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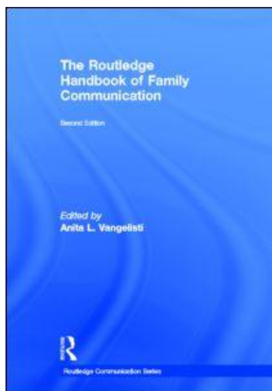

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Anita L. Vangelisti

Family Communication in Later Life

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7

Family Communication in Later Life

Jake Harwood, Christine E. Rittenour, and Mei-Chen Lin

The study of communication in older adulthood has grown exponentially in the past 20 years. From a small body of pioneering work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the field now boasts a large cadre of active researchers, numerous textbooks, courses at a large number of universities, and broad recognition as a valid area of study. Family is as central in older adulthood as any other period of the lifespan. Older adults are often recognized as grandparents and great-grandparents, but they are also parents, spouses, children, and even grandchildren. They are sometimes the stereotypical storehouses of family history and sage advice, but they communicate in a myriad of other ways within families. They are caregivers and care-recipients within families, but their contributions to family life extend beyond their roles in the caregiving process.

In this chapter we discuss areas of family communication in later life in which there is research and theory. We begin with some broad coverage of the communication and aging literature so as to give context for the family-specific work. This discussion includes principles shared by most researchers in the area and widely used theories. Subsequently, the bulk of the chapter is organized by relationship, with sections on spouses, siblings, adult children, and grandchildren. We close with a section on elder abuse and some concluding comments.

Three pieces of "set-up" are merited at the outset. First, researchers in this area are often asked "what counts" as old? Age is a continuum, and there is no clear demarcation for who is "old" and who is not. However, much of the research focuses on 65 as a convenient cut-off, and this chapter will do likewise. Second, the word "elderly" is used extensively to describe the populations we are addressing. As scholars concerned with communication processes, we avoid this word. It has strong associations with frailty, dependency, and illness, and is subject to the depersonalizing, homogenizing article ("*the* elderly"). As a result, we use (and recommend) the terms "older people" or "older adults," or more specific descriptors (e.g., "65- to 75-year-olds"). Third, different cultures place different values on aging, have diverse family structures within which older people are embedded, and consider family cohabitation differently. In this chapter, we attempt to incorporate such cultural concerns. However, we cannot do full justice to cultural issues given space limitations, and the fact that most research is from North America and Northern Europe.

Underlying Principles

The communication and aging literature has been driven by some broad underlying principles concerning human aging. Most communication and aging scholars accept that age brings decline in certain aspects of functioning, which in turn has consequences for communication behavior (e.g., hearing and memory problems influence communication in ways that cannot be ignored). Most scholars, however, understand this decline with some qualifications. First, we assume that *some* of that decline has a social etiology grounded in attitudes about old age. If older adults are forgetful, we ask if this is influenced by a lifetime of hearing jokes about older adult forgetfulness, exchanging birthday cards playing on ideas of memory loss, and hearing and making age-related attributions for forgetfulness. Full review of negative attitudes about old age is not appropriate here, but we direct the reader to important work by Hummert (2010) and Levy (2009).

Second, we assume that there are appropriate and successful compensations for many areas of decline (e.g., hearing aids, memory aids, increased use of social networks). The extent to which such compensations are adopted (or not) is itself a social and communicative process worthy of study. Third, we acknowledge a distinction between "normal" and "pathological" aging; declines associated with conditions such as Alzheimer's disease (AD) or other dementias are qualitatively different from, and more devastating than, normal changes expected in old age. For example, memory challenges faced in normal aging tend to be grounded in short term memory, and often result in linguistic difficulties with complex grammatical constructions (Kemper, Kynette, & Norman, 1992). In contrast, communication problems associated with AD largely relate to long-term memory problems. While grammar is retained, people with AD lose the ability to retrieve words and concepts as the disease progresses (Kemper & Mitzner, 2001).

Fourth, we assume that older adulthood is a diverse period in the lifespan (something underlined by the normal-pathological distinction just outlined). Merely the diversity in *age* among older adults is remarkable. The 30-year difference between a 67-year-old and a 97-year-old carries with it profound implications for human functioning, social roles, and family position. Add to this, diversity in socioeconomic status, health, culture, gender, marital status, and the like, and the resulting picture is extreme heterogeneity.

Fifth, many scholars acknowledge that some declines in cognitive and communicative processes uncovered in the lab are small and not particularly influential in daily life. While older adults score somewhat lower on a backwards digit span, for instance, the implications of this for daily functioning are minimal. Sixth, almost all scholars in this area would emphasize that there are *positive* changes and continued development in old age. Knowledge continues to be accumulated, which translates to continued growth in vocabulary and areas of social skills. Older adults are also happier than younger people (Yang, 2008). Amidst generally negative attitudes about aging, these positives can get lost. It is critical that we remain cognizant of benefits and improvements that come with old age in our research agendas, and avoid becoming driven by stereotypical negative assumptions.

Theoretical Perspectives

Many theoretical perspectives have been invoked in the study of family communication in later life, a few of which we summarize here. Much research emerges from an "intergroup" approach to intergenerational relations, focusing on how we deal with each other as group members rather than individuals. This involves perspectives such as social identity theory

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and self-categorization theory (Giles, Reid, & Harwood, 2010), which treat social categorization as an inevitable and natural process, albeit one with sometimes unfortunate consequences. This work acknowledges the family as an important social category, while also describing how family members treat one another in terms of other social categories (notably age).

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) has been a powerful force behind much communication and aging research, including work on the family (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). CAT describes how people adjust communication to their partner. Early versions focused on adjusting speech so as to be more similar to the partner's speech style (converging). Later incarnations focused on intergroup manifestations of communication adjustments at multiple levels of discourse (e.g., adjusting discourse stylistics or topics). A particular focus has been placed on how younger people adjust their speech to accommodate perceptions of older adults' hearing (e.g., speaking louder), cognitive abilities (e.g., using simplified speech to accommodate cognitive decline), or social mores (e.g., avoiding controversial topics to accommodate "old-fashioned" values). The communication predicament of aging model has described how such adjustments contribute to dissatisfying intergenerational communication, and to reinforcing pernicious stereotypes of aging (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986). On the flipside, the communication *enhancement* model has focused on how appropriate and person-centered accommodations to older adults can facilitate intergenerational communication (Ryan, Meredith, & MacLean, 1995). Also important in this area is intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Harwood, 2010), which suggests that contact with members of other social groups (in this context, older adults) improves attitudes about those groups.

Beyond the intergroup, socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that certain social and psychological processes in later life are driven by lifespan position (specifically the perception of time "left" at different ages: Carstensen, 1992). Older adults' time horizon grows more limited than younger people's. As this occurs, their approach to interpersonal relations shifts from a focus on "acquiring" friends to enhancing the quality of existing relationships. Thus, they emphasize interactions with existing contacts, and become less interested in meeting new people. Socioemotional selectivity theory has been applied to marriage, depression, and marital conflict in later life (Harper & Sandberg, 2009).

Attachment theory originally aimed to understand interaction patterns between infants and their primary caregivers, and personality development as a result of these patterns (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). According to the theory, children formulate attachment styles based on experiences with primary caregivers and these styles frame relationships *across the lifespan*. Research has examined associations between attachment styles and many relational phenomena (e.g., Guerrero & Bachman, 2006). Cicirelli (1983) found that adult children's attachment styles influence how they discuss caregiving arrangements.

Other perspectives such as intergenerational stake (Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995), communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002), and relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2004) may also generate fruitful insights on late life family communication. We now move to discuss key family relationships in older adulthood.

Spousal Communication

As a relationship frequently regarded as the beginning of a family (see Chapter 4 of this handbook), husband-wife bonds are a fruitful area for communication and aging research. However, communication-based studies of marriage in later life remain scarce, with most research appearing in other disciplines (e.g., social psychology, gerontology). We discuss

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a few caveats before diving into the existing literatures. First, terms such as *long-term marriages, older couples,* and *marriage in older couples,* have been used interchangeably. Their emphasis on relationship length versus person age complicates interpretations of study results, particularly when researchers fail to distinguish between first versus later marriages. Second, most studies on late-life marriage are cross-sectional in design. This illustrates meaningful differences between middle-aged and older couples, but longitudinal studies are needed to understand differences between relational history, cohort, or individual maturation effects (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Third, sampling techniques are a concern in this research. Solicitation in churches and senior centers might yield samples that are happier or more functional than the population (Sporakowski & Axelson, 1984).

Mirroring trends in younger populations, the bulk of older marriage studies reveal that marriage is beneficial (Gilford, 1986). Older married people have more social support available than those who are not married. They are physically healthier (Palmore, 1981) and happier (Altergott, 1985) than unmarried individuals. Consistent with other marriage research, men are particularly benefited by staying married: retired men rely on wives' social networks rather than building their own and are more likely than wives to receive spousal care (Keicolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

Cross-sectional studies suggest a curvilinear trend of relations across the lifespan, with middle-aged couples experiencing more conflict and negative emotions than other age groups (Sillars & Zietlow, 1993). Compared with middle-aged couples, older couples enjoy their marriage more, have fewer conflicts with their spouses, and continue to communicate affection sexually and nonsexually (Gott & Hinchliffe, 2003). Dickson and Walker (2001) found that older (versus younger) men were more emotionally expressive and willing to discuss their relationship with their wives. These findings disconfirm stereotypes of aging as decline, suggesting that benefits of intimate relationships are sustained or increased with age.

To explain heightened satisfaction in older marriages, Levenson et al. (1993) showed that older couples are less likely than middle-aged couples to argue over children. Instead, older couples shift to conversing about good memories from their children's past and current events in children's and grandchildren's lives. Children's marriages create new potential stressors with the introduction of children-in-law and potential disagreements over grandchildren (Morr Serewicz, 2006), and couples transition from spending the majority of time with younger family members to more time with each other, and become more emotionally interdependent (Arp & Arp, 1996). For couples who have been married a long time, awareness of each other's behaviors and dispositions contribute to their success. Older couples have a ''been there, done that'' mentality which yields a more relaxed attitude toward spousal interactions. Older adults also find ways to prevent conflicts from escalating. Levenson et al. (1993; Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995) showed older couples expressing more positive and less negative effect during conflict.

Reciprocity of social support also affects quality of marriage among older couples (Goodman, 1999), as is the case in all marriages. However, in older adult marriages support is more likely to be manifested in more life-altering behaviors such as full-time caregiving. Though providing this support can be emotionally and physically draining for the caregiver (Mui, 1995), this strain is often tempered by the support of caregivers' friends or family (Scharlach, Li, & Dalvi, 2006) and particularly the care-receiving spouse (Dorfman, Holmes, & Berlin, 1996). Edwards and Noller (1998) found that a direct communication style by autonomous caregivers was associated with the receiver's satisfaction. Conversely,

caregivers who used patronizing talk created conflict and negative effect for their spouse. Caregiving is often viewed with a negative lens, but (consistent with other forms of support) it yields benefits for both provider and receiver.

Just as marital satisfaction is linked to physical and psychological health, ample evidence links poor marital quality to depression (Harper & Sandberg, 2009). Communication between distressed individuals and their spouses is negative in both content and manner, which causes negative emotions in both partners (Kahn, Coyne, & Margolin, 1985). Negative communication such as criticism is associated with marital conflict, frustration, hostility, negative evaluation of one's spouse and the marriage, reduced intimacy between spouses, and depression. A vicious cycle may ensue, wherein both partners jointly create and reinforce marital dissatisfaction and problematic mental well-being (Segrin & Flora, 2011). Sandberg, Miller and Harper (2002) show that depressed couples demonstrate an inability to resolve conflicts or engage in empathetic communication. Such findings reflect a dyadic etiology for depression (Coyne, 1976), within which negative effects are stronger for relationally closer couples (Tower & Kasl, 1995).

Unsurprisingly, the loss of a spouse takes a heavy toll on the widow(er), particularly when it occurs at a younger age (Arp & Arp, 1996). Bergstrom and Holmes (2000) asked widows to offer advice to other widows, revealing prominent themes of staying active, spending time with family, and celebrating the qualities of the lost spouse. Such suggestions provide support for activity theory perspectives on aging (that successful aging is a product of remaining active: Atchley, 1999), and further discredit ideas pertaining to functional disengagement in old age. Though widowhood is difficult, particularly for men, bonds with children and siblings tend to grow stronger as they provide social support to buffer the effects of the loss (Anderson, 1984).

Parent–Adult Child Communication

While most parent–child research focuses on childrearing (see Chapter 5), recent work acknowledges that this relationship has important implications for families beyond the early years of life. Value transmission is a prominent parenting practice in older adulthood, particularly as it concerns memorable messages about aging (Holladay, 2002) and communicating beliefs about death (Cicirelli, 2001). Common themes include an emphasis on maintaining family relationships, working to maintain youth and youthful appearances, and embracing old age.

Upward (child to parent) influence is prevalent in the literature only in the context of caregiving. Though many older parents are the *providers* rather than the recipients of financial and emotional support (Lye, 1996), adult children increasingly provide care for their aging parents (Walker, Pratt, & Eddy, 1995). Caregiving brings benefits such as increased closeness with the parent (Koerner, Kenyon, & Shirai, 2009), pride, feelings of being needed, and joy in repayment for care received during youth (Lawton, Moss, Kieban, & Glicksman, 1991). These benefits are linked to the parents' communication of appreciation and affection to their children (Blieszner & Shifflett, 1989). Koerner and colleagues (2009) found that support from spouse, caregiver agreeableness and extroversion, and support from other family members also predict caregiver benefits.

The strains of caregiving receive greater attention in the research and include emotional stress and physical ailments (Cicirelli, 1983; Walker et al., 1995), financial loss, threats to occupation, time away from family/spouse, ethical dilemmas in providing support for parents instead of own children (Koenig, 2004), and a decline in marital satisfaction

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(Sparks Bethea, 2002). These strains, though common, should be reduced with improvements to communication between parent, child, and the surrounding family system. One promising avenue here is the role of humor in these contexts, given its demonstrated utility in alleviating caregiving-related strain (Sparks Bethea, Travis, & Pecchioni, 2000; Wanzer, Sparks, & Frymier, 2009). Communication scholars should identify the communicative, relational, and personal factors associated with balancing the burdens and benefits of this complex relationship.

In the task of improving the communication surrounding adult children's care of aging parents, we might begin by assessing family discussions about caregiving. Such conversations occur infrequently; although parents (Blieszner & Mancini, 1987) and children (Pratt, Schmall, & Wright, 1987) perceive these discussions as important, the tendency is to avoid. Fowler and Fisher (2009) show that discussions are more likely when children endorse shared autonomy and parents endorse independent autonomy, have fears about aging, and expect future care needs. Given that shared autonomy is associated with joint decision-making and that independent autonomy is linked to making decisions alone, these predictors suggest that dyads more likely to discuss caregiving might also be least likely to agree. Fowler and Afifi's (2011) research suggests that children's sense of urgency about care needs determines whether or not discussions occur, and most adult children feel little sense of urgency. These studies suggest a need to balance increasing people's sense of urgency about discussing these issues, while avoiding perpetuating stereotypes of aging and dependency.

Researchers are also exploring the process and content of parent–child decision-making about eldercare. In their assessment of mother–daughter discussions, Pecchioni and Nussbaum (2000) showed that mothers' and daughters' endorsement of paternalism was associated with the daughters talking more during these discussions. Furthermore, while half of the dyads were relatively egalitarian, approximately 20 percent of the conversations involved daughters' dominating the conversation, speaking for the mother and overlooking or undermining the mother's desires.

Sibling Communication

Despite the fact that siblings are often long-lasting, resilient, and intimate bonds in the lives of older adults, family research tends to overlook these bonds (Gold, 1989). Older adulthood is a time for strong sibling bonds (Goetting, 1986). While some sibling relationships maintain closeness throughout their lifespan, others experience turning points surrounding siblings' ties to parents, spouses, and children. Due to changes in responsibilities and potential dislike for a siblings' spouse (Allan, 1977), marriage is associated with a decrease in sibling closeness that is restored when marriages experience distress (Felson, 1983), or dissolve as a result of divorce or the death of the spouse (Spicer & Hampe, 1975). Similarly, the death of, or distance from parents enhances sibling bonds due to the reduction in phenomena such as sibling rivalry (Felson, 1983). Siblings share experiences such as peer groups, power within the family system, religious and cultural orientations, and often geographic closeness (Harwood, 2007). Of course, not all siblings grow close in older adulthood, with some siblings expressing indifference or hostility toward each other (Gold, 1989).

Certain communication behaviors that negatively affect commitment, trust, and liking, are less frequent in middle and older adulthood than among younger siblings (e.g., verbal aggression: Myers & Goodboy, 2006). In older adulthood, siblings are less likely to

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communicate as a means of providing counsel or as an escape, tending to communicate more for positivity and to establish family connections (Fowler, 2009; Goodboy, Myers, & Patterson, 2009). Gold (1989) presents a typology of sibling relationships varying in terms of feelings (Gold, Woodbury, & George, 1990): intimate (closeness beyond obligation; best friends), congenial (deep friendship that peaks in stressful times), loyal (bond grounded in shared background rather than personal connection), apathetic (indifference and absence), and hostile (feelings of resentment, disgust, and avoidance). Future research could employ this typology to examine communicative trends across various sibling relationships, including those that are less positive.

Grandparent–Grandchild Communication

Images and rhetorics of grandparenthood have become closely associated with perceptions of aging in the family context. Such images are largely positive, which contrasts with the rather negative broader social discourse surrounding aging. The grandparent role offers a focus on nurturing that fits well with an established stereotype of older people as low in competence but high in warmth (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005). The grandparent–grandchild relationship is for most people the "first, most frequent, and most enduring" (Harwood, 2007, p. 111) source of intergenerational communication in their lives. Increasing numbers of grandchildren have multiple grandparents who live well into the grandchildren's adulthood; the majority of recent work has focused on relational issues for grandchildren who are college-age (Soliz, Lin, Anderson, & Harwood, 2005).

Closeness and Distance

Overall, research shows that grandparent relationships are more intimate when the parties live closer together, when the grandparent is young, when the grandparent is healthy, and when the grandparent is a maternal grandmother (Harwood, 2007). Closer relationships are also more likely when women in the middle generation have a good relationship with the grandparent (Fingerman, 2004). In terms of communication *medium*, telephone (Harwood, 2000) and email (Holladay & Seipke, 2007) positively influence the quality of grandparenting relationships. Face-to-face communication in the grandparent relationship may occur more often in groups (e.g., family gatherings), and hence contribute less directly to intimacy. Telephoning or emailing is a more direct one-to-one communication connection that symbolizes targeted caring and relational commitment. In terms of communication content, accommodating behaviors, self-disclosure, and social support are all associated with positive grandparent–grandchild relationships (Harwood, 2007), as is true in many relationships. Similarly, predictable forms of relational maintenance behaviors are associated with positive grandparenting relationships (Mansson, Myers, & Turner, 2010).

Grandparents serve a symbolic function in the family context, representing the past and supporting ideas of family tradition and identity, while also representing family continuity and stability. This symbolic role is apparent in communication patterns. Storytelling between grandparents and grandchildren is frequent (see Chapter 24)—particularly from grandmothers to grandchildren (Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994). Stories often relate to family issues and serve to reinforce family identity (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). The symbolic function is also apparent in themes that emerge in grandparents' communication *about* the relationship. Notably, the theme of "pride" is apparent in grandparents' communication about their grandchildren (Harwood & Lin, 2000), reflecting the awareness and pleasure in the continuity of the family that grandchildren represent.

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Grandparent–grandchild communication is not always characterized by undifferentiated positivity. Kam and Hecht (2009) discuss how grandchildren sometimes behave inconsistently with their personal identities when communicating with their grandparents (e.g., avoiding topics). Interestingly, Mansson et al. (2010) demonstrate that "openness" is the least commonly used relational maintenance strategy exercised by grandchildren, supporting the idea of felt-constraint in this relationship. Younger adults also report "biting their tongue" in communication with other older people (Williams & Garrett, 2002), demonstrating that some more general intergenerational communication issues extend to the grandparent–grandchild relationship, and are not buffered by shared family status (but see Anderson, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005).

Another area in which grandparent–grandchild communication reflects broader intergenerational communication issues is in terms of painful self-disclosure. Older adults disclose unpleasant life events (e.g., bereavement, illness) more than young people (Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988). Fowler and Soliz (2010) find that grandparents also disclose such events to grandchildren; grandchildren's discomfort in dealing with such disclosures is associated with more negative evaluations of the relationship.

Complex Family and Cultural Roles

Custodial relationships present a challenge to traditional grandparenting roles (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1987). Physical strain, less time for friends and spouse, decreased privacy, and financial loss represent challenges to custodial grandparents (Kolomer & McCallion, 2005). Grandparents also must help children manage emotional distress resulting from their parents' absence. Successful strategies for this include involving grandchildren in the local community, acknowledging parents' absence, and focusing on "effective communication" (Gibson, 2005). Grandparents also work to shield their grandchildren from parents' misfortunes or failures (Silverstein & Ruiz, 2006). The role shifts and stigmas surrounding custodial care sometimes overshadow important benefits of custodial grandparenting. Custodial grandparents get a second chance in the parent role, and also experience enhanced life purpose and a sense of pride (Kolomer & McCallion, 2005).

Grandparents provide support to grandchildren during parental divorce (Cogswell & Henry, 1995), including serving in complex roles. Soliz (2008) describes a peacekeeper role, wherein grandparents maintain a relationship with their child's former spouse and encourage positive perceptions of that individual in grandchildren.

Grandparent roles and behaviors are, of course, culturally patterned and distinct. Sandel, Cho, Miller, and Wang (2006) examined grandmothering in Taiwan and the U.S.A., demonstrating distinct patterns whereby advice-giving (to daughters and daughters-in-law) and disciplining of grandchildren were viewed as normative in Taiwan. In contrast, Euro-American grandmothers were more likely to view themselves as playmates to the grandchildren (Lin & Harwood, 2003). Culture also carries implications for language. In immigrant families, grandparent and grandchild may lack a common language, and they become reliant on the middle generation to serve as linguistic "brokers." Ng and He (2004) describe how such brokering can both enhance and constrain the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Weisskirch (2006) notes that language brokering is often associated with a sense of pride. This work illustrates some of the benefits of examining grandparenting tri-generationally (Miller-Day, 2004). An additional dynamic that can occur in immigrant families is when the grandchild performs translation services for the grandparent (e.g., in service settings such as physicians' offices: Greenhalgh, Robb, & Scambler, 2006). Such phenomena are

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more likely to occur when grandparent and grandchild cohabitate, which enhances the likelihood that the grandchild will speak the grandparent's language (Ishizawa 2004). Grandchildren are more likely to maintain the family of origin language when parents encourage such maintenance, which they often do to retain communication between grandparent and grandchild (Park & Sarkar, 2007). In the case of threatened languages, grandparents are often critical to the transmission of such languages to grandchildren, and play a central role in protecting some languages from extinction via a tri-generational transmission pattern (Nolan, 2008).

As should be clear, scholars are beginning to examine complex identities in the grandparenting context (e.g., Soliz, Thorson, & Rittenour, 2009). Families are complex and evolving structures; today's families challenge our theories as we pay more attention to gay couples; multiracial, multilingual or multinational families; step-families; families with adopted children; and single-parent families. In all of these cases, the important consequences extend beyond the parents and the children to other generations, and the implications for identities in the grandparent–grandchild relationship merit study.

Technology

Technology offers new routes for grandparent–grandchild contact, including new forms of play between grandparents and grandchildren (see Chapter 27). Some data indicate that older adults are particularly drawn to games that bring them together with their grandchildren (Mubin, Shahid, & Mahmud, 2008). Boomers are more likely to play computer games with their grandchildren rather than with their children, including on-line games with geographically distant grandchildren (Pearce, 2008). Grandchildren are often early adopters of technology who teach parents and grandparents (Aarsand, 2007), resulting in interesting identity and role shifts. There are also interesting research avenues here in terms of culture, with preliminary work showing how older generations help to structure grandchildren's learning of cultural constructs (Kenner, Ruby, Jessel, Gregory, & Arju, 2008). Technology offers numerous means by which geographical distance can be overcome, both via media already described (e.g., telephone, email) and also newer and emerging media (Vetere, Davis, Gibbs, Francis, & Howard, 2006).

Intergroup Contact

A small body of research examines whether the grandparent–grandchild relationship has broader implications for grandchildren's perceptions of older people and aging in general. Harwood, Hewstone, Paolini, and Voci (2005) demonstrate such a connection, showing that the link is mediated by specific communication behaviors (notably self-disclosure and accommodative behaviors). Soliz and Harwood (2003) demonstrate that having multiple and *diverse* grandparents predicts perceptions of older adult heterogeneity (thinking that all older people are not the same). One important issue here is the boundary of the family unit and if the grandparent is viewed as peripheral to the core family. Soliz (2007) compared step-grandparents with family-of-origin grandparents, finding that specific predictors of shared family identity were shared across grandparent types (e.g., grandchildren with better step-grandparent relationships were more likely to perceive a shared family identity with them). This contributes to the idea that family represents a "common ingroup" to which grandchildren and grandparents can subscribe; achieving the perception of belonging to the same family is one way to transcend intergenerational boundaries (Soliz & Harwood, 2006).

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Elder Abuse and Family Communication

Beyond specific family relationships, communication researchers have begun to examine family dynamics surrounding abuse of older adults. Elder abuse has been treated as a crime since the 1990s but its prevalence is not fully recognized nor is enough research being done. Elder abuse is "any knowing, intentional or negligent act by a caregiver or any other person that causes harm or a serious risk of harm to someone over 65 years of age" (National Center on Elder Abuse, 2004, para 2), including physical assault, emotional harm, verbal aggression, and financial exploitation, as well as sexual abuse (Burgess, Prentky, & Dowdell, 2000). The media downplay elder abuse, focusing instead on child and spouse abuse (Payne, Appel, & Kim-Appel, 2008; see Chapter 29 for overview of abuse in the family).

A large proportion of elder abuse is perpetrated by family members—particularly husbands and adult sons (Krienert, Walsh, & Turner, 2009). Family members experience significant caregiving stress and simultaneously benefit from trust and often complete control in these relationships; a combination of factors that can precipitate abuse (Thompson, Buxton, Gough, & Wahle, 2007).

Giles and Helmle (2011) proposed a model of elder abuse and communication to address ten different bi-lateral communicative pathways between abusee, abuser, their social/family networks, and institutional networks. For instance, negative age stereotypes (Hummert, 2010) and communication schemas (Harwood, McKee, & Lin, 2000) can lead family caregivers to dismiss messages from the aging parent or misjudge his/her communication competence and hence fail to attend to his/her needs. Similarly, in links between family/friends networks and the abusee, abusees face the dilemma of whether and to whom they can disclose the abuse—such disclosure being a communicative privacy dilemma (Petronio, 2002). Disclosure is influenced not only by complex relational issues, but also by the cognitive state of the abusee (Schofield & Mishra, 2004), and the stereotyping and stigma associated with being abused (Quinn & Tomita, 1986). This discussion focuses on family caregivers as perpetrators of the crime; equally common is when the perpetrators are nursing home residents or staff. In such contexts, older adults are isolated from the community and family and their relationships with their families may greatly influence if and how they can reveal these criminal activities (Giles & Helmle, 2011).

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the richness and complexity of family communication in older adulthood. Beyond the stereotype of grandma in her rocking chair telling stories about the good old days, there are dynamic life-and-death issues surrounding family relationships among older adults. Communication helps us explain why older adults have positive relationships and it provides for some of the most meaningful experiences of late life. Communication also generates and perpetuates negative myths about aging which can influence even the most intimate interpersonal relationships. It is in this tension that we find the fascination in studying family communication in later life.

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