

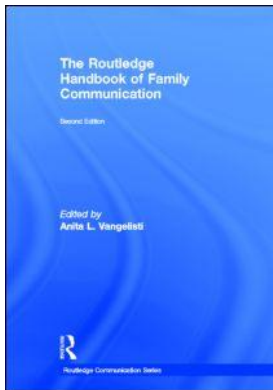
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Part III
Communication in Various
Family Forms

Communication in Intact Families

Ascan F. Koerner and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick

Writing about communication in intact families is an interesting challenge because intact ostensibly describes the structure of a family, but it also carries connotations of normalcy and normative functioning that rarely are articulated. Consequently, we start this chapter by discussing what we, and others, mean by saying a family is intact. Then we describe types of family functioning that are most closely associated with structural intactness and how structural intactness is related causally to family functioning. Finally, we will discuss how structural intactness might affect families' habitual ways of communicating in their mundane, day-to-day interactions, that is, their family communication patterns. We conclude the chapter with a look at the future of research on intact families.

Intact Families: Multiple Levels of Meaning

Defining Intact Families

Historically, social scientists and other family researchers have used three distinct perspectives to define family (Wamboldt & Reiss, 1989). *Structural* definitions are based on the presence or absence of certain family members or roles and allow for distinctions between, for example, families of origin, families of procreation, single-parent families, families headed by homosexual parents, as well as step, adopted, and extended families. *Psychosocial task* definitions are based on whether groups of people accomplish certain tasks together, such as maintaining a household, educating their children, and providing emotional and material support to one another. Finally, *transactional* definitions are based on whether groups of intimates through their behaviors generate a sense of family identity with emotional ties and a shared experience of a history and a future (for detailed discussions, see Fitzpatrick & Caughlin, 2002).

Intact, customarily defined as meaning whole or unbroken, when applied to families initially suggested a structural definition of family, which focuses on who is part of a family and who is missing, respectively. Examples include nuclear family, adopted family, single-parent family, and intergenerational family, to name a few. As to who is part of a family, one could argue that the presence of at least one child is a necessary condition for a group of individuals to be a family. As far as the adults are concerned, because two adults of opposite sex are required for the conception of the child and humans have a tendency to form enduring dyadic relationships with their procreational partners that are often socially

sanctioned in the form of marriage, one could argue that the presence of a married or otherwise committed adult couple that are the parents of the children in the family is the other necessary condition that defines family. From a structural perspective then, an intact family can be very narrowly defined as a couple of heterosexual adults in a committed relationship and their biological children (i.e., the nuclear family). It is also possible to expand structural definitions to include others, such as adopted and step children, other relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, and biologically unrelated individuals, such as a homosexual partner of a parent, boy and girlfriends, neighbors, and others.

Because of its connotation of wholeness and unbrokenness, to define intact families from the other two perspectives is more difficult and less intuitive. From the psychosocial task perspective, intactness could mean that families are those who accomplish their respective psychosocial tasks, while from the transactional perspective, it could mean that families are those who create a sense of permanence and interdependence of their relationships. While there are many psychosocial tasks that families can and do accomplish, among the most central and therefore most defining tasks for families are the raising and socialization of children, or parenting, and providing emotional and instrumental support for one another. Thus, intact from these perspectives can be defined as engaging in the parenting of children in the context of enduring, interdependent, and supportive interpersonal relationships. In other words, intactness of families from these perspectives is largely defined in terms of its functioning.

This observation is of more than semantic importance, because when researchers and laypersons alike think and write about families, they usually define families from all three distinct perspectives simultaneously, so that notions of structure, transactions, and psychosocial tasks are conflated (Fitzpatrick & Caughlin, 2002). They do so necessarily because any definition based upon only one of the three perspectives does not adequately capture the entire theoretical concept of “family.” For example, a group consisting of a married couple and their biological children might meet a structural definition of family, but if the parents do not talk to their children regularly and, as a consequence, the group neither develops a shared identity nor adequately socializes its children, it clearly lacks some fundamental attributes of a family. Similarly, a household of two single fathers who raise their children together may lack a mother and thus do not meet the structural definition of family, yet it clearly provides the core functions of a family: parenting and social support. In other words, it is impossible to define family exclusively from only one of the three perspectives and, in practice, families are defined from all three perspectives simultaneously. As a consequence, intact becomes a term with multiple layers of meaning when applied to families.

One reason “intact” is a difficult term when applied to families is because intact most directly refers to structure, so that structurally intact often is equated with accomplishing its psychosocial and transactional functions. This is the case even if the connection between structure and function is only implied and not explicitly stated, especially because structure and function are theoretically independent. Neither the psychosocial task definition nor the transactional definition of family require structural intactness; they only require that the family group fulfills certain functions. At the same time, structural definitions do not require any functioning either. At least theoretically, structurally defined families do not need to function well, and functionally defined families do not need to be structurally intact. Thus, implicitly assuming that structurally intact families function well can obfuscate the real causal factors for family functioning, especially in cases where structure is used as an

indicator of the quality of functioning, as in many studies that compare intact with nonintact families.

Structurally Intact Families in American Society

Although much has been made of the decline of the structurally intact family in contemporary America, according to the last census, the vast majority of children (71 percent) are still living in families headed by two heterosexual adults. Of children in these families, 78 percent live with both their biological parents, 19 percent live in families with a stepparent, and 3 percent live in families headed by two unmarried adults (Fields, 2001). Thus, the structurally intact family headed by two adults is still the predominant family form in North American society, and understanding the communication in the structurally intact family is therefore of great importance for scholars and lay persons interested in family communication, as well as those interested in public policy.

In addition, as we have argued above, the nuclear, structurally intact family often is perceived by the general public as the most natural and therefore normative way for families to be, and for parents to raise their children. Although less likely to make the same argument explicitly, family scholars frequently seem to imply the same when they focus their attention on investigating families that are not structurally intact (e.g., single-parent families) or structurally different (e.g., families headed by same sex parents) and more or less explicitly use structurally intact families as the standard to compare other types of families to. Despite the implication that communication in intact families is normative and how it functions is well researched and understood, it is actually neither fully understood nor is its functioning not interesting. Quite the opposite! Far from being a homogenous group exhibiting similar behaviors that lead to predictably positive outcomes for families, individual family members, and society at large, intact families exhibit a wide range of communication behaviors that are associated with both positive and negative outcomes for families and their members. In addition, there is no single pattern of family communication that is equally beneficial for every family. In fact, as our own research on family communication patterns over the past decades has shown, different families function quite well employing very different communication patterns. At the same time, the different family communication patterns do not result in uniform outcomes for all families. Each family communication pattern has distinct strengths and weaknesses for families and individual family members.

Thus, there is no easy way to describe family communication in structurally intact families. Rather, understanding of communication of structurally intact families requires consideration of different types of intact families, each characterized by their own, unique communication patterns and appreciation of the particular strengths and weaknesses of each pattern. To this end, we will first review research on the association between intactness and family functioning before briefly reviewing family communication patterns theory and how communication patterns define different types of families. Then, we will show the profound effects that family communication patterns have on various outcomes for families, and conclude with a review of factors that link family structure and family communication patterns.

Family Structural Intactness and Functioning

Despite theoretically being independent from one another, there is empirical evidence (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010) that suggest that structurally intact families often do function

better than structurally nonintact families, although the causes of better functioning are not necessarily found in the structure itself. Rather, they often happen to be associated with structural intactness for other reasons. For example, in structurally intact families, the bond between parents and children is often stronger and more intimate because it is not interrupted by stressful events that often characterize nonintact families, such as parental divorce or death (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Similarly, structurally intact families often experience less conflict and stress than families where the parents are divorced, separated, or widowed (Gano-Phillips & Fincham, 1995). Furthermore, structurally intact families usually have more economic and social resources available to them (Gringlas & Weinraub, 1995; Kissman & Allen, 1993). While none of these factors is deterministic in regard to family functioning, combined they can give structurally intact families significant advantages over nonintact families and thus create what might be most accurately called a mediated relationship between structural intactness and functioning.

Linking Structure and Function

The variables that mediate the relationship between structural intactness and family functioning operate at different psychological and sociological levels and through a number of different processes. Although communication in its broadest definition is probably involved in all of them, as interpersonal communication scholars, we are most interested in those that connect structure and functioning primarily through interpersonal communication and relationship processes. Consequently, we will briefly acknowledge other factors that are associated with measures of family functioning, such as child adjustment and individual well-being, but do not consider them further in this chapter other than to remind ourselves and our readers to keep them in mind as potentially alternative explanations for the associations between structural intactness and family functioning.

Distal Causes of Family Functioning

External Factors

Probably most important among these factors that do not directly involve communication is the economic advantages that a family headed by a married couple has over a single parent household. Being in a single parent household is the single largest contributor to child poverty in the U.S.A. (Brown, 2010; Manning & Brown, 2006) with children of single parents being about five times more likely to grow up in families below the poverty line than children of married and cohabitating parents (Manning & Brown, 2006). Not only do these households benefit from the material contributions of two adults that often both work for pay, but married and cohabitating parents are usually older, better educated, and therefore have access to better educational and other social resources than single parent households. Thus, they live in a socio-economic space that advantages their children over that of single parent households.

Another set of external factors that favors structurally intact families but whose impact is difficult to quantify is the socio-cultural space that these families occupy. Although social acceptance of alternative family forms has increased significantly over the past 30 years, most social and cultural institutions are geared toward structurally intact families. Schools and daycare providers often have hours that accommodate families with either one parent working part-time or with two working parents with flexible schedules, but not single

parents with full eight-hour work days. Similarly, many extracurricular or after school activities, such as athletics or music classes, require parents to accompany their children but do not provide supervision or a safe space for their siblings. As a consequence, social institutions are often geared to the needs and capabilities of structurally intact families. This creates barriers for the use of these institutions by nonintact families and deprives their children of the advantages these institutions can deliver to the children. Again, it is difficult to quantify the precise impact that these social institutions have on child adjustment or other measures of family functioning, but it is quite obvious to us that their overall effect on families is positive and that, at least in contemporary U.S. society, structurally intact families have easier access to these institutions.

Relational and Communication Factors

Other advantages that structurally intact families have over structurally nonintact families are rooted not as much in societal context, but are related to interpersonal processes and family communication more directly. One such important aspect of structurally intact families that differentiates them from structurally nonintact families is the stability of the parental (i.e., usually marital) relationship. Because under most circumstances children cannot and do not leave their parents, it is primarily the stability of the parents' relationship that determines whether or not a family is structurally intact. Infrequently, the stability is determined by external factors, such as death, military deployment, or imprisonment of a spouse, for example, but most frequently the stability of the parental relationship is determined by its quality.

An enduring parental relationship suggests that parents of structurally intact families have more satisfying intimate relationships than adults in nonintact families, which generally has a positive effect on their own life satisfaction, and, by extension, also positively affects their relationships with their children as well (Gano-Phillips & Fincham, 1995; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). In addition, couples in high quality relationships are able to provide each other with emotional and instrumental support in stressful or challenging situations (Cutrona, 1996). As a consequence, parents in structurally intact families more often can rely on each other for emotional support, especially in situations where the stress results from parenting or from difficult relationships with the children. This is particularly important, because the attentive, warm, and supportive parenting most associated with positive child outcomes is difficult to perform for parents who experience difficulties in their relationships with their children and assign responsibility for the difficulties to the children. In these situations, having a partner intervene on behalf of the parent or take over parenting responsibilities can be tremendously beneficial, not only for the parent, but for the quality of the parent-child relationship as well.

In contrast, parents in structurally nonintact families often lack such supportive relationships with another adult, and if they have one, they often perceive it to be less important than their relationships with their children (Burrell, 1995). Consequently, these parents often are emotionally overly dependent on their children, which makes them relatively less powerful in their relationship with their children than parents in structurally intact families. In other words, the power dynamics between parents and children often are vastly different in structurally intact and nonintact families. Parents in structurally intact families are relatively more powerful and influential in regard to family communication behaviors compared to parents in nonintact families and thus are able to better provide parental discipline and monitoring of children's behaviors

(Baumrind, 1991), both of which correlate positively with child adjustment outcomes (Steinberg, 2001).

In addition to being less dependent on their relationships with their children for their own psychological well-being, parents in structurally intact families also often are better at allowing their children to develop secure attachment (Nair & Murray, 2005). Attachment security is very much a function of parents' ability to function as both a secure base for exploration as well as a safe haven during stress for their children (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988); abilities that are enhanced when the adults themselves are in satisfying and supportive adult partnerships (Davies & Cummings, 1998) and do not experience negative life events such as separation and divorce (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). Children's secure attachment to their parents, in turn, has been shown to have positive effects on children's mental health and psychosocial adjustment (Davies & Cummings, 1998), and these positive effects seem to endure well into adulthood (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

Genetic Factors

Finally, another potential advantage of structurally intact families over nonintact families is the genetic relationship between parents and children, which often is greater in structurally intact families. The quality of parent-child relationships and children's acceptance of, and compliance with, parental discipline often is a function of their perceptions of parent's intentions. Parents sometimes make their intentions explicit, for example, by explaining them to their children, but frequently the children have to rely on attributions they make about their parents' behaviors to deduce their intentions. Because there is a genetic component to cognitive information processing and to underlying attitudes and beliefs, genetically related individuals, such as biological parents and children, should be able to make more accurate attributions about their intentions. In addition, these attributes should be more sympathetic and understanding (Rueter & Koerner, 2008). In a study testing this reasoning by comparing the adjustment of adopted to biological children, Rueter and Koerner found that adopted children that are low in conversation orientation are at a three- to five-times increased risk for externalization problems as compared to biological children. Because there was no difference in the externalization behaviors of adopted and biological children of families high in conversation orientation, Rueter and Koerner interpreted these findings to suggest that genetic relatedness between parents and children is a protective factor that can compensate for poor family communication.

Proximal Causes of Family Functioning

The demonstrated empirical correlation between structural intactness and functioning seems to suggest that little real harm is done by equating one with the other, even if done only implicitly. From a theoretical perspective, however, it is important to recognize the definitional independence of the two concepts and to focus on those underlying variables that causally connect structure and functioning. From a practical and public policy perspective, knowledge of the real reasons that structural integrity and function are associated is paramount.

A good example is the public discussion of the importance of structurally intact families for child adjustment and well-being, and in particular the singular importance of fathers for

families. The two most recent presidents, Bush and Obama, have publicly endorsed the importance of fathers for families and children and have referred to research showing better adjustment of children of married parents as compared to children of single-parent children as evidence for their position. Furthermore, both administrations have devoted significant public resources to encourage more fathers to marry, or to stay married to, the mothers of their children. However, a recent meta-analysis by Biblarz and Stacey (2010) that compared families headed by same and opposite sex parents and single-parent families found that essentially all of the positive effects that have been ascribed to the presence of fathers in families are a statistical artifact. Specifically, Biblarz and Stacey argued that past research on the role of fathers compared married to single-parent families and confounded the effects of fathers with those of dual parents. When they separated the effects of number and sex of parents and compared families headed by two parents with one another, they found that there was no advantage for the children in terms of their adjustment to having opposite sex parents. In fact, families headed by lesbian parents seemingly outperformed mixed sex couples on a number of child outcome variables and families headed by two homosexual men were largely indistinguishable in that regard from families headed by heterosexual couples. Biblarz and Stacey concluded that there are real advantages for families that stem from having two parents that bring their economic and social resources to the family and their children, but that the sex of the parents is not one of those important resources.

Summary

To summarize, even though labeling a family as intact is ostensibly a statement about the structure of a family, it often implies a well-functioning family as well. Furthermore, there are pragmatic reasons for why structurally intact families do function comparatively better than structurally nonintact families. In addition to having the benefit of two adults that provide material and interpersonal resources to the family, structurally intact families are less likely to experience the stress and strain inherent in deteriorating parental relationships. In addition, parents in structurally intact families tend to readily provide social support to one another and also have relatively more power in their relationships with their children and therefore have relatively more influence on family communication behaviors than parents in nonintact families. These parents also are better at raising securely attached children, and finally they are better understood by their children due to shared genes. While these factors are not necessarily attributes exclusive to structurally intact families, they tend to be positively correlated with structural intactness, and because they are associated with better functioning, suggest that structural intactness has a positive effect on family functioning, albeit a mediated one.

Family Transactional/Psychosocial Task Intactness and Functioning

In the preceding sections, we discussed the associations between structural intactness and family functioning. A similar discussion of the association of transactional/psychosocial task intactness and family functioning is not quite possible. Not only is the meaning of intactness when applied to a transactional/psychosocial task definition of family somewhat unclear, but as we argued above, the transactional nature of family interaction and the psychosocial tasks that define family are closely intertwined with, if not defined by, the core functions of families. Consequently, any attempt to associate transactional/psychosocial task intactness with functioning is at danger of being tautological.

Parenting as Family Function

Despite this danger, it seems to us that a look at the type of psychosocial tasks that families accomplish and the transactional processes involved in accomplishing those tasks is informative. As the review of the research on structural intactness has shown, one outcome by which family functioning is typically evaluated is how well their children are adjusted, which in the studies reviewed was usually defined in terms of social performance or psychological well-being. This suggests at least two qualitatively different types of functions that families are expected to perform and by which they are judged. One function is to socialize children so that they become socially competent and successfully perform in their respective social roles. The other is that children (and parents) achieve a certain degree of psychological well-being that is indicated by them exhibiting satisfaction with their lives and relationships, self-esteem, and a general sense of happiness.

That there are two distinct functions that families are expected to fulfill for their children suggest that there also are two distinct processes or sets of processes that families employ to achieve these two functions. One process teaches children how to be socially successful by making them aware of social expectations of others and by instructing them how to manage these expectations and relationships. This process is externally oriented toward social relationships and is concerned with social norms and rules and adherence to them. One could say that this process is fundamentally about compliance with social rules and norms. The other process makes the children self-confident and happy with themselves. This process is internally oriented toward acceptance and love of self and is concerned with the child's self-esteem. One could argue that this process is fundamentally about love and acceptance.

From the psychosocial task and the transactional perspectives then, intactness can be defined as the presence of parental love, expressed as warmth and support, and parental discipline, expressed as clearly communicated expectations for behavior and sanctions for behaviors that violate those expectations. This view is supported by researchers who study parenting, such as Steinberg (2001), who argues that the most consistent findings of parenting research over the last three decades have been that warm and firm parenting that is responsive to children's needs for autonomy is most likely to be associated with child adjustment. It is also supported by researchers such as Baumrind (1968, 1991), who consistently has found that authoritative parenting, that is, parenting that combines parental warmth with parental discipline, is superior in terms of child outcomes to warmth without discipline (permissive parenting), discipline without warmth (authoritarian parenting), and parenting that ignores the children all together (neglecting parenting).

Family Communication Patterns in Intact Families

As argued above, to the extent that families foster a family communication climate that at the same time is warm and supportive and provides firm guidance for children, they can be considered intact from the psychosocial tasks and the transactional perspectives. Thus, theories of family communication that are concerned with intact families need to account for the communication processes that are associated with warmth and support and with firm guidance, respectively. Family communication patterns theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, 2006; Koerner, 2007) is such theory, which is why it deserves closer examination here.

Family communication patterns describe families' fairly stable and thus predictable ways of communicating with one another. These habitual ways of communication allow researchers to distinguish between different types of families and are predictive of a

number of important family processes and psychosocial outcomes for families and individual family members, especially children.

Family communication patterns emerge from the process by which families create and share social reality. Thus, they are inextricably linked to the most basic social functioning of the family. Specifically, family communication patterns result from the process of co-orientation without which human interaction in general, and family communication in particular, would not be possible. The process of co-orientation and its role in creating social reality was described in detail by McLeod and Chaffee and their colleagues (1972, 1973; Kim 1981). Co-orientation occurs when two or more persons focus on and evaluate the same object in their social or material environment and are aware of their shared focus.

In dyads and groups, co-orientation results in two distinct cognitions for each person involved. The first cognition is a perception of the observed object, and second cognition is a representation of the other person's perception of the same object. These distinct cognitions determine three attributes of the co-oriented dyad or group: agreement, accuracy, and congruence. *Agreement* refers to similarity between the two or more persons' perceptions of the object. *Accuracy* refers to the similarity between one person's representation of the other persons' perception and the other persons' actual perception of the object. Finally, *congruence* refers to the similarity between one person's own perception of the object and the same person's representation of the other persons' perceptions of the object. These three attributes of the dyad or group are linearly dependent on one another such that the state of any two determines the state of the third, such that a dyad or group that has accuracy and congruence also is in agreement.

Families and other social groups that are co-oriented are not necessarily in agreement, however. They do not necessarily share a social reality. Social reality is shared only when the family is co-oriented and has agreement, accuracy, and congruence (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972). There are psychological and pragmatic factors, however, that favor congruence and accuracy (Koerner, 2007), respectively, and because of the linear dependency between congruence, accuracy, and agreement described above, also agreement. As a consequence, co-orientation in families usually leads to a shared social reality. The processes of co-orientation that establish that shared social reality, however, are the communication processes that determine family communication patterns.

Co-orienting Communication in Families

Family members can achieve shared social reality in two distinct ways. One way is for individuals to discern another family member's attitude about an object and to adopt that attitude. In other words, they can conform to other family members. Because this process emphasizes the relationships between family members over their relationships to the concept, McLeod and Chaffee (1972) called this process *socio-orientation*. The other way to achieve a shared social reality is for families to discuss the object of co-orientation and its role in the family's social reality and thus arrive at a shared perception of the object. Because this process emphasizes how family members conceptualize the objects over their interpersonal relationships, McLeod and Chaffee called this process *concept-orientation*.

Concept orientation and socio-orientation, however, are not only important because they describe the processes by which families arrive at a shared social reality. They are important because they underlie the communication behaviors and practices of families and therefore are associated with a large number of important outcomes for families that on the surface have nothing to do at all with the creation of social reality. Much in the

same way as social groups develop and maintain a particular grammar, syntax, and vocabulary in their language, family members create and maintain their shared social reality every time they say or do anything within the context of the family. Every family interaction contributes to how a family constructs its reality, even though individual family members engage in these interactions for ostensibly entirely different reasons.

Of particular importance for the study of families is the fact that families develop preferences for how they achieve a shared social reality that become habitual (Reiss, 1981). Some families prefer socio-orientation to concept-orientation, whereas other families prefer concept-orientation to socio-orientation. Yet other families make ample use of both strategies, and some families do not use either strategy particularly frequently.

Family Communication Patterns Theory

The two processes of co-orientation have important effects on the behavior of family members. Recognizing this, Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1994; Ritchie, 1991, 1997; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) reconceptualized McLeod and Chaffee's (1972, 1973) socio- and concept-orientation by placing a greater emphasis on the communication behaviors typical of the two orientations. Thus, concept-orientation became conversation orientation because the communication behavior typical of concept-orientation emphasizes family discussions. Similarly, socio-orientation became conformity orientation because the communication behavior typical of socio-orientation emphasizes conformity within families.

Conversation Orientation

The first dimension of family communication, conversation orientation, is defined as the degree to which families create a climate where all family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interaction about a wide array of topics. In families on the high end of this dimension, family members freely, frequently, and spontaneously interact with each other without many limitations in regard to time spent in interaction and topics discussed. These families spend a lot of time interacting with each other and family members share their individual activities, thoughts, and feelings with each other. In these families, activities that the family plans to engage in and decisions that affect the family are discussed within the family. Conversely, in families at the low end of the conversation orientation dimension, members interact less frequently with each other and there are only a few topics that are openly discussed with all family members. There is less exchange of private thoughts, feelings, and activities. In these families, activities are not discussed in great detail and not everybody is involved in family decisions.

Associated with high conversation orientation is the belief that open and frequent communication is essential to an enjoyable and rewarding family life. Families holding this view value the exchange of ideas, and parents holding this belief see frequent communication with their children as the main means to educate and to socialize them. Conversely, families low in conversation orientation believe that open and frequent exchanges of ideas, opinion, and values are not necessary for the function of the family or for the education and socialization of children.

From this description of conversation orientation, it should be apparent that conversation orientation is also associated with perceptions of a warm and supportive family climate and warm and supportive parent-child relationships. Because conversation orientation values individuals and their perceptions and perspectives, it leads to communication that

is affirmative of individuals and therefore perceived as warm and supportive. Thus, while conversation orientation originates with families' needs to inhabit a shared social reality, how it is implemented affects parent-child relationships and family communication climates in ways that are profoundly important for child adjustment and well-being.

Conformity Orientation

The second dimension of family communication is conformity orientation. Conformity orientation refers to the degree to which family communication stresses a climate of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs. Families on the high end of this dimension are characterized by interactions that emphasize a uniformity of beliefs and attitudes. Their interactions typically focus on conflict avoidance and adherence to social rules and norms, with obedience to parents being among the most important ones. In inter-generational exchanges, communication in these families reflects obedience to parents and other adults and authority figures. Families on the low end of the conformity orientation dimension are characterized by interactions that focus on heterogeneous attitudes and beliefs, as well as on the individuality of family members and their independence from their families. In inter-generational exchanges, communication reflects the equality of all family members, e.g., children are usually involved in decision making (Koerner & Cvancara, 2002).

Associated with high conformity orientation is the belief in what might be called a traditional family structure. In this view, families are cohesive and hierarchical. Family members favor their family relationships over relationships external to the family and they expect that resources such as space and money are shared. Families high in conformity orientation believe that individual schedules should be coordinated to maximize family time and they expect family members to subordinate individual interests to those of the family. Parents are expected to make the decisions for the family and the children are expected to act according to their parents' wishes. Conversely, families low in conformity orientation do not believe in a traditional family structure. Instead, they believe in less cohesive and hierarchically organized families. Families on the low end of the conformity dimension believe that relationships outside the family are equally important as family relationships, and that families should encourage the individual growth of individual family members, even if that leads to a weakening of the family structure. They believe in the independence of family members, they value personal space, and they subordinate family interests to personal interests.

From this description of conformity orientation, it should be apparent that conformity orientation is also associated with perceptions of parental guidance and the teaching of social norms and expectations. Because conformity orientation emphasizes compliance with others' expectations, it leads to communication that is regulating behaviors and makes social rules and norms explicit and therefore perceived as firm and providing guidance. Thus, while conformity orientation originates with families' needs to inhabit a shared social reality, how it is implemented also affects parent-child relationships and family communication climates in ways that are profoundly important for child adjustment and well-being.

Interdependence of Conversation and Conformity Orientation

The effects that these two core dimensions of communication in families have on actual family communication are often dependent on one another. That is, rather than having

main effects on family communication, these two dimensions frequently interact such that the impact of conformity orientation on family outcomes is moderated by the degree of conversation orientation of the family, and vice versa. The impact of conformity orientation is especially sensitive to the degree of conversation orientation in a family. Generally speaking, guidance and expectations that are expressed and enforced without warmth and support are perceived as coercive, undermining one's autonomy, and ultimately as belittling or disaffirmation of self. Conversely, guidance and expectations that are provided in a warm and supportive environment are perceived as helpful, enabling of autonomy, and ultimately affirming of self. Therefore, to predict the influence of family communication patterns on family outcomes, it is rarely sufficient to investigate only one dimension without assessing the other dimension as well (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Because the two dimensions of conformity orientation and conversation orientation interact consistently with one another, in effect they create four family types that differ from each other in qualitative ways.

Consensual families are high in both conversation and conformity orientation. Their communication is characterized by a tension between pressure to agree and to preserve the existing hierarchy within the family, on the one hand, and an interest in open communication and in exploring new ideas, on the other hand. That is, parents in these families are interested in their children and what the children have to say, but at the same time also believe that they, as the parents, should make final decisions for the family and for the children. They resolve this tension by listening to their children and by spending time and energy in explaining their decisions to their children in the hope that their children will understand and adopt the reasoning, beliefs, and values behind the parents' decisions. Children in these families usually learn to value family conversations and tend to adopt their parents' values and beliefs. In these families, conflict is generally regarded as negative and harmful to the family, but because unresolved conflict is perceived as potentially threatening to the relationships within the family, these families also value and engage in conflict resolution (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997).

Parenting in these families is warm and supportive, but parents also provide firm guidance to their children. The parenting corresponds to Baumrind's (1968) authoritative style. Accordingly, children in these families are usually well adjusted. Communicatively speaking, these families are intact.

Pluralistic families are high in conversation orientation but low in conformity orientation. Communication in pluralistic families is characterized by open, unconstrained discussions that involve all family members. Parents in these families do not feel the need to be in control of their children or to make all their decisions for them. This parental attitude leads to family discussions where opinions are evaluated based on the merit of arguments rather than on which family members supports them. That is, parents are willing to accept their children's opinions and to let them participate equally in family decision making. Because of their emphasis on the free exchange of ideas and the absence of overt pressure to conform or to obey, these families openly address their conflicts with one another, are low in conflict avoidance, engage in positive conflict resolution strategies, and most often resolve their conflicts. Children of these families learn to value family conversations and, at the same time, learn to be independent and autonomous, which fosters their communication competence and their confidence in their ability to make their own decisions.

Parenting in these families is warm and supportive, but parents fail to provide firm guidance to their children. The parenting corresponds to Baumrind's (1968) permissive style. Although children in these families are often well adjusted, because of the relative

lack of parental guidance, how well they do depends on their personality and social intelligence. Thus, for children that have deficits in these areas, growing up in pluralistic families can be associated with poor adjustment and related outcomes. Communicatively, these families are less intact than consensual families.

Protective families are low on conversation orientation and high on conformity orientation. Communication in protective families is characterized by an emphasis on obedience to parental authority and by little concern for conceptual matters or for open communication within the family. Parents in these families believe that they should be making the decisions for their families and their children, and they see little value in explaining their reasoning to their children. Conflict in protective families is perceived negatively because these families place great emphasis on conformity and little value on open communication (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Family members are expected not to have any conflicts with one another and to behave according to the interests and norms of the family. Because communication skills are not valued and not practiced much, these families often lack the necessary skills to engage productively in conflict resolution. Children in protective families learn that there is little value in family conversations and to distrust their own decision making ability.

Parenting in these families is cold and often coercive, consisting of insistence for obedience with little concern for explanation or for the autonomy needs of the child. The parenting corresponds to Baumrind's (1968) authoritarian style and children are less well adjusted. Communicatively, the families are less intact than consensual families.

Laissez-faire families are low in both conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Their communication is characterized by few and usually uninvolved interactions among family members that are limited to a small number of topics. Parents in laissez-faire families do believe that all family members should be able to make their own decisions, but unlike parents in pluralistic families, they have little interest in their children's decisions and do not value communicating with them very much. Most members of laissez-faire families are emotionally uninvolved in their families. Laissez-faire families value neither conformity nor communication very much. As a result, they do not experience their families as constraining their individual interests, and incidents of colliding interests and thus conflicts are rare. These families also do not engage much in conversation with one another and therefore also tend to avoid conflict. Children of these families learn that there is little value in family conversation and that they have to make their own decisions. Because they do not receive much support from their parents, however, they come to question their decision making ability.

Parenting in these families is uninvolved and often neglectful and fails to provide either warmth or guidance. The parenting corresponds to Baumrind's (1968, 1991) neglecting style and children are most likely to be poorly adjusted. Communicatively, the families are the least intact.

Conclusion

Structurally intact families are still by far the most frequent type of family in North American society and the vast majority of American children grow up in these families. In addition, structurally intact families are used by researchers and lay people alike as a sort of norm to compare other types of families against, although this is usually done implicitly rather than explicitly. For these reasons, structurally intact families deserve our continued attention and research. Only when we know how structurally intact families communicate

and understand why this communication often is associated with superior functioning can we use this knowledge to aid all families in improving their functioning.

In this chapter, we have made the distinction between structural intactness and the functional intactness implied by definitions of family based on psychosocial tasks and transactional approaches. Because families are usually defined from all three perspectives simultaneously, structural intactness and functioning are often conflated, which leads to the unstated assumption that structurally intact families are also highly functional. While there is empirical evidence for an association between structural intactness and functioning, the reasons for this association are not necessarily causal, but often are spurious or mediated, and not all of them are associated with interpersonal communication. We highlighted some of the relational and communication variables that appear to causally connect structure and function. Among them are that the parent–child relationships in structurally intact families are often more stable and supportive than those in nonintact families. In addition, structurally intact families are more likely to foster secure attachment in children, and parents are less emotionally dependent and consequently more powerful in their relationships with their children, which enables them to parent more resourcefully than parents in nonintact families. Finally, there is initial evidence that suggests that the genetic relatedness in structurally intact families can compensate for inadequate communication; an advantage that these families have over nonintact families.

As far as the communication that characterizes functionally intact families is concerned, we have argued that two processes are essential: love and discipline. We have further argued that family communication patterns theory (FCPT) is a theory that conceptualizes two communication practices that can be associated with parental warmth and support and parental guidance and discipline, respectively: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Not only does FCPT identify the communication processes most closely associated with child adjustment and well-being, by linking them to the functional need for families to create a shared social reality, it provides an explanation for the origin of the communication behaviors as well. To our knowledge, this sets FCPT apart from other theories of family communication that describe communication behaviors and link them to outcomes, but that fails to explain the origin of the communication behaviors in the first place.

Future Directions

In this chapter, we have reviewed and synthesized a large amount of research on family communication, but very little of that was explicitly on intact families. In fact, one could argue that intactness as an attribute of families and variable of relevance to family communication is largely ignored, at least by communication scholars. As we have argued, while there clearly is an association between intactness and functioning, this association is primarily implicit and assumed rather than explicitly investigated and theorized about. Thus, one obvious avenue for future research is to conceptualize intactness as a variable in its own right and to develop theories that explain how intactness and family functioning relate. In this chapter, we have made some preliminary attempts along this vein, but much more theoretical work could and needs to be done in this regard.

Another important area that needs more attention than it currently receives is the question of what exactly constitutes family functioning and whose outcomes we should consider. The research that we reviewed defined family functioning primarily in terms of child outcomes. Although consistent with a conceptualization of family that has child

rearing at its core, this perspective completely ignores the outcomes family relationships and family communication have for the parents. Because family relationships are also central to parents' lives, they should have significant influence on how parents fare as well. In addition, because parents do have a greater degree of autonomy than children in regard to how they communicate in families, how well family functions for them in turn probably affects how well they parent their children, and how well they allow family to function for their children as well. Thus, we see research on the impact of family communication on parent outcomes as another promising and fruitful avenue of future research.

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