past two decades (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012; Fingerman et al., 2010). Indeed, even when middle-aged adults engage in caregiving for their aging parents,

they continue to support grown children, albeit to a lesser extent (Fingerman et al., 2010; Grundy & Henretta, 2006). These studies have led researchers to use the term “pivot generation” to describe middle-aged adults’ attention to generations above and below them.

Furthermore, as can be seen in Table 6.1, over a third of middle-aged adults have children in their homes, and a third of them have grandchildren. Of those middle-aged adults who have grandchildren, the majority of these grandparents provide at least some care for them. Further, although information is not available concerning the age distribution of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren full-time, data from a national study indicated that their mean age is 59 (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997). As such, a sizable group of middle-aged adults serve as surrogate parents for their grandchildren.

In short, the family context of midlife reflects a vast accumulation of ties from prior stages of life. Middle-aged adults retain ties to their families of origin, their spouse or romantic partner, their family of procreation, and often reap the benefits of grown children’s ventures to create their own families. Middle-aged adults also have the stamina to foster new ties and build on existing relationships. The resulting family network provides multiple venues for communication. Middle-aged adults also often feel torn in many directions as they attempt to meet the needs of multiple family members.

Nonfamilial Demands at Midlife

Although they deal with multiple family roles, middle-aged adults also confront multiple demands outside the family (Goodman & Crouter, 2009). Some demands may impede the processes of family communication (by drawing middle-aged adults away from family) and may also generate the substance of that communication. Middle-aged adults are likely to talk about extrafamilial issues, such as work and civic activities, with family members.

For example, at the individual level, functional ability contributes to the nature of family communication. As can be seen in Table 6.1, most middle-aged adults are in good health and confront few physical difficulties getting around or communicating with loved ones. At the same time, limitations in daily activities increase around age 45, as do visits to doctors. By age 55, this shift is even more dramatic. As such, middle-aged adults must devote time and energy to their own health care in ways that younger adults (who rebound quickly from life’s physical demands and a night of partying) do not. From this perspective, the capacity to communicate remains intact at midlife, but the content of communication may become more health focused (Hay et al., 2009; Wright, 2009).

Further, as can be seen in Table 6.1, family communication at midlife occurs in concurrence with demands from work and leisure activities. Research examining American’s use of time indicates that parents of small children face the greatest demands on their use of time. For middle-aged adults who have small children, family communication must take place in the harried context of children’s demands and schedules. Many middle-aged adults have passed this stage of hands-on childrearing, however, and have greater latitude in the use of their time on a day-to-day basis. Yet, middle-aged adults commonly confront increasing task demands at work and from multiple generations of family members who turn to them in periods of crisis. Indeed, data from the American Time Use Study collected from 2003 to 2007 found that adults aged 35 to 54 average 508 minutes a day devoted to work, family care, and household tasks, and adults aged 55 to 64 continue to average 454 minutes of such work. It is only after age 65 that work-type activities drop off (Bianchi, 2010).

As will be discussed, middle-aged adults also often take on tasks associated with maintaining ties to a variety of family members, such as holiday celebrations and special occasions. As such, we liken family communication at midlife to a juggling act: Middle-aged adults must keep a hand out to keep many interactive balls in the air simultaneously.

Content of Communication with Family Members at Midlife

Communication research often focuses on the expression of information rather than on the content of information. From a developmental perspective, what people talk about is important. Midlife is a time of numerous familial roles such as spouse, parent, child, sibling, and possibly grandchild and grandparent. At the same time, individuals encounter new responsibilities in their careers and civic lives. Individuals find themselves engaged in the most diverse set of communicative encounters of their lives, ranging from appropriate curfew times for the children, to bathroom wallpaper decisions with a spouse, to organizing the family reunion, to decisions about parental health care. At no time in life is the content of communication more diverse and thus more challenging for the individuals involved.

Social Contexts and the Content of Family Communication at Midlife

As mentioned previously, family communication at midlife partially reflects the complicated social situations in which middle-aged adults are embedded and the multiple roles they juggle. The question arises—how does the diverse content of these interactive lives relate to the construction and management of specific familial roles? At midlife, individuals are faced with maintaining several different, and at times contradictory, relational roles. For instance, they are simultaneously a parent who must raise children and a child who must manage an ever-changing power dynamic with a parent. The middle-aged adult must exhibit appropriate controlling and dominant behavior with adolescent children while indicating respect and submission with parents. The children may observe this submissive behavior and attempt to take advantage. At the same time, the middle-aged adults' parents may view the controlling behavior toward their grandchildren and attempt to interject their opinions on child rearing. The middle-aged adult must respond with appropriate communication across parties—juggling multiple roles simultaneously.

An additional challenge that adults face at midlife concerns the choice as to whether particular topics should or should not be communicated to a specific individual, to numerous individuals, or to no family members. Midlife presents the individual with an overwhelming number of conversation options. It is not unreasonable to imagine that certain familial relationships are appropriate for certain conversations, whereas other relationships would be threatened if not destroyed by a similar conversation. For example, a divorced, middle-aged woman might talk with her teenage daughter about the daughter's desire to date a young man in her class at school, to her mother about the loneliness of being unpartnered, but to neither party about her own sexual behavior. Similarly, a husband and wife might discuss financial problems with one another, but seek to hide these problems from grown children and aging parents.

There is little doubt that middle-aged adults are aware of their conversational choices and the effects that these choices have upon the family members with whom they interact. The juggling act of maintaining appropriate conversational boundaries adds to the complexities of family ties at midlife. Middle-aged adults not only find themselves in multiple family roles but also must possess an understanding of the parameters of those

roles that help determine what and with whom they communicate if their communication is to be successful.

Content Reflecting Middle-Aged Adults' Psychological Development

Features of psychological development may also contribute to what middle-aged adults talk about with family members. Middle-aged adults tend to demonstrate greater cognitive complexity, stability of the self, and more mature coping styles than do younger or older adults (Diehl, Youngblade, Hay, & Chui, 2011; Labouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, & Hobart, 1987). These features of individual development contribute to a more sophisticated pattern of communication and to greater control over the content of that communication. For example, observational studies of middle-aged women talking with their adolescent children and with their mothers reveals that the middle-aged adult does most of the talking, regardless of the family partner (Lefkowitz & Fingerma, 2003; Lefkowitz, Kahlbaugh, & Sigman, 1996). Further, the content of those communiqués tends to involve the middle-aged adult's efforts to guide other family members, to provide advice or input into their behaviors (Fingerma, 2000).

The emotional qualities of relationships at midlife also tend to be complex. Carstensen and her colleagues have argued that individuals focus on emotional goals in relationships as they approach the end of life. Older adults select relationships that are most rewarding and describe their relationships in more positive terms than do younger adults (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Charles & Carstensen, 2010). Yet, middle-aged adults tend to view their relationships in more complicated emotional terms than do older or younger adults. For example, middle-aged adults are both more positive and more negative about their parents and their children than are younger or older adults; they may see nuances of the strengths and weaknesses of these family members in any given encounter (Fingerma, 2000; Fingerma & Hay, 2004). Middle-aged adults may also talk more about the "other" rather than the "self" in family communication based on both social contexts and psychological processes at midlife. From a theoretical perspective, Erikson (1950) initially argued that midlife is a period of generativity, a time during which individuals increasingly derive rewards from assisting and guiding younger people. Subsequent research suggests middle-aged adults are also likely to nurture individuals in their own generation and generations above them (Stewart & Vandewater, 1998). For example, in one study, middle-aged women were asked to describe what they enjoy about their aging mothers and their grown daughters. Middle-aged women reported that conversations about everyday events were a source of pleasure in both relationships. The women enjoyed conversations about the daughter's decisions at school, romantic ties, and her children (if she had them). With their mothers, they talked about daily events, friends, or the larger family network in which both women were invested (Fingerma, 2000).

As an extension of generativity, middle-aged adults may engage in conversations aimed at protecting other family members. A series of studies have found that adults of all ages engage in protective communication behaviors when they perceive time remaining with another person as limited (Fingerma & Charles, 2010). This theoretical premise extends to middle-aged adults' behaviors with their family members. Studies suggest middle-aged offspring worry about their parents' future health needs long before the parents incur actual needs for care (Cicirelli, 1988; Fingerma, Hay, Kamp Dush, Cichy, & Hosterma, 2007). Further, middle-aged grandparents worry about their grandchildren's home environments more than do older grandparents (though older grandparents worry

more about their grandchildren overall; Fingerman, 1998). Middle-aged adults are likely to communicate these concerns to other family members in their efforts to nurture them or to contribute to their growth.

Finally, by midlife, gender differences in family communication notable in the early years of adulthood may become muted (Huyck, 1999). Men and women alike may value their relationships, and the content of communication may focus increasingly on efforts to connect to family members. Gerontologists have argued that an older woman in the family often serves as the “kinkeeper” who rallies family members to celebrations and reunions (Troll, 1988). Yet, it is middle-aged adults who are the “kinkeepees,” the individuals who respond to the kinkeeper’s efforts by attending such festivities and bringing along their spouses, children, and other relatives (Fingerman, 2001). As grown children leave home and return to visit, men and women alike may become invested in fortifying ties, organizing family structure, and bridging relationships. In sum, from both a theoretical and a practical perspective, the content of middle-aged adults’ family conversations may focus on the details of keeping the family going.

Communication Styles at Midlife

In addition to considering *what* middle-aged adults communicate within families, we might ask, how do they communicate it? Williams and Nussbaum (2001) argued that middle-aged adults must develop a complex set of communicative behaviors to simultaneously meet the disparate needs of multiple generations of family members. Family communication is often difficult under the most perfect conditions. Numerous studies (see Williams & Nussbaum, 2001, for a review) have shown middle-aged adults face distinct challenges, however, as they interact with family and nonfamily members of differing ages. The general issues surrounding competent family communication encompass use of language, cognitive processing ability, stereotypes that may result in misjudged accommodations to the conversational partner, and general skills that are required to send and receive messages. Yet, middle-aged adults face particular demands in these processes. Middle-aged adults must develop sophisticated approaches to communication given their need to interact with multiple partners of different ages. These partners have specific familial roles, a wide range of cognitive abilities, differing interactive styles, and may or may not possess the necessary skills to manage an effective conversation at times. Furthermore, middle-aged adults must adjust their communication styles to facilitate family unity.

Middle-aged adults’ communication styles may reflect their social contexts and their psychological development. From a contextual perspective, they must simultaneously serve as listeners and communicators in their family relationships, while processing what is taking place. To illustrate this point, a young child wishes to communicate her desire to go to the park to her parents. Appropriate to her age, she is not concerned with her parents’ desires, whether going to the park conflicts with her older brother’s desire for help with his homework, or drawing the larger family together (e.g., her mother’s need to telephone the child’s grandmother). Middle-aged adults possess the capacity to consider others’ needs. At times, their own needs may dominate their concern, but middle-aged adults often turn outward to balance the needs of other family members.

As a result, middle-aged adults must “analyze the audience” as they juggle; they must determine what each family member wants and understands. This task requires specific skills to communicate with an appropriate style and intensity for each family member. Furthermore, middle-aged adults not only are concerned with communication in each of

their multiple relationships (e.g., with spouse, parent, child) but also are concerned *across* these ties. Midlife communication styles may reflect a desire to unify the family or at least to handle multiple relationships.

Middle-aged adults' positions in the family may also diminish their likelihood of confronting other family members in an aggressive manner. Rook (1995) argued that certain family ties, such as long-term marriage, parenting, and caring for an aging parent, entail enduring responsibilities. Such responsibilities may curtail negative behaviors and even negative feelings. Similarly, an experimental study asked adults of different ages to indicate how they would react to social transgressions committed by older and younger social partners. Participants were considerably less likely to confront an older adult than a younger adult committing the exact same faux pas (Miller, Fingerman, & Charles, 2009). In midlife, adults may increasingly mute their responses as their family members grow older.

Furthermore, psychological processes such as the ability to regulate emotions may contribute to individuals' ways of dealing with interpersonal problems (Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005). Birditt and Fingerman (2005) asked individuals how they handled problems they experienced in their close and problematic relationships. They found that older adults were more likely to use avoidant strategies (e.g., doing nothing) to solve the problems than were younger people (who used confrontational means of handling problems more often). Bergstrom and Nussbaum (1996) reasoned that younger and middle-aged adults might differ in their strategies for dealing with interpersonal conflict in general. Results from their investigation point toward more cooperative conflict management as individuals grow older. For the most part, in their study, younger adults were found to be more aggressive and competitive in their style of conflict, whereas older adults were more conciliatory in working out a solution that benefited both family members.

In sum, as middle-aged adults find themselves in positions of increasing responsibility and authority, they may be more likely to take charge of family communication. In this regard, middle-aged adults may attempt to direct conversation, ask questions, include multiple family members' perspectives, and adjust their conversational style to the needs of the other family members. Of course, such communication may be more an ideal than a reality. Research suggests middle-aged spouses may still engage in overt confrontation when they are upset with one another (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Story et al., 2007), and middle-aged parents may still engage in conflict with their adolescent children (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Furthermore, because middle-aged adults may be forced to focus so much on other people, they feel cast into a role of listener or director rather than that of communicator. Their ability to communicate their own needs may become stifled. Nonetheless, most middle-aged adults rise to the occasion and deal with family communication issues successfully.

Suggestions for Future Research

Scientific methodology by definition involves addressing unanswered questions, but we know considerably more about family communication at some periods of life than at others. Many questions about family communication in midlife warrant investigation. For example, in comparison to assessments of family ties in childhood and young adulthood, researchers have relied on a limited set of methodologies to examine communication between middle-aged adults and their family members.

Future studies might seek to ascertain information about basic questions such as:

- 1 With whom do middle-aged adults communicate most frequently in the family?
- 2 What contexts require communication with different family members?
- 3 What is the content of communication?

With regard to the first question given the demands involved with growing children and adolescents, certain middle-aged adults may have the majority of their interactions with their children. Other middle-aged adults may have a much broader and more multigenerational family interaction pattern. For still other middle-aged adults, the oft-cited increase in marital satisfaction when children leave the nest (Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008) may reflect more time to communicate with a romantic partner and friends outside the family.

Certain contexts, of course, may be stressful. Middle-aged adults typically are involved with their siblings, particularly when it comes to care and support of aging parents (Suitor, Sechrist, Plikuhn, Pardo, & Pillemer, 2008). Alternately, one of the middle-aged daughters may take over care of the parents, talking primarily to her spouse about the stress incurred (Stephens, Townsend, Martire, & Druley, 2001). These difficult contexts for communication often occur with little time for planning or preparation. The siblings may have communication skills or relationship patterns allowing them to work together to assist in the aging parent, or they may experience discord and conflict. Other contexts of midlife communication are more positive. Family celebrations that surround activities such as first holy communions, bar mitzvahs, graduations, and marriages bring families together to celebrate (Fingerman, Buckser, & Turiano, 2009). These life events offer ample opportunities for family members to contact one another, share experiences, and to maintain high levels of family solidarity. Further, the content of family communication is an empirical indicator of what issues are most important to the family and which family members are involved in managing these issues. The persistence of certain content can also indicate how well middle-aged adults are managing family problems. If communication consistently focuses on stressful issues, does this indicate that the family may be dysfunctional?

Do topics of family discussion change across middle adulthood? We know little about normal changes in the content of communication across a typical day, a week, a year, or across the entirety of midlife. Scant evidence suggests young adults talk about themselves and their goals, and expect family members to be interested in these topics (Fingerman, 2000). Middle-aged adults are less intrigued with their own development. Middle-aged adults are the workers who keep the family running. As a result, are middle-aged adults confined to talking with family members about tasks that must be accomplished in daily life? Further, given demands on middle-aged adults, few individuals have time for the deep friendships characteristic of younger adulthood. How do middle-aged adults nurture their sense of art, creativity, and leisure within the family?

Midlife adults must also adapt to changing communication technologies utilized by adolescents, younger adults, and by an increasing number of older adults (Ledbetter, 2010; Mesch, 2006). On-line social networking and text messaging are challenging face-to-face communication as the preferred method with which to not only gather information, but to start, maintain, and end relationships (see Table 6.1). Midlife parents often must utilize Facebook to discover what their teenage children are doing. How do communication technologies affect communication patterns of midlife adults who attempt to stay actively engaged within the lives of their children and their parents is an area rich for

future investigations. In addition, very little is known about how communication content changes or how communication effectiveness is enhanced when interacting on some form of communication technology.

In addition to these questions, future research should use diverse methodologies to tap the nonverbal aspects of family communication at midlife. The questions above prioritize the study of verbal communication. Yet, effective family communication involves sending and interpretations of nonverbal communication as well. The interpretation of messages depends upon such factors as the intensity, passion, timing, gestures, eye behavior, touch, and paralanguage of communication. Observational studies of middle-aged adults that have incorporated analysis of nonverbal behavior are notably sparse. Prior observational studies have focused on how middle-aged parents communicate with their adolescent children (Flannery, Montemayor, & Eberly, 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Lefkowitz et al., 1996; Smetana, Yua, Restrepo, & Braeges, 1991). Indeed, most observational studies of marital couples focus on newlyweds (e.g., Cobb, Davila, & Bradbury, 2001; Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002). Few studies have focused on communication with other family members at midlife such as parents or spouse (for exceptions see Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Cichy, Lefkowitz, & Fingerman, in press; Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003; Story et al., 2007).

Communication scholars must consider macrolevel influences on family communication involving middle-aged adults. Investigators might also consider how changes in family structures over the past 50 years have altered family communication. For example, several excellent, recent studies have investigated the impact of divorce, remarriage, and stepfamilies upon familial communication (King, 2009; Soliz, 2007). Further, middle-aged adults must communicate not only with family members but also with outside parties *about* family members. Parents in some contexts may have greater ease in communicating with their children's teachers, peers, or after-school providers than parents in other contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Increasing outside pressures (work, commute, geographic moves) pull people away from family ties at midlife. Technological advances over the past 50 years have rendered communication by phone or email everyday occurrences within families, regardless of distance. Likewise, car and air travel have become easier and less expensive over the past 50 years (long waits, traffic delays, and detours notwithstanding), potentially altering the ways in which family members communicate and the primacy of family in individuals' lives (Cotten, McCullough, & Adams, 2011; Fingerman, 2009). Family no longer holds the center stage on the social world that it might have in foregone eras.

In summary, scholars have only begun to examine how middle-aged adults communicate with family members. It is clear that families are strengthened by the work of middle-aged adults in bridging members of many generations. It is also clear that middle-aged adults respond to family members by juggling multiple demands and needs. Future research must focus on understanding how this act is accomplished with such apparent ease for an audience of so many.

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