Reviewing Family Communication Scholarship:
Toward a Framework for Conceptualizing a Communicative Perspective on Family Identity

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Abstract

In this manuscript we review multiple approaches to family communication research, and provide directions for future research as they relate to family culture. Specifically, we review family communication research that is either explicitly or implicitly tied to family culture. Given the importance of families and understanding the first social group that individuals often belong to, it is necessary to synthesize programs of research related to family culture. Thus, in order to further the progression of family research we provide an overview of where current research on family communication converges, present additional factors for family scholars to include in their work, and conclude with suggestions for scholarship that builds on and integrates existing research.

Keywords: family communication, family culture, family communication patterns, family communication standards, family stories

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Family represents one of—if not the most prominent and noteworthy social group individuals will belong to over the course of their life (Lay et al., 1998; Yip, Kiang, & Fuligni, 2008). Our families are influential in developing personal identity and self-concept, socializing attitudes and worldviews of members, and serving as a source of support and affiliation (Cicirelli, 1995; Dailey, 2009; Soliz & Rittenour, 2012; Whiteman, McHael, & Soli, 2011). Consequently, family identity is an important and salient concept tied to a variety of individual and relational outcomes. Family identity is discussed as how “families are (re)created through discursive practice” (Suter, 2012, p. 12), and thus communication processes are integral to this discursive practice.

Recognizing the salient role of communication, family communication scholars have focused on this interactive dimension of family as a social group as research has been quite extensive exploring communication in multiple family dyads—marital partners (Givertz, Segrin, & Hanzal, 2009), parent-child (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2012), siblings (Mikkelsen, 2014), grandparent-grandchild relationships (Soliz & Lin, 2014), and extended family dyads (e.g., cousins, aunts, uncles: Floyd & Mormon, 2014). Further, communication scholars have demonstrated that family communication is tied to a variety of informational, psychosocial, and behavioral outcomes for family members (Schrodt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008), such as mental health, relational satisfaction, and family conflict. Although each of these areas of scholarship are extremely beneficial, the issue lies in the disparate nature of these lines of research. Scholars are informed by multiple theoretical and conceptual traditions, resulting in a lack of cohesion among various lines of inquiry. In short, what is needed is more integration of these traditions to

create a more comprehensive and expansive understanding of the communicative dynamics that are enacted and constitute family. Although we see why it is easy to label this family identity, and why it is a term frequently used in the literature, in order to distinguish and capture additional components that are important to the discussion, we argue that family relational culture is a more inclusive and perhaps less value laden term. By utilizing a more expansive framework for investigating family communication, the potential for further enhancing our understanding of family functioning and, more importantly, how practitioners can best assist families, is limited only by the silos we draw around aspects of family.

Given the importance of expanding our current understanding of family communication, we argue for the importance of situating current and future research within a more expansive framework of family relational culture. No framework will account for everything; however, we hope that the proposed framework will enable scholars to: (1) see how current research informs each other, (2) recognize the limitations in research that largely ignores socio-cultural factors and focuses primarily on White families, and (3) utilize it as a springboard for continued research on families that can be used by practitioners. The purpose of the article is to summarize these lines of research and offer additional factors to consider moving forward. The hope is that this framework will be beneficial for family communication scholars as well as providing an important overview of family communication perspectives to scholars and practitioners unfamiliar with this body of literature.

The goal of this review, therefore, is to synthesize the research that speaks to these communicative characteristics of *family culture*. Whereas family identity in popular culture and certain academic circles is often conceptualized in terms of family values or structural characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status), conceptualizing family identity also

necessitates a focus on the communication processes (Edwards & Graham, 2009) that constitute family. Doing so is important if family scholars and practitioners are to continue to pursue the goal of understanding family functioning as well as the manner in which families influence individual and dyadic-level outcomes in and outside of the family. As such, we define family relational culture as the *communicative processes and relational ideologies that constitute the family as it is constructed through social-cultural influences* (Perry-Jenkins, Newkirk, & Ghunney, 2012).

In the following, we first review and synthesize some of the more prominent ways in which communication scholars have studied—whether implicitly or explicitly—communication culture. This is not an exhaustive list, rather it contains several of the major avenues of research in family communication that focus on family culture. We encourage scholars to think critically about how their work fits into the larger discussion of family culture. Collectively, these lines of research reflect multiple paradigmatic and conceptual approaches to studying family. By synthesizing these areas, our hope is that scholars can locate similarities as well as identify opportunities to integrate these research traditions, developing a more cohesive idea of the factors that reflect and affect family. Doing so is important for providing a common perspective upon which to build knowledge, and a recognition of how the field has grown and changed over the last several decades. We begin with a discussion of Korner and Fitzpatrick's (2002, 2006) general theory of family communication, and move into additional approaches to studying family communication including family communication patterns and narrative approaches. We conclude this section by summarizing the conceptual patterns of communication that are found at the intersection of these often-used approaches to studying family communication.

Approaches to Family Communication

Patterned interactions are those communicative processes that are assumed to be stable and consistent across interactional contexts. Often, these patterned behaviors are exemplified in terms of typologies (e.g., Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) or specific categories (Caughlin, 2003). Each of these processes have typically been investigated using quantitative methodology, and are frequently used to predict family functioning (e.g., Schrodt, 2005), in addition to a host of behavioral, information processing, and psychosocial outcomes (Schrodt et al., 2008). Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002c, 2006) articulation of a General Theory of Family Communication, provides an overarching framework for investigating patterned interactions.

General Theory of Family Communication

Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002c, 2006) conceptualization of a theory of family communication utilizes schemata. Schemata are hierarchical in nature with the top layer being general scripts, the middle layer being the scripts that one uses in a given type of relationship, or in this case any relationships that are categorized as family, and the bottom layer of scripts being those that one holds for particular individuals (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002c). Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002c) argued that schemata are relatively stable patterns used for efficiency in interpersonal relationships and that individuals employ the hierarchy in order to find the script that is most competent for that interaction. In other words, schemata are both efficient and useful. Relationship type schemas are the commonalities that exist within families that allow individuals to use similar scripts with different members of their family. Family relationship type schema can be seen across three different dimensions—expressiveness, structural traditionalism, and conflict avoidance (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Hortsman et al., 2018). These three dimensions offer one approach to studying the patterned ways in which families are constructing how they

“do” family. Centered within this framework, is family communication patterns theory, which has been labeled a “Grand Theory” of family communication research (Koerner & Schrod, 2014), and is often the go to framework for studying family communication.

Family Communication Patterns

Family communication patterns originated in 1972 with McLeod and Chaffee’s cognitive approach to family communication and their desire to describe families’ tendencies to develop stable and predictable ways of communicating with one another (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Based on the cognitive theory of coorientation, McLeod and Chaffee (1972, 1973) developed two theoretically orthogonal orientations that are representative of how families achieve coorientation. Coorientation occurs when “two or more persons focusing on and evaluating the same object in their social or material environment” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 52) reach agreement about the object. The two processes through which families achieve coorientation and are socialized are socio-orientation and concept-orientation. These two orientations form the foundation of family communication patterns and were reconceptualized by Ritchie (1991) as conversation and conformity orientation.

Conformity orientation is based on socio-orientation—or the idea that family members reach shared understanding of an object by adopting the views of other family members, typically the views of a parental figure, and it is “the degree to which families create a climate that stresses homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 85). Conversation orientation is based on concept-orientation—the idea that through interaction individuals reach a shared understanding of an object (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006), and it is “the degree to which families create a climate where all family members are encouraged to participate freely in interactions about a wide array of topics” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002c, p.

85). Together, these two theoretically orthogonal orientations (cf. Keating, 2016) form the foundation of family communication patterns and the subsequent typology of families and family communication patterns theory. Family communication patterns (FCP) were developed to understand both the interpersonal and intrapersonal communication that occurs in the family (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). FCP focuses on two communication schemata—conversation and conformity orientation that reflect two patterns of communication that families use to construct their family culture.

Conversation and conformity orientations have been used to assign families to one of four family types (consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire; Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994), with each family type being indicative of a stable and patterned way in which families communicate in everyday life. FCP's utility has resulted in two separate meta-analyses, Schrodts et al. (2008) demonstrated that conversation and conformity orientation are associated with psychosocial, behavioral, and information processing outcomes. Whereas Keating (2016) investigated the extent to which conversation and conformity orientation are correlated, or operate in an orthogonal manner. These two meta-analyses, and the special issue on family communication patterns in the *Journal of Family Communication* (2014) emphasize both the utility and prominence of FCP; however, they also illustrate the concerns scholars have with the conformity orientation measure. These concerns have resulted in two new waves of FCP research that measure conformity in different ways. Specifically, Hesse et al. (2017) developed a measure of conformity that divides it into two dimensions: warm and cold conformity. This approach focuses on the idea that not all conformity is negative—as prior research frequently indicates that more conformity in the family has negative outcomes (Schrodts, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). Such that, “warm conformity represents the idea that parents can have set ideas of rules, discipline,

beliefs, and values without being a negative influence on the wellbeing of the child” (p. 325), and cold conformity behaviors “include parents limiting debate and open discussion of family beliefs, exerting large amounts of control and influence in the child’s life, and presenting a family that is overly dependent on each other, and not allowing for outside influences such as friends” (p. 325). This approach to studying conformity orientation focuses on both the positive and negative aspects of familial control. Hortsman et al. (2018) took a different approach and developed a measure of conformity that includes four dimensions: (1) respecting parental authority, (2) experiencing parental control, (3) adopting parents’ values/beliefs, and (4) questioning parents’ beliefs/authority. Each of these approaches is beneficial in studying the underlying schemata that constitute family; however, FCP only represents a small portion of what scholars know about family communication processes.

Relational Standards

Individuals hold certain beliefs about the nature of family relationships (Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999) and the role of communication in the family (Caughlin, 2003). These relational and communication ideals or standards impact family satisfaction, are linked to family communication schemata (Caughlin, 2003), and may reveal additional components of family culture. These relational standards may be thought of as existing for the family as a whole; however, research suggests that individuals within the family do not always hold the same standards (Matsunaga, 2009).

Vangelisti et al. (1999) investigated what relational standards individuals have for their family based on the stories they told. Specifically, they found ten story themes in their analysis of family stories, (1) care, (2) disregard, (3) togetherness, (4) hostility, (5) adaptability, (6) chaos, (7) reconstruction, (8) humor, (9) divergent values, and (10) personality attributes. In addition,

participants were asked to revise their story if it did not meet their ideal for family, this resulted in approximately 34% of participants revising their family story. Although several of these themes are representative of communicative behaviors, there are also multiple themes that speak to the relational ideology families hold. Thus, by incorporating not only how families communicatively construct who they are, but also including the values and beliefs that are paramount to what is considered standard for families, scholars can begin to utilize all aspects of this relational group and the standards they hold as part of their culture.

Caughlin (2003) developed the Family Communication Standards (FCS) scale to assess the standards or ideals that individuals hold for communication in the family and found a set of 10 dimensions that are representative of how individuals believe families should communicate. Specifically, he found that the 10 dimensions individuals believe to be the standards of family communication are (1) openness, (2) maintaining structural stability, (3) expression of affection, (4) emotional/instrumental support, (5) mindreading, (6) politeness, (7) discipline, (8) humor/sarcasm, (9) regular routine interaction, and (10) avoidance. Caughlin (2003) suggested, “that family communication standards constitute part of the specific content of family communication schemata” (p. 33), in that FCS functions as schemata within the family. Understanding the ways in which the combination of particular standards influences family outcomes is relevant to our discussion of family culture, as it suggests that there are multiple ways to “do” family. This is arguably one of the most important but often overlooked aspects of family culture, as “doing” family has been shown to vary considerably based on socio-cultural features, and nationality in particular.

Matsunaga (2009; Matsunaga & Imahori, 2009) used the FCS to determine if there are different family communication standards profiles for Japanese and American families and the

extent to which multiple family members hold the same standards. Using latent profile analysis, he found three distinct profiles for American and Japanese families, and for each of these three profiles cultural differences emerged. Japanese families were primarily classified as high-context, and American families were split between laissez-faire and open-affectionate. These results indicate the need for research that uses a more diverse sample, as the current family literature should not be generalized to families who are not middle-class Caucasian Americans. Based on Matsunaga and Imahori's (2009) research, it is clear that family identity is influenced by cultural factors and rather than prescribing certain communication behaviors, researchers need to understand the significance of these socio-cultural factors in their explanation of family communication. In addition to cultural differences, Matsunaga (2009) found three profiles for American families—open-affectionate, which supports one of the profiles found in the comparison study, and two profiles that indicate more than half of the families in the sample have divergent views on family communication standards. Thus, it stands to reason that it is not just national culture (cf. Sillars, 1995) that influences family culture. This is also evident in the multiple ways in which families use narratives to create and indicate who they are as a unit.

Family Construction Through Narrative

Families jointly tell stories that create a family culture and are indicative of both who is considered family and the extent to which individuals identify with their family (Koenig Kellas, 2005, 2015; Thompson et al., 2009; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009). "People build and communicate their relationships, cultures, and identities, in part through the stories they tell" (Koenig Kellas, 2015, p. 253), and these stories offer a view of the relational standards individuals hold for their families (Vangelisti et al., 1999), the legacies that they inherit from

their families (Stone, 2004; Thompson et al., 2009), and how the process of telling stories affects and reflects family identity (Koenig Kellas, 2005).

One-way families construct culture is through stories about work and in particular negotiating family-work boundaries (Langellier & Peterson, 2006b). Through family storytelling about work, families negotiate boundaries surrounding culture, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation among other aspects that make up their family culture. We see this reflected in the tension individuals experience when moving between the working class promise and middle-class affiliation in Lucas' (2011) investigation into the social construction of the working class. Stone (2004) suggested that our family stories shape us, not just the stories we are characters in, but also the stories that are passed down or inherited from other family members. Stone's work is important as it elucidates how family identity is inherited and created and the role it serves long-term for that family. These inherited family stories (or legacies) can be embraced or rejected by the family, and may be positively or negatively valenced (Thompson et al., 2009).

Koenig Kellas et al.'s (2015) research investigates the process of jointly constructing stories and how through the telling of stories families create and reflect their identity. Through jointly told family stories, individuals can imply relational status, relational closeness, and the degree to which they feel a sense of identification with their family (Koenig Kellas, 2005). Inherent in each story told is a theme—or another aspect of culture, and which stories families choose to tell are connected to the ways in which they tell the story and engage in sense-making behaviors (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006).

Each family may differ in the ways in which they use storytelling processes to enact family culture. Thorson, Rittenour, Koenig Kellas, and Trees (2013) explored how differences between and within families contributed to their storytelling process. How family members feel

about each other contributed to the way in which they engaged in jointly told stories, as those who were more satisfied with their relationships were more engaged in the storytelling process. Narratives serve to create identity (Koenig Kellas, 2015), enable researchers to investigate both content and process (Koenig Kellas, 2015), and observe the ways in which stories allow families to pass on their identity to future generations (Stone, 2004).

Research on patterned interactions in the family allows scholars to compare different processes across families and various outcomes (Schrodt et al., 2008). In addition, the stability that can be viewed through patterned interactions lends credence to the assumption that there is an overarching culture that families have and enact in their everyday interactions. Patterned interactions are just one approach to family culture, with narrative being an important component of how families reify that culture. Family stories provide a glimpse of what characterizes each family, and it is their telling of the story that determines the meaning (Stone, 2004).

Given the multiple paradigmatic and theoretical approaches to studying family communication culture, we felt it was paramount to summarize where the overlap lies in this literature and present what we contend are eight conceptual dimensions of family communication that pervade family culture.

Conceptual Dimensions of Family Communication

Based on the conceptual and theoretical overlap in our review, we synthesize these often-fragmented bodies of scholarship into the following communication patterns and processes: discipline, conflict avoidance, openness, affection, support, humor/fun, storytelling, and family time. Collectively, these communication processes reflect a variety of behaviors that researchers have investigated in the family context, and we argue are foundational in how families reflect and enact their family culture.

Discipline. From authoritarian to laissez-fair scholars have studied the way parents discipline children. The way in which co-parenting occurs and how discipline is enacted reflects and affects what values and communicative behaviors are considered acceptable within the family. Consequently, discipline serves an important role in facilitating and creating family culture. Caughlin (2003) proposed that discipline functions as one of the standards of family communication. Human-Hendricks and Roman (2014) in their systematic review suggest that the ways in which parents discipline their children impact adolescent antisocial behavior, such that harsh, inconsistent, and conflictual parenting leads to more antisocial behavior. In addition, researchers have demonstrated that discipline methods, and co-parenting practices are also tied to marital conflict (Katz & Woodin, 2003), where more hostile couples use more assertive parenting practices.

Conflict avoidance. Family relational standards (Vangelisti et al., 1999), family communication standards (Caughlin, 2003), and Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002) general theory of family communication all include a conflict avoidance dimension of family communication. Emphasizing the importance of conflict assessment and its impact on families. Schrodtt (2009) found that conflict avoidance is negatively associated with family strength and family satisfaction, indicating that how conflict is modeled and enacted contributes to the norms in the family. Both the FCS (Caughlin, 2003) and the FCEI (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994) contain dimensions that focus on level of conflict avoidance, as the extent to which families are conflict avoidant (or not) speaks to their need for group harmony, and the ability to express conflict with other family members.

Openness. Openness is frequently investigated as an indicator of positive relational outcomes (e.g., Schrodtt & Phillips, 2016), and is a key component of the FCS, RFCP, and FCEI

(e.g., Caughlin, 2003; Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Yet, when considering openness as a factor in family research scholars frequently ignore additional factors that may dictate that less openness is the norm. Schrodt and Phillips (2016) found that individuals who have more conversation-oriented families, are more likely to be open with their siblings, and thus have more satisfying sibling relationships. Consequently, when investigating the role openness plays in family culture, scholars should consider the implications of suggesting a practice that may be outside the norms of that family.

Affection. Floyd and colleagues (2005, 2010) have repeatedly demonstrated the importance of affection in romantic and family relationships, and individuals also indicated that affection is a critical standard within their families (FCS; Caughlin, 2003). Floyd and Morman (2000) found not only that the extent to which fathers were affectionate with their sons predicted how satisfied they were with their relationship, but also that fathers who had highly affectionate parents were more likely to be highly affectionate with their sons. Therefore, we see continued evidence for the impact of family culture on future families, and the intergenerational transmission of family culture (see also Rauscher, Schrodt, Campbell-Salome, & Freytag, 2019).

Support. Social support has been extensively studied (e.g., Goldsmith, 2008), and makes an appearance in the FCS (Caughlin, 2003). Goldsmith (2008) argued that enacted support is most beneficial when conceptualized as a communication process, and by framing social support in the family as a communicative process, it can be viewed as a component of how families conceptualize their culture—either as a family who supports each other or a family who does not. Supportive communication has been linked to relational satisfaction in families and the extent to which individuals perceive they are part of the same social collective—or family (Soliz, Thorson, & Rittenour, 2009), thus although it is easy to say that some of these factors are always

good reifies a heteronormative understanding of families and gives credence to the assumption evident in much of our work—that all families are happy and functional in the same way.

Humor. Humor functions in a variety of ways and can be used to sneak in hurtful comments, yet it also is seen as a “fun” aspect of family. Humor (and fun) as a component of family communication is consistent with Koenig Kellas’ (2005) family storytelling themes, the FCS (Caughlin, 2003), and family relationship standards (Vangelisti et al., 1999). Myers and Weber (2004) found that siblings use humor as a relational maintenance behavior, such that it is positively related to sibling liking, commitment, and trust. Thus, humor serves as role in facilitating relationships, and potentially serving as an ingroup marker (see Abrams & Bibbpus, 2011). Humor and fun may be a frequent part of storytelling in the family, and families may retell stories that are entertaining.

Storytelling. Given the importance of narrative in identity development (Koenig Kellas, 2015), we argue that storytelling is an essential component of family culture. Families tell various types of stories, such as stories of accomplishment, fun, tradition/culture, separateness, and togetherness (Koenig Kellas, 2005). It is through these stories that families pass down traditions and culture. Specifically, family stories serve to affect and reflect who they are and how they do family.

Family Time. Family rituals, activities, dinnertime, and just spending time are key aspects of both the “routine interactions” category in FCS (Caughlin, 2003) and the “tradition/culture” theme (Koenig Kellas, 2005). Family time, whether dinner or other activities, these events illustrate the importance of rituals in constructing families (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006). Each family may utilize or not specific rituals that help constitute what they value or consider to be important.

Additional Family Culture Factors

Each of the aforementioned bodies of scholarship provides an important orientation toward understanding family culture from a communicative perspective and reflects various methodological and paradigmatic approaches. Yet, there has been little integration of these lines of research resulting in a fragmentation of family communication scholarship. Given our definition of family culture, integrating these lines of research provides a more comprehensive perspective of the various communicative patterns and practices that constitute our families. With that being said, a holistic conceptual framework needs to also attend to the socio-cultural factors that are often ignored in family communication scholarship (Sillars, 1995).

As such, we propose a need for scholars to more consciously consider and situate their research within several socio-cultural factors that have direct influence on the interpretation, implication, and application of family communication scholarship.

Socio-Cultural Context

Family communication scholarship has often ignored non-communicative factors that are vital to our understanding of family culture even though there have been calls for many years to include cultural and other social ecological factors in considering family communication and family functioning (Perry-Jenkins et al., 2013; Sillars, 1995; Soliz & Phillips, 2017; Turner & West, 2003, 2018). In cases where these considerations do come into play, there are often differences in family communication processes and outcomes (e.g., Matsunaga, 2009). In the following, we introduce three salient socio-cultural domains that we contend are critical to family research: race-ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status. Although not completely comprehensive of all factors in the larger sociocultural context, we highlight these because research demonstrates both how these considerations can shape the nature of family

communication patterns and processes and their role in influencing individual and relational outcomes. For instance, a family religious identity may be unimportant in some families, and yet when it is important to the family, it may serve as the foundation for the ways in which a family communicates. Further, we argue that inclusion of these factors highlights how we must consider the manner in which family culture intersects with other salient social identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

Race/Ethnicity. Research on family communication often includes a tag-line about race-ethnicity, yet fails to discuss the important implications of those limitations, and there is even less research that investigates the family communication differences based on racial-ethnic group (Soliz & Phillips, 2017). North American researchers know a lot about American, White, middle-class families; however, by ignoring other cultural factors, scholars are generating knowledge that is specific to a particular family (Sillars, 1995). Gudykunst and Lee (2001) called for research that investigates ethnicity and family, and suggested that race and national characteristics associated with ethnicity are important for understanding family functioning. If race/ethnicity is influencing family functioning then it stands to reason that race/ethnicity is also impacting the communicative processes within families.

For example, families who identify as open are seen as stronger and more functional (e.g., families who are more open about sexual health have adolescents who engage in less risky sexual behaviors; Markham et al., 2010) but perhaps we are missing part of the story (e.g., when cultural differences are considered, openness is not always viewed as more positive when talking about sexual behaviors with adolescents; Wang, N., 2016). For example, N. Wang (2016) demonstrated that in Chinese culture, openness—particularly openness about sex is not always the best choice for parents hoping to reduce their child's risky behavior. Whereas Holman and

Koenig Kellas (2015) found that adolescents' perceptions of frequency of parental communication about sex-related topics was negatively related to sexual risk-taking. Regnerus (2005) found that African American parents, and specifically Black Protestant parents, had more frequent conversations with their adolescents than Asian-American, White, and Hispanic parents. It is not just openness where scholars have demonstrated differences based on race/ethnicity. Shearman, Dumlao, and Kagawa (2011) found that Americans were more likely to use avoidance and distributive strategies, whereas Japanese used integrative strategies when engaging in conflict with their parents.

Scholars have also demonstrated differences in family communication patterns based on race (Allen & Chaffee, 1997), and Soliz and Phillips (2017) presented preliminary findings indicating that how conformity orientation functions varies based on race/ethnicity. Thus, when thinking about one of the largest and most well-known bodies of family communication scholarship, it is possible that the conclusions drawn about conversation and conformity orientation are limited given the relatively homogenous nature of the research.

By centralizing race/ethnicity in family research, scholars are able to provide information on the norms of each group, rather than drawing comparisons between any non-White group and the typical study sample (Staples & Mirande, 1980). While marriage and family therapists have been investigating the role of culture for several decades (see Hong, 1989), family communication scholars have largely ignored the impact of race and ethnicity in families, and have instead treated all families as similar. Ethnicity and race, are not a choice but rather an inherent part of the family structure (Sillars, 1995), and should be included in our scholarship and how we frame family culture.

Religion. Scholars have approached religion from a variety of ways such as church attendance, and extrinsic and intrinsic orientation (e.g., Fife, Nelson, & Messersmith, 2014). Fife et al. (2014) demonstrated a positive relationship between conversation and conformity orientation and religious strength, indicating that religious orientation is connected to the way families communicate. Thus, religion is a prominent factor in some family's relational culture. Specifically, as parents try and enforce particular religious values (e.g., Fife et al., 2014) through communicative behaviors, individuals may try to indicate how their own personal religious orientation diverges from that of their family (Colaner et al., 2014). Consequently, religion functions as part of family culture, but also as a point of contention when individuals have to manage conflicting religious identities. Religion is not the only socio-cultural factor that is potentially a point of contention in families as Lucas (2011) demonstrates.

Socioeconomic status (SES). Lucas' (2011) investigation of the working class promise clearly identifies one of the ways in which SES may influence the culture of a family. Specifically, through the stories families pass on it is clear how the value of the working class promise contradicts their newly attained middle class status. SES status has been linked to divides in education attainment (Musu-Gillette, 2015), mobile access (Lee & Kim, 2014), and health care (Hughes & Simpson, 1995), to name a few. Ramdahl, Jensen, Borgund, Samdal, and Torsheim (2018) found that children who reported higher levels of family wealth, were more likely to report better parent-child relationships. Amato, Booth, and Johnson (2006), found that family income was related to measures of marital quality, such that higher income was related to happier couples, less conflict, fewer problems, decreased chances of divorce, and more interaction. However, these findings become more complex when we separate out wives' earnings and hours worked from the overall financial stability of the family, such that working

wives contribute to greater strain on the marital relationship. Finally, T. R. Wang (2016) argues that SES shapes the type of conversations parents have with their children, specifically about education, jobs, and families.

As we mentioned above, there are additional sociocultural factors that could be considered in inquiries into family culture and family functioning (e.g., how families intersect with social institutions: Socha & Stamp, 2009). What is important is recognizing that understanding family culture and consequently situating family communication within a larger framework necessitates considerations of these macro-level and socio-cultural influences on our family communication patterns and processes.

Relational Ideology

As Sillars (1995) points out, the value framework of families is integral to understanding family functioning. In fact, aspects of family values are reflected in the family communication patterns and processes (e.g., openness in the family) and, as we emphasize, influenced by socio-cultural considerations. We recognize that relational ideologies are constituted within the family; however, given the value that families place on these constructs, we argue that centrality of family, family hierarchy, and a continuum of closeness are integral to a comprehensive framework of family culture.

Centrality of family. Sillars (1995) proposed the term “centrality of family” to indicate a focus on the family, and noted that family centrality is often associated with various ethnic minorities in the US; however, that does not preclude it from being an important ideological component of other families, nor does it mean that all ethnic minority families must hold centrality of family as a foundational value. Part of family centrality is the overall cohesiveness of the family, such as a focus on *we* language instead of *I* language. Families who use more

cohesive language demonstrate a more collectivistic orientation to family, instead of an individualistic tendency. Rather what is important is the role that centrality of family plays in relational and individual outcomes and the way in which centrality of family interacts with family identification, as individuals may not identify with their family, but may feel such a strong sense of familialism that it overrides their lack of identification.

Hierarchy. Structural stability, traditionalism, conformity, these terms are often associated with some type of familial hierarchy and adherence to a prescribed set of beliefs and values (Caughlin, 2003; Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Moreover, they are frequently viewed as having a negative effect on relationships and individual well-being outcomes (Schrodt et al., 2007). Families adhere to specific roles and beliefs, yet this underlying ideology may produce different outcomes depending on the family. Rather than assuming that families only conform to discriminatory beliefs (see Odenweller & Harris, 2018), when we consider hierarchy as a value that is important to families, we can take a more holistic approach. For example, if we consider conformity as one way in which families instill a sense of hierarchy, then it makes sense to investigate a curvilinear function (Phillips, Ledbetter, Soliz, & Bergquist, 2018), differences based on racial/ethnic groups (Allen & Chaffee, 1977; Soliz & Phillips, 2018), and how it is reconceptualized to better capture these nuances (Hesse et al., 2017; Hortsman et al., 2018). When hierarchy, or this adherence to a set of values and beliefs dictated by parental authority, is thought of as an ideological component that families value and endorse, it opens the door for a broader and more complete understanding of the ways in which this family value influences relationships.

Closeness/distance. The positivity bias in research often leads us to use closeness as an outcome variable, and to view estrangement as a negative outcome of family communication

(see Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). However, when we think about families as having a particular ideology that contributes to their functioning, then we can view closeness as a value that families hold. Is being close important to them as a whole? Do they prioritize family closeness? Individuals may discuss estrangement as a negative aspect of their relationship, as one is always connected to his/her family, or individuals may extol the values that should be associated with family and distance themselves from individuals who do not meet those standards (Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Adams, Anderson, and Adonu (2004) argue that the experience of closeness is often framed “as a secondary product, not necessarily in the sense of less values, but in the sense of derived or manufactured” (p. 322). In other words, that closeness or intimacy is considered to be something that results from something else. Research often views closeness and intimacy as disclosure driven, yet this happens at the expense of socio-cultural factors (Adams et al., 2004). Thus, by thinking about closeness as a function of family ideology, rather than as an outcome of family communication or openness, researchers will approach families with a more culturally sensitive lens.

Family Culture: Moving Forward with Family Communication Research

As illustrated throughout, there are multiple ways in which family culture has been conceptualized and studied; however, these approaches have yet to be integrated into a more comprehensive framework of family culture, and in many cases only consider communicative aspects. The differences across these approaches lies in how family culture is conceptualized, whether as a patterned or stable interaction (Caughlin, 2003; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), or as story content or process (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Langellier & Peterson, 2006a; Stone, 2004). Each approach adds something different to researchers’ understanding of family culture and how to position it as a larger theoretical model. There are also pragmatic implications of conducting

research that investigates family components such as family ideology and race/ethnicity, in that by ignoring these factors researchers may be missing out on important dynamics that could influence how families negotiate which communicative practices are “normal”. For example, Soliz and Phillips (2017) noted in their essay on family communication and race/ethnicity that initial findings indicate that the way in which family communication patterns functions varies based on racial/ethnic background. Such that within Black families conformity orientation serves a positive role for some individual and relational outcomes. Thus, research that considers these additional factors may be particularly important for translational work, as scholars and clinicians work to help families improve the quality of their communication.

The goal of this project was to summarize several prominent areas of family communication research, and present a more expansive framework of family culture from which scholars can position their work. Specifically, by integrating communication processes and relational ideology within the context of sociocultural factors, researchers have the opportunity to account for differences in how people do family that moves beyond the stereotypical White heteronormative middle-class family experience. Through research that examines multiple aspects of family culture, researchers can begin to understand how the various components of family culture work together. Family culture is largely presumed to be a salient component of the development of individuals, and may be predictive of not only the longevity and quality of family relationships, but also the extent to which children are able and want to bring new individuals into the group (i.e., spouses and children).

Based on these factors, we believe there are various directions for integrating this framework of family culture into family communication scholarship. Researchers should assess the manner in which the communication process dimensions are associated with individual and

relational outcomes (e.g., relational trajectories, family satisfaction, life satisfaction, and self-worth). These inquiries should also consider variations based on race-ethnicity, SES, and religion, to name just a few of the sociocultural features that influence families. Second, scholars should continue to investigate the role of family identification (see Phillips et al., 2018, Odenweller & Harris, 2018), as the extent to which one feels part of the family may be just as important if not more so that the characteristics of family culture in predicting long-term family outcomes. Fourth, scholars should consider ways to account for the multiplicity of family members. One way to investigate this sense of shared meaning, is to ask about the extent to which the individual feels their family members would answer similarly to them. Although this is no replacement for soliciting data from multiple family members, it is one way to address how individuals and their family members may perceive these constructs differently.

Moving forward, family communication scholars have a unique opportunity to create a cohesive framework for studying family communication and collaborating with marriage and family therapists. Family communication scholars are uniquely qualified to work with practitioners to develop interventions that can be used to help improve family functioning. The reason family culture is so integral to this process is because of the ability to determine what communicative processes are instrumental in different families. For example, closeness is often considered a positive outcome in families, and something that should be strived for; however, closeness in families might really be considered something that families consider to be an ideology (see Sillars, 1995). In other words, families do not necessarily become closer over time; rather families may value closeness to a certain degree. If closeness within the family is not particularly valued, then trying to make a family closer may be counterproductive to helping the family function.

Ultimately, by situating research within the larger framework of family culture, family scholars have the opportunity to start larger discussions about the way in which research can be used to support the work of practitioners.

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